

# **Seeds of Bible Study:**

Writings on how to approach the Bible from a writer and reader

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## Author's Note

**T**his Book is written for anyone who wants to understand the Bible but it is also for those who want to write Bible studies, magazines, online print, church newsletters, local newspapers and for those who teach neighborhood Bible studies and church groups. I can't take credit for it because I have read many Christian books, listened to many sermons, and spoken to many Christians from many denominations. These have all contributed to this book by their simple sharing of their often differing opinions. And of course, God's Holy Spirit leads us. If there is any wisdom in this book, God and my friends and mentors deserve the glory. If there is any error in this book – and I have no doubt there are—then those errors are entirely mine.

As for the book, some of its advice will be geared towards writers, others towards speakers. Some comments will be geared towards those who write for children, or those who write for specific denominations. All chapters are useful for everyone. I hope you will be patient and forbear with this format.

### Note to Writers:

Bible studies geared towards the young for instance would take vocabulary and appropriateness into consideration. The education of one's readers, whether they are professors or regular folks should also matter. Some readers like a conversational style. Others want more academic writing. Some people know their Bibles very well, others will be ignorant of it. In addition, there are denominations, publishers, and websites. Each audience has its requirements, doctrines, and taboos. The sensible writer and preacher should know this. Denomination matters. The insights that one shares in a Catholic newsletter may not necessarily go over well in a Baptist bulletin.

Something written with a Pentecostal mindset might offend a more mainstream denomination. The same goes for politics. Unfortunately, sometimes Christianity and Bible-reading seem more influenced by politics than it should be.

Conservatives, Liberals, Socialists and revolutionaries will view different passages in the Bible differently and interpret them in wildly different ways. Moreover, there are many kinds of sermons and Bible studies: Topical, Thematic, Seasonal or event-related, Retelling (usually done for juvenile and teens), historical, Examinations of Bible passages, verses, whole books, character studies, word studies.

Bible studies can be written as Dramatic Plays, Juvenile plays, Narratives, Meditations, Object lessons. The important thing is that you be mindful. This means being aware of what is going on in your mind and what might be going through the minds and hearts and cultures of your readers.

A messenger must try his best to make the path clear for his message. Therefore the following should always be kept in mind.

There are many Bible studies on the New Testament but few on the Old. An Old Testament Bible study is easier to sell in some respects. But conversely, it requires a good deal of research and explanation. Secondly – and this is for both writers and speakers—whether you choose to get paid for your work or not, retain your rights.

Copyright them yearly. This is very important. Christian writers often want to “only do” something for God. This is very nice but it does hurt the heart to see some less noble Christian make money off one’s work. And believe me, this happens.

Fourthly, follow the advice of well-meaning critics and editorial requirements. If a friend says a piece of writing sounds arrogant, you might consider toning it down. People won’t hear your message because they will be so annoyed at the way in which it is being given to them.

As for editorial requirements, if an editor says a Bible study is supposed to be 300 words, do not write 2000 words. Or vice versa. If an editor insists on a certain vocabulary level, or wants work for a particular season, don’t ignore the editor’s needs no matter how insightful and brilliant you think your writing is. I need not tell you some of the basics such as “don’t write clichés” or “don’t turn people off” but I will discuss other important aspects of Bible study writing in the

rest of the book.

As a child I loved the Roman Catholic order called the Jesuits. They had a love of learning combined with a worldly wisdom that awed me. They were pragmatists of the highest order who understood how wisdom, expedience and self-preservation worked together. I love practicality. That is one reason why I have written this book. But the other is far more important.

I want to give Bible readers some answers before they get the wrong answers from the world. Often Christian Bible writers don't deal mindfully with the Bible. For instance, they often give racist and sexist interpretations of Bible passages, thus making God cruel, unfeeling, anti-women or plain "out-of-touch." I have seen countless popular ministers and heard hundreds of local ministers give faulty sermons that resulted in people leaving the church – or never going in. This has caused many searching Christians to dismiss the Bible because the Bible was presented to them as a cruel book about a cruel God.

I am very passionate about the Bible and I am always saddened when someone dismisses it because a well-meaning Christian person has depicted the Bible in an offensive manner. Well-meaning Christians have done much damage to the cause of Christ by the way they depict the Bible. How, for instance, is a young girl from a Christian family in which the father is an abuser to deal with ministers who seem to have no compassion for women and who base their lack of compassion on the Bible?

Watching television one morning, I saw an interview with a filmmaker who spoke about the subject of her film – a young teenaged girl's journey from her conservative Christian outlook to a spirituality where she gave up much of the value she had placed on the Bible. The filmmaker was triumphant. The young girl had been, among other things, given unsatisfying answers by her denomination. That kind of thing always upsets me.

Finally, the Christian Church has many denominations and sects. The opinions in this book are clearly mine. People will probably disagree with some of my opinions. That is fine, and quite good. As Christians we all have different indoctrination. Sects such as the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and other variant

Christian groups desire that all their adherents believe the same thing. Most standard denominations, (Protestant groups, Roman Catholicism, Orthodox) allows their congregation to think for themselves. As a Christian who was reared in liberal churches and conservative churches, in liturgical and non-liturgical denominations, my opinions on the Bible don't follow any one denomination. I am sure you will find yourself agreeing wholeheartedly with me in some chapters and being quite angry with me in others. It doesn't matter, we are family. We all have the same basic beliefs: Jesus Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified and died, saving the world from sin, then rose again to intercede in Heaven for us. That is all that matters.

This book is written in the hope that I can do my little part in helping people love the Book I so greatly love. I hope it blesses and helps you.

## **Author's Note to Bible Teachers**

**B**ible Teachers have other challenges. On the one hand, those you are teaching are close to you – in your neighborhood and your church. But, paradoxically, this very closeness can cause obstacles.

Firstly, it is very difficult to teach anything new to people whom you know and people who think they know you. In a neighborhood Bible study for instance, everyone has opinions which they have picked up from churches and other people along the way. Most of these opinions will be right, but some of them will be very wrong indeed. We all know that disagreement brings discomfort, and often causes enmity. We are all human and we don't like to be challenged, even for our own good. In many poor communities, for instance, many people are not as literate as they could be. They have trouble reading the daily newspaper which is written in modern English. Yet ,many of these people admire the King James Version and consider it the "real" Bible. Some even think that Jesus, a first century Middle-Eastern Jew, spoke in fluent King James English. These people often balk at using a contemporary Bible. They will be insulted if told that – even though they understand the KJV-- they would probably understand the Bible a bit more if they read it in a modern version.

These kind of challenges can be hard-going, and it is a good idea to learn how to be tactful and to remember that although you are a teacher of Bible studies, you are also a learner. If you remember that God's Spirit works in everyone, giving every Bible reader insight (even in those passages which they don't fully understand), then you will respect your students. And they, in turn, will respect you.

God bless you.

Carole Stewart McDonnell



# The Seven Basic Rules of Bible Interpretation

The following pages show the seven basic rules of Bible interpretation and the many pitfalls that a Bible study writer can fall into.

## BASICS IN BIBLE STUDY

**M**any Christians call the Bible “the Good Book.” They see it as a book which teaches morality and spiritual laws. And it is. But the Bible is a Good Book primarily because it tells us about a Good God. Like all major works, the Bible has a theme. Amazingly, this book – a collection of 66 books—is written by authors who all have the same theme -- the theme of God’s amazing love. It tells us about other things too – the rebelliousness of man, the working of evil in the world, the importance of faith in God. But its primary purpose is to point us to God.

*What does the word Bible mean?*

The word “Bible” means a “book of books.” The Christian Bible contains 66 books. The Books are always arranged in the same order, unless one has a Bible which places them in the chronological order in which they were written. These books are divided into The Old Testament and the New Testament.

*What is a testament?*

A testament is a testimony and an inheritance, as in “Last Will and Testament.” A testament is a spiritual and/or material gift given to heirs when a death occurs. The testaments are also called covenants. People who are part of a covenant have responsibilities, rights and inheritances under that covenant. A “covenant” is a vow or promise with responsibilities on both sides. The word “testament” means something like a contract, or a covenant. We see the word today in the phrase “Last Will and Testament.”

*What is the difference between the Old and the New Testament?*

The “Old Testament” is the “Law and covenants” God made with the Jewish people. The “old testament” contains many promises and covenants. The New Testament is the set of promises and covenants God gave the world because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Some people don't like the phrase “old testament.” They say that it implies that the “new testament” is better, or that the old testament is finished and done away with. Instead of using the words “Old” or “New” Testament, some people use the phrase “The Jewish Covenant” and the “Christian

Covenant.” Although the covenants seem to be different, they mirror each other. In both the Old and the New Testament the covenant or contract is sealed by sacrificial blood. The blood of the Passover Lamb and the sprinkling of blood sealed the contract under the Law and is called the Old Testament or the Old Covenant. The Blood of Jesus sealed the contract under Grace, and is called The New Testament or the New Covenant. Grace means God’s undeserved Love which He gives us because His son died for the sins of the world. Those who are under one Covenant cannot be under the other. Either one is seen as holy by fulfilling all the requirements of the law or one is seen as holy by accepting Jesus’s righteousness and trusting God’s love.

