

Stone: a biblical history

Sometime last year, a Jesuit collaborator gave me a gift; it was a book titled, *A World History of Salt*. Imagine that – common table salt with a world history! I was thinking of that book when I heard the first reading. The reading ended on a rather curious note. After making a covenant with the people, Joshua

Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was in the sanctuary of the LORD. And Joshua said to all the people, ‘This stone shall be our witness, for it has heard all the words which the LORD spoke to us. It shall be a witness against you, should you wish to deny your God.’

Strange: a stone as witness, with ears, eyes and mouth; and able to testify and witness against the people? That’s not what comes to my mind when I think of a witness. Imagine walking into a courtroom with a stone and saying to the judge this stone shall be my witness. Stones don’t hear, see or talk.

As I flipped through the Bible to find out more about the meaning of this text, I discovered that, actually, the stone has a fascinating history in the Bible. Like salt we take it for granted – it’s everywhere. It turns out that, in the Bible, stones turn up in the most amazing of places; represent the most fundamental aspects of our spiritual experience; and symbolize the foundation of our Christian faith. I am sure the exegetes in this chapel would appreciate the challenge of digging into the biblical history of stones. Here’s a small sample:

- Jacob celebrated his first encounter with God with a stone that had served as his pillow.
- God gave Moses the Ten Commandments inscribed on two tablets of stone.
- Joshua used 12 stones to commemorate the crossing of the Jordan by the Israelites.
- Stones are the basic material for constructing a temple or an altar to God.
- The stone is the commonest metaphor for rebelliousness and disobedience in the Bible; hence, God promised to replace our heart of stone with a heart of flesh.
- It was a stone that destroyed the statue of King Nebuchadnezzar’s imperial dream.
- Several prophets spoke about God bringing, laying or setting forth a stone, similar to how the prophets announced the coming of the Messiah.
- Stone is another name for God in the Old Testament (Isaiah 28:16; Genesis 49:24)
- The first temptation of Jesus was to turn stones into bread.
- Even Jesus boasted that God could make children from stones for Abraham and that stones would cry out if his followers remained silent.

- It was a stone that blocked the entrance to the tomb of Jesus.
- And, practically all of the New Testament unites with the Psalmist (118:22) in proclaiming Jesus Christ as the stone that the builders rejected and which has become the cornerstone of our faith.

We are accustomed to thinking of a stone as purely material – you cut a stone; you build with stones; you sculpt a stone, break a stone, throw stones, etc. But in the Bible there's a whole world of meaning connected with stones. So, what's the point? I'm not sure. But here's the lesson that this simple experiment taught me.

It's possible to see things differently. If we open our eyes and our minds, we can see beyond the routine and the mundane, and we can begin to discover new worlds where a stone is not just a stone; we can see new milieus where meaning and beauty lie hidden in every experience, every human being, and every encounter – a world where, as Pope Francis tells us in *Laudato Si'*, “everything is ... a caress of God” (LS 84).

As we begin a new academic year, let us train our eyes to discover new things; let us sharpen our minds to envision new possibilities. Whether in theology or in Peace Studies, where other people see stones, obstacles and stumbling blocks, let us strive to see alternatives, possibilities and opportunities for new life and new beginnings.

For those who have eyes to see, a stone is not just a stone. Amen!