

Beyond Third Grade

An Adult Primer On The Bible



By Robert John Andrews

It happened at my 40th college reunion banquet. It happens quite often. She was the lovely wife of a college class-mate who discovered that the fellow in the Panama hat and Hawaiian shirt sitting next to her was a preacher. Me. Before I finished my chicken leg, the questions started. Her schooling, her base of knowledge and experience, her maturity, squared less and less with her Sunday school background in Bible stories. How could they really get all those animals on Noah's Ark? Did Eve really come from Adam? What about creation and evolution?

Dear Lord. My sweet Lord.

In her case, she had (God bless her) a genuine interest in learning more. So many don't. And I'm getting tired of stupid criticisms of the Bible from persons who criticize out of their own stupid assumptions.

Many call themselves atheists, which I think funny. Though, I do admit to a big soft spot in my heart for atheists. I'll take any day an honest atheist as opposed to one of those milquetoast agnostics. Atheists at least stand for something (or is it nothing?), whereas agnostics just philosophically meander around, diddling with their decisions, unable to make up their minds or commit to anything that doesn't make them feel special or is on their terms.

It may surprise many to learn that we Christians share much in common with atheists. The original accusation against Christians by the Roman government was that we were godless atheists. Check out your Justin Martyr. They charged that we denied the existence of the Roman gods, which of course we surely did. And were quite glad to do so. By the way, guess what were the other two accusations? Incest and cannibalism.

We tend to attack what our ignorance finds threatening.

What I find interesting about atheism, despite all the froth and lather, is how I haven't met an atheist yet. How can you deny the existence of something nobody can prove in the first place? Talk about your ironies! If anyone insists they can prove the existence of God, sit back and giggle over the theological vaudeville. Who wants a God you can prove? Because then God is a something (emphasis on thing) rather than the abiding truth and unlimited reality which is beyond (and within) all things. After all, if we can prove God, then God must be less than us. God isn't a being, but being itself.

I haven't met an atheist yet. I've met a fair number of folks who enjoy flirting with the fantasy that they are atheists, but mostly what they reject are the narrow forms of religious expression or the clumsy manner in which God has been represented. Dear friends, I don't believe in Zeus either. Well, okay, I confess sometimes I do, but that goes to my sin and that bloody, irrepressible, superstitious side of me which keeps trying to make God into my image. I really do want a God I can manipulate, but God won't let me.

Everyone is religious. That's my point.

I remember Bill, my Alcoholics Anonymous contact in my first congregation. He hated church. He hated religion. I laughed at him when he said that to me because, as I told him, in belonging to AA he belonged to one of the biggest religious cults in the world.

Everyone is religious. That's my point. There really is no such animal as an atheist. Even those who call themselves atheists have a god, an ultimate concern. Everybody is religious. Sometimes their religion is their atheism. I figure it is my job as a beatnik evangelical pastor to do my best to keep everyone off balance. The curious question is: which kind of religion? What is your God?

Most who scoff at such texts are ignorant of such texts. That's why they can think them ridiculous. These are the same folks who taunt us to prove God. But the problem is: if we can prove God, it's not God. I can no more prove God than I can prove I love my children. I can show it, but that's not proof.

A good part of this problem with perceived problems with the Bible is our own fault. We rarely help Christians mature past a third grade, pop-sickle stick puppet understanding of the Bible. There's nothing wrong with third grade, if you're a third grader.

This, basically, is what my mentor from the 4th century Augustine realized. Most folks who criticize religion actually criticize what they assume about religion. Augustine, one of the fiercest critics of the church who became one of its fiercest adherents, confessed how he ignorantly dismissed the Bible as silly, irrational, and coarse. Augustine confessed how

“passages had been death when taken literally but when they were explained in their spiritual meaning I began to blame myself”

He also admitted that he attacked doctrines of the church, which, after his conversion, he discovered really weren't doctrines of the church.

Reading the Bible is good. Being Christian is good. If I didn't prefer Christianity, then I should be Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim or uselessly agnostic...

And as much as narrow minded fundamentalists drive me nuts at times, if I'm hurting, if I'm in trouble, if I've been mugged and left on the side of the road, I'd rather they were near instead of any of those smug critics quick to make fun of us Christians.

Smarmy is as smarmy does. You are what you pay attention to.

Or even those caressing a rather ambivalent, self-absorbed spiritualism.

“I can worship Jesus on my own. I don't need the church.”

Sorry folks: there is no Christianity on your own.

“Why should I belong? All you Christians are hypocrites.”

Well, of course we are, and there's always room for one more.

I caught a quip where a talk show host talked about how offended she became when she heard the phrase describing God as a jealous God. I admit, it was only a quip and I'd like to know more, to listen to get the real facts. We've heard stuff like this before though. She didn't like the word, 'jealous.' It offended her notion of God as all-loving, kind, gentle. Well, yeah, so what?

I'm betting that if her husband didn't feel at least a little bit jealous about her, she'd be really disappointed.

I guess what ought sadden us the most is how a growing majority of people react this way out of ignorance of the Bible. They don't take time to listen. They want to hear what they want to hear.

Which, theological differences aside, is why if I were bleeding on the side of the road, I'm pretty sure I could count on my fundamentalists being coming to help me. As he knows Jesus, he knows his responsibility.

Reading the Bible from front to cover is great, though the real issue is: what does it say to you? Did you read with understanding? What meaning do you discern and what difference does it make in your life? How does the Word change you? Or are you too busy trying to make it fit your life? How does the message from the Bible inspire you? Engage you? Confront you? Convict you? If it doesn't change you, you probably aren't reading it right.

Theologian Karl Barth said that religion is our search for God, and that this always results in our finding a god that is most convenient for our own purposes. Barth distinguishes this from faith, which results from God's seeking us through Christ.

We are not called to read the Bible and ask no questions. I reject Biblicism, which is an "idolrous veneration of the text itself, enshrining the texts as authoritative in and of themselves rather than because of to whom they bear witness."

Nor are we called to listen to the Word and then weigh, assess, and decide if we wish to agree. We are called to hear, love, and follow.

It is not our heart that determines our course, but God's Word
--Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Life Together"

And that the attitude that got dear Dietrich hanged by Hitler.

So the trick then is to hear God's Word in the Bible. What is really being proclaimed?

*I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand;
and what is more, I believe that unless I do believe I shall not understand.*
-- Anselm's Proslogion:

In other words, this faith business echoes marriage. If you're married, how well did you really know your spouse before you married? Did you pull out your clipboard and review your checklist to make sure he or she was the right one? Odds are, you married and then began discovering each other together. I hope you still are. Although, we often marry because of the illusion we place upon and expect from the other. The fortunate are those who prefer prefer the reality to the illusion.

I don't make a point of knowing her to love her. I love her and then get to know her.

Let us listen to the proclamation within the story, listening for the dimensions of messages bursting forth from the text. I write in the hopes that this primer might prove helpful and lend itself to mature faithfulness.

What follows are very personal musings, observations, comments, and opinions developed (utterly bereft of footnotes) over a lifetime of trying to respond to the Bible. You are welcome to disagree with me. If everyone agrees with me, I get scared that I'm not doing my job.

You are invited to consider these sounding and framing questions for each narrative lifted up in this primer as a means of appreciating the depth and intensity of scripture.

Sounding and Framing Questions

- 1. What questions arise in your mind about the selected text or texts? What do you want to ask God? What do you want to ask the author?*
- 2. What bothers you about the narrative?*
- 3. What warms you to the narrative?*
- 4. Where has this narrative played out in your life?*
- 5. Which of the characters in the narrative are you?*
- 6. What is the 'so what?' you get from the narrative?*
- 7. If you were to distill into one sentence the meaning of this scripture, what would it be?*
- 8. Where do you agree with the author?*
- 9. Where do you disagree with the author?*
- 10. How has the scripture changed you?*
- 11. What are you going to do about it?*

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Is The Bible Really A Holy Book (and how do we really read these books)?

Yes. And no.

It depends on whether or not you believe any 'thing' can be holy. I don't. Never have. Not the Bible, not a church building, not a flag, not Ground Zero, not the so-called Holy Land over there at the end of an El Al flight to Tel Aviv. People – my wife, my daughters, my son, my congregation, my readers, my dearest friends, my soccer teammates, plus the Rabbi or Imam I never met, my friends and lovers (past and present), even my enemies -- are holy and sacred, never 'things.' Nor do I find Managua, Nicaragua, any less the holy land than Jerusalem. They both sell postcards. We have a big, big problem when we equate holiness with geography. It's called idolatry of place and race. Neither do I regard some fellow who wears white robes and sits in the Vatican any holier than a fellow wearing orange and sitting on death row. Francis wouldn't either.

Someone asked: "What should I do with old, tattered, yellowed Bibles?" Bear in mind, most Bibles do bear this inscription on the cover: HOLY BIBLE.

I replied: "Throw them out, but if you feel uncomfortable doing that, do what they do when retiring the US flag – burn them."

You should see how tattered my Bibles are. How often I have scribbled in them.

This doesn't mean we ought not treat 'things' with respect and elegant decorum, it is just that I don't venerate or worship the Bible. Rather, I worship what the Bible says. The story and message of the Bible is holy, for it has been set apart to inspire us, convict us, challenge us, awaken us with divine insights and truth and love. I do not believe in the Bible but by the Bible.

The Bible reveals the Word of God. The printed text itself isn't the Word of God. After all, which text would we be talking about: Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Spanish, English, Armenian, Arabic, Vietnamese? All the translations have nuances and idioms appropriate to their language. So which is the real version?

Which is why I often refer to myself as a literalist when it comes to reading and interpreting the Bible. But let us avoid equating literalism with slavish exactitude. A

professor once described the Bible as an artichoke: it is all artichoke but, let's face it, some leaves have more meat than others. There is no way I am going to give equal weight to God's instructions about stoning adulterers as I would Jesus' new commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. If we really were exact and verbatim about punishing adulterers as the Bible commends, how many of us would there be left to throw those damned stones? Am I going to regard Paul's outburst that some women should be silent in church equal to Mary sitting with the men listening to Jesus?

A literal reading will necessarily lead me to interpreting the Bible symbolically, metaphorically, anagogically, and allegorically, as if affects my faith and kindles our faith.

The Bible reveals what is holy through the snipet-snatches of niggling-nudging insights from the Holy Spirit. If I view the Bible as some kind of manual or rule book or some kind of code of conduct, then I cheat the Bible of its ruddy inspiration and its passionate authority over my mind, heart, and will. Then I make it no different than the Qu'ran. The text itself isn't what is infallible or inerrant, its proclamation is.

This is why we do a disservice to Jesus when we speak of Jesus in the past tense. If we really believe in the resurrection, Jesus (and all Jesus is) lives today. The Bible is a living text because it bears witness to the living reality of Jesus.

Who Wrote The Bible?

It didn't drop out of the sky from the hand of God caught by our grubby hands. It wasn't discovered in some field in New York State. It wasn't dictated to an illiterate man in a cave. If we accept this, we've staked out for ourselves a fine place to begin. The Bible as we know it is the result of many hands over many years of composition and inspiration. Who really wrote the book of love?

Besides, it isn't as if they were writing scripture in the first place. Their works became recognized and validated as scripture much later.

If we start with figuring out who wrote the New Testament, it will be easier for us because most of the New Testament originates from a compact span of time: the first century following the birth of Jesus. We have letters signed and written by Paul. Luke refers to himself as an author. The internal clues of historical references and vocabulary helps pinpoint authorship and date.

Though we need to note several realities. First, we have no original writings. We have copies of copies of copies. We have pieces and bits that have been collated and collected over the centuries. The earliest bit, that is, the earliest surviving fragment of the New Testament is a parchment from the second century containing John 18: 31-33. Second, it is likely that John wrote his material but it was added to, edited, and enlarged upon by his school of John – his own batch of disciples. Third, plagiarism was regarded an honor, not a reason to be expelled from University. If you credited your work to someone like James or Peter, you were giving them the credit for the inspiration and content. Fourth, reducing your thoughts to writing was the sign of a second rate thinker. First rate thinkers, such as Jesus, would have been so important their spoken message would have been memorized. In fact, the oral tradition back then was more reliable than the written tradition. Odds are, the Christians rushed to write because they needed to transport to as many communities of faith as possible their proclamations in their portable notebooks (easier than bulky scrolls) before the preacher/authors would be killed for following the way of Jesus.

Think of yourself as Nora and Nick Charles (or if you wish to be more rugged, Sam Spade) deducing who did what by the clues.

Scholarship is pretty certain about the formation of the Gospels. Mark's gospel has been deduced to have been the first written because readers will find Mark's gospel fully consumed by both Matthew's gospel and Luke's gospel. Unknown to Mark was a source

that Luke and Matthew independently both used: it is called Quelle, meaning quite ingeniously, 'Source.' This is the material common to Luke and Matthew not found in Mark, such as the sermon on the mount. Still, both Matthew and Luke found unique material. Somehow, somewhere, because they were writing for different and disparate communities, they found material which they incorporated in their gospels. For Matthew, for example, his birth narrative emphasizes the role of Joseph and as well as the role of Pharisee and Temple. Luke must have found a collection of Jesus' parables, for many of his parables will not be found anywhere else; the same with his unique birth stories.

Besides, Christianity was hardly some seamless cloak of homogenous belief. More accurate would be to talk about Christianities.

John's gospel has little to do with the others, which are much more parallel in content (synoptic). His is a much later, far more symbolic work, full of miracles and monologues.

By the way, get rid of your red letter editions of the Bible. Who is to say which material Jesus really said and which he didn't but the editors said he did? We know Matthew added his own commentary. They all did. So? Let's not be like Thomas Jefferson who cut up the Bible and pasted into his folder only the things he liked from Jesus.