*What books are called the Old Testament?*

The books that describe the Old Testament (Old Inheritance or Old Covenant) are The Books of Moses, the history of the Jewish people, Prophecies and Wisdom books. These are the books from Genesis to Malachi.

*What books are called the New Testament?*

The books that described the New Testament (or New Inheritance) are the gospels, the book of the Acts of the apostles, the epistles, and The Book of Revelation.

*What are the books of the Bible?*

The books of the Bible are:

GENESIS: The book that tells about beginnings: beginning of humanity, the world, sin, and the nation of Israel.

EXODUS: tells about the first Israelites escape from Slavery and their journey to the land God had promised their ancestors.

LEVITICUS: means religious laws. It is named after the tribe of Levi who were the priestly tribe.

NUMBERS: means census.

DEUTERONOMY is when the law was given again. Read the Bible to find out why.

These first five books of the Bible are called The Torah. They tell about the journeys and wars of the Israelites as they journeyed towards the Promised Land.

JOSHUA: the book named after the leader who succeeded Moses.

JUDGES: describes the leaders of the people. It is almost like a collection of short stories and tells about the errors of human judgement and where expectations are turned on its head. Its theme is

“Each man did what was right in his heart.”

RUTH is a love story about a woman who is the ancestor of David.

I+II SAMUEL, I+II KINGS, I+II CHRONICLES. These are historical books that tell about the history of Israel. The books of Samuel tell about David and his descendants. The books of Kings and Chronicles tell about the division of Israel into two kingdoms: Israel and Judah. The people of Judah are taken into captivity. Kings and Chronicles mirror and supplement each other.

EZRA, NEHEMIAH, ESTHER are about the Israelite exile in Babylon and the return home.

The Wisdom books:

JOB: is about the suffering of a good man. Job is the oldest book in the Old Testament but it is not the first book a reader sees when opening the Bible.

The PSALMS: songs, prayers, prophecies and praises to God. Many are written by David and many are for group worship.

The PROVERBS: are a collection of the nations proverbs.

ECCLESIASTES means The Preacher's sermon and is the memoir of a Preacher/King.

SONG OF SONGS or SONG OF SOLOMON is a play made from a collection of marriage songs by Solomon.

The Prophetic books made of:

The major prophets:

ISAIAH prophesies before the people of Judah are conquered and taken into exile.

JEREMIAH, who also wrote LAMENTATIONS, prophesies just as Babylonians are approaching.

He is also called the weeping prophet.

EZEKIEL was a priest who accompanied his people into exile.

DANIEL was a prophet who served the king

The minor prophets --HOSEA, JOEL, AMOS, OBADIAH, JONAH, MICAH, NAHUM, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH, HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, and MALACHI all prophesy at different stages after the exile and when Israel returns to the land.

It is a good idea to read the prophets and the historical books together in order to comprehend the prophecies.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament books are made up of the gospels, the epistles and the prophetic book, Revelation.

### *What is the Gospel?*

Gospel means “good news.” There are 4 gospels that tell us about the good news of the testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ. They tell about the spiritual benefits of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

MATTHEW: The gospel written by one of Jesus’ followers who had been a tax collector.

MARK: Mark was an early companion of Jesus’ friends.

LUKE: Luke was a Greek doctor and researcher who was a friend of Paul.

JOHN: John was Jesus’ closest friend.

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES: This book was written by Luke. He tells us what happened in the early days of the church.

### *What is an epistle?*

An “epistle” is a letter. The New Testament is full of letters which were written to different Christian churches by some of Jesus's followers. An epistle is named after its author or (if the letter is written by Paul) the epistle is named after the city the letter was addressed to.

Epistles were written to the churches in the following cities by Paul:

Romans, I & II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philipians, Colossians, I & II Thessalonians.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is the oldest New Testament book. This also is not the first book one sees when opening the New Testament.

Paul also wrote letters to the following people:

I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon. Timothy and Titus were ministers in the church. He wrote the letters to Timothy and Titus to encourage them and to show them how the churches should be organized. Philemon was a wealthy man who had a runaway slave whom Paul met. Paul wrote the letter to ask Philemon not to punish his slave.

One letter was written only to Jewish believers (the others were written to congregations that were both Jewish and Gentiles). This is the letter to the Hebrews.

Three letters were written by Jesus' closest friends:

James, I & II Peter, I, II, & III John

One letter was written by Jesus' brother:

Jude

The Apocalypse or the Revelation of St John was written to tell God's people what would happen at the end of the world

It is also interesting to note that there are a few other letters mentioned in the New Testament that do not appear in the Bible. First Corinthians, for instance, is not really the first letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians. But the first letter was lost. The letters to the Thessalonians were written by Paul because some unknown person had forged a letter using Paul's name to tell this church that the Day of the Lord had arrived. Also, Paul writes that he has written a letter to the Laodiceans. This letter has not been found, or else it became the letter to the Ephesians.

*Now open your Bible. What do you see?*

*What do all those numbers in the left margin of my Bible mean?*

If you've ever sat in church or seen a televised sermon or if you have a Bible-quoting friend, you will hear a lot of Bible names, chapters, numbers and verses being spoken about. As you read your Bible, you will see large numbers at the beginning of each chapter and smaller numbers to the left of sentences. The little numbers at the left of each column are verse numbers. The books of the Bible were not originally written in chapter and verse. But over the years, it became useful to number those chapters and verses. All Bibles share the same verses and chapters to make it easier for Bible readers to discuss certain texts and to read the same place. When a Bible book has a roman numeral before its title (I or II as in I Corinthians 13:1 or I Cor 13:1), this means the book is a two-parter. So, if a minister tells you to "go to First Corinthians, Chapter 13, verse 1" he is sending you to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the thirteenth chapter and the first verse.

You should also notice how certain words are written. Publishers use different fonts within a Biblical passage to signal readers about certain words. For instance, many Bibles will use The Lord written with a Capital L and The LORD in small capitals. Notice the difference. This is the

Publisher's way of showing the different words used for God. There are other publishing clues. We still aren't sure of the meaning of some Biblical words. Some Bibles will add a footnote at the bottom of the page to explain all the possible meanings of a word. Some will add footnotes in the margin. Some Bibles, like the King James Version, will italicize those words the translators were unsure of. As Biblical archeologists make new discoveries and words are defined, newer Bibles have less and less italicized words.

### *The names of books in the Bible*

The titles of many Bible books are regular words. Sometimes these words are not common words. The word "Genesis" means "Beginnings." The Book is called "Genesis" because the first words of the book reads, "In the Beginning." The English translators could easily have used the word "Beginnings."

### *Names of countries, regions, and nations*

The Bible uses the ending "ites", "ians" to describe types of nations, peoples. The ending "im" is often used to name types of angels and spiritual beings. The word "Israelites" is the Bible word for Israel. In modern times, we use the word "Israelis" to describe people from the nation of Israel.

### *Names of People in the Bible*

Some Bible names take a lot of getting used to. Don't let this bother you. The thing to remember is that the Bible people named their children in the same way we name our children. The name means something to us. Sometimes children are named in memory of dead family members. Sometimes the name is a symbol of a parent's hope for a child. We can understand the meanings of many names, names such as Faith, Hope, Joy, Mercy, Crystal, Tiffany or even Carol. (The name Carol means "a song of joy.") Most Biblical names have meanings. Sometimes the meanings of these names do not matter. Usually they do. Sometimes the writer of the Bible story will tell the meaning of the name. Sometimes he doesn't. Many Bibles have the meaning of the names in margins. As you move along the Bible, remember these names are often transliterated. This means that the sounds of the names are translated. Just as Ian, John, Ewan, Ivan, Yan, Jan, and Owen are really all transliterations of the Hebrew name Ionannan, which means "God's gift." The name "Jesus" was a common Biblical name. Joshua, Jesus, Jesu, Yehoshua, Iesu, are the same sounds for the name "Jesus." All these different versions of the name mean "God Saves."

### **What Bible should I choose?**

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for Doctrine, for reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness.” I Tim 3:16

The Bible has many different translations. The Jewish People accept as Scripture only those works which we Christians call “The Old Testament.” The Catholics add the “Apocrypha.” (The Apocrypha is a collection of books that the Jewish people accepted as important and but did not consider them divinely inspired.) Some groups such as the Mormons and the Jehovah’s Witnesses have created their own “translation” of the Bible or interpretation of certain lines. But if you compare the Jehovah’s Witness translation of the old testament to the Jewish translation of the old testament, you will see that the Christian translation and the Jewish translations match. The Jehovah’s Witness New World Translation is out in left field. Certainly, the Jehovah’s Witnesses are wrong to think that they speak Hebrew more than Jewish rabbis. As for the book of Mormon, it just seems like an 18<sup>th</sup> century creation (one wonders why an angel would preach the gospel when no angel in the Bible was ever given the privilege of teaching it, and one also wonder why the Book of Mormon translators would translate an ancient “manuscript” into Elizabethan King James English instead of into the American 18<sup>th</sup> century English his listeners ) It is plainly one of the many “other” gospels given by angels that Jesus warned about. It is hard to believe that God would use so many different prophets over the centuries to create the Books of the Bible during the times and yet have one prophet come and all at one give a new version of everything written by all those prophets because all those prophets were supposedly wrong.

