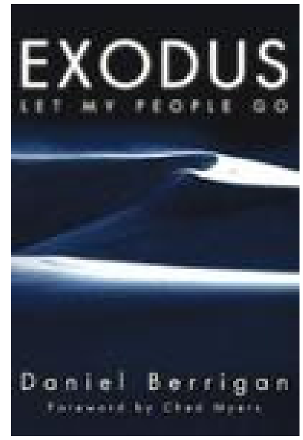
Foreword to Daniel Berrigan's *Exodus: Let My People Go* (Cascade Books, 2007)



Foreword

By Ched Myers

The first time I heard Daniel Berrigan speak was early in 1976 at the Newman Center in Berkeley. National myths were already running hot and heavy during the country's bicentennial, touting imperial grandeur wrapped in noble innocence. Dan, however, was talking about America in terms of Babylon, reading John's Revelation and the newspaper synoptically.

I was a new convert to the faith, intrigued by the Bible but aghast at the church, and searching for some version of the tradition with backbone and balls. I left that evening knowing I'd heard a gospel to be reckoned with. I was never the same. Dan became a mentor, true north on my discipleship compass.

To put it plainly: Many of us would not be members of the North American faith-based justice and peace movement were it not for Dan's showing and telling of the gospel. For five decades he has opened political spaces through public witness, ignited theological imagination with his pen, and given us language of sanity and grace in a time when lies are sovereign. These kaleidoscopic gifts have helped us find enough courage to embrace something of the Way.

Exodus is the latest in Dan's venerable series of biblical reflections in which he blows the dust off sacred scrolls long buried in the cellars of a compromised church, blinks bemusedly at our pretenses of discipleship, and refuses to concede an inch to imperial shock and awe. It is vintage stuff from a prophetic reader of prophetic texts.

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The last thing the Risen Jesus said to his disciples, before he was swooped like Elijah up into the heavens, was that the life and death of the church would depend upon its biblical literacy. Luke's Emmaus Road story reports that "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted the scriptures to the disciples" (Lk 24:27). The verb here is *diērmēneuen*, an intensification of the word from which we derive "hermeneutics" (the art of interpretation). In every other appearance of this verb in the New Testament it means "to translate from one language to another" (Acts 9:36), especially the interpretation of ecstatic tongues (I Cor 12:30; 14:5,13,27). The risen Jesus is, in other words, portrayed here as a patient *translator* of counterintuitive biblical wisdom into a parlance that his demoralized disciples can fathom.

This inaugural Bible study in the history of the church makes it clear that the prophetic tradition should be the lens through which we make sense of our national history. Israel's prophets were forever engaging the way things were with the vision of what should be: questioning authority, picketing palaces, refusing to settle, interrupting business as usual, speaking truth to power, giving voice to the voiceless, stirring up the troops.

The prophets were accused of treason in times of warmaking for being an inconvenient conscience, and inevitably jailed, exiled, or killed. Only after they were disposed of did they become nostalgic celebrities, honored with national holidays and street names. As in our own context with Martin, Cesar, Dorothy, even Dan's own brother Phil: once canonized, thereafter ignored. Nevertheless, insists Jesus, it is these very prophets who teach us how the sacred story should be read. Their witness, though first maligned and then mystified by those in power, represents the "hermeneutic key" to the *whole tradition*.

Luke reiterates this point later in Jesus' upper room appearance to the cowering disciples. "Then he *opened* their minds, that they might *understand* the scriptures" (Lk 24:45). The two verbs here tell an interesting story. *Dianoigo* elsewhere in the N.T. refers to the opening of deaf ears (Mk 7:34f), of a closed womb (Lk 2:23), of blind eyes (Lk 24:31), or of a hardened heart (Acts 16:14). The verb "to understand," meanwhile (*suniemi*), means to bring together all the data—to "connect the dots," so to speak. In the N.T. it is usually employed to describe those many situations in which disciples are *unable* to make such connections (e.g. Lk 2:50; 18:34; Acts 7:25). Both verbs are specifically connected in the gospels with the story of the call of Isaiah (Is 6:8-10), in order to remind us that the reason we fail to understand the prophetic Word is ultimately because we are unable or unwilling to change our way of life.

The prophets exhort us to defend the poor; but we lionize the rich. They assure us that chariots and missiles cannot save us; yet we seek refuge under their cold shadow. They urge us to forgo idolatry; but we compulsively fetishize the work of our hands. Above all, the prophetic Word warns us that the way to liberation in a world locked down by the spiral of violence, the way to redemption in a world of enslaving addictions, the way to genuine transformation in a world of deadened conscience and numbing conformity, is the way of nonviolent, sacrificial, creative love. But neither polite religion nor society are remotely interested in this—which is why Jesus had to "translate" and "midwife" the prophetic insights for his companions in their historical moment.

Dan has done the same for us in ours. As this reading of Exodus attests, he has a keen eye for both text and context, and exegetes both with his life. Thus does he help us shed our denial, connect the dots and move from our pews to the streets.

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The unique poetry of both Dan's words and deeds has made an extraordinary impact. It has animated discipleship communities of resistance and renewal to an extent none of us can tally or fully fathom. In particular, he and his co-conspirators singularly helped rehabilitate the prophetic tradition of embodied symbolism in public space. For this Dan holds a special place in the history of social change movements.

