

THE WATERS PARTED BEFORE US

GLEN V. WIBERG

Riding through the unpaved roads of Bangui on a hot Sunday morning in March of 1981 can only be described as hair-raising. For one thing, both sides of the road leading to the airport were lined with mobs of people, many of whom appeared to be out of control, whether because of the election the next day or being lubricated by strong drink. Added to this, we were riding in a truck with only one gear. We were warned by missionaries not to stop until reaching the airport.

As foreigners, our visas expired the next day, so getting to the airport early and hoping to find seats on the plane to Paris, which flew only once a week, lent a further sense of both urgency and anxiety to the trip.

But these concerns were only secondary to the ultimate concern: to deliver an important manuscript safely to a post office in London. On this hangs the tale.

I had been invited as a teacher to a Bible week in Karawa by the Covenant missionaries in Congo (then Zaire). Our home congregation, Salem Covenant Church in New Brighton, Minnesota, made it possible for my wife, Jane,

to accompany me on the trip. It was an unforgettable, eye-opening experience in visiting our several mission stations, learning firsthand the extensive work of our missionaries in education, health care, agricultural and power projects, and not least of all, evangelism.

Shortly before leaving, we were invited to a fellowship service at the home of Fern and Marvin Wickstrom in Gemena, where missionaries from other denominational backgrounds gathered for an informal evening of storytelling, conversation, and refreshments. Knowing Jane and I were leaving shortly for London, two small, wiry and charming women from the Wycliffe Bible Translators approached us with a large envelope.

Margaret Hill and Elaine Thomas had been working for years in a remote area of Congo translating the New Testament into the Ngbaka dialect, used by a tribe of people who lived in the Ubangi Region, where the Covenant's work was centered. After several months of work, Margaret and Elaine had completed Paul's pastoral letters. Not having the technology of computers or even copying machines, they did not want to entrust their handwritten work to the local postal systems.

"Would you be willing to take this manuscript with you to London and mail it to the Wycliffe headquarters?" they asked. "If so, you must guard it with your life."

Feeling the weight of the request, which was hard to refuse, my briefcase holding the manuscript remained at my side both waking and sleeping. So the trip to the Bangui airport in the nearby Central African Republic had not only a sense of anxiety and urgency, but now the weighty sense of destiny to deliver the only existing copy in the Ngbaka dialect of Paul's letters. I felt as the couriers of Paul must have felt in delivering his handwritten letters to the churches.

The scene at the airport was one of confusion with people milling around waiting for the arrival of the plane from Kinshasa to Paris. Going through customs was slow, involving opening luggage and searching personal belongings.

When I opened my suitcase for the young customs official, he noticed a copy of the Gospel of Mark in the Ngbaka dialect on the top of my clothes. He broke into a broad smile and said, "You are a Christian!" and promptly closed my suitcase. He was equally

gracious to Jane. With my briefcase in hand, the waters parted as in the Exodus story.

As we stood in a long line in the hot sun waiting to board the plane, we wondered if there would be seats for us, and if not, what would happen to

Kinshasa.

“My mother is dying and this was the last time I would see her,” he said with emotion. “And what are you doing in Africa?” he asked.

Several thousand feet above Africa, our mission by a small denomination

golese man asking if we were related to the Swedish Mission Covenant was mind-boggling. “Why, yes, that is our sister church, the church from which our American Covenant has come,” we said.

While both Jane and I were recover-



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us tomorrow with an expired visa. We felt a sense of hopelessness as we entered the crowded plane and began our search for unoccupied seats. Moving toward the front of the cabin we found two empty seats beside an African man in Western dress.

“Are these seats taken?” I asked. “Free!” he said with a wave of his hand.

When airborne, our seat-partner introduced himself and spoke of his sad visit in returning to his parental home in Congo, across the river from

suddenly seemed quite insignificant. “We were here to visit our missionaries and conduct a Bible week for them,” I said.

“What is your denomination?” he asked.

“We belong to the Evangelical Covenant Church,” I responded somewhat hesitantly wondering how I could explain that to our newly made friend.

His face brightened, “Is that by any chance related to Svenska Missiönsförbundet?” he asked.

Hearing Swedish spoken by a Con-

ing from shock, our seatmate told us, “I was educated, converted, baptized, and confirmed by Swedish Covenant missionaries, and further supported by the mission in furthering my education at the University of Paris.”

Looking out of the window of the plane, he turned to us and said in Swedish, “If it were not for the Swedish Mission Covenant, I would still be living in one of those huts down there.”