There are many “versions” of the Bible. A “version” is not a different gospel or a translation that “proves” that a specific church is right. A “version” is merely a translation of the Bible in the language people of a particular country. Bibles exist in many Chinese, African, and Native American languages. The English language “versions” include The King James Version, The New King James Version, The Contemporary English Version, The Ebonics Bible, The Jerusalem Bible, The New International Version, The Amplified Bible. Most Christian churches use one of these versions. For English-speakers, the most beloved version of the Bible is the King James Version. It’s a beautiful and old translation, but if you don’t speak fluent Shakespearean English, it might be best to avoid it until you’ve read the Bible in more modern English.. For new Bible readers, I highly recommend the Contemporary English Version from the American Bible Society or the Amplified Bible.

The Contemporary English Version isn't as poetic as the King James Version but it is easier to understand. The translators not only use modern everyday words but in many instances, they choose to write the meaning of a Biblical slang (or metaphor) rather than use the literal Middle Eastern metaphor. Here is an example: In the King James Version Ecclesiastes chapter 11, verse 1 reads like this: "Cast thy bread upon the waters and you will find it after many days." The Contemporary English Version translates it as "Be generous and someday you will be rewarded." The Contemporary English Version (CEV) also uses non-sexist language in many places. They often replace the word "man" with the words "humanity" or "people."

Another beloved translation is The Amplified Bible. This translation includes every possible meaning of a word in each Biblical verse. It often translates the phrase "have faith" as "to rely on, to trust, to cling to." It makes a good "study Bible." Study Bible and Bible Study sound alike, don't they? A Bible Study is a book which teaches you how to study the Bible. It might quote sections of the Bible but it is not really a Bible. It is a study book. A Study Bible is a Bible but it also has some good study material in it. It often contains maps, family trees, and dictionaries to help you as you read. Some of them have concordances or Bible dictionaries.

You can pick up a Bible for less than ten dollars. If you want a brand new Bible, your Christian friend will probably have one to spare. The United Bible Societies also has a large selection of translations, in English, Spanish, French, Chinese and other languages. These Bibles are usually sold at low prices. You can write the American Bible Society at 1865 Broadway, New York, NY 10023 or contact them on the web.

This Reading Plan is not intended to be a rigid guide. I want you to feel your way through the Bible and to understand the purpose of theme of a story. There are differing ways of reading it. Some approaches are less helpful than others. Some people simply pick up a Bible and begin reading it from cover to cover. Other beginning Bible-readers might ask a Bible-reading friend for advice on which book to start with first. Some people simply attend a church-sponsored (or denomination-sponsored) Bible study class. And some Bible readers might "take a course in college on the Bible-as-literature." Some people use study guides such as this one. (I recommend reading as many study guides as you can. This means, you should try to get books from a Christian bookstore that has books from many denominations.)

### Beginning your Bible Reading

Now that you know a little about the books you should be able to move around the Bible with a sure footing. A good Study Bible will usually have cross-references placed throughout the Bible in the margins or in subheadings. The following is only a guide. The inspirational works such as Psalms and Proverbs should be read anytime throughout. Most of the Psalms refer to events that happen in the Torah and historical books. But that should not prevent you from understanding them. The book of Proverbs is made up of 31 chapters and one chapter can easily be read every day.

### IN WHAT ORDER SHOULD I READ THE BIBLE?

Is there a right way to read it? Should the books be read in any particular order? Most Churches have printed guides which help parishioners read the Bible. These guides usually mirror the passages shown in missals, the Book of Common Prayer, and Church Prayer Books. Often a passage from the Old Testament is grouped with a passage from the New Testament. Those who know their Bible which books to study for wisdom, the history of the church, etc. However, if you are a new Bible reader, you might not know where to start. Some Christians might suggest you begin with the book of Genesis. Others might suggest you begin with one of the gospels such as the Book of Luke or John. I recommend starting with the gospel of Mark. It is short and accessible and is free of the extra material that might confuse someone who knows little about the Bible.

A reading plan for new Bible readers might be:

The Book of Mark

Hebrews Chapter 11

The Book of Genesis

The First 20 chapters of Exodus

The Book of Romans

The remaining chapters of Exodus

The book of Hebrews

The Book of Luke

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles

Paul's letter to the Philipians

Paul's letter to the Ephesians

Joshua, Judges, Ruth

I & II Samuel

Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus

I & II Kings

Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Song of Solomon

Ecclesiastes

I & II Chronicles

Isaiah

Obadiah

Jonah

Jeremiah

Lamentations

Ezekiel

Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai

The minor prophets

The Book of John

Peter's epistles

John's three epistles

Job

Paul's letter to the Ephesians

Paul's letters to the Corinthians

Jude's letter

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians.

The Revelation of St John.

## When Reading the Bible, Use Common Sense

**I**t has been said that the Bible is written on a sixth grade level. This means that anyone with a modern translation should be able to read it. It is a Bible for the people and although it has many complicated sections, it is not hard to figure out most of it on one's own. However, the many Christian denominations in the world show us that people do misunderstand and misread the Bible. There are many cultural, educational and emotional reasons for this.

I remember a co-worker telling me that she felt God was being very harsh to demand that people pluck out their eyes if they sinned. She was referring to the verse in the Bible which states, "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off." (Mark 9:42, 43) She thought Jesus meant this literally. It is possible he did and Islam, for instance, preaches the cutting off of the hand of a thief, but since Christianity teaches that sin proceeds from the heart and mind, I doubt the Christian God would want anyone to pluck out her eyes since the eyes are not the root cause of the sin. Even a blind person can lust. The Christian God does not believe that sin lies in a particular part of the body. For Christians, sin is in the will, not the eyes or the hand. So an adulterer should not have his eyes plucked out or be castrated. And a thief should not lose his hand. Jesus was obviously trying to show his hearers the dangers of evil and the reality of hell. He was saying that no matter how much we love our sin - even if it is as dear to us as our eyes - we should remember that they separate us from God.

Common sense also means using your knowledge of human nature. For example: I have heard many New Age Christians say that Jesus was wise and spoke in parables because for more than ten years he traveled to far off lands and studied with the gurus, philosophers, magi and shamans of India, China and Tibet. They say this is the reason his teaching is so "universal." This "traveling Jesus," they believe, 'learned' all the "good" parts of his teaching elsewhere. But common sense can tackle this theory.

First of all, we all know travelers. If Jesus traveled in other countries for the ten or fifteen years he was supposed to have traveled, he would have returned to his homeland with much more than 'wisdom.' Expatriates develop odd habits, odd accents. Nowhere does anyone – Jesus' friends or enemies – mention that Jesus has any odd "foreign" behavioral behavior, speech patterns, or tics.

Jesus isn't socially awkward or inept. Nothing gives him away as a man who has been traveling out of his country for ten years.

Common sense would also realize that those who believe Jesus traveled to gain wisdom don't seem to think God can give wisdom directly. In fact, they seem to be implying that all true wisdom comes from traveling, something that has never been proven as true.

An example where common sense is needed occurs in Titus 1:12. In this letter, Paul warns Titus about certain people in Crete. He writes, "Even one of their own prophets have said 'all Cretans are liars.'" Imagine if this were taken out of context. Christians would be walking around saying, "All Cretans are Liars!" But funny as this may seem, this kind of thing does happen when people don't use their common sense and take Bible verses out of context. Like all Paul's letters, this one was written in response to some situation or person in a particular church or city. The history and the back-story of the letter should be taken into consideration. Instead of thinking that the Holy Spirit is stating something about the characters of the Cretan people, a reader with common sense will realize that Paul was very educated about Cretan literature and was blowing off some steam. This is Paul's own issue, not God's last say on the subject. So, the first thing to do when reading the Bible is to use one's common sense.

Here is another example of common sense. Some people have said that Jesus didn't really exist. They believe, instead, that St Paul was so learned and scholarly that he invented Jesus and Christianity. But could Paul really perpetrate such a feat of creative fiction? Paul, a scholar who spoke Greek, Latin, and Hebrew fluently would have to choose to write in the koine (common language slang) Aramaic of his time. That would be equivalent to a great modern scholar/philosopher writing deep truths but using the poor lingo of folks in backwater or urban cities. In addition, Paul would have to write four different gospels and create a Jesus who treats women as equals to men. Then to top things off Paul would "prove" his false gospel by saying that women were the ones who first saw the resurrection. Not the kind of thing a Middle Eastern audience would accept. It's just not logical.

Another example of the logic behind common sense occurs here: Moses gave the new nation of Israel a law commonly called the Eye for an Eye law. (Exodus 21) This law states that if a person takes someone else's life, that person must be punished by losing his life also. Those who oppose the death penalty consider this law barbaric and ruthless. And often it is. Christ taught his followers to be forgiving and therefore this law from the Old Testament is tempered by Christ's gospel. But, let us study the law itself, using our common sense.

The average human is quite vengeful when wronged. I remember once stepping out of my house to realize that my little son's bike had been stolen. I was livid. The more I thought about the bike, my son's sad face and the evil bike thief, the more angry I became. I found myself hoping the bike thief would have a tragic accident on the bike he had stolen, maybe fall off a cliff on one of his joyrides. Another example: once a driver in full-blown road-rage beeped his horn at our car because we were driving too slow for him. We steered to the side, he raced past us and showed us his middle finger (adding a few choice curse words) as he zoomed by. I couldn't help hoping he'd race into a Mack truck or an eighteen-wheeler. This is human nature. Who among us has not imagined herself destroying – literally or figuratively – the boss who has fired us?