When it comes to the composition of the Old Testament, we are talking eons in development. In fact, it wasn't until the late first century AD that the Jewish Bible was fully validated pretty much as we now have it -- excepting for the tidbits the Roman Catholic church appropriated from an early Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures - which is why to this day the Roman Catholic Old Testament (based on the Latin translation) differs from the Protestant version (based upon the Hebrew version).

Most scholars concur that the oldest bit in the Bible is Miriam's taunt song. Many of the Psalms go back to the earliest of days. Then we would have Amos' book of prophecy. But then again, it's not as if Amos wrote the book of Amos. Somebody compiled and composed the best top ten hits of Amos. Isaiah spans at least three centuries, which makes it tough for a single author. Daniel is purported to have been written during the Hebrew captivity in Babylon (basically 580 to 500 BC), but given the language and themes, it was written during the Israel's war against the Greeks (around 165 BC). The early chapters of Genesis (the ones we tend to unduly fuss over) are modern works composed during the time of the Babylonian Captivity. It wasn't as if there was a journalist recording creation. Persecuted, exiled, enslaved, they needed scripture to be keel, rudder, and sail for their ship of faith.

There in the Babylonia captivity two great things happened to help them preserve their identity and faith. Given the destruction of their homeland, the burning of their temple, and their enslavement and deportation, they needed to remember who they were. So they

met in worship, to sing, to pray, to hear the stories. Where they met were called gathering places: synagogues. And from that, they began to gather up the stories, rework their understanding of God, begin to specify how they could distinguish themselves from other faiths (hence, kosher laws along with the hundreds of the other laws and ordinances).

Tradition suggests Moses authored the first five books of the Old Testament. Not really. It was credited to him as the spiritual authority. In reality, they are a patchwork quilt of four basic schools of writing, which we call JEPD : J for the Yahwist writers, referring to God as Yahweh; E as the Elohist writers, referring to God has Elohim; P for the Priestly writers, temple and cult focused; D as the Deuteronomist writers, concerned about the commandments and ordinances of the people.

And don't conclude David wrote all those Psalms. He may get the credit for them, but these 150 Psalms constitute the collected hymnbook, the best of their favorite hymns culled and chosen from centuries of hymns. And Solomon didn't write Ecclesiastes or the Song of Solomon – he was long dead. Facts indeed, as John Adams reminded us, are stubborn things.

'Biblia' is the Greek word meaning books, from the town of Byblos where papyrus was manufactured.

Does Evolution Disprove The Biblical Account of Creation?

Genesis 1

The silly debate between evolution and creation is simply and utterly boring.

Evolution is evolution, still being explored and explained by scientists. It is a theory to the same extent that gravity is a theory. It works. Enough already.

The real issue isn't between the creationist and evolutionists. The real debate – and the one far more interesting – is the debate between those who interpret Genesis as a historical and scientific narrative and those who interpret it as a metaphorical and theological proclamation.

Guess which camp I've erected my tent?

The modern authors of Genesis weren't writing how the material world came to be, they were writing why and what for? That's the job of theologians. I want my scientists to explain the how, but my job is to discover and relate what is the meaning of life and what are meant to do and be, especially considering what nuts we are and what messes we get ourselves into. Another fine mess, Stanley...

Picture the authors of Genesis 1 sitting in the middle of Babylon, the mightiest empire in the known universe. The authors are slaves, oppressed by both the politics and the religion of Babylon. There is a reason Genesis 1 sounds like a liturgical chant. It is. It is a hymn making serious sport and taunting fun of the Babylonia religion where sun and moon are deities whilst extolling God's glory. To the Hebrews, sun and moon are merely clocks to keep track of time. To the Babylonians, the gods formed humans from clods of mud to be their slaves only after the the gods tired of creating. To the Hebrews, humankind is the fulfillment of God's creation.

It also isn't creation out of nothing. The whole account presents God bringing organization and sense out of chaos. I compare it to when socks are laundered. You carry them up to the bed in the laundry basket, you dump them on the quilt, you begin sorting

them, bringing order to chaos. We divide, separate, and sort so we can make sense of our world and pretend to have some control over it.

Our church confirmation class once asked: “Why did God create the world?” which is a far better question than asking “When,” because then we’d have to get into all that distraction about creationism and evolution and we’d pull out our timelines.

Remember, there are two basic ways to interpret the first chapters of the Bible. I’ve never agreed that you must choose between creationism or evolution. Why debate trivialities? Since when is life so black or white? Remember, the real debate isn’t between the Bible and Science, it is between the different ways we read the Bible.

Besides, the Bible really begins with chapter 12 and Abraham. The first 11 chapters, describing this royal mess called humanity, depicts why we need the faith of an Abraham. God saving the world through humanity rather than saving humanity through the world.

The first way of interpreting these chapters is depicted by imaginary timeline signs posted from the church organ behind me to the back right window. 1,000 years equals 10 feet. This way is called the historical narrative reading of the Bible, where everything written is not just truth but actual fact. We thank Bishop Ussher from the 17th century for calculating how the earth is very young, created in 4004 BC. I believe he figured out it was Sunday, October 23. And yes, old Triceratops and Tyrannosaurus Rex co-existed peaceably with little Adam and Eve. Peaceable because -- according to the Bible -- everyone, until after the flood, even those Raptors with their fangs, were all vegetarians. I’m guessing all those pointy, nasty teeth were useful in opening up coconuts. I suppose the Creation Theme Park in Kentucky has better answers and can set this boy straight.

So then we follow the imaginary string, every 10 feet 1,000 years, and we come to the Great Flood (2348 BC), then Abraham (1900), Moses (1250), with the Iron Age right after (1200), then the Hebrews in Babylonian Captivity (586), until we come to the Christ and the beginning of the new age (6/7 BC, actually – they got the 0 wrong).

Or...

Or...

We follow the alternative timeline of geology, anthropology, paleontology, and appreciate the Bible metaphorically, as a theological document concerned with speaking spiritual truth rather than scientific fact. This is my path and my timeline.

So, we get a different timeline, still with 10 feet for each 1,000 years, starting her at Grove Church. In this case we see the earliest versions of ourselves (homo sapiens sapiens, as opposed to the other forms of human that became extinct) evolving around 500,000 years ago. That would put our origins, using this same time scale, down around the Middle School (almost a half a mile away). Lucy, an early hominid, a pre-human, walked around what we call Ethiopia 3.5 millions years ago – near the Sunbury Christian Academy (a little more than 9 miles away).

T-Rex hunted as early as the late Cretaceous period, 85 million years ago (around Grove City College). With a roar and snarl. Long string.

Pangaea (when we were all one continent) existed 225 million years ago – around Toledo, Ohio.

Multi-cellular organism emerged 1,500 million years ago (California).

And old mother earth congealed into solid form over 4,600 million years ago (that'll take us to China).

Fortunately, we can get beyond all this and get down to the real question: not when, but why was the world created? This moves us from fussing about whose facts are correct to being moved by matters of faith.

Far more interesting.

Far more interesting and, frankly, far more useful.

By the way, the great theologian Augustine preferred to interpret Genesis as an allegory of how individual Christians emerge from the chaos of nature into the sublimity of a divine humanity.

I'm a pragmatic sort of fellow. Sometimes. Pragmatism mixed up with a masculine sense of romance and passion. Go figure.

We seek a faith that helps us live in this creation as creatures. Day by day. Give me a reason to wake up. Give us a purpose for making coffee, making love, making a living...

Sounding and Framing Questions

1. *What questions arise in your mind about the selected text or texts? What do you want to ask God? What do you want to ask the author?*
2. *What bothers you about the narrative?*
3. *What warms you to the narrative?*
4. *Where has this narrative played out in your life?*
5. *Which of the characters in the narrative are you?*
6. *What is the 'so what?' you get from the narrative?*
7. *If you were to distill into one sentence the meaning of this scripture, what would it be?*
8. *Where do you agree with the author?*
9. *Where do you disagree with the author?*
10. *How has the scripture changed you?*
11. *What are you going to do about it?*

Did Woman Really Come From Man's Rib?

Genesis 2-3

Bear in mind, this story of Eve and Adam's rib is the second account of creation. In just a few verses earlier (in the far more liturgical Priestly authors account), it is described how God creates male and female from God's own selves (the original royal 'we').

This second story of creation (and there are other ones elsewhere in the Bible) really makes the same claim, but in a far more graphic and earthy, gritty style (appropriate to the Yahwist authors who liked to be earthy and gritty, very existential). Folktales are words and words tell truth. There's a hint at the end of the second chapter, where the writer adds that juicy bit about husbands leaving their father and mother and clinging to their wife – this obviously was written when there were families and unions, marriages and mothers-in-laws.

Words are the only thing that makes us human. We alone of creatures talk about talk. Without words we have no way of knowing, no way of experiencing and understanding the experience, without words we would be completely alone -- without words we cannot even think, we cannot name things or ideas.

Word also is a major theological point, as Word means that which makes intelligible the divinely unintelligible; more so, knowledge in the Bible isn't intellectual (that's Greek), it is experiential (that is Hebrew) -- as in man knowing woman and creating together. So vastly more fun than mind melding.

I am a theologian, and if you get the theology right you treat others right. So I want to refute some of the theological notions of women that some in my tradition use to repress women, much as the Taliban perverts their religious tradition.

Let us go back to Genesis and the great myth (myth is not the same as fiction -- myth is truth as story and metaphor) proclaiming who we are in the eyes of a loving God, otherwise known as the story of Adam and Eve. An authentic reading of this scripture will

show you women that you hardly are something secondary or simply created for the man's benefit, for him to use or abuse.

Quite the contrary. Adam is not so much a name as a pun: *'adham*. A play of words with *'adhamah*, which means earth, dirt, clod. Translate Adam as earthling.

Earthlings are formed from the earth, then given the breath of life, vitality. And when *'adham* needs someone with whom to share and work paradise (and paradise is best seen and created through the eyes of the other not through the self) God takes *'adham*, and from a sleepy *'adham* come *ish* and *isha* – the words for male and female. We genders are born of a dream. *Isha* and *ish* are the same, just different in gender, as in the Spanish *querida* and *querido*: female beloved, male beloved.

Here is a divine act of separation from the one into two. The authors, of course, write from a perspective where all that they know are the two genders. God bless the genders. Together then we complete each other as full equals, equal before God, equal in respect and purpose and responsibility and dignity. For only that which is of yourself can complete yourself, something animals (created as themselves separately) cannot do.

Besides, a quick flip to the New Testament will not only show how Jesus valued women as equals, they were the better disciples. Matter of fact, in the early Christian church women also were apostles, at least until the men pushed them out of the way.

One other thing to ponder: the story of Adam and Eve and garden doesn't seem to warrant a whole lot of attention in the rest of the Old Testament. Adam is only referenced once, and that in a genealogy (I Chronicles 1: 1). You never hear about Eve again. And please, don't even mention Lilith, Adam's so-called first wife. She isn't in the Bible, no how, no where, only in some bizarre other forms of Jewish mystical literature

Well now, assuming I take the Bible seriously, if that is how God and Jesus view women and value women, I had better also. For my Bible tells me so. Male and female as one who have become whole and complete -- spiritually as well as physically, howsoever brief (well, maybe not that brief...).

And now for the rest of the story...which will be inevitable, for Adam and Eve will and must grow up.

They are now like babies. They are unaware of their selfhood. They exist in paradise. But do they appreciate it? No more than a baby appreciates the womb or the nursery.

These two have no sense of who they are. But they soon will, for the price of growing up into self-consciousness comes with the price of learning how separate and lonely we are from all of creation, from all of each other. No wonder we hunger so.

What is the most common first word a child learns to speak?

No.

No! Staking out themselves. Staking out their identity. Learning who they are. Learning who they are by learn how apart from others they are. The child rebels, as Adam and Eve rebel against God and paradise. Inevitable.

It is inevitable this growing up. And a sign of their self-consciousness is the realization that they are naked. Which brings to them shame and embarrassment. What fun it is growing up, right?. I doubt many of us adults would hop around in the public swimming pool as nakedly unaware as a three year old child. We'd get arrested.

And so the story of growing up continues. And so they must be removed from the garden for their own sake, lest they eat from the tree of life and live forever. How tortuous it would be to live forever in such a state of loneliness and separateness, nonetheless mitigated in waves of appreciative oneness when we find someone with whom we want to be naked and exposed, free and vulnerable.

They leave the garden and enter human reality, where life is purchased in pain – whether the pain and risk of childbirth or the pain and risk of farming and scratching out an existence for those you love. It has its rewards, for outside the garden they 'yada' each other: they get to know each other; they make babies.

Adam and Eve have become us. Yada, yada, yada...

Which is quite okay, because, as Mark Twain wrote in his "Diary of Adam and Eve," Adam decided it was far better to be outside the garden with her than inside the garden without her. Being outside the garden isn't a choice, but how we manage it and who we share it with is a choice.

Sounding and Framing Questions

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Where Did Cain Find His Wife?

Genesis 4: 16-17

The answer is easy if you don't think of the myth of Adam and Eve as a story of global and total creation.

Picture it instead as particular creation. Which really is consistent for me. I've never viewed Jesus as demonstrating universal truth but rather particular truth. Bringing the reality of God's will into each particular situation.

Eden isn't the world. The Garden isn't the world. The Garden is a special place in the land of Eden, suggesting other lands. We already know there is a land of Nod, east of Eden. Even earlier, in chapter 2, the writer talks about other place names: Pishon, Havilah, Cush, Assyria. He mentions rivers out there too. If you have rivers, you have life.

This particular creation is happening there in the garden, God creating *ish* and *isha* special and dear to God. When forced outside the garden, they enter the world of others. Others who already are there. Others, who Cain mentioned in fear and trembling, who might attack him. After all, Cain knew they were out there because he feared for his life when he was to be exiled east of Eden. He killed his brother because he couldn't celebrate his brother's success. Cain thus demonstrates the ancient story of crime, blame, and hidden guilt exposed.

Guilt never is easily hidden. Cain is sent out but still protected – the mark of Cain.