Then the conversation turned to

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ward us. “You may feel that your brief visit to Africa has accomplished little measured by our immense needs,” he said. “But remember the story in the gospel about the little boy who put his loaves and few fish into Jesus’s hands, which he took and multiplied to feed the thousands.”

Then adding, with a note of passion: “But please don’t forget Africa.” His name was Mr. Gabriele, the name of the angel Gabriel, and his message to us was a moving benediction upon our exodus from Africa. With the briefcase at my side, once again the waters parted.

Upon arriving at de Gaulle Airport in Paris, we said our farewells and observed that Mr. Gabriele was met by several business associates who were waiting for him. Showing our uncertainty in seeking the way to the baggage storage where we had left our winter clothing, Mr. Gabriele, who had his eye on us, came over and offered his help.

“Thank you,” Jane said, “but I am sure we can find our luggage.” To which he replied, “Madame, you are in my village now!” And leaving his friends, he showed us the way to where our luggage had been stored. Another parting of the waters.

With little time to spare, we found our gate to the next and last leg of our trip to London, only to be informed that there was a strike at Heathrow and the airport would be closed by midnight. With the anxiety of another deadline to meet, we boarded the plane along with dozens of Welsh men who were in Paris to watch their rugby team win in a tournament. It soon became obvious that they had been doing a lot of celebrating. But these were also men who loved to sing. So we were entertained by boisterous Welsh singing of ballads and, yes, hymns all the way to London.

We arrived at Heathrow five minutes to twelve, just before the airport shut down. At the information desk



Glen and Jane Wiberg

we inquired about transportation into London. Asking about our baggage, the woman at the desk said we couldn’t take that much luggage on the tube—the public transportation. “And what might be the cost of a taxi into the city?” About forty or fifty dollars was the amount she cited, which at the time seemed monumental.

There was a Welsh man standing nearby, listening to this conversation and observing two sad looking Americans who were somewhat disheveled in our summer clothes and obviously sleep-deprived from the long day of travel. He intervened and spoke to the agent behind the counter, telling her that he would take this couple any place they wanted to go.

“Glen,” Jane whispered, “this man says he will take us any place in London. Do you think he has been drinking?” Pausing to catch our breath and seeing the man’s wife and young son standing nearby, we accepted the invitation.

The man introduced his lovely wife and young son—who was wearing an Eton jacket—and then asked us to wait at the entrance while he retrieved his car. Packing our suitcases into the trunk of his Mercedes, we were off to London. The conversation was delightful, despite our near exhaustion. He was interested in why we were in Africa, even as we were interested in why he had singled us out at the airport before returning to his home.

“Last year,” he said, “we vacationed in California where we were treated with such hospitality that my wife and I said that if we ever saw an American in distress we would do whatever we could to lend our help.”

With no difficulty he found the way to the hotel where we had reservations.

He carried in our luggage, told the clerk to treat us well, then with a hug for Jane and a hearty farewell, returned to his car. Now once again, with my briefcase at my side, it seemed as if we had been visited by another angel who parted the waters.

Holding onto the manuscript until our last day in London, we went to the post office and ceremoniously mailed it to Wycliffe Bible Translators. Looking back at what had occurred when two English women entrusted us with Paul’s pastoral letters, we had cause to give thanks to God for the parting of the waters and his protective hand that guided us each step of the way.

But the story doesn’t end there. A couple of years later an old friend of ours from student days at North Park College, Marian Johnson, visited our church one Sunday evening for a missionary talk on her literature distribution mission in Congo. At the end of her talk, she held up a black book and announced the completion of the New Testament in the Ngbaka dialect. Jane and I sat as if in a trance with tears in our eyes as one more time the waters parted, feeling we had played a minuscule part in this publishing event.

The sequel to the story, which I learned recently from correspondence with one of the translators, Elaine Thomas, is that the Ngbaka people now have the whole Bible in their language. It was published just in time for its dedication and wide distribution before the civil war started in 1998. So when the Ngbakas had to flee into the forest to hide from the advancing soldiers, the Christians took their new Bible with them and testified how comforting it was to read the Scriptures together.

With the Wycliffe translators, Elaine Thomas and Margaret Hill, the Bible distributors including Marian Johnson, along with our fellow believers, the Ngbakas, we join together with exuberance in the Song of Miriam at the crossing of the Red Sea, “The Lord has triumphed gloriously.” □