But really, is death the proper punishment for the above “crimes”? Do the bad guys deserve such murderous anger? No. Something a little less fatal, perhaps. But such is the nature of human anger that when we punish wrong-doers, we generally go overboard in order to teach the bad guy “a good lesson.” (But when we punish ourselves, we are selfishly forgiving.) The Eye for an Eye law puts a limit on revenge. Common sense also demands that we use all the evidence before us. The "Eye for an Eye" law does not stand alone. The Bible is full of loopholes to bring mercy into the situation. For instance, the Refuge Cities were created where "accidental murderers" could live free from punishment.

One of the most important thing to remember is that common sense grows as our knowledge of human nature, science, history, and the Bible grows. Let's look at the Creation Story for a moment, and let's see how modern science helps our common sense understand it.

Story Found in: Genesis chapters 1, 2

Summary: God created the world. The story teaches that God created everything. It tells us that “what is seen” was made from “what is unseen.”

The creation story is a beautiful chapter to read. But then there were those science classes at school. They made the Creation Story a tough read for older kids because we were pretty much grilled to believe that “evolution is the truth.” So, while younger children will readily accept the Creation Story, for older ones and many adults it is at best, an unscientific cultural myth. At worst, it's a bold-faced lie.

How are we to tackle this? Stir up our imaginations, explore the greatness of God, compare the Christian worldview with the scientific one, and in matters too high for us to understand, simply to believe God's Word.

"In the Beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth." This is not news to me, because I have no problem thinking that the world belongs to only God. ONE God. But even this small verse could bring a bit of trouble to some people.

Remember that many people in Moses' time did not believe that one God could handle everything in the universe all by himself. Moses freed his people from slavery. But he had to free their minds from their polytheism. They believed in many minor gods who specialized over certain specific territories. The sky god had his turf, the god of the wind had his, the god of valleys another, the god of frogs something else.

Although many people nowadays are more apt to believe in evolution or that aliens created the earth (Yep, some folks actually believe this, but it begs the question: who created the aliens?) What they have one thing in common with the freed Israelites to whom Moses told the Creation Story is that they don't understand the greatness of God. They have yet to understand that whether or not they believe in evolution, God is (as St Anselm puts it) the Uncaused Causer of all things. If there is something in the world that God did not make, then God is not God. God made everything, and without Him there is nothing, period. So that's the first hurdle.

The next hurdle occurs with the first day of creation. The world is spoken into existence. Human words can create many things, happiness or joy, but the non-imaginative might not be able to believe that God's words and the power of the tongue can create a whole universe. This is something a person should take on faith. After all, our reasoning is limited by what we know. For instance, we don't know how God can be three persons and yet one God: God as He is in Himself, God as He exists in human beings, and God who lived a specific human life --Jesus, the Word of God-- a being who was everything God had ever spoken from the beginning of time. This idea of God being three persons in one is not hard to understand. It's a plain mathematical fact that oneness can be threefold. What is  $1+1+1$ ? The answer: 3. What is  $1 \times 1 \times 1$ ? The answer is 1. Thus, three beings can be one. Not if you add them, but if you multiply them. So, yes, some stuff we can't reason out with our finite brains, but there are enough clues on earth to make us reasonably sure of our faith.

The next hurdle isn't so much a hurdle but a matter of semantics. God created the universe by saying "Light! Be!" And Light came into existence. Then God called light "day" and darkness "night." In the Bible, the "light" isn't related to the sun or the moon or the stars. This is made clear because the sun has not yet been created until the fourth day. When we see the word "Light" in the Bible, we are not to understand it in the way we generally understand "Light." Not only does the

Bible idea of Light include and bypass the human idea of energy, it goes so far as to say that God is Light, and the source of Life and light. As Moses and the Bible writers describe “light,” the “Light” spoken into being in the Creation Story is not too far from the great burst of Energy scientists call “The Big Bang.”

Another thing you will have to realize is that the earth we live on now is different from the earth Moses describes in at least two ways. Moses describes an earth surrounded by one layer of water, a dome called sky and then another layer of water. The watery rings of water above and below the sky don’t exist now. (Moses later tells us that there was no rain at that time; the earth was watered by a "mist" that rose up around the whole earth and underground springs rose out of the earth.) We know our solar system well enough to know that planets come in different forms. Some are made of gases, some of frozen matter, some of solid rock. Some planets spin clockwise, some counterclockwise, some on their axes --- one even spins on its side. Some planets have rings. Some have moons that spin in one direction, some have moons that spin in both directions at once. The earth when it was first made was surrounded by water. How this affected the dinosaurs, or other kinds of animals, is up to us to guess.

The second difference is that the earth before the flood was one large land mass rising out of the water on earth. It’s not the same anymore, but it’s interesting to note that the modern scientific theory of continental shift – “Look! All the continents can be joined together in a puzzle!”-- came about years after Moses described the old world.

The next hurdle is the theory that animals adapt. Moses describes God giving seeds the power to reproduce "after their own kind." This is a genetic command which says oranges will look like oranges, apples will look like apples, kids will look like their parents. As we advance through the days of creation, God makes the world a bit more of a partner in creativity, leaving it a bit more self\_reliant and independent of His power: Plants now have “Life” within them. People who believe in evolution believe that since the earth’s history shows adaptation to climates, then this “after its own kind” business proves that the Bible account is wrong. But, they make the mistake of believing that God created a scaled-down meager first “seed” that is “nature” adds to because the first “seed” had so little genetic material. The truth of the matter is probably the other way around: The first “seed” had every possibility of adaptation the climate could or would ever call for. That means: the first dog had all the genetic material for every adaptation descended from it: dog, wolf, hyena, or whatever. And who knows? Maybe the first “horse” looked more like a combination of giraffe, zebra, horse...or simply contained genetic material for all of them.

The Creation story follows the fossil record in many ways: first vegetation is created, then water life, then animals who live in the air, then animals who live primarily on earth. So most folks can accept this. The next big hurdle appears when the Creation story deals with the Creation of Adam and Eve. Especially the creation of Eve.

According to Moses' account, humans were created in two ways: first God spoke them into being. Then he made them by using the dirt of the earth. It shows humans as called into existence by the Word of God, yet at the same time being created in a unique hands-on molding by the hands of God. The molecules in dirt alone cannot create humans; but God's word can bring life into anything. Many people have said that because Christians believe they are different from other creations, Christians feel they can rape the earth. But, come now! We are different in so many ways from our fellow creatures. God gave all the other creatures instincts. A duck will always behave like a duck. A cow will always behave like a cow. But God gave humans the freedom to create their own personality, their own character, their own soul when he said, "Let us make Man in our own image, after our own likeness." This is what it means to be created in God's own image. It is not a mere physical description of God. It is the "spiritual" image. God is a complex being made up of emotion, intellect, will, senses. Humans also have these traits. God is love, justice, creativity, truth. Humans have ideas of love, justice, creativity and truth. But we pervert them and are a bit confused most of the times. God is also a being who can make many choices. Animals and plants are limited in the choices they can make, and whatever choices they do make are subject to their instincts. But humans are free to make themselves into devils if they wish to.

But even if someone has a problem with the Creation of man, they balk at the rib business.

I personally have no problems with it. As Moses explains the creation of woman, God put a deep sleep on Adam. We can understand that if God exists he can anesthetize His patient before an operation. But why do we balk at Him using a rib to create a woman? It is Adam's genetic material. And it seems to me to be nothing more than God doing something that is akin to but even greater than a high\_end cloning job. God could have made Eve without using the DNA double helix pattern, but it would seem that if these two would be populating the earth, they would have to share the same genetic material. Eve is not so much a replica of Adam, as a female version of him. So not only does God do a kind of cloning of Adam, He pretty much does a sex-change operation. Men carry XY chromosomes and women have the XX. If the world were without women: might it be possible with enough scientific know-how to create a woman from a man? I think so. However, the world lacked men, where would we find that male Y chromosome?

I love wordplay and the Bible is full of them. Jesus is the Word and He can pun all he wants to. God names the new creature "Woman." Wo\_Man because she was taken out of "Man." Later Adam gave her a new name, Eve, which means "Mother."

Having made the world, God rested on the seventh day. Let us rest by trusting in His power, His great Wisdom, and most especially in His great love.

Verses to Study:

John 1:3-10; Hebrews 11: 3; 2 Peter, 3:9; Revelations 20:2

If you have a concordance, do a word study on the word "Light"

## **Don't Assume that tiny Bible Stories contain no Spiritual lesson**

**E**very story in the Bible is important. All the stories pertain to the larger story of man's fall, man's separation from God, God's mercy and grace despite humanity's rejection of His love. But even the smallest Bible story matters. In addition, just because some Bible stories are largely ignored that doesn't mean the story is unimportant.

It is amazing how many times preachers, writers and TV evangelists will discuss the same stories over and over again. Yet they neglect others which probably have great stores of richness waiting to be mined. A small aside here, but it would be good to remember that many Bible study writers do the same thing. I have found that a lesser-known story from the Bible has a great chance of selling than a story everyone knows. Just a bit of marketing advice there.

The story of Lamech is a tiny little story but it is the first story that shows how we humans can be deluded our own spirituality and how we use religion and God's forgiveness for our own selfish ends.