Cain meets them. Cain marries one of them. We never know her name, sadly.

His son builds a city. We travel from gardens to cities. We also end up traveling from killing a brother to one of Cain's descendents boasting how many men he can kill. Progress, I suppose.

Humanity is well on its way to being well on its way away from the Word of God.

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Who Are These Sons of God Fooling Around With Our Women? Did They Really Live For So Long So Long Ago?

Genesis 6: 1-4; 7:11

Nobody likes it whenever strangers start messing with our women. Just try hitting on a pretty girl sitting on a stool at a Cowboy Bar and see what happens when her boyfriend stands next to you.

Really bad news when the sons of God come into the bar. We regular guys have no chance.

In this case, it is the giant Nephilim who are the result of such an unholy and wholly inappropriate union between the sons of God and the daughters of men – never the twain should meet. Keep to your own kind. Kind to kind. They have violated the kind.

Ancient and bizarre folklore this.

Mythologies from around the globe abound of giants and mighty men of renown, fearsome and terrible. Think of Heracles. Think of Polyphemus. Think of Gilgamesh. Think of Hiawatha with his comb and Tadodaho and his head full of snakes. Part of this narrative speaks to our feelings of frailty and feebleness. We moderns don't cope as well as we suppose those in the past may have coped and conquered.

Does every generation question itself based upon the past generations, longingly looking backwards as if yesterday as a golden age? We weigh ourselves and find ourselves wanting.

Which explains the longevity of the Genesis patriarchs. By the Bible's numbers, Adam would have lived long enough to see his great-great-great-great-great-great-grandchild

born. Noah would have seen Abraham born. After Noah there is a rapid decline until average life span settles into our normal range

The closer we were to creation, the longer we lived and the more vital and virile we were. The farther we remove ourselves from creation, from those glorious beginnings, from the golden past when gods roamed the earth, the more we become who we are now: weak and puny and fragile and impotent.

You're a farmer in Greece or Sumeria. You're ploughing your field. You unearth a large thigh bone, bigger than anything you have ever seen on a mere human. Paleontologists today would name it a brontosaurus bone, but the farmer would think of giants or sons of Gods. You ever see a mastodon skeleton? Big hole where the trunk was – or where a cyclops eye might have been.

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Was There Really A Noah's Ark?

Genesis 6: 11-22

Who cares?

I mean that. Really. Who cares?

It's not as if Noah's Ark improved anything.

Why do we keep looking for corroboration for matters of faith? Do you really need proof that the Bible is true? Can anything of faith be proved? Who wants a God that can be proved?

Give me a break.

Even if there were a Noah's Ark, would it really matter? Because Noah's Ark achieved absolutely nothing except to convince God how useless it is to try to improve humanity by getting rid of the bad guys. Even Noah, the best and brightest, left much to be desired. It isn't as if his descendants were much better after the flood.

We write this primer because it is easy to be lazily skeptical about the Bible. Consider how we prettify, fable-ize, and moralize these stories, such as Noah's Ark with pictures of boats, cuddly animals, or desperate people pounding on the door desperate for rescue (well, our Sunday school books usually omit that last image).

What I want is for us Christians to avoid mistaking myth with fiction or truth with history, while at the same time affirming Scripture's infallible majesty and mystery, so that those skeptics who do dismiss the Bible as fable or nonsense will realize how paltry is their understanding of the Bible, how their disbelief and cynicism has more to do with them than the Bible. Their judgmentalism is based on ignorance and flawed presumptions. PREJUDICE.

Watch out for lazy assumptions. They might bite you.

The real issue is competence. Let's be intelligent, accurate, and authentic. Listen to the proclamation of the text, for the Word within the words. What is the meaning and message of the story?

I was told how an eleven year old girl, very precocious, visited a Sunday school. Her teacher told the story of Noah's Ark. The little girl, a math wizard, ran the numbers. She came back and told her teacher that the story didn't make any mathematical sense.

Here's the math. Enough water flooded to float the ark above mountains. Mount Ararat rises 16,900 feet, so we have at least enough water to cover the entire earth 17,000 feet (3.22 miles). A one-square-mile puddle of water a quarter of an inch deep contains 4,344,685.7 gallons of water. Let's raise that level of water to 3 miles high and the dimension of the puddle from one square mile to 197 million square miles, the Earth's surface area. That's plenty of gallons of water, even excluding those gallons displaced by land mass above sea level.

The little girl was invited not to return to Sunday school.

Arrggh! That's exactly the kind of student we want! I don't want young Christians fearful that if you suggest something in scripture is unhistorical their faith in the Bible, like some house of cards, all then comes tumbling down.

Let's ask questions. Let's also avoid jumping to conclusions. We want to know exactly what the text says. If you really read the text about Noah you find some interesting facts. The ark wasn't a boat, having neither propulsion nor means of direction. The ark was the length of a 1 1/2 football fields, 1/2 skinnier than a football field, and 4 1/2 goal posts high. Since bodies take a long time to decompose, did they see the rotting cadavers? What is this talk about people making fun of Noah when the Bible says nothing about mockers? One verse tells how Noah knew in advance why he built the ark. Another text tells how he didn't know until he got in the ark (which tells us we have different authors). One text tells Noah to bring in pairs of animals. Another text tells him to bring in 7 pairs of clean animals and a pair of unclean (which is puzzling because how did Noah know which animals were clean since the Mosaic law and the Levitical codes wouldn't be around for centuries?).

After getting the facts of the text straight, we next ask the 'So What?' questions. We engage the story so the story engages us, spiritually, morally, theologically. We distill and discern the real Noah's Ark. Truth doesn't have to be historical.

For me this becomes a tale of a moral yet chagrined God starting over. Once again it is a perilous new creation, born of a difficult birth, life from death. The ark becomes a cradle in

the center of chaos. Life preserved in the frailest, weakest, darkest, most vulnerable of ways.

It helps to appreciate the Hebrew view of the cosmos. The earth and firmament were but the palms of God separating the world from the roiling, dark chaos threatening all around. Fed up with an evil humanity, God lets it loose. Chaos swirls upward and cascades downward. All is chaos except for this miniature earth, this frail ark of preservation, creation compressed in gopher wood, it too (as is the world) three tiered. The creation that God intended is kept and stored in this chest, surrounded by madness and destruction. Isn't that always the way? De-creation in the hopes of re-creation.

There is a documentary about the origins of humanity called "The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey." It traced our DNA heritage and how these scientists have genetically deduced that humanity nearly was snuffed out numerous times from innumerable threats: starvation, freezing, drought, illness, war, injury, predation. And yet, this tiny, precarious remnant of humans somehow survived to spread out from our origin in the Kalahari Desert into India, Australia, Europe, Mongolia, North American – from the tiniest, merest of possibilities to populate an entire globe. Something divine works to save us. Somehow, despite chaos all around, we make it. Life, as Jurassic Park reminds us, does find a way.

Which maybe is why they called it an ark rather than a boat. The ark in which infant Moses was saved so he could lead his people. The Ark of the Covenant through which Israel was preserved as God's people.

What I find terribly interesting is how the only one who changes in the story is God. It is not as if humanity following the flood is any better than before. They're still a pretty wretched bunch, especially after Noah's son sexually violates him. Noah's Ark is neither cute nor pretty. De-creation in the hopes of re-creation doesn't work out.

So regrets and holocausts don't work even when God causes them. So God renounces holocausts. But something else will work. Not by trying to fix humanity by changing the circumstances, by change from the outside. Change will happen by changing humanity from within, by the God of love and justice working through Abraham and Abraham's children rather than through deluges, lightning bolts, and a brutal God. Noah's Ark sets the stage for the God who will work for our salvation from an entirely new and surprising soulful way.

Through Word rather than wrath.

My Christ already is there.

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Why Would God Want Sodom And Gomorrah Destroyed?

Genesis 19

Not sure God would want destruction but the episode does become a very important object lesson to those hearing the story retold around the campfire or kitchen.

The trouble really began when Lot and Abraham were apportioning out where they would take their clans. Abraham, the patriarch, should have had the first choice but he kindly deferred to his nephew, Lot. Lot looked toward the rugged mountains, then greedily toward the fertile and soft valley. It was a no-brainer. Lot claimed the valley and so led his clan into a soft and verdant life, a life among strangers as well. For down in the valley were the cities where others live and others who also appreciated the cushy and luxurious life of pleasure.

Meanwhile, Abraham led his people into the hills, up into the wilderness, forging them into a tough and hardy people. It is what I learnt from my father and confirmed from experience: kids that learn to do chores do better in life than those who play video games while watching the lawn service mow the lawn.

Down among the cities, Lot's people lost their identity along with their cohesion. They blended into city life, they conformed, they lost their distinctiveness. Lot lost his edge alone with his hold as clan leader. They all lost their bearings. Flint became flabby.

It is more than comparing small town values to big city values. We do have a peculiar prejudice -- that if you want the good honest folk, go to the small towns.

Which many of us who live in a small town realize is a crock and a lie.

I will confess that I've been trying to figure out exactly what are small town values. Could somebody make a list of them for me. Are they really any better than the values you might find, say, in New York City, Chicago, or the Jersey suburbs? Okay, I'll admit it is much nicer to drive around my small town than in Jersey. Is that a value?

What exactly are small town values? Are small town folk really more moral than city folk? Are they really more decent and honest?

In Sodom and Gomorrah's case they are. The urban young men who run around the city all day and night are a pretty wretched bunch. Which brings us to the second object lesson of this episode.

The fault isn't that we have here a city that sets aside a week for Gay Pride parades and waves rainbow flag. Sodom's sin isn't that the young men very fond of musical theatre, whimsical versions of the Little Mermaid and every other gay stereo-type. It has everything to do with violence, inhospitality, domination, and control. We're talking about rape. In the ancient world (and frankly, the modern one too) homosexual rape was a traditional way to accentuate the subjugation of captives, for it was deemed humiliating for a man to be used as a woman. This has been called the "ancient horror of the feminine, to be made inferior as a woman."

The Hebrews, however, held dearly a very different notion of females, despite their very paternalistic faith. Women were sacred. Of God. They were the source of life from God. They were to be valued. Women, by the man's circumcision, participated intimately in the covenant of God. You were never quite sure of your father, but you always could be sure who your mother was.

If you turn the pages of the Old Testament, you will note that the sins of Sodom are described as greed, injustice, inhospitality, excess wealth, indifference to the poor – rampant decadence.

Lot, now a dreadful weak wreck of a man, cowers and shames himself by buckling under to the point of being willing to disgrace his own daughters. He should have stayed up in the hills.

God, fed up, plans to blast them all. Oddly enough, Abraham, a man of character and verve, tries to persuade God to withhold his judgement.

Nope. God destroys. The way the city of Sodom blows up smacks of natural disaster, with a lightning bolt igniting the abundance of pitch and asphalt beneath and surrounding Sodom and Gomorrah – fire and brimstone, smoke and soot like a furnace!

How do we today explain disasters? We might look for a natural cause but how often do we retrospectively seek a superstitious rationale? How often have you heard someone in the midst of a calamity asking: what did I do to deserve this?

For Lot and the rest of his family, disaster and ruin only accumulate. Lot's wife, longing for what was, turns back and pines for what was in violation to God's warning, and is turned into a pillar of salt (there are many salt deposits today in that region which resemble statues, lending themselves to legend). Object lesson number three: the sin of foolish nostalgia, the sin of wanting what was rather than claiming the courage to look ahead and move forward.

Soon enough, hiding in a cave, Lot's daughters despair of having no husbands to help them have children so they get dad drunk and fornicate with their father.

I suppose we get very selective when it comes to Christian Educators deciding which Sunday School lessons to teach our children.

Twisting the knife in deeper, the authors punctuate this tale of woe and pitiful decisions by telling us that the incest-spawned bastards become the eponymous patriarchs for two of Israel's most hated and vilified enemy nations.

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Why Would God Ask Abraham To Sacrifice His Son?

Genesis 22

This one really stinketh.

Some interpreters try to soften this dreadful account by explaining how this is a polemical story drawn to dramatize how God disdains child sacrifice, which was a very real and very ugly and very despicable practice throughout Israel and Canaan.

The old gods demanding human sacrifice. What better gift, though, could you give to such a demanding deity, but your own first born child?

Thank you for the polemic. How wonderfully and awfully nice of God raising a red flag and warning us about killing our kids – no, no, no! But there is more, of course. Symbolical, metaphorical, anagogical, allegorical.

How about: don't we all to some extent have to sacrifice our sons and daughters and give them up, preferably up to God?

How about: if God decrees it, it cannot be bad, it cannot be evil – it must always be a good for it comes from a good God.

How about: aren't we all and each tested in some way or another to be completely obedient to and dependent upon God? Even though there is some textual confusion as to whether or not the child is a lad or a teen, we still have here an Abraham asked to give up everything he hoped for -- giving up even God's original promise and covenant -- out of incredible trust and even more incredible obedience. How, in God's good name, could anything good come of this? But, if it is of God, it must be good even if it destroys your own hopes and crushes your own heart. As if any parent wouldn't die for their child...

A curious hint could also be in how this takes place on a hill that will eventually become known as Jerusalem.

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What Is This About Burning Bushes And Manna?

Exodus 3: 1-6; 16: 14

Let's review the art of Biblical interpretation first.

We begin by getting into the text. What words are used? What is the style of the text? What phrases need special attention? What is the theological, historical, literary context of the passage? Who is the author? Who is the author's audience?

Then we see what we can get out of the text. How do we interpret this passage in light of the whole Bible? How does the doctrinal consensus of the church help you understand this Scripture? Where is Christ proclaimed in this text? How does the rule of love and the rule of faith help you receive meaning from the text? What is the Holy Spirit saying to you? How does it move you? How does it convict you?