Actions at Catonsville (1968) and again at King of Prussia (1980) rattled the dry bones of American opposition culture to life again. These powerful and provocative experiments in making the Word flesh represented a watershed in the tradition of nonviolent direct action. Homemade napalm and carpenter's hammers became ciphers that unmasked the Powers:

> "Forgive us for burning paper instead of children."
> "To beat swords into plowshares the hammer must fall."

Such symbolic action and explanation remind us that mere rational discourse does not suffice to challenge the murderous reign of technocracy. Such witness, from the Pentagon to arms factories, helped knit bones of conscience back together in the valley of death.

Bill Kellermann (a Methodist disciple of our Jesuit) rightly called such actions "public liturgy," and it stands to reason that they would have been born out of a priestly imagination. Dan's redeployment of the old sacred stuff of blood or ashes renewed our sacramental tradition and changed forever the way we view our Christian vocation of evangelism before the Powers (Eph 3:10).

Meanwhile, Dan's literary corpus has undergirded his prophetic embodiments, maintaining a mystical vision at the heart of strategic public gestures. The perennial temptation for activists is to force the connection between organizing and efficacy; to evaluate our work according to empirical results; to link hope (or despair) to this or that drift in the political current. Dan, on the other hand, is always insisting—it threads throughout this reading of Exodus—that there is no simple relationship between our initiative and divine redemption. With Gandhi we must remember that we sow seeds only, and leave the fruits to God. Between our deeds and our dreams is an opaque veil of unknowing, the consciousness of which keeps us from becoming that which we oppose. This is why we should always endeavor, as one of Dan's riddles put it, to say "yes and no to the whole damn thing."

Because Dan understands the difference between the "dead letter" of managerial logic and the life-giving Spirit of political imagination (II Cor 3:6), his writing and acting tend toward the parabolic. This is one of his most animating gifts to us, impoverished as we are by capitalism's relentless advertising fantasies, commodity fetishism and religious spiritualizing. If the social function of parables is to "deconstruct" and "reconstruct" consciousness, then Dan is a master craftsman.

Theologians rightly insist that all language about God is necessarily metaphorical, an assertion that deeply offends modernists, rationalists and imperial engineers. But the truth is, *only* metaphors—carefully chosen and preferably biblically grounded—are strong enough to bear the horrors of the militaristic State, elastic enough to encompass the divine dream of liberation, and big enough to surround our deepest hopes and fears. Nothing less can inspire and sustain action that would be simultaneously revolutionary, nonviolent and humane. Critical analysis, philosophical idealism or ideological fervor alone cannot hold together the personal and the political, the past and the present, the prophetic and pastoral.

Dan's mediation of undomesticated mystery is thus deeply priestly, offering a refuge for imagination that cannot be locked down by the dehumanizing structural adjustments, technological messianism or scientific demythologizing wrought by the totalitarian ideology of Progress. Dan continues to insist that Pharaoh let the people go. But he long ago up and left for the wilderness.

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The last time I saw Dan was in 2003 at a Catholic Worker retreat in California (though I pray there might be another meeting yet, I am mindful of his 86 years). He was walking us through a poignant reading of Jeremiah 36. It struck me then that Dan himself is a kind of American Baruch. Like Jeremiah's amanuensis, he listens carefully to the prophetic Word; inscribes it lovingly; declares it publicly; and accompanies it underground when it is pronounced heretical to the logic of national security (Jer 36:15-19). And if and when the rulers of State or church contemptuously whittle the scrolls of truthtelling into the courtroom firepit, Dan obeys the mandate to write it all down again, over and over for as long as the denial prevails (Jer 36:20-28). In this way he has faithfully embodied the vocation of "reading of America biblically" inherited from William Stringfellow, Abraham Heschel and Thomas Merton, with the accompaniment of Irish mystics and Jesuit martyrs.

I believe there is a sort of poetic justice that, at this stage of his life, Dan would turn his attention to Exodus. This wise, old wild tale speaks exactly to our historical moment (as it did equally for early Christians and desert monks and radical reformers and Abolitionists), particularly to resurgent perceptions of American omnipotence. Exodus is "biased beyond doubt," Dan points out; "it dwells compassionately on those left out of the imperial records" (p. 3). It is, as such, good news for the poor, and a warning to the Project for a New American Century and their ilk.

To be sure, Dan refuses to gloss over the difficult parts of Exodus, from the curious vignette in which Yahweh tries to kill Moses (p 31) to the texts of terror that seem to represent "an invitation to genocide" (p 164). Indeed, Dan's reading ends on a note of ambiguity: "A shadow stands and will not dissolve" (pp 161ff). Yet "our story must include its own version of the sins of Exodus" (p 159). For each character in this ancient epic is archetypal; its setting amidst empire and its discontents is distressingly contemporary; and its plot of surprise and deliverance is still the stuff of hope.

What better companion, then, with whom to wrestle again with the ecstatic and traumatic tale of Exodus than this poet, practitioner and priest? Dan is rightly revered among us. He is an oak of an elder: skin as thick as bark, leaves that can prick, a reach that defies gravity, providing cover for whoever would sit with him. He has been a kind of *axis mundi* in our lives, offering communion with both heaven and earth. And we need trustworthy elders as much as we do the saints, to pass on understanding like an heirloom. Again I say: We would not be here but for Dan's faithful work and witness over half a century. I honor him without apology. And I commend to you his reading of our oldest sacred narrative of liberation, which still beckons us to freedom.

Ched Myers
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