The story is found in Genesis 4:18-24 and tells about a descendant of Cain who kills someone and then declares that God has forgiven him. Moses uses the story to show humanity's worst side. He explores humanity's need to find itself guiltless, to glorify itself, to emulate bad people who "got away with a crime" and to rationalize away guilt.

The Bible is a divinely cynical book. It is especially cynical about religious people and people who consider themselves holier and better than others. Lamech's small story shows many powerful but distasteful truths about human nature. Lamech is the first human who uses "religion" in order to appear special. But it tells so much more.

The funny thing is how much of the story is left out. We don't know much about Lamech. The details of the murder are lacking. We know a killing occurred, but all we have is Lamech's side of the story. But in these small perfectly chosen words, we have a complex and deep story which could lead the Bible study writer to many different kinds of Bible studies.

*One can for instance do a Bible study on the meaning of names in Lamech's family.*

If the names of the people involved in Lamech's family were all translated into English, the

verses would read as follows: “The disciple of God married Dawn and Shade. And Dawn gave birth to Shepherd, who tended flocks and his brother Musician. Shade gave birth to Blacksmith, who worked with iron and brass and his sister Beautiful.” This would be a wonderful symbolic story of the development of civilization.

*Or, (if one doesn't want to write a study of Lamech's family of traditional farmers and keepers of animals,) one can write about the character of Lamech, his life and that nasty murder.*

Lamech is the first Bible person (that we know of) with two wives. Is this a clue to his personality? God had ordained monogamy. Does this imply Lamech has a grasping personality? Was this man so enslaved to his emotions that he was unable to stay within God's proscribed limits and have only one wife?

*Or one can write about the dangers of ancestor veneration:*

Lamech is the second (recorded) murderer in Biblical history. Cain was his ancestor. But Lamech's mind is not filled with Cain's remorse; all he remembers is God's loving kindness in giving Cain a mark of protection and forgiveness. Certainly the Lamech story is about emulating or identifying with the wrong people. Lamech so identified with Cain, his family ancestor, he even included Cain's name in the name of one of his children. Such is the effect of ancestor worship and identifying with our great ancestors! When we compare Cain's homicide with Lamech's, we see several differences. Cain slew his brother because of a religious dispute. Lamech killed because of a personal affront. Cain was filled with the fear of punishment. Lamech had no such fear. A human's death was new to Cain. Lamech had lived long enough to know a thing or two about humanity's ability to die. But all this is lost on Lamech. Lamech actually uses God's grace as a defensive tactic and reminds his wives that God promised to avenge Cain if anyone killed Cain in vengeance for Abel's death. Then he proceeds to add that since Cain would be avenged seven times, then God would avenge him seventy-seven times. Apparently, this story of God's graciousness had made its way through Cain's descendants. What started out as a symbol of God's grace, in my humble opinion, became a twisted heretical badge of courage. The family history loomed larger and larger until the extent of Cain's crime was forgotten. All that was left was selfish family history boasting about its greatness. Even worse, Lamech usurped God's grace without consulting God first. Not once do we hear him having a conversation with God.

*Or a Bible writer could write an article on “easy grace” in which she shows how humans take God’s kindness for granted.*

Like Lamech, people nowadays use religion and God’s goodness to rationalize away their crimes and bad behavior. God’s gracious forgiveness can be used in an extremely ungodly way: Lamech used it to get out of a murder charge. Moses continues to show how people --including God’s own people often use God’s grace in a selfish way. This is one of the first times in the Bible where we are shown how people react to God’s patience and love. We begin to understand that Grace is always being attacked from two sides. On the one hand, there are people like Cain, who believe that God can best be reached through human works, ceremonies, sacrifices and wisdom. They want nothing to do with a blood sacrifice. On the other hand, there are people like Lamech who take advantage of God’s grace and turn the grace of God into lasciviousness. They say, “God is love” and forget the ugliness of sin by skipping quickly to Grace.

*Or a Bible study writer can use the story to talk about the evils of TV and the media which might make children identify with the bad guys instead of the good guys.*

Lamech’s need to make himself notorious and famous shows humanity’s perverse need for self-glory. Think of copy-cat school killings. An isolated, alienated or angry child gets hold of a gun and murders his schoolmates. Another isolated child sees the newscast and so identifies with the notoriety of the first child’s “glory” that another mass killing soon takes place. But does the child who sees the murderous acts of other children on TV also identify with the punishment that the other child is given? Here, Lamech identifies with Cain's anger and Cain's “mark.” He identifies with Cain’s glory. But he doesn't identify with Cain's remorse at all. Lamech's story is a story about a man who thinks he is special. He “glories in what should be his shame.” Lamech was an unspecial man who knew that Cain’s sin made Cain “special.” Therefore Lamech’s sin makes him --in his own mind at least-- a great friend of God. Are little kids across the world suffering with a kind of Cinderella complex and will they also identify with evil doers as a way of being special and making up for their bad lives?

*One can write an article about Bible comparisons:*

Different translations of Lamech's words will lead to different ideas of Lamech's motives. Either he killed the young man because of self-defense, or from an inferiority complex. Either he is a coward, a braggart, or a God-fearing prophet of God's grace. As the story goes, Lamech comes home one day with news for his wives. According to the Contemporary English Version, Lamech said, "Today a young man wounded me and I killed him." The King James Version makes Lamech seem more boastful. The KJV translators translate Lamech's words as: "Listen, o wives of Lamech. Today I killed someone to my wounding." The CEV translation seems to be saying, I killed a man in self-defense. The Hebrew version isn't any clearer. Scholars have disagreed over the actual meaning of the Hebrew text for centuries. We don't even know what the "wound" was: a physical attack or an attack to his ego. The reader has to decide. Is Lamech boasting that he has killed someone who hurt his ego? Or is he claiming self-defense? Or is he saying that the death of this young man will be destructive to him in the community?

*Or you can write an article about religious self-delusion.*

Lamech warns would-be avengers, vigilantes, or upholders of the law, that God is on his side. But is God really on Lamech's side? Of course, your opinion of Lamech's declaration depends on what you think about the situation. You might want to write an article stating that Lamech looked at Cain's mark as a kind of foreshadowing of Christ and the atonement. Some writers might think that Lamech is a prophet of God who understood God's grace. It's true that nowhere do we get an inkling that Lamech had even the faintest relationship with God, but his name is a religious name which means "trained of God." A religious name may or may not imply a religious person, and many people in Lamech's time had names with religious implications. This is not to say that religious people don't murder. A lot of religious murderers float through the Bible. And after all, Cain was religious and a murderer. But even if we were to believe that Lamech is religious, we still have a problem with Lamech using God's name to save his skin from earthly punishment. To me, his "religion" seems suspect. A Roman Catholic writer could even use Lamech's story to preach the necessity of having a priest hear our confessions.

*You might want to do a psychological assessment of Lamech*

Granted, Lamech lived in wicked times. Either he killed the young man in self-defense or he did not. We know nothing of the man he murdered, earth's second murder victim. We know the

man was young. But that is about all. Young men have “wounded” older men for as long as we can remember. Bruised emotions and crimes of passion are part of human history. But are they causes for murder? My gut feeling is that Lamech is an insecure little man who killed the “young man” because the young man said something that offended Lamech’s masculine ego. But that is my take. This is partly my knowledge of human nature and my literary observation that Lamech seems to be a small man with a mania for greatness. Everyone else has one wife; Lamech has two. Cain is avenged seven times; Lamech is avenged seventy times seven. Lamech is the world’s first egomaniac.

*Or you could write an article on humanity’s need to glorify itself.*

This tendency of human beings to glorify their self-created spirituality is seen throughout Scripture. It turns up next in the story of the Tower of Babel. The Lamech story could be used as a good transition from the Cain story to the story of Babel.

*Or you can use the story of Lamech to return again to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden to show God’s love for humanity.*

After God finds the shamed couple hiding in the garden, He tells Adam, Eve and the serpent their futures. Then he expels the pair from the garden. There are who argue that this "patriarchal" God is unfriendly and bossy. They believe that the expulsion from the garden is another sign of the patriarchal God's punitive nature. But is God really being nasty and pushy when he sends Adam and Eve from the garden? (In the story of Lamech, we see that God does not punish Lamech). Certainly, if God were a hateful tyrannical being, He would've killed Cain then and there. Humanity will always judge God. Some people will find fault in His mercy -"Why do the guilty go unpunished?" And others will find fault when He allows mankind to suffer the consequences of its action. As always, humanity falls back on the original sin: "It continually judges God as not being worthy of his Godhood." Not only do humans say, "Hath God said?" But we also say, "Such and such an action of God's does not seem right in our eyes." The question is this: what insight will you find in the Bible story you explore?

## Use the Bible to Interpret the Bible

**M**y third rule of Bible interpretation is not really mine. It's actually the method recommended by the Bible itself: use the Bible to interpret itself. "Precept to precept and line to line." (Isaiah 28:10) In order to use this method, one must believe that the Bible does not disagree with or contradict itself. This is an article of faith, I agree, and many people who do not believe that the Bible a book sent from God will have trouble accepting it. Nevertheless traditional Christian belief states that God's Holy Spirit spoke through holy people as they wrote the books of the Bible. (2 Peter 1:20)

The books in the Bible are written by writers who lived centuries apart. Yet, amazingly, these books all say the same things about human nature, God, faith, and sin. Moses concepts of sin, human nature and faith are the same ones held by later prophets and by Jesus. In order words, the requirements and definition of faith in Genesis are the same requirements and definitions as those in the Book of Revelation and all the other books in between.