Readers of the Bible seek to listen to and discern the KERYGMATIC nature of the passage. It is far more than reading a book for facts and data or entertainment or rules of engagement. It is a living revelation that engages us, hooks us, and hauls us in.

Kerygma is the Greek word for 'proclamation: κήρυγμα.

Whether you hold to a literal or a metaphorical form of interpreting Scripture, both can agree when you go deeper and listen for: 1) what the author is saying; 2) what the Holy Spirit is culling forth.

Burning bushes: So Moses encounters the awful and ineffable God, whose very name disclosed by this episode is enigmatic and teasing: YHWH. The name itself reminds us that God is an action, a spirit, a verb, if you will. Not a noun. Not even a being. The better translations of this word try to emphasize how God is that which is being itself: I AM that which is, I AM that which is is-ness, I AM what is AM...

Go figure. But this name sure steers us away from believing in some ultimate being in the sky, some old man with grey beard – wise and omnipotent. Frankly, I've always

questioned the omnipotence of God, in the sense of God as puppet master controlling our decisions and fates. Who wants that kind of God. That type of God may be well-meaning, but, let's face it, he's annoyingly quixotic and downright bossy

Let's rid ourselves from imagining our God as chess player, marionette master, the cosmic prankster, where we are the pawns, puppets on a string. Come on, now, jump for me. What are we, pets forced to do stupid dog tricks?

Not some Father in heaven in the sense of a big daddy in the sky rewarding or punishing.

Let's stop trying to put the Heavenly Father in a box we can control by how we behave, by incantation and ritual. Okay, I'll play along, if I can get what I want out of the deal. After all, isn't the main goal of my life to bend the world to do my will?

Enough of such superstition.

God is no being. God is no omnipotent genie whom, if we rub the lamp right, will award us our wishes. God is not some big mommy or daddy in the sky who disciplines us when naughty or comes running when we skin are knees and cry for mommy and daddy. God is no being ruling from the outside. God really isn't a god, as we think of gods.

God isn't a being, but being itself. God is no noun, no object. Even those pronouns misdirect us, calling God 'He'. Not a what, but when. God is action. God is the dynamic activity of the ultimate, the divine.

YHWH's essence entering existence through our souls.

A Father in heaven and earth (let's not forget earth), a mother in heaven and earth, ever vulnerable as any parent.

Whenever we look for God outside ourselves we fail [saith Augustine], just as we fail whenever we look for happiness in what God created, in things, rather than in the experience of the living God.

Burning Bush: take off your shoes, come barefoot. Some say the word for bush itself is a pun on the name for the mountain upon which this event takes place, the Hebrew word resembling the word Sinai (and why are so many divine experiences connected with mountains – ponder that).

Other, however, suggest, and this be true, how you can find bushes that ooze flammable sap. Mostly, though, I'll take it as a mystery, full of fire and flame and a word heard without voice in the midst of the ecstatic and overwhelming moment. If you have had such moments when you have been surprised by the divine and taken out of yourself, you know of which I speak.

Same with the manna: a most natural substance. Manna is bug excrement that tastes, not like chicken, but like honey. Come, friends and lovers, and look and see how our natural world is filled with divine responses to our needs and opportunities for our desperation, if we would but look around. Life is precarious and life is a gift.

Caution, however: you cannot hoard what is given. You must depend on it day by day.

Day by day.

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How Could Lamb's Blood Prevent The First Born From Being Killed?

Exodus 12: 21-32

Life always is purchased in blood. Blood always is precious and sacred. More so to the Hebrews, as evidenced in their kosher regulations and Levitical ordinances.

Life purchased in blood. Ask any mother about childbirth. Life purchased in blood and sacrifice. This is one of the most dominant themes pervading the Bible. And in this case, it is coupled with the death of first-borns, another major Biblical theme.

We come to Passover. The lamb is sacrificed. Its blood is smeared by hyssop branch on the lintel of the doors of the Hebrews (hyssop has its own symbolic role in the Bible). This is their secret, for unless there is this blood sacrifice, the Destroying Angel will not pass over your door and spare you and yours, but linger and cause death to you and your family as he will to all of Egypt. Egypt – their oppressors. Egypt – their enslavers.

It is cruel, it is horrible, it is the way the powerless seek rescue and redemption. It is the story of the Hebrews from the beginning. Hope purchased in suffering. Again, a Biblical theme.

Those plagues that preceded this last one? They still happen, whether boils or frogs. Natural calamities are given theological purport, they carry supra-natural freight.

There is a hint as to the primitive origin of this blood sacrifice. Passover (as with so many religious customs) was appropriated and ritualized from ancient practice. Bedouins, well prior to the Egyptian captivity in those pre-scientific days, would at the onset of fertile spring daub their doorways with blood to safeguard their home and protect their livestock from demonic forces that come at night. One animal would die in the hopes that others would live.

Chaos was always threatening. Life always harsh. Success not guaranteed. They had so little they could do about nature's caprice as disease or disaster. Flood, famine, sickness, injury. So few defenses against nature.

Of course, as a superstitious people (an attitude from which, thankfully, we moderns are completely unsullied), they viewed themselves as victims of these gods of wind, fire, nature, sickness, weather. There were many gods. The question was: which one was the strongest, which one needed to be appeased?

The Destroying Angel would visit again, this time as a pestilence against Israel itself (II Samuel 24: 15-17). A plague.

Life always is purchased in blood. Life secured by the death of something. When I became a husband, the bachelor died. When I became a father, the careless fellow I was before died. We gain only through loss.

Is the loss worth the gain?

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How Could Moses Part The Red Sea?

Exodus 14: 21-31

That Moses was thought to have parted the Red Sea was part of the problem and a primary reason Moses wasn't allowed to enter the Promised Land. They celebrate him having parted the Red Sea and saved them. The people credited him with the parting of the Red Sea and saving them, along with the gift of manna, the quails, the water, the rescue from the snakes, with the Ten Commandments, and with their overall success crossing the wilderness. Congratulating him rather than praising God.

Not good. Not good at all.

Time to yank Moses from the limelight. Time for new leadership, lest 'go down' Moses started believing the lie himself. Nobody is indispensable. We're all ice cubes. We're all a stone tossed into a pond. The ripples may ripple for a while, but they eventually dissipate. So does our fame. Nobody is indispensable. Ask any pastor who revisits a former congregation after a decade or two. "Oh, yes, I think I remember you..."

How many of us really remember our great-grandparents? Do you remember their names. Can you recall their achievements, their failures?

Moses becomes famous because he only did what he was told to do. To be honest though, even when told by God to do something, he usually balked. My, that does sound familiar.

For those of you who wish to assume the crossing of the Red Sea took place exactly as Charlton Heston and Cecil B. DeMille depicted it in the movie, "The Ten Commandments," suit yourselves. It's pretty dramatic. This ragtag band of Hebrews -- women and children and old people too -- getting one over on the mightiest and fiercest army of the known world. Charioteers and soldiers washed away to their deaths in the torrent while the huddled refugees gloat in safety. Praise God for our deliverance.

The banal and mundane will take a different tack on this narrative, suggesting that very likely the Hebrews slogged through the delta region, the Reed Sea. Horses and chariots

and armored soldiers couldn't follow them there. Yes, and manna is bug excrement rather than Wonder Bread dropping out of the sky. Boring.

Still, do you remember the symbolism of water as chaos? Out of chaos comes life. This episode is a parallel creation account? Dry land was formed for the chosen people, chaos for those who wish to harm and persecute and limit the potential of God's people. Not that we today in the church ever limit the potential of God's people.

What else about water? What other symbolism? Waters of life? How, as the Apostle Paul wrote, the Red Sea symbolizes baptism, passing through the waters toward new life, new beginnings.

Don't we always have to pass through troubled waters to obtain a chance for life? Ask any birth mother. It always requires a risky crossing over.

It always requires going over to the other side, especially where the water is wide.

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How Can An Ass Talk?

Numbers 22: 21-30

Sure it can.

Asses tend to talk too often.

Sure an ass can talk.

So can Bugs Bunny.

So can Donald Duck.

Disney built a fortune on a talking mouse.

So can the animals in the Aesop fables.

We have Anansi the spider.

The Cherokees had their talking bears and coyotes.

Our more modern fables include Beatrix Potter, AA Milne, and Dr. Seuss.

Please giggle when you read this passage about Balaam and his ass. This is a very funny, laugh out loud, passage. It is a folktale. Don't take it as real. It's a joke.

For between the two, who is smarter? The ass or the prophet-for-hire on his bribed way to curse the Hebrews?

Enjoy the bickering and arguing too, the 'kvetching.' This is good Jewish humor. Good Jewish complaining. The book, "Born to Kvetch," mentions how Jewish prisoners of the Nazi's would, whenever they could, be sneaky and clever and insulting without the guards ever knowing it, what the author contends is the usual Jewish tactic of 'powerless subterfuge.'

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Why Would God Approve Of Genocide?

Deuteronomy 7: 1-5; 20-10

Why would anyone approve of genocide?

Talk about sick!

So why have we bi-polar humans been waging war and committing genocide since the time we humans discovered we could crack someone's skull open with a rock?

Was the common practice of genocide God ordered? God required? God commanded?

Or was it man's self-justification, man caught up in the thralls of exceptionalism? When you are a zealous patriot and convinced God is on your side, you can pretty much justify any horror and any atrocity. We still do.

Those were violent times. It was often kill or be killed. It was survival of the fittest. Chariots. Spears. Shields. Bows and arrows. Swords. Slingshots. Daggers. Javelins. Clubs. Right. What a club...

When we come to this material in the Bible, we compare it with the *Iliad*, with the *Odyssey*, with the *Aeneid*. With the *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu.

Oft overlooked is how the code of "an eye for an eye" was an advancement upon the prior practice of wholesale slaughter and bloodlust. The new code tried to limit the retribution to the wrong-doer only.

Remember also how these works were written hundreds of years after the fact, even centuries. They represent retrospective rationales, the modern people trying to make theological sense of the brutal trauma and complicity of their history. Where is God in all this mess? Where is God in our history, which affirms God is a God within history rather than a spectator God amused or horrified by our doings.

So, even the Bible idealizes and simplifies and rationalizes complex cultural, historical, sociological events. Like us.

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Did They Really Destroy The Walls Of Jericho With Horns?

Joshua 6

Archeology poses a big problem here. Given the dating of the Bible, Jericho already was leveled by the time Joshua and the Hebrews arrived. Matter of fact, there's very little evidence confirming there ever was a Hebrew army of conquest invading, conquering, and claiming title to the so-called Promised Land.

There's a greater body of evidence that the Hebrew people were a combination of outside people migrating into the region and setting up housekeeping with many of the locals. Immigrants. It was more emergence than conquest. But if you are eager and earnest and want to help establish yourself as a distinct nation and exclusive religion, you develop stories to substantiate your claim. And so the Bible paints a portrait of the formation of a special identity:

- ➔ It begins with Abraham as a people called to step forth in faith into unknown territory and experience.
- ➔ Under Jacob they become people of the Twelve Clans, spreading out.
- ➔ By Moses, they become Hebrews, which likely refers to all the refugee people who escaped captivity and migrated into a new land to create a new future.
- ➔ When David becomes king, choosing quite strategically to center his kingdom in Jerusalem where Abraham bowed to Melchizadek and his God Most High, they become the nation of Israel.
- ➔ It takes Ezra and Nehemiah to codify them into Jews.
- ➔ Last and first, a fly fellow from Nazareth named Jesus awakens them and startles them into a universal Judaism, a universal faith tucked up within the Torah and prophecies.

It's a grand story, even without the drama of horns and walls come a tumblin' down.

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Did God Really Stop The Sun?

Joshua 10

We have an interesting question here: can God transcend or at least suspend the laws of nature? Fascinating.

If God can, did God stop the sun in fact and prevent the natural disasters that would follow such a fact? What would happen were God to stop the sun in its course and the moon in its course: "and the sun stayed in the midst of heaven and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day."

If God can suspend natural law, why then doesn't God cure a child dying from cancer?

Or can it be that God enjoys playing with us the way a cat plays with a mouse?

Boy, if God can stop the sun for a battle, no wonder God's seeming indifference for other needs gets me so angry.

Of course, this narrative reflects a pre-Copernican cosmos. The Bible's whole cosmology is scientifically flawed, as we know now, thanks to Galileo and Hubble. Most of the Bible is bad science.

Step back for a second and consider: to most peoples, the sun and moon were objects of worship, themselves deities. Interesting indeed is how the Hebrew Lord governs them. A scriptural way of tweaking their noses.

You also get stones hurling from heaven helping the Israelites fight their enemy. Hailstones?

Key, however, is how this is an ancient song celebrating victory by the God of Battles. Key is how Joshua quotes the Book of Jashur (which we only know about because it is referred to -- there is no extant copy). Joshua is reciting a passage from this unknown book to bolster his position.

In Shakespeare's, "Henry V," the Dauphin keeps repeating the night before the battle of Agincourt, "O would it be dawn."

Let us liken the Joshua passage to the Dauphin's wish, Joshua wishing the sun would stand still so they could continue the battle and the victory, the Lord giving them sufficient time to surprise and defeat their enemy.

It is an expression, hardly a violation of natural law.

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Why Would God Punish Uzzah For Touching The Ark? What is the Ark Anyway?

II Samuel 6: 1-11

Here's another Bible passages we would never use for children's Sunday school.

If you insist on reading the text narrowly, exactly, two-dimensionally, you can easily conclude that our God is horrible, terrible, some kind of tyrant or bully. Hardly a God worth trusting, leaning upon.

I wouldn't believe in such a bully God. I don't.

When you take time to dig and discover the Biblical text's spiritual meaning and get beyond the exact, below the topsoil, you can unearth an epiphany of spiritual diamonds.

Take for instance this pitiful story of Uzzah who, according to the author of II Samuel, gets zapped by God when he tries to prevent the ark of God from toppling over and falling to the ground. They were transporting it into the city of Jerusalem. Wow, that sounds unfair! Poor Uzzah, getting killed by God for trying to protect God's precious box. Mean old God. Cranky old God.