This means that if the meaning of a particular passage eludes a reader, then that reader must compare verse to verse, phrase to phrase, word to word, and concept to concept. A concordance is necessary for this kind of comparison, like a dictionary, a Bible concordance lists words but only those found in the Bible. Words are listed alphabetically and their locations in the Bible are shown.

One can do a search for any words found in the Bible. Words such as house, home, homes, land, men, thousand, left, right, great, etc. If a word exists in the Bible, a good concordance will list it. (Most concordances don't index words such as the, but, if, or and, however. Those words are too common.) A concordance to the NIV (New International Version) of the Bible will be translated somewhat differently from the KJV (King James Version.) The important thing is that if you are not familiar with the Bible or the King James Version, your concordance should reflect the same version as your Bible. If you know your Bible well, you'll get a hang of maneuvering through translations, synonyms, etc.

Comparing words to words, concepts to concepts, and actions to actions help to fine-tune the meaning of a passage.

Let's look at the verse: "Our God is a consuming fire."

What exactly does it mean? To be honest, it can mean whatever you want it to mean. I have no doubt this verse has been used in many a hell-fire sermon. But if you really want to know what it means, you will not only have to read it in context, but you will have to do a concordance search of the word “fire.” You will find many Bible verses that contain “fire.” Sometimes a literal fire is being described; at other times, a symbolic fire or a spiritual fire that purifies the soul. Sometimes God is physically described as being partly made of fire. He was the fire that burned the burning bush and yet did not consume it. He is a purifying fire.

But God is often compared to water: a fountain of life, living water. Or to wind, as in the Hebrew word “Ruach” which is sometimes translated as wind, breath, spirit, depending on whether the Bible passage is meant literally or symbolically. (For more about translations, cultural slang, etc please see the section on slang later in this book.) So then words, concepts, and phrases can be compared with each other throughout the Bible.

Actions can also be compared throughout the Bible. Here is an example:

In St John’s description of the Passion, Pilate washes his hands in front of the crowd. From the text alone, assumptions can be made about Pilate’s reason for such a symbolic action. But if we are to understand the full import of Pilate’s action, we have to bring all shades of the meaning to the forefront. Why not see if this action has appeared anywhere else in the Bible? Picking up the concordance, what do we look for? Wash? Washed? Hands? All of them. Remember, knowing what to look for depends on the translation you are using and whether your concordance is a concordance to the King James Version or to another version. So then, what have we found? The sixth verse of the twenty-first chapter of the book of Deuteronomy also refers to washing of the hands and guiltlessness. Interesting. Is it possible that Pilate knew this verse and was using a symbol the high priests knew? Maybe, maybe not. Is it possible that the symbol was Pilate’s own symbol of guiltlessness? Maybe, maybe not. You are free to give any opinion as to the meaning of the verse, but you will not be too far off because you have done some research on the action.

Knowing when to use your concordance to compare other actions depends on how well you know your Bible and how much delight in discovering spiritual insights. Delight should not be taken lightly, especially if you don’t want to rehash the insights of others. Serendipity, mindfulness, and insight often are helped by a good concordance.

Let’s consider this: the Bible uses the phrase “old and advanced in years” about six times. But five of the six times this phrase is used to describe someone who is about to do accomplish the

most important adventure of his life. Sarah and Abraham are described as “old and advanced” in years. But then, suddenly childbirth. Caleb is also similarly described. But then a new spiritual accomplishment. The concordance has helped you notice this pattern. Noticing this pattern a writer could create a good devotional or Bible study entitled “The Best is yet to be” which might explore usefulness to God, perseverance, retirement, or whatever insights you want to discuss.

Another example: Many of the patriarchs (or their representatives) met their future wives beside a well. This is culminated in Jesus’ meeting of the Samaritan woman, which hints at the symbolic marriage relationship between Jesus to the Church.

Here is a Bible study I wrote once. Instead of simply writing a long article, I simply listed some of the many questions God asks in the Bible. The article follows in its entirety. Note the following actions, as concepts compared with concepts:

Long-time readers of the Bible have a subtle understanding of the consistency of God’s personality. That is: they know God. Throughout the five thousand years and dozens of authors who wrote the Bible, God’s personality traits and actions remain consistent and can be compared one with another. For instance, have you noticed that Yahweh has a habit of asking the guilty person searching questions instead of coming straight out with an accusation? Yahweh is not the “accuser” and seems to have a dislike of straightforward accusation, therefore he rarely uses it. This is part of God’s unchangeable personality, something that shows up in the God of the Old Testament as well as in Jesus, whom Christians also believe to be God. Both approach the sinner with questions designed to create a relationship of reasoning and truth. (I will refrain from listing the Bible chapters and verse so that you may use your concordance and read the stories in context.)

1. In the Garden of Eden, after Adam had sinned, God said, “Adam, where are you?”
2. To Eve, after the Fall, he said, “What is this that you have done?”
3. To Cain after Cain had murdered Abel: “Where is your brother?”
4. To Jacob, as he fought with the angel of the Lord, “What is your name?” Perhaps, the Lord wanted Jacob to get back to his roots. Before Jacob becomes a “prince” (Israel), he must acknowledge that he is a “supplanter” (Jacob)
5. To Sarah when she disbelieved and laughed in her disbelief, “Why did you laugh?”
6. To Hagar, when she was despairing in the desert, “What is the matter, Hagar?”
7. To Moses, when Moses asked Him to part the Red Sea, “Why are you looking at me? You stretch out your hand and part the sea.”

8. To Moses, after Miriam had caused a fuss because of Moses' Ethiopian wife, "If her father had spat in her face, would she not be ashamed seven days?" (This is the third person invisible, more insulting than usual. Miriam is nearby, but God is making a point of not talking to her directly because as a backup for her racism, she had said that God had also talked directly to her.)
9. To Satan, after he came to see God in the court of Heaven, "I see you have been pondering my servant Job?"
10. To Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul since I've removed the kingship from him?"
11. To Balaam, "Who were those men who visited you?"

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ does the same thing which shows that he is very much like his Father.

1. After He had left His mother and father and made them worry themselves sick about him, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know I would be doing my father's business?"
2. To his mother after she asked him to turn water into wine: "Woman, what is that between you and me?"
3. To the man who told him that his brothers and mother were waiting for Him outside, "Who are my brothers and sisters?"
4. To the woman taken in adultery, "Woman, where are your accusers?"
5. To the man who wanted to know what the greatest commandments were: "Tell me who acted as a neighbor?"
6. To the man who wanted Jesus to give the man's greedy brother a talking to. "Who made me a divider among you?"
7. To John and James when they asked Jesus to make them special in heaven, "Do you think you can swallow the cup reserved for those who will stand at my right hand?"
8. To the man who wanted Jesus to tell his brother to divide the inheritance properly: "Who made me a divider between you?"
9. On the question of tribute, "Whose inscription and face is on this coin?"
10. To Simon Peter, "Who do you say I am?"
11. To Simon Peter, "Do you love me?"
12. To Simon Peter, "If I will that he (my best friend) waits around until I return, what is that to you?"
13. To Paul on the road to Damascus, "Paul why are you persecuting me?"

14. In the gospel of John chapter 14, Phillip asked Jesus to show them the father. Jesus said, “Have I been so long with you Philip and you don't know me? He who has seen me has seen the Father.”

Did you buy a concordance? Did you find all the chapters and verses? What words did you use in order to find the verses? Did you read the entire passages in context? Good, now you are an expert in the use of concordances, finding patterns and concepts, and commonalities in words, phrases, symbols and actions. With this knowledge you can develop mindfulness and be able to hear those insights which the Holy Spirit gives you.

## Be Honest

**T**his seems like a strange thing to say to people who are interested in spirituality and the Bible but it must be said. A reader of the Bible and a writer of Bible studies must be ethical. Be honest. Don't misrepresent a passage. I am convinced of better things concerning you, but the simple truth is that even the most honest of Bible Study writers have agendas, biases and temptations towards handling Scripture in the wrong manner.

Consider, for instance that Paul clearly states that people were getting drunk by taking too much wine during the Lord's supper while others went away with nothing. (1 Cor 11:20-21) The writer of the gospel of John also states that Jesus turned water into wine and a party guest stated, "You saved the good wine until now." All this might be clear to the average reader. Clearly people do not get drunk on grape juice. And it would seem very strange to have someone say of the wine Jesus made, "you have saved the good grape juice until now." But a Bible writer whose denomination does not believe that Jesus meant wine might do a bit of omission here in order to say that no one actually drank wine in the Bible. She might even go so far and say that every time wine is mentioned in the Bible the Scripture writer meant only grape juice. Her reasoning might be a noble one. After all, wine is abused in many quarters. But dealing dishonestly with Bible interpretation is unethical no matter how noble your agenda.

But there are honest errors and there is plain old fraud. Most of the cults started because some seeker with bad reading skills and even lesser knowledge of Greek or history misread or misunderstood some word or Bible passage. Don't assume that only small modern cults play around with Scripture. The bigger cults have done this. For instance, one well-established Bible denomination, which disagrees with most other Christian denominations on almost all its tenets, didn't like the fact that Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, 'Today you will be with me in Paradise.'" This cult, which declares that people are "asleep" after their deaths could not get past this statement, therefore they moved the comma after the word "you." In their "translation" of the Bible, they change a well-known Aramaic slang of Jesus' time in order to make the passage read: "Truly, truly, I say to you today, You will be with me in paradise." The arbitrariness of this punctuation change can be seen when one looks in a Bible concordance. Every time the phrase "truly, truly I say to you" is used in the Bible, the comma comes after the word you. The odd placement of this particular comma jumps out to the attentive reader. Now, whatever your opinion on life after death, this kind of fudging is simply too slick and deceitful.

I will discuss this matter of agendas in greater detail in a later chapter. But for now, I will simply repeat: honesty is required when you're reading the Bible. A certain amount of integrity, to be sure, might cause confusion in both you or your denominational readers. But whether you are an atheist who has found something noble about a Bible story or a true believer who has found something unpleasant, honesty is the best policy. Don't pretend that you have seen things that aren't there; don't avoid things (you disagree with) that are there. Don't withhold evidence to prove your case. (Rev 22:18)

## **If You Don't Know the Meaning of a Passage, Withhold Judgment**

**S**ome have dismissed the Bible because they could not "get past" a problematical verse. Or because they detested a particular Biblical character. One friend of mine kept wondering how God could call someone like David "a man after His own heart?" Heck, I don't much like David either. But let's face it: the David story is only one story in a book of many stories. If the history of David and his family irks you, move on. There are sure to be other stories that will be more to your liking.

Similarly, if you don't understand what is going on in a story, don't mull over it and become obsessed with it. People have created whole sects in order to make some obscure passage of the Bible comprehensible.

For instance, the writers of the books of Kings, Samuel, and Chronicles speak of other seemingly lost historical books: the history of Gad the prophet, the history of Iddo the prophet, etc. Paul speaks of a letter he sent to the Laodiceans. As far as we know these books are lost. (The recreation of these "lost" books has been the preoccupation of many.) But perhaps the books aren't lost at all. Perhaps we do have the letter to the Laodiceans in the Bible but it's now given another name. Maybe the courier who traveled with the letter passed through Corinth or Ephesus and somehow the name of the epistle was changed. Or maybe the letter was truncated or two or more letters were collapsed into one. Perhaps the history of Gad is just another name for one of the historical Bible books we do have. After all, no one knows for sure who wrote the books of Kings and Chronicles.

Whatever the answer, be aware that there are only a few times in your life when knowing the exact right meaning of a Bible passage or the whereabouts of some obscure passage will be a life or death.

## **Don't use your denomination to interpret the Bible. Use the Bible to interpret the Bible**

**M**any Controversies arise not from the Bible but from our interpretation of the Bible. In my opinion, many of the sects which now exist would be proven wrong if they read a Bible they can understand. The King James Version is a beautiful translation, but most people don't speak Elizabethan English. In addition, new Biblical scholarship, archaeology, and linguistics, have clarified and changed the meanings of certain words which were translated wrongly in the King James Version.

The truth of Christianity is what is important. All the true denominations agree on the main important points of the truths God wants us to know. But even so, all denominations have some error. And all engage in a bit of Scripture Twisting in order to prove their interpretation. Sometimes they go so far as to make a Bible verse mean exactly the opposite of what it was meant to mean. The Bible speaks against creating and bowing down to engraved images or any kinds of heavenly images..even God. Yet there is a denomination which allows this. The Bible states in Timothy that in the last days some will depart from the faith by commanding to abstain from meats It also states that those who eat only vegetables are weak in faith. Yet, there's a denomination that specifically states eating meat is a sin. The Bible states that the day will come when Christians will reject Jesus as Lord and savior and even now there are denominations and Christians who say Jesus was not the only Son of God. The Bible states that "speaking in tongues" and the miraculous charismatic baptism of the Holy Spirit will cease when knowledge and prophesy seek. Yet there are denominations which say that the days of miracles have ceased because "that which is perfect is come." But how can this be since we live in the last days when that which is perfect has not come and knowledge is increasing?

St Paul warned against carnal divisions over minor matters. In the twenty-second chapter of St Matthew, we see how the Lord views these petty disagreements where people go out of their way to make up silly spiritual "What if?" questions. Some denominational differences are important and you should know which are important and which are not. Although these questions are important to the people asking them, they are not important to Jesus.

1. Is there something that your denomination believes that other Christian denominations do not?

2. Does your denomination judge other denomination because of this?
3. Why is your denomination right?
4. Do you have a live-and-let-live attitude towards Christians of other denominations or do you believe you must get them to change their minds and believe as you do?
5. Do you believe only those things your denomination has convinced you of?
6. Are you uncomfortable when you believe something that others in your denomination does not believe?
7. Can you have friends who don't believe as you do or do you prefer to stay with like-minded people?
8. Have you studied other denominations in order to understand or confront them better?
9. Do you think there is more to being a Christian than simply trusting in Jesus' death and Resurrection and loving God and your neighbor as yourself?
10. What other books do your denomination use to interpret the Bible?
11. Who are the great Christians who helped to create your denomination?
12. Have you researched their lives?

In all things, The Holy Spirit shows us what is on our hearts. Question to ask yourself:

- 1 As I read this Bible passage, is there a part of me that doesn't want this passage to be true?
- 2 Is there a part of me that is ignoring verses I don't like and twisting their meaning around because of works written by the prophet in my denomination ?
- 3 Is it possible that some of my beliefs are based on my own personal fears and agendas?
- 4 Do I try to avoid certain Scriptures or change their meanings because they make me feel uncomfortable?
- 5 Do you think that certain parts of the Bible were written by people who are not as enlightened or as knowledgeable as you?

## **These are the basic beliefs of Christianity.**

1 – Jesus gave those who would believe in Him God’s life, the power to use God’s words, and God’s authority over sin, sickness, death. Those who believe in Jesus are no longer regular human beings; they are a kind of new creation – perfectly human...and yet like God ...just as Jesus was so are His people in the world.

2 – The words of the Bible are living and active. They have power and God’s life within them.

3 – Christianity is a religion which states that one cannot reach God by one’s own righteousness, wisdom, mystical experience etc. In short, one cannot reach God at all because human righteousness leads to boasting and self-righteousness (if goodness is achieved). Or it leads to self-delusion and boasting, judgemental behavior towards others. God sees human righteousness as pitiful and like a person dressed in filthy rags. Christianity is about accepting the love of God as one’s father and living a life of daily trust in the saving work of Jesus. Christians believe that Jesus was a substitute death for us and his triumph over death, sin and self resurrection saves us if we believe and trust in His work. In Christianity, there is a “great exchange” where God’s goodness is imparted to those who believe in Christ. The work of a Christian, therefore, is not primarily to be good enough to get into heaven. Because no one can be good enough to do that. But the Christian’s work is to believe, to live a life of daily trusting and relying on God’s love, care, and power working in us who believe.

4 – God showed the world that Jesus was the bringer of Truth and the Savior of all men by raising Jesus from the dead. God could have raised any other prophet from the dead. But He did not, because the only Truth God wanted to set His seal on – to endorse as we would say—is the Truth, Way, and Life ad Jesus taught it.

5 – Jesus is the only prophet of any religion who is still alive. God gave Him the power to conquer death because Jesus is God. Jesus is all the words God ever spoke made into human flesh. Jesus knew God before the beginning of human existence. Jesus always was and is not merely a good man, but God Himself.

Bad scholarship, Human manipulativeness, and people's desire to find hidden obscure knowledge rather than accept the glorious gospel -- which they consider too simplistic because they don't see its riches or the valuable kingdom—should not be allowed to go unchallenged. Study to show yourself a good workman.

Exercise:

What do you think of the Charismatic Renewal?

What do you think of heaven?

What do you think of Jehovah's witnesses?

How do you define a cult?

Exercise:

Many Christians have influenced Christianity in general and certain denominations in particular.

Likewise, many enominations are linked to historical movements.

How to research:

Use writings from inside and from outside of your denomination:

1. Martin Luther, St Augustine, Calvin, The Russellites, Joseph Smith, Pope Gregory, Azusa Street
2. Study the Mission Statement of your denomination. Study the Mission Statement of another mainstream denomination. How are they similar? How are they different? Do these differences matter in the long run?
3. Create a group to study various cults. Do NOT study any cult by yourself or with a member of that cult. How is the writing of the cult different?

Many Christians believe in hell. Some don't. Some believe in ghosts. Some don't. Some believe in soul-sleep; most don't. Some believe in going to heaven immediately after one's death; some don't.

Exercises:

St Paul says he was caught up into the third heaven and saw great things. He did not know whether he was living or dead. That's an interesting comment. If Saint Paul did not know if he was living or dead, then – for Paul—the senses of the dead believer are very much alive. John saw the souls of those who died during the Great Tribulation under the altar. Moses and Elias spoke to Jesus in the transfiguration. What would you say to someone who believes in soul-sleep? What do you think about the afterlife? What do you think of the afterlife? What do you think of hell? Do you believe in a certain kind of afterlife – or non-afterlife—because you want it to be so? Some people think there

will be marriage in heaven? Do you or don't you want to believe this?