Such is the danger and limitation of ignorant assumptions about the Bible.

Consider this about Uzzah's death...

Number One: God really didn't want his ark of the covenant, which the Hebrews viewed as his throne on earth, fixed in any temple, any city, any place. The ark was meant for the tabernacle, the tent. The ark was meant to be portable.

Spiritual Meaning: Don't fence me in! Who can limit God? When I first conducted worship at a Roman Catholic nursing home, they wouldn't allow me to place the communion plates and trays on their altar, so they equipped me with a rolling kitchen cart.

I thought it delight and far more sacred than some fixed altar (which we Presbyterians reject anyway). I liked the idea of trucking around the sacrament to where the people sat.

Number Two: The better reading of the text is that the big old box and the heavy ox cart fell over and crushed Uzzah after hitting a bump, an obstacle. The word used to describe the cart overturning could mean it really did topple and crush Uzzah.

When we experience a bizarre tragedy, how quick are we to turn to superstition and find a cause? The men tried to take a short cut and it backfired. God to blame? No. It was their own fault for taking a short cut across unpredictable ground.

Spiritual Meaning: There are no short cuts in faith. It always requires us taking the long way round.

Number Three: Why was David bringing the ark into Jerusalem in the first place? He did it for political reasons. He wanted power. He wanted to be recognized as both king of the people and God's own anointed one.

Spiritual Meaning: It's not a healthy idea to use God for your political power grabs.

Number Four: Uzzah and the others were cheating by letting the ark be conveyed by an ox-cart rather than carrying it themselves, which is what they were supposed to do.

Spiritual Meaning: you can't let others carry the presence of God, you got to carry the weight of faith yourself.

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Why Would A Prophet Kill Children With She Bears?

II Kings 2: 23-25

Consider this very weird story of Elisha and the two She-Bears. 42 naughty children greet him one day and start making fun of him by yelling: "Old Baldy, Old Baldy." Elisha gets cranky, scolds them in prayer, and God sends two She-Bears to tear into and maul the children to death.

Here's a fun Sunday school story.

But if you dig for diamonds...

Number One: there are not 42 children but a gang of young men, thugs, gang-bangers.

Number Two: Elisha had arrived, as did his boss Elijah once before him, to challenge their sick idol fertility worship (male and female prostitution) where all this takes place.

Number Three: this gang of bullies, of thugs, despise this prophet because he tells them the truth. They insult him with ugly taunts, they despise his God, they impugn God's honor, they intend to drive him away from their turf, perhaps murder him.

Spiritual Meaning: with the courage of religious conviction, he braces them down – one against a gang -- and then two bears charge into them to drive the gang apart and send them scurrying away. Even bears have more honor than these gang-bangers. Especially She-bears. There is nothing fiercer than a momma protecting her own.

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Why Would God Let Satan Test Job?

Job 1-2

Aside from the beginning chapters, the satan is irrelevant to the story of Job. We give the satan way too much credit. I refuse to capitalize this word and prefer the definite article because it is not a name but an office.

It wasn't until after experience the dualism of the Babylonian and Persian culture, that the Hebrews shifted the satan from an agent of God into a fallen angel bent on opposition to all things godly. John Milton sure nudged this view along with his "Paradise Lost."

Originally, the satan served as God's District Attorney, the name meaning not a personal name but the title for an office called, 'The Adversary.' The Tester.

God, being viewed as plural, is the King of Kings, surrounded by his retinue and host. Angels, meaning 'messengers,' become God's mediums to communicate on earth. Originally, the concept of angel had no being-hood apart from God's being. When I use the descriptor angels as God's flunkies, class members groan. We like the idea of them as having personalities and abilities.

We also abuse the idea of both angels and the reality of children when we speak of dead children as another angel gone to be with God in heaven. I catch the sentiment, but calling our children angels cheats them of their humanity.

So again, given the Persian and Babylonian culture, these angels soon become identifiable as carrying out certain functions, indeed, nearly divine beings themselves. Much later Jewish literature depicts stories of these angels and their roles, as personified warriors for good against evil.

But if God is God, how can anything be opposite God? That question always has nagged me.

Can't, if God is God. Evil opposes humankind, us earthlings, not God. That is because evil comes from us. Sin is the distortion of a good, fractured by the self. If God is the sunlight, then the broken mirrors of our souls, the scuffed and scratched mirrors of our

souls, distort and reduce this light. Horrible deeds are done for the noblest of reasons. Which is why, as my gracious grandma reminded me, there are no evil people only damaged people who do evil things.

On this notion of the TESTING the folktale of Job spins. And it is a folktale, little different any other folktale. You will find similar stories of TESTING among many cultures, Egypt notwithstanding. Well, only the prologue and the epilogue of Job are part of the classic folktale of a man who suffers unjustly at the hands of the tester, the adversary, but who remains faithful and stalwart and is justly rewarded. Good for Job. Not so good for his killed kids.

Of course, that tale is all stuff and nonsense if you read the material between prologue and epilogue where Job, ever impatient and angry, shouts out at God to vindicate him. Job even demands that God give an accounting of God's own self to him. Meanwhile, his well-meaning but officiously orthodox friends, try to get Job to examine his life, to repent, to praise god, to be humble and appropriately contrite. If you are appropriately contrite, you might just appease the almighty Deity. They advise him, they counsel him, they point their finger at him with all the traditional and familiar crap of religion without ever bothering to listen to Job or at least wait with him in his unjust suffering.

Job is a story of religion versus faith.

That Job's suffering is unjust is exactly the point of the entire middle portion of the Book of Job. This material, a series of agonizing dialogues, reminds me of the libretto of an opera, a very modern opera sandwiched between the very formulaic and primitive prologue and epilogue. The opera portion echoes the despair of Ecclesiastes, for both works are haunted by unjust and unfair suffering. Both question and challenge the bankrupt orthodox view that the righteous are rewarded and the unrighteous are punished.

Really? How's that working out for you?

Sure didn't for Job.

Suffering: nature causes it, we choose it, or else we suffer from the choices of others. God, being God, cannot cause suffering.

In the opera portion of Job, God finally concedes to Job's demand for a court hearing of his complaint, which God will allow only when Job can explain the mysteries of creation. Why an ostrich with feathers cannot fly. Why do the stars shine? Why does the tide stop where it does?

If Job can answer these whys then God will explain why there is suffering, why there always will be unfairness and injustice.

But Job can't answer. There are no whys. There is only learning to figure out how to live and love and believe without understanding why there is pain and suffering and loss.

God basically tells Job there is no answer.

But there is God's presence.

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Did The Hip Bone Connect To The Leg Bone In The Valley Of Dry Bones?

Ezekiel 37

How can you not start singing?

*Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,
Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones,
Now hear the word of the Lord.*

*Toe bone connected to the foot bone
Foot bone connected to the heel bone
Heel bone connected to the ankle bone
Ankle bone connected to the shin bone
Shin bone connected to the knee bone
Knee bone connected to the thigh bone
Thigh bone connected to the hip bone
Hip bone connected to the back bone
Back bone connected to the shoulder bone
Shoulder bone connected to the neck bone
Neck bone connected to the head bone
Now hear the word of the Lord.*

*Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.
Now hear the word of the Lord.*

Fun, fun, fun.

With a terrifically fun message too.

When Ezekiel preaches and prophecies, he's prophesying and preaching to a people who have very little hope in their hearts. Sagging hearts. Listless hopes. Once again, they are captives in a foreign land. They have been slaughtered, their babies tossed off walls, their homeland ruined.

It is amazing how many times the Hebrew people have suffered at the hands of others. Not that the Hebrews did themselves any favors, given how corrupt their own leaders had been.

Now they serve in Babylon. Humiliated. Burdened. They are not their own.

Worse, Babylon is a pretty nifty place in which to live. It is beautiful, it is magnificent. It is filled with culture, science, great literature, great art, powerful and exciting religions. Here in Babylon they marvel upon the Code of Hammurabi, the inspiration for what will be called the Ten Commandments. It is a land tempting and enticing and seductive, especially since the Hebrews lost the war, which must mean the Babylonian gods are mightier and truer.

Gods back in Bible days were like National Football League franchises. The best team wins and the population joins the bandwagon to cheer them on and buy their souvenirs.

So why should any Hebrew stick with their loser YHWH God? Especially since their loser YHWH God lacks the appeal of the Babylonian gods. Their YHWH is stern, demanding, personal – their gods are fun. Let's chuck it all in and become like them.

Which leads to Ezekiel saying: "Don't, for there's hope yet to come."

The valley of dry bones represents a new brand of literature called apocalyptic literature. It is startling, somewhat mystical and magical, certainly graphic. Apocalyptic literature is like a thrilling video game replacing the board game of Monopoly, except Apocalypse means a disclosing, a revealing – the lurid, graphic, dramatic images convey meaning and message rather than going for jolts.

From destruction, Ezekiel paints, our people will rise up from the ashes and death and come together again. We will be revived, resuscitated, restored.

Punchline? All of this happens only via the word of God. Only the word of God truly animates us and brings us together. O hear the word of the Lord!

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What Is Hell And What Is Heaven?

Isaiah 66: 1

Matthew 5: 22-29

We really don't get around to hell until the New Testament, at least the torment kind of hell promoted by church propaganda through the centuries, mostly inspired by Enoch (an intertestamental work of literature). Enoch, reflecting the trauma of Babylonian exile and the dualism of Persian mythology, paints the picture of the wicked punished by a lake of fire and the righteous rewarded by heavenly bliss.

It does help, doesn't it, to threaten miscreants to get their act together and behave like decent people. Maybe. Toe the line! Time out and sit in the corner! Behave or be sent to the principal's office! Wait till your father comes home and then you're really going to get a spanking. What the carrot won't encourage, the leather strop just might discourage.

It helps to worry people that they – sinful and misbegotten wretches -- might not be able to earn their way into heaven. So we paint (or draw lots of cartoons) all those images of Peter at the Pearly Gates with his thick ledger in front of him. This is your life. Of course, as a comedian once quipped, since when did heaven become a gated community?

Plus, how can anyone be good enough anyway to earn heaven and gain admittance.

Hell isn't real big in the Old Testament, excepting for those references to Sheol and Hades, which, akin to Greek mythologies, are places of shade and shadow, hollow and empty. Later, Hebrew theology got influenced by the Babylonians and Persians. If you go back to the time of the Patriarchs, none of this is what they believed. There was no afterlife. When Hebrews died, they simply were gathered up with their fathers. Quite literally. They'd place the corpse on the shelf, wait for the decay, then gather up the bones and place them on the pile of the other bones who have preceded you.

Heaven is very popular in the Old Testament. It is what they saw when they looked up: at night pinpricks of light above and during the day the inverted blue bowl that separated them from the waters of chaos beyond. Heaven was the realm above, the realm of the divine -- airy, light, bright. It was where the smoke of the sacrifices and incense would

ascend. They were the only things that could ascend, except birds. It was the region beyond the material world.

Their cosmology was essentially a plate with a bowl covering it. Below the plate of earth, the waters of chaos pulsed. Above the heavens the waters roiled, every now and then pouring down through windows in the copper blue sky.

It is Jesus who spoke about hell, often. Matter of fact, we can produce a photograph of hell. It is called *gehenna* by Jesus. It is located southwest of Jerusalem. It stretches, oddly, from the foot of Mount Zion. In periods of Old Testament history, it was the place where infants were sacrificed to Molech. A place of an idolatrous cult. The Jews abhorred the place. They cast into it all manner of refuse – even the dead bodies of animals along with the unburied and executed criminals. *Gehenna* is where Jesus was supposed to get dumped. Fires were kept burning to consume the refuse and keep the air from becoming contaminated. It became known as “*Gehenna* of Fire.”

Some suggest, myself included, that Molech still lives and we still sacrifice our children to Molech.

It remains interesting how when Jesus warns about *gehenna* he’s usually talking to all the good and righteous people. When he talks about heaven (usually in terms of the kingdom of God), he’s talking to all the bad people.

In other word, neither heaven nor hell are places. They are relationships.

Heaven means being part of a communion of divine love, belonging to God.

Hell means you are apart and alienated -- you get only yourself.

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Did Jesus Have Brothers And Sisters?

Matthew 13: 53-58

We could wish the text made it clearer about Jesus' family life. Instead of saying...*Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?* ⁵⁶*And are not all his sisters with us?*

I wish Matthew had written...*Is not his mother called Mary? And are [not these Mary's other sons] James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?* ⁵⁶*And are not all his sisters with us?*

There are some artful, indeed, gymnastical ways to explain this reference to Jesus' siblings.

Some have argued they are his step-brothers and sisters. Joe had a first marriage and these kids are from that first wife.

Well, not too sure about that...nothing about it in the Bible.

Some have argued this is a blip of a reference to his spiritual brothers and sisters, as when Jesus said:

*For whoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven,
the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.*

– *Matthew 12:50*

Well, not too sure about that... why then are all the neighbors talking about mom and dad? The neighbors know this family very well.

Some have tried to suggest the words 'brother' and 'sister' can also be more generically translated as 'cousin.'

Well, not too sure about that. The Greek word used for brother and sister are the same word for natural siblings, just with feminine and masculine endings: *aldephus*. The word for cousin is a much different word altogether.

These fellows – James and Joseph and Simon and Judas and the unnamed sisters -- are *adelphus* the same way my two brothers and two sisters and I are siblings – all five of us have shared the same *delphus* -- *delphus* means womb. Thanks, mom.

Plain sense? These are Jesus' brothers and sisters by blood and womb.

Besides, what excellent lessons might it say when we say how Jesus grew up in a normal, thriving, family? Doing the stuff that family does. Eating together, working together. Telling the family stories. Teasing each other. Big brothers picking on little brothers. Mary scolding them all. Mary showing the girls how to bake. Dad giving the boys extra chores. Mary drying their tears. Dad stepping back to let them cut that piece of wood by themselves.

Frankly, the unbiblical view that Mary lived an abnormal life with her husband sabotages God's special fondness for the essential gift of family and family life.

Where would we be without family?

Family is, for better or for worse, from the moment we get squeezed out into this world, how we become who we are. At least until we exercise critical analysis of our beliefs and behaviors (if we ever do).

Sounding and Framing Questions

1. *What questions arise in your mind about the selected text or texts? What do you want to ask God? What do you want to ask the author?*
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Where Is The Trinity In The Bible?

Matthew 28: 19

You'll be hard pressed to find the word 'Trinity' anywhere in the Bible. Yet, our branch of Christianity affirms that we are Trinitarians rather than Monotheists. How can this be?

The above passage provides some guidance as to why I conclude most worship services of worship with this benediction: *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

Though, ever since studying my Julian of Norwich, I've been prone to add some words, to it -- prepositions that make all the difference (theology, for all its intimidation, basically comes down to prepositions):

*From the Father
Through the Son
In the Holy Spirit
Your Maker, Lover, Keeper*

The Trinity.

We also will find plenty of references to the Father in Heaven, along with a whole bundle of other titles. We have the Word (aka, Logos) used throughout the Bible, with the New Testament identifying this with the Son of Man, Son of God, Son of David (aka, Jesus the Christ). And we have numerous references to the gift of the Spirit equipping and empowering and inspiring a variety of persons and groups. .

After all, if God the Father is spirit, invisible, eternal, how the deuce are we supposed to experience and understand God, unless God-ness is somehow made intelligible and communicated to us in ways we can perceive and conceive. The Trinity isn't how we should describe God's essence and eternal being, it is better appreciate as how God-ness reaches out toward us.

Try these exercises on for size and see if they help produce a Aha! Moment, when you shout out: Aha! I get it (just before you lose it). Damn fleeting it be...

Exercise One: The Shoelace Trinity

Write down instructions on how to tie a shoelace.

Next, choose someone and show them the pair of sneakers. Using your instructions, read to them how to tie the shoelace. They must follow your instructions to the letter.

Evaluate how successful you were in telling them how to tie a shoelace.

Would it be better to show them how?

Consider how you learnt to tie your shoelaces. Did someone tell you or show you or both?

Okay then, so what does this have to do with the Trinity?

It sure is easier when we are shown.

Exercise Two: The Love Trinity

Does your mother or father love you?

Can you prove it?

Take a moment here to define what you mean by "love."

How do you know your mother or father loves you?

What are ways they show their love for you?

How does it feel when they show their love for you?

What do you do in return when they show their love for you?

Okay then, so what does this have to do with the Trinity? How about: how the quality of love, otherwise known as love-ness cannot be known (yada) unless the concept, the idea of love-ness takes form and is communicated? When communicated it is understood, appreciated, responded to. Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

Exercise Three: The Trinity as Adverb

Remember: God is a verb. So, instead of asking, “Who is the Trinity?” or “What is the Trinity?” try changing your language, especially your relative pronouns and adverbs. How different might we discern the work of the Trinity if we think of the following:

God, acting toward us as the Father, is who
God, acting toward us as the Son, is how
God, acting toward us as the Holy Spirit, is when

Exercise Four: The Trinity as Yeast

Bakers today use packets of yeast. In the days of yore they used yeast taken from the master loaf. All the fullness of the yeast from the master yeast would be in the portion taken to activate the leaven of the new loaf.

Exercise Five: The Economic (Dynamic) Trinity

Here is my favorite: The source is the Sun. The Sun expresses itself through sunlight. The consequence is warmth and life.

Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

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Why Would Jesus Get Angry At A Fig Tree?

Mark 11: 13

Fig trees pop up throughout the Bible. Throughout the Old Testament, they symbolize peace, their broad leaves providing welcome shade. The shade of the fig tree often was used like a chapel for prayer and contemplation. A personal space for private devotions. In the New Testament there is the parable of the Fig tree, which is bookended by Jesus getting angry at a fig tree. His anger is more the pique of a temper tantrum.

For the Hebrew, prosperity meant having a healthy fig tree and plenty of figs.

What makes you feel prosperous?

Once upon a time, my wife and I use to consider ourselves sitting in the lap of luxury if we had a ready supply of postage stamps.

I prefer my figs as Newtons. I haven't quite acquired the taste for raw figs. But the Hebrews loved figs. More than a delicacy, figs were staples. A blessed, prosperous man was one who could boast of a fig tree in the middle of his garden, there to provide, like a protective umbrella, shade for the vines and other crops. Nutritious they are, plus wonderfully shady with their big, broad leaves providing also an outdoor study, so to speak, a cool place for private meditation. The Apostle Nathaniel meditates under a fig tree when he is invited to meet Jesus. Fig leaves were used to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve. The tree in the Garden in the land of Eden was likely a fig tree, not an apple tree.

The added bonus: figs were the source for a medicinal salve. A fig tree just seemed to tell a man that God favored him. Peace and prosperity and blessings.

So we turn to this parable of a fig tree. But in this story the landlord was none too happy about his fig tree. For three years he waited for it to mature. For an additional three years he waited for the fruit to turn ripe and thick.

But this tree failed to produce. A user. A slug-a-bug. A waste of good soil. Unproductive. Barren, sterile, and disappointing. Worse, fig trees demanded a lot from the soil. Fig trees suck up a lot of moisture from the soil, thus depriving the vines and vegetables planted around it.

An early Hebrew folktale, predating Christ by about 500 years, spoke about a barren fig tree. In the story of Ahiqar (a wisdom book from the fifth century BC) these words are told:

The gardener has a tree standing near water but it bore no fruit. He resolves to cut it down. But the tree objects, and pleads for the gardener to transplant it then if it doesn't bear fruit, he can cut it down for firewood. The gardener replies, "When you stood by the water you bore not fruit, how then will you bear fruit if you stand in another place?" He then cut the tree down.

Jesus knew this folktale. He retells it with a spin.

What does it mean to be a real church, a church grieving enough, sad enough, loving enough to confess our barren branches.

...confessing that we as a Presbytery diddle with resolutions and try to police clauses in the Book Order while too many children suffer and thirst and hunger...

This I confess.

...confessing that we are more interested in enshrining the Bible than in listening to the Word...

This I confess.

...confessing that we are more interested in proving our doctrines right than in following Jesus...

This I confess.

...confessing that we are more interested in success than in service...

This I confess.

...confessing that we are more interested in Christianity than in Christ.

This I confess.

....confessing we produce bitter fruit, or produce only leaves that fall to the ground in the slightest wind, when sweet figs are desired...

In Ahiqar's story the tree had it's chance. It didn't do the job. It's gone. Cut up and out of here.

Jesus' story starts off the same: barren, sterile tree, judgement, a disappointed landlord. Yet in Jesus' story there is the gardener. He does the unusual. He intercedes for the tree. He takes responsibility for it. "Please, give it another chance by giving me a chance at it." A second chance. The gospel of second chances. Of course, you might note the warning that there's no guarantees of third or fourth chances.

Wolves do not give second chances. Wolves go for the throat every time. Humans sometimes give second chances. I've received several in my day from friends who didn't give up on me.

When did someone not give up on you? When did you refuse to give up on someone else? Or when did someone give up on you?

Jesus, well now, Jesus knows how to be merciful. Jesus keeps on trying with us. A little tender loving care here. A little manure (dung, koprion) there. Let me work the soil, loosen it, and let's see what happens. Let me get dirty. Let me see what my skill can yield. I can confident my labor, my sweat, and skills can turn it around. I can try a little more. I don't like giving up on my fig trees.

Neither does Jesus give up on us. There's fruit yet to be produced. He see potential still where the world sees none. He does the hard work. He has the patience. He has hopes for us yet. But it takes shovel work. Hard mattock work. Hot sun work. He's going to try to earn it for you. He's going to give it his best for us.

The gospel of second chances. But not the gospel of third or fourth chances.

There's a thought when it comes to charity.

Anyhow, somewhere along the line, even if you are a church or a denomination (or maybe especially if you call yourself a church) you've got to start producing some sweet Jesus fruit.

If we don't, then Jesus has a right to curse us. Not out of petulance but grief.

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Okay Now, How Can A Virgin Become Pregnant?

Luke 1

By her ear.

Yours too. That is the Christian organ of procreation. Maybe we should order T-shirts for everyone saying on the front: 'Baby Jesus,' with an arrow pointing toward our guts. Jesus in us. Well, the bellies for us men. Wombs naturally for the women. Jesus in us. By spirit, however. Which is good, because I'm pretty certain I wouldn't be so agreeable to giving birth as was my wife. I didn't mind my contribution, but I don't think I could have handled the incubation.

I may say I cannot conceive, but now I can!

We all are able to become pregnant with the Son of God (sonship, by the way, being an office where the deputized agent named 'son' represents the authority of the boss named 'father'). We all can go through the stages of Mary's pregnancy when the announcement is made: her disquiet at the news (she was troubled), her reflection (she considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be), her inquiry (how can this be, since I have no husband?), her submission (I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word), resulting in her merit.

According to your word...

Jesus' conception has nothing to do with obstetrics or gynecology. It has everything to do with Mary and all Christians being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit (the spirit overshadows and, bingo, new life begins inside out). The reality of Christ grows within her and becomes flesh, God-ness incarnate, by the word. The word creates reality, creates life, the word brings forth the new humanity, the word connects us, the word lets us know each other, the word creates.

Great Christian artists have depicted this for centuries by Mary reading a book or by a baby coming down a tube into her ear at the time of the annunciation. So that's what happens when you read!

What also is worth noting is how young and virginal she was.

For, in all the previous Biblical marvelous births (Samuel, Isaac, John) it was to old women well past the point of procreation. Their wombs dry and barren. How extraordinary! In Mary's case, she's fertile, she's young, she's vibrant, her womb ruddy and ready. She's supposed to get pregnant. How wonderfully ordinary is this conception.

Second, sorry nuns, monks, priests. I realize it may help focus you but in the Bible virginity is a curse to the Hebrews. Women don't want to remain virgins. They want to be loved. They want flesh in them. What good is virginity? The references in the Old Testament about virginity refer to it as a calamity and a sorrow because the men have all been killed and the young women will remain virgins, unmarried, bereft, prevented from the fulfilling joy of becoming mothers and grandmothers.

When Amos shouts (5: 1), "Fallen, no more to rise is the virgin Israel," it is a prophecy of sorrow and lamentation, for now virgin Israel will never produce children, never be loved.

In Mary, God can, by the poetical power of the Word, smile at her virginity and make her the mother of Jesus.

And the Word becomes flesh and still dwells among us.

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Was Jesus Really Born In A Stable?

Luke 2: 1-21

Maybe it is time for us to display accurate with our Christmas nativity displays. My perverse side twinkles at the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon where Calvin added a model army tank to the nativity scene because it made it appear realistic. There's other ways we can be more authentic.

Sorry Hallmark. Sorry just about every Christmas carol. We owe our Christmas images more to Francis of Assisi than we do Luke's Gospel.

Why do our nativity scenes include barn animals, shepherds, and Magi bearing gifts, all there to adore Mary's first-born child (which to us Protestants hints that there's going to be a few more down the road conceived by Mary and Joseph the good old fashioned amorous way)?

Despite the fact that Luke says nothing about the Magi and that Matthew remains silent about shepherds, we may calculate that the Magi and shepherds never were present at the same time. It may be an attractive and socially inclusive image but it sadly is unbiblical. The Magi showed up later, likely as late as two years later bearing their symbolic gifts: frankincense for a priest, myrrh for death, gold for a king.

What about this Star of Bethlehem?

Come on, get real: stars don't slide across the sky like giant spotlights.

Remember, the Magi were astronomers. They also represent the fulfillment of the prophecies that even gentiles (foreigners) will worship the God to be manifested in the flesh of this new boy named Jesus. A strong case for this star is how an extremely rare triple conjunction of Jupiter (star of Marduk the supreme god) and Saturn (star of the king) took place three times in May, October, and December, finally joined by Mars (the star of the west, of Syria-Palestine, the star of war) in the constellation of Pisces (the constellation of wisdom, life, creation) that took place in 7 BC (something about retrograde motion and the kind of stuff Neal deGrasse Tyson could better explain).

Our Christmas cards and carols portray Mary and Joseph entering Bethlehem unable to find lodging. No vacancy!

As legend goes, this desperate couple gets rebuffed at every inn until some innkeeper (or his wife) takes pity on them and permits use of the rude stable out back.

Did they really arrive while she was suffering contractions? How long had Mary and Joseph been in Bethlehem before Mary went into labor? Did they arrive in the wee hours? The text says, "While they were there the time came for her to be delivered..."

Friends, they already had arrived, already settled in. Bags unpacked. They probably were living in Bethlehem for weeks, perhaps months.

A Palestinian Christian becomes baffled by our saccharine and fanciful depictions of the Christmas story. There's absolutely no way Mary and Joseph would have been refused lodging. Why? First, good Jews never slept in inns. Those were places where unclean Gentiles stayed. Second, good Jews stayed with family. Even if the hosts had to sleep on the street or with neighbors, they would have made certain Mary and Joseph were housed and welcomed. There are few virtues more important in the Bible than hospitality. Besides, Zechariah and Elizabeth, (Mary's cousin) lived just eight miles from Bethlehem. If Joseph and Mary couldn't find a place to stay with Joseph's family in Bethlehem, they could easily have moved in with them, as Mary already had done several months before.

I believe Joseph got a young and pregnant Mary out of Nazareth right away so she would avoid being endangered by the neighbors. He sent her to stay with cousin Elizabeth. Cuckolded Joseph faced the brunt of the scandal until he came and got her, then they slipped over to the next town to stay with his family. Only later did they marry.

Which bring us to the line, "*And laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*" What's a manger? Often we mistake the manger for a stable or barn when it means a feeding trough.

Consider: mangers were found inside their homes. Go to Israel or Jordan today and you'll see them. The first floor of your average Bethlehem home, nestled snug against each other like puppies, consisted of one large room divided into a lower section and a higher section. The lower section was at ground level, the entrance level, where during winter the family's few animals would find shelter at night and be fed. The home served as the barn for their livestock. The other half of the room was raised about 18 inches or more above the lower level. On this level the family worked, slept, cooked, and ate their meals. This was the common room, the kitchen, if you please. In such homes, the manger often would be

carved into the raised platform near the edge, convenient for the animals to feed. Being a trough, it forms a lovely crib.

What's the connection then between the manger and the inn, that baby Jesus was placed in the manger because there was no room for them in the inn? The difference between fancy and fact comes clear when we realize Luke uses two different words when talking about inns. Eight chapters later he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan and how the Samaritan takes the mugged man to the inn (*pandoxeion*). Here is your Pine Barn Inn. Rooms for rent. But that is not the word Luke used in the birth story (*katalumati*). Why? Because that word connotes a guest room.

A guest room? Of course. Homes in Bethlehem would expand as families expanded, adding rooms where they could. Here's the background to Jesus talking about how in his Father's house there are many rooms (John 14). The young man, after receiving permission to marry, would start building his addition to his father's house. When ready, he would bring his bride to his house: *"in my father's house there are many rooms..."*

During warm weather, mom, dad, and kids, would sleep on the flat roof of their home. Visiting family would sleep in these guest rooms. Odds are Jesus was born in the warm spring because those shepherds and sheep were out in the fields at night (grazing outdoors rather than fed by trough). Our appreciation for the birth of Jesus increases when we paraphrase the verse as: *"And Mary laid him in the feeding trough near the kitchen because other family members already were occupying the guest room."*

Now we can identify those to whom the shepherds made known the angelic message. Luke writes, *"...they made known what had been told them, and all who heard it were amazed..."* In other words, there are a bunch more folks involved in this birth than merely mom, dad, and animals. Who were they? They were uncles, aunts, cousins, maybe a grandma or two.

So what would my revised and authentic nativity display look like? Forget the mystical one invented by St. Francis. Forget this popular and unbiblical infatuation with stables, homelessness, and rejection. I'd put baby Jesus where he best belongs: in a crib inside a happy kitchen, in the middle of our warm, bustling, and common lives, surrounded and welcomed by loving family members and friends.

Sounding and Framing Questions

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Did Jesus Really Turn Water Into Wine?

John 2: 1-11

Today's passage ranks right up there as one that if you don't bother to wade in and appreciate the meaning of the text, it can become an excuse to dismiss the Bible as ridiculous or antique or superstitious or a clever Las Vegas act.

Today's story often is the butt of jokes:

A Lutheran minister is driving down to New York and he's stopped in Connecticut for speeding.

The state trooper smells alcohol on his breath and then he sees an empty wine bottle on the floor, and he says, "Sir, have you been drinking?"

The minister says, "Just water."

The sheriff says, "Then why do I smell wine?"

And the minister looks down at the bottle and says, "Good Lord, He's done it again!"

So let's wade in. The story is a much more than Jesus kind enough to spare the bridegroom from becoming embarrassed because he's run out of wine before the party's over. It is much more than Jesus the magician. It is much more than Jesus minding his mama when she tells him to do something.

We step into the story and want to listen to what the author is suggesting, proclaiming, the meaning within the story. We enter the story. Imagine what it would be like if we were there.

And it is a story. Pretty dramatic story.

Matter of fact, let's listen to it as a parable. What is a parable? It is a story that demands a personal response, an invitation. Here we are given an acted out parable, telling us something about God and Jesus, thus telling us something about ourselves, depending on how we respond to the parable.

If we respond by dismissing it as stuff and nonsense, that says a lot about us.

If we respond, however, by glimpsing the meaning and message, well now, thank you for taking the time to appreciate a beautiful story about who you are, about who God is in you, about how the sacred works through you.

How bland to miss the message in the author's mind.

Newness. Transformation. Caterpillar becoming butterfly. Of course, cocoons are required for butterflies to become butterflies.

In fact, this is a visual dramatization of what in the other gospels is a saying. John was more visual learner than auditory learner.

The other Gospels tell about Jesus. John shows Jesus in action.

What saying does this passage dramatize?

How about: you cannot put new wine in old wineskins. The new wine, bubbly away, fermenting away, will burst the old worn out, dried out bags. You need new wineskins to handle what is taking place.

The reality whom we call Jesus is changing us all into something new. The way of God is not just for some but for all. Belief becoming vibrant life in the spirit.

What Jesus brings is something far more than merely tinkering with the old. Adjustments, corrections, moving deck chairs, without elemental change. So what? If a cannibal uses a knife and fork, does that make him any less a savage? If a drunk drinks out of Waterford Crystal, does that make her any less of a drunk?

Newness. Transformation. Caterpillar gaining wings.

Where in your life have you experience this? Take time today to share your story with someone.

Back to the story. So, what happens? Water into wine. Really good wine.

Specifically, from waters of purification. Required in Jesus' day by the law and rituals of the day for the ritual cleansing of hands and feet so they would be worthy of attending. The water representing the law. Which Jesus doesn't reject. Not as if he tells them to dump

the water out of the jars. No. But when wine is needed, the water becomes something better. Time for a change. Time for water to enjoy becoming fulfilled, its potential released. Water to wine. Something fine. Sublime.

Water to wine. Law to grace. Mere Judaism, mere religion, into a fermented life in God. A life that brings delight to the party.

Obedience to willing love. Obligation to wanting to

Same as marriage. Never a matter of needing to, always a matter of wanting to...not needing her; wanting her... Or him.

And how much wine?

120 gallons. Your average wine bottle is 0.75 litres, which is 0.20 of a US gallon. A little arithmetic and my pencil makes 120 gallons out to be 600 bottles of wine.

Nice wine cellar.

By the way, there's a scroll that Jesus would have read, he and all the others hoping for salvation and deliverance, them eager to throw off the attitudes that trap and oppress you, them eager to reclaim the heart of faith that pulsed in Abraham. It was one of those scrolls that were popular between the time of the Old Testament and the New Testament. A writing called Baruch.

Baruch sings about what will happen when God sends the deliverer (messiah) to the people. How it will be a new age. People will so love God and so love their neighbor, that the new age of the divine, when heaven and earth become one, will be experienced fully.

Christian unity when denominations act civil? Okay, that might be nice. Or unity of us and the divine, heaven and earth? Fantastic!

What will be one of the signs of the new age? How will we know? What should we look for?

Well, according to Baruch, look to your vineyard. When heaven and earth blend and unite, every vine will produce 1,000 branches. Every branch will produce 1,000 clusters. Every cluster will produce 1,000 grapes. And every grape will produce (drum roll please) 120 gallons of wine.

Now what do you imagine the teller of this story of wine and water, water and wine, is saying?

120. The new age is here, right next to you!

A parable about possibilities.

And what occasion this? A wedding.

Throughout the Bible weddings are the most consistent and beautiful image of the procreative relationship between God and God's people. God marries us. Intimacy. Yada, yada, yada...

Promises and vows and rings and things.

And then a party. Because this is really good.

A sidebar to all the miracles in John's Gospel: they very rarely convince anyone to believe in Jesus. If anything, they are reasons some of the big boys get angry at Jesus. What really changes people is not what they see, but what they hear.

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Is Jesus The Only Way To God?

John 14: 1-7

God's path: it is all a stepping out, never quite certain where it will lead...

Now, what about this Jesus?

Is following Jesus the only path to heaven? Only Christians allowed? And only the right kind of Christians?

Is that what this famous passage from John's Gospel declares?

I always do get a bit itchy when heaven becomes too much a reward, or being denied it, a threat.

Are all paths to God the same, such as those offered by other religions? Or have we gotten the whole thing backwards. Maybe it is not about us seeking and finding God, but how the divine truth finds us.

So, can we please avoid using this text as a club to knock on the head non-Christians, like whack-a-mole? Sorry, no ticket, no admission, and only we know where you get your ticket punched.

Can we please find in this text a comfort for those who trust and hope? That's how Jesus meant it, speaking as he was to his friends, preparing himself and them for the cross.

So, who is Jesus? We who call ourselves Christians affirm he is the revelation, the embodiment, the incarnation of:

Agapic
love

Justice

Compassion

Humility

Truth

Faithfulness

Charity

Everything
universally

divine!

Yeah, that is a pretty good way: "I Who Am This -- am the way and the truth and the life."

It is personal, the result of being drawn in relationship with this person Jesus. Like marriage. You never can be quite totally certain where marriage will lead but you sure know who you want to walk with, even when this life isn't so much a journey as it is bumper cars.

If you have problems with this affirmation that Jesus is the way and the truth and the life, try living according to everything opposite this Jesus:

Hatred

Unfairness

Apathy

Pride

Falsehood

Fear

Selfishness

Everything
materialistic
and worldly
and temporary!

Yeah, I get Jesus. Now I can buy that.

Of course, it doesn't matter if I buy it or not.

The path of:

Hatred

Unfairness

Apathy

Pride

Falsehood

Fear
Selfishness
Everything
materialistic
and worldly
and temporary!

Or the path of:

Agapic
love
Justice
Compassion
Humility
Truth
Faithfulness
Charity
Everything
universally
divine!

You tell me which way makes heavenly sense.

Is Jesus the only way to God? Heck no.

But Jesus sure is the best way for God to come to me.

Sounding and Framing Questions

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How Can We Be Resurrected If We Have Been Cremated?

I Corinthians 15

Atheists might wish to argue that God has being because we (weak and benighted souls) created God. People of faith flip this around: we have our being because God is being itself. Some people of faith will suggest that though we cannot prove the existence of God (nor would we want to be able to prove God) we can give daily evidence for the reality and let the chips fall where they may.

That we have yearnings for eternity, for freedom, for something sacred beyond us just might be an indication that there is something out there, for why else would we hunger and thirst for something if it weren't real? Why do we ache so?

Some will suggest that the mere fact that we can reason and think and can realize we are human – this reality of self-consciousness – again demonstrates that we are more than mere animals who have no sense that they are animals. My dog doesn't know he is a dog.

What does this all have to do with resurrection?

The familiar yet facile cliché does help: “we are not bodies with souls, we are souls with bodies.”

Cremation: a perfectly sensible way to dispose of our mortal remains. I plan on it. We have a memorial garden next to our sanctuary where we have so far interred about twenty members. It is where I will someday be poured.

Two undertakers once laughed telling rookie me years ago how cremation just speeds up what nature's going to do anyway.

I really don't think cremation will hamper resurrection, any more than it would hamper those blown to bits, incinerated in the Twin Towers, drowned in the ocean and nibbled up by fish.

God is God and that is good. And we are not God – we need to remember that, often.

When Paul writes about his belief about what happens after we die, Jesus is the evidence and the template. Paul uses some specific words in reference to us mortals.

There the flesh, in Greek '*sark.*' As in sarcasm, the 'tearing of flesh.'

There is the spirit, in Greek '*pneuma.*' As in a pneumatic pump.

There is the body, in Greek '*soma.*' As in a somatic condition.

Flesh is flesh and flesh decays, withers, returns to dust, returns to the earth from which we came. Earthlings back to earth.

Pneuma also returns, this borrowed breath. The first thing we do as humans is breathe in, the last thing we do is exhale, returning the breath that supplies us the fibre of life and animates our flesh.

The body is neither, nor depends on flesh or spirit. The body is who we are. Our personality. Our memories. Our dreams and hopes. The body is our being, our being-hood. Bob-ness.

This is why Paul speaks of bodily resurrection and distinctly discounts a fleshly resurrection, mindful that upon our death, we die as Jesus died and was buried.

Resurrection is the willful act of God as GROUND OF ALL BEING – for us who remain in time, governed by the clock, an event still to come; for those freed from time by death, it is a moment – to raise up our being among being itself.

Greek offers two types of time: *chronos*, meaning chronological time; and *kairos*, meaning Godly time, the appointed time. *Chronos* is horizontal, sequential; *kairos* is vertical, interventional.

At least that is how Paul viewed it. It is how I believe it. I guess we will all have the chance for finding out and being surprised. After all, who am I to try to limit God?

And so we trust in God as the author and finisher of our being, which is the real meaning of our affirmation of our doctrine of predestination. Our destination is in God's good keeping. Trust it and therefore be free and encourage and confident enough to be God's person today. God is good enough for me.

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What Does The Bible Say About Homosexuality?

Romans 1: 24-27
I Timothy 1: 3-13
Leviticus 18-20

For some, the Bible is quite clear, quite adamant about homosexual behavior. It forbids it. It declares it immoral and unclean. How, by spirit and by nature, by temperament and by biology, men and women are fitted to fit (tab A into slot B) and that we are meant by God to be monogamous partners. These folks will question (well, more likely state as fact) whether Jesus would seriously and brazenly approve of and sanction same-sex sexual activity, let alone any form of sexual activity outside the blessing of marriage,

Please note that it speaks of behavior rather than orientation. Orientation has been pulsating, goading, compelling since the dawn of humanity. Orientation isn't the issue, but behavior and practice. Same as it is for heterosexuals. I like my wife, a lot. This doesn't mean every now and then I better watch my practice and my behavior when it comes my heterosexuality. I confess to being an insufferable and inveterate flirt.

For others, maybe the Bible isn't so clear cut, so abrupt, so definitive. They will suggest that the Biblical references to homosexuality have little to do with our modern attitude accepting how there can be affection for persons of the same gender. For these folks, the inflammatory Biblical references refer to behaviors and practices that are abhorrent in their own right, not referring to those who love someone of the same gender.

These Biblical interpreters will point out that the usual texts presented to underscore God's detestation for homosexual practice have more to do with violence, with rape, with debauched and atrocious violence intended to dominate another person sexually so has to make them inferior and submissive. These Biblical interpreters will highlight how the references by Paul condemning homosexual practice are actually condemnations of idolatry and prostitution, kidnapping, and pederasty, economic exploitation and pimping.

I guess it always is easier when someone makes up your mind for you.

Does society mirror us, or do we mirror society? Does God work through the church to transform society? Cannot God also work through culture to transform the church?

Are we playing loosey goosey with the Bible or is it the rule of our faith and practice. I guess it depends -- as it has for the role of women, slavery, gentile and Jew -- on how we interpret this Bible.

Even those who argue they aren't interpreting the Bible, that they are obeying it, well, they really are interpreting it.

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Is Man The Head Of The Woman?

Ephesians 5: 23

Try telling this to my wife. If it means bossing her around, she'll gladly tell you where you could stick it.

But let's tease out what Paul really means here. And I mean to do this text that man is the head of the woman justice, unlike a preacher I heard once at a wedding reading this passage about how woman should be subject to her husband but failed to read the rest of the Scripture. Neither the marriage nor the pastor lasted long.

Understand the context in which Paul is writing. Frankly, it compares to the unsettling and barbarous views of women held by the Taliban, where little boys are encouraged to smack with sticks women who, in their opinion, are dressed immodestly. So imagine Paul writing to the Taliban and telling them they must love and respect and value and serve their wives. That their woman cannot be mistreated nor divorced on a whim because she has earned your disfavor.

Paul is commending radical new ideas about marriage here. He's telling the men of the church of Ephesus they cannot fool around up at the temple with those temple prostitutes. He's telling the men they have an obligation of love and duty, comparable to the duty and love shown by Christ toward us all.

It is a matter of mutual subjection and mutual respect, which extends to all the family.

Bear in mind, when Jesus was a boy, it was the men who were most responsible for teaching their sons and daughters how to be devout and faithful.

As soon as Jesus reached an age able to work, Jesus would have left the company of women and joined the company of men. Proud, yet bittersweet for the mommas.

His father would have been the most important influence in Jesus' life and the life of his brothers:

- Learning his trade from Dad.
- Gaining the stamina to do the hard work necessary of a man.

- Listening to his father and his father's friends get together over tea and discuss politics and religion.
- Sitting with the men at synagogue.
- Practicing the skills necessary to become a craftsman, skilled enough to eventually take a wife and support the whole family. By the way, this might also explain why Jesus' family was angry and disappointed in Jesus. In their eyes, he gave up his family responsibilities and obligations to pursue this ministry. In Jesus' eyes, however, he was now practicing the trade for which his other Father – his Father in Heaven – had prepared him.

This high regard for the role of Fatherhood, by the way, helps us interpret why the world of Jesus viewed men as the 'Head of the Family.' The women of that age lived focused on the inner family life. Within the walls of the household. As said, the women took care of the house, the men the household. The men of the family were oriented toward the exterior life, the life outside the walls: the life of commerce, economics, school, property, politics, religion.

Women, in Jesus' day, would never have been expected to make decisions in those areas. Consider it division of labor.

Whether this division of labor still is valid in our modern age can be readily debated if you wish, but one thing has demonstrated itself essential in Jesus' age and ours: fathers are needed to be fathers, lest we risk emasculating our sons and starving our daughters.

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Should I Expect The Rapture?

I Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Maybe.

Depends on what you mean by the rapture. If you believe in the ecstatic experience of entering into a personal relationship with God through the Holy Spirit, the rapture can be an episodic or even ongoing event. Have you ever seen Bernini's statue of the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa? Goodness gosh, it makes you feel you have intruded on one of those special moments.

It also depends on what you mean by the Second Coming?

I'm trying to figure out when did Jesus leave us behind? Do we believe the Ascension means departure? Or better, does it mean sovereignty now? Fulfilment and completion?

Certain popular religious books and movies have popularized a notion that emerged from the 19th century that suggested Christ will collect the godly and save them, leaving behind the ungodly to a time of testing, travail, and trial. That the faithful will be raptured up and the rest will have to work it out the best they can. Escape is your reward.

Lord, we have a lot of religious unpacking to do, ridding ourselves of the clutter of religious nonsense from the 19th century.

The only useful thing about this notion is how it might give a sense of urgency to apathetic Christians.

I'm still trying to figure out where you read this 'left behind' stuff in the Bible.

Besides, if the rapture should ever happen, I really believe the real Christian would say to God, 'No thank you,' and prefer to stay behind to help as best they can those left behind.

Jesus would. Jesus did.

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Are Priests Holier Than The Rest Of Us?

I Peter 2: 5

Those who are professional priests (or pastors) sure behave as if they are holier all the time, don't they? Such are the dangers of power and entitlement and privilege, egged on by religious hubris.

I don't think I could handle being a priest. For one, I'd chaff in the uniform. Who am I anyway to mediate between the people and God? O wait, I don't have to. Someone else already has – we name him Jesus, and Jesus has made utterly irrelevant individuals serving in this capacity. Jesus has made the entire temple concept irrelevant.

Good thing I'm a Presbyterian (and a pretty low one to boot along the liturgical scale) who views ordination not as coming from God but as an act of the community acknowledging gifts and organizing responsibilities for the welfare of the community of faith. I am far happier serving as a Teaching Elder because then I get to ask questions rather than tell people what to believe and how to believe. I'm not such a good example myself. I prefer us being in it together. I like being a team player.

There are no priests, there is only the priestly community, gathered together in the priesthood of all believers. Authority has been decentralized. There is the direct exercise of the means of grace. Individuals are not heirs to the means of grace, the entire community is.

For that matter neither are their divisions between clergy and laity. All Christians are clergy and all are laity. There is no spiritual or practical differentiation. Be gone silly and soporific sacerdotalism!

How many ministers are there in a congregation? The answer? How many participants are there in the church?

When we speak of holiness, it isn't a recognition that someone is morally purer than others or closer to God than others or even spiritually superior. Sainthood (holiness) isn't some sort of religious merit badge bestowed upon really diligent Christians. Alpha Christians!

No. No.

Sainthood means having been called to be holy. Which is why our congregation is filled with a motely bunch of rather sinful saints, such as your own Saint Bob. That's me.

Sainthood isn't something we've earned, it is something we've been given: a task, a potential. It reminds me of when my father and mother would remind me, before I'd go somewhere where I could have gotten myself in trouble, that I am an Andrews and my behavior reflects on the whole family. What a nuisance they were telling me that.

And sainthood sticks to us whether we like it or not, like being part of a family. We've been set apart so that we are supposed to live a certain way and give evidence to the reality of Christ's rule on earth.

Trust me, it may be a royal pain, but it's a really worthwhile pain.

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Is Armageddon Around The Corner? Why Is The Apocalypse of Revelation So Weird And So Frightening?

Revelation 16: 12-21

Always.

Armageddon always is around the corner.

The Book of Revelation (please note the title is singular) belongs to the genre of Apocalyptic literature. Such literature is shocking, revealing, secret, private, filled with codes, allegories, strong images; it is violent, scary, startling the hearer with a profound apocalyptic mystique.

To read the Book of Revelation literally requires reading it symbolically, allegorically. Dragons, Angels, Beasts, Scrolls, Seals, Bowls, Plagues, the Four Horsemen, the Lamb: all are images drawn from previous Hebrew writings.

So too the word 'Armageddon.'

The very mention of the word 'Armageddon' in our culture conjures up images all the way from Bruce Willis and killer asteroids to Hal Lindsey and his fancy that the USA will fight Soviet Union in Israel. Which could be difficult today considering there is no Soviet Union. Whoops, got that wrong.

But to the Hebrews and their first century Christian kin, the word 'Armageddon', or more properly, Har-Megiddo, meaning fortress Megiddo, would conjure images comparable to what we imagine when we hear the names the Alamo, D-Day, Iwo Jima, Gettysburg, Yorktown, San Juan Hill: decisive battles, battles that turn the tide of history, battles where empires rise or fall.

Megiddo and nearby Mount Carmel were the sentinels for the Valley of Decision. Because of its location this valley was the site of numerous and perpetual battles. Most

battles of the world are fought in the same location again and again and again. Armies traveling through Israel always had to pass through this valley. It was where final stands were made, where chariots could attack.

- It was the site of Sisera's defeat, when even the stars fought from heaven, and that most elegant, eloquent, terrible sentences in the Bible: *"The kings came, the kings they fought, then fought the kings of Canaan at Ta'anah, by the waters of Megiddo."*
- It was the scene of Josiah's death, the great hope of Judah
- On Mount Carmel Elijah defeated the false prophets
- King Ahab used it as the headquarters for his mercenary army of charioteers
- A passage from Zechariah (Zechariah 12: 10-11) speaks of it as a site for heathen pagan worship
- Last, and within the memory of those hearing this Book of Revelation read to them at worship, it was the staging area for the Roman army in the destruction of Jerusalem

I believe the author of Revelation views this as a symbolic battle, the final battle – always spiritual -- when in arrogance and pride imperial Rome gathers itself to oppose God, when corrupt harlot Rome will fall in these last days, the day of the Lord, when enough is enough, and the new world begins. You see, the reality is the Book of Revelation is hardly a book to frighten us, it is a book to comfort us, encourage us, inspire us. For when God goes forth to battle evil, there is no battle. Decisions have already been decided.

The whole story of Revelation, written by a pastor to comfort his people, is one where this oppressed, threatened marginalized minority community must endure times of suffering, times for witness, times of injustice, times for faithfulness, and then emerge (as from a bloody birth) unto communal salvation, God abolishing war and injustice and death and sorrow, where love and truth abide forever and ever and ever. Amen.

Revelation is a terrific, wonderful book of hope.

It is a book about victory over evil. Evil, falsehood, can never stand. It may have its day, but it can never last, no more than darkness can hold back light. The kings and demons assemble, posture, and menace; but they are empty.

I am reminded of that liberating scene in the TV mini-series called, "The Stand," by Stephen King"

The superflu has wiped out most of the population of the world. The world splits between those who want to follow God and those who are following the Devil in the persona of a fellow named Randall Flagg – decent Colorado versus decadent Las Vegas. It

is a time of fear and hardship and suffering. Finally, the Godly ones receive a prophecy that four of them must go and stand before the evil one. Not to fight him, but to bear witness. They are captured. One of the four is an old professor, Glen Bateman. Randall Flagg does his best to threaten him, tempt him, frighten him into serving him. Suddenly the professor starts laughing at him.

"You're *nothing!*" Glen said, wiping his streaming eyes and still chuckling.
"Oh pardon me...it's just that we were all so frightened...we made such a *business* out of you...I'm laughing as much at our own foolishness as at your regrettable lack of substance..."

Armageddon is every day. Every day we have reasons to cower before the fear and malice that postures and menaces us every day, urging us to despair, to give in and give up. I don't believe we need to think of Revelation in esoteric or futuristic terms.

Armageddon is painted as the cosmic final battle, but aren't they all? Aren't they each? Every day is the last day, every day is the day of the Lord, a decisive day. For some it is a coal mine, for others it's a bridge collapsing and unsuspecting victims fall victim to the free will of others, the bad choices others have made that determine their fate. There always is a battle against evil deeds. When the demonic assemble that is when we, trusting in God, must stand.

If we teach our children anything, let it be hope, let it be courage. Let it be then an inner faith that conquers whatever the world throws at us. Christians above all are a people of hope.

You don't need to read a map of Israel to locate Armageddon. Armageddon is a battle always fought in the soul for the soul.

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Is The Number Of The Anti-Christ 666?

Revelation 13: 18

Do you have the secret decoder ring? You'll need it for this. The author of Revelation, whom we call John, writes these prophecies to his beloved Christians, abused and victimized by imperial Rome.

It always boggles me when some kids spray paint the number 666 on a wall and the outraged public then decries this infestation of a satanic cult, accusing them of using this sign of the anti-Christ. What they really are a cult of is the cult of Nero Caesar. That is what the secret decoder ring will tell you. Hebrew and Greek words had numerical equivalents.

What alarmed the Christian community was the return of someone as deranged and damaged as Nero who brutally and ruthlessly persecuted the Christians, hence he was an anti-Christ. Anyone who persecutes the people of Christ is an anti-Christ. Take a number, any number. There's lots of anti-Christ in the queue.

It is a *gematria*: numbered equivalents for Hebrew letters. Twist the decoder ring and we discover the number of the beast translates into Neron Kaisar. Caesar Nero. 666 literally means less than perfect, a corruption of what should be.

Jesus' *gematria*, by the way, is 888, a signal cut above the perfect 777. 7 = the perfect number formed from the perfect divine number of 3 + 4, the perfect earth number (four cardinal points, four winds). If we go to multiplication: 3 X 4 = the perfect number of 12. 12 tribes, twelve gem-stones, 12 signs of the zodiac, 12 apostles. What is a pyramid but fours and threes forming a man-made holy mountain?

So whenever you see kids in those tedious blood and gore movies vaunting themselves satan worshippers, them spray painting 666 on walls, what they really are worshipping is a dead Roman Caesar. That's pathetic. Do you really think God is worried about a number? Do you really think God is worried about evil? Saddened, yes, but hardly worried. Heartbroken? Yes.

Even though Nero, a terrible enemy of the Christians, had died decades before the Book of Revelation was written, there was a crazy superstition that Nero hadn't really died but would rise up again, Nero Redivivus, and would intensify the persecution of the Christian community: economic deprivation, legal persecution and loss of rights, martyrdom for some. Hey, we imagined the same thing about Hitler. And Elvis.

At the time Revelation was written the Christians were a small, powerless, threatened, embattled, persecuted minority, viewed by everyone else as both traitors and blasphemers, certainly threats to the stability of respectable society.

But they did have faith and that made imperial Rome shudder in fear.

Always will make Rome tremble.

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