Some Christians believe in ghosts. Others say there is no such thing, only demonic trickery. St Paul said something about baptizing living people for the dead. No one is exactly sure what that means, but one modern cult does baptize for the dead. Samuel was brought up from death by the Witch of Endor? What do you think about Ghosts? Why?

God the Father gave gifts to the church (Rom 12:6-8), Christ gave gifts to the church (Eph chapter 4), the Holy Spirit gave gifts to the church. (1 Cor 12) ) In addition other gifts are mentioned in (Isaiah 11:2) (Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17) (1 Cor 12:4-11) and (Gal 5:22) Discuss.

Some Christians believe in Evolution. Others don't. Some believe that God set the matter in motion, and that "Let there be light" is in fact the Big Bang. And still others simply don't care. In the Creation Account, we read that the sun was created after light was. As Christians, we do not worship the sun. We know that life comes from God -- who give (and is) total Light and energy-- and not the sun. What do you think about evolution? Why? Why do you think it matters, if you think it matters?

In the first chapter of I Chronicles, the children Keturah bore to Abraham are not listed as being his children. They are listed as the children of Keturah, and Keturah is the only woman in the list as the parent of children. What's that about? Why do people blame Hagar and Ishmael since Esau --Isaac's son—was prophesied as a father of many nations? Did you know that many of the rabbis in the Talmud, believe that Keturah is the same person as Hagar? What do you think of Hagar and Ishmael now?

1. Why is Naamah mentioned as Lamech's daughter? Why is she so important that Moses and the Holy Spirit mentions her?
2. Why do all the descendants of Cain and Seth share such name similarities?
3. Why does God call a council and uses the help of a lying spirit in order to kill Ahab at a particular place? (I King 22:21)

We understand that there are basically three dispensations – that of God, that of the Son, that of the Holy Spirit—but why does Jesus say the Spirit of Truth cannot come unless Jesus go away?

1. Why are we told the exact number of fish (John 21:11) that the disciples found in their net after the resurrection?
2. What do we do with cultures? What about the Virgin Mary? When the disciples entered Rome, Corinth and Ephesus, they found worship of Diana. Here was a place where a virginal goddess ruled. Paul got into trouble for this. And the modern-day Ephesians have a tradition that the big argument Paul got into when he preached to the Ephesians was that he was putting down Diana and comparing her to the virgin Mary. Many people pray more to the Virgin Mary than they do to God. They call Mary the Queen of Heaven, which was the name given to Tammuz's mother. And prayer was made to Tammuz's mother on prayer beads that are curiously and scarily like rosary bead. Although early Christian paintings and frescos show the burial of the virgin, etc, by the 1800's theology said Mary was assumed into heaven. Although the Revelations vision of the woman surrounded by stars was interpreted as representing the sufferings done to Israel, now the woman with the stars is the Virgin Mary. But does this mean Roman Catholicism is wrong and we are right? At this time in your spirituality, does it really matter?

Many questions pop up when one reads the Bible. But when you read, ask yourself this: Does this question really matter to me and my life right now? Is my obsessing over this question keeping me away from God? What does God require of us? To be doctrinally correct in all things? Well, that would be nice. But it's not going to happen in this life. To be more doctrinally correct than our neighbor? Perhaps. But it seems to me that if were to be aware of how doctrinally correct we are "in comparison to someone else" then we are in danger of being in comparative mode. To be good? Well, that would be nice. But we have Jesus' righteousness because all our own righteousness is like filthy rags. God requires us to love Him and to trust Him, and He requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves. The Spirit will bring us into all truth...in His own time...when we are ready for meat and not milk.

## Read the Bible in a Translation You Understand

**O**kay, some of us are Shakespearean scholars. But not me. I highly recommended that teenagers, new Bible readers and those of us not fluent in King James English use a contemporary English version of the Bible. Much of the grammar, word order, and word meanings of King James' English are different from English as we now speak it. Shakespearean King James English is also different from the English used in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. In addition, the King James translation is an old translation. While it is a beautiful translation and every good Bible study writer should have one copy, its translators were not as knowledgeable about archeology and linguistics as translators today are.

I'll give you some examples of confusion that could occur when someone reads the KJV Bible. What does the phrase "suffer the little children to come to me" mean? Christians who have read their Bibles all their lives know that "suffer" means "allow." But this word could confuse an innocent searcher who will ask, "Why does he want the children to suffer to come to him?" See what I mean? One famous verse in the gospel of John is: "The light shined in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not." The meaning of the word "comprehend" has changed. In King James' time, it meant "to encompass or to conquer." When the KJV translators saw the old Aramaic/Hebrew word that meant to conquer, they used "comprehend." But when modern folks say "comprehend," we mean "to understand." Therefore when they read the KJV, they do not "comprehend" the verse. I've heard some great sermons on the darkness not "understanding" the light. These wonderful sermons and interpretations were valid in their own way. But the verse still means: "the darkness did not conquer the light."

Other examples of confusing words are:

"Despise." Modern readers would understand the word as a synonym for "hate" but in King James time its meaning was "to hold in small esteem" or "to see little worth in."

"Confession." Paul writes that "Jesus witnessed a good confession before Pilate." (1 Ti 6:13) Today the word means telling our sins to a priest or to others. But in King James day, the word "confession" meant something like "declaration" or "preaching." The translators used confession to translate the Greek word which meant that although the bloodied beaten Jesus did not look like the Son of God as he stood seemingly powerless before Pilate, He nevertheless had spoken God's truth and declared that He was the Messiah.

As I have stated before, many Bible cults were begun because someone simply did not understand the language of the King James Version. An example that comes to mind is the KJV meaning of the word “herbs.” A reader in King James’ time would understand that it meant “vegetables.” Unfortunately, if one does not use the King James Bible or her denomination’s particular version of the KJV, the KJV’s meaning is obscured because of the old-fashioned word for vegetables, which is “herbs.” So, do not be surprised if someone reads the passage in the Bible and says, “but it doesn’t say ‘vegetables,’ it says ‘herbs!’” A Christian who belongs to a denomination that espouses vegetarianism and believes that meat-eaters will go to hell – because of meat-eating and Sabbath-worship will refuse to see what the Bible plainly says in Colossians 2:16, 17 and Romans 14: 5, 6. Unfortunately, Elizabethan English can cause much confusion if one doesn’t fully understand it.

It’s a good time to point out that the English Bible is not the only Bible in the world. Different translations and different texts create different meanings. The western church, for instance, translated its Bible from one ancient text and the Eastern Church translated its Bible from another text. Therefore we must be aware that what might appear to be a big problem in our Bible might not exist as a problem in the Eastern Bible. And vice versa. The Bibles of the Eastern Church and of the Western Church agree on most matters but there are many, many instances where whole sentences are different.

The Eastern Church (which includes Greek Orthodox, Arab Christians and Indian Christians) claims that since they live in the East where Christianity was founded, and where many Christians speak languages which are closer to the Biblical languages of Greek and Aramaic that they understand the vocabulary, syntax, punctuation and grammar of the original Biblical language much better than the Western Church. Thus, they understand how errors can be made. This may be true. For instance, most western translations of the Bible translate the phrase found in Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25 and Luke 18:25 as: "A camel through the eye of a needle." This is what their ancient manuscript shows. The eastern church - which lives more with the old Aramaic language than Elizabethan translators - translates the passages as "A rope through the eye of a needle." The problem in this case is the “dot and tittle” of the Arabic word "gamla” which can mean either “rope” or “camel” depending on whether the scribe remembered to dot his i’s, cross his t’s, and mind his p’s and q’s. To say this in English, a dash or a dot in the wrong place can easily turn one word into another. Or, for an English example, the word “hail” can become the word “hall” if the dot over the letter “I” is left out, written too small, too far or too near the letter “I.” Only a natural speaker of

English could understand why such an error could be made.

This is not to say that the ancient manuscript from which the Western Church translated its Bible is more flawed than the one on which the Eastern Church based its translation. (After all, the “rope/camel” error in this case seems to have occurred in all three books of the Bible – a difficult error to make) – but knowing that that other accepted Bibles see things differently does make a Bible reader want to do research.

One of the most striking discrepancies between the western text and the Eastern Text occurs in the translation of Jesus’ words from the cross. (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34) The Western Text reads, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Throughout the centuries, this has been discussed in many great sermons and linked with Psalm 22. The Eastern Text, however, translates the verse as “My God, My God, For this purpose I was spared!” On the one hand, it does make the passage about the centurion “hearing Jesus’ cry” said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!” make more sense. After all, there is more triumph in this statement than in the other. But that would mean that even the translation of Psalm 22 in the Western Text is slightly off. What is a Christian Bible student to do, then? Be practical. When in the west and speaking to western Christians, use the western Bible. When in the east and speaking with Eastern Christians or Eastern Arabs, use the Eastern Text. In short, we do not know everything about every book or verse or character in the Bible. If a problem bothers you, pass it by until you have studied the matter more thoroughly.

## **Do not Build Entire Worlds upon a Scarcity of Material**

**T**he last rule is one of the most important rules of Bible study. How often have you heard a minister you love and respect step up to the pulpit and spin a fantastic yarn about some Biblical person from weak, iffy, and non-existent facts? A lot of guesswork and arguing from ignorance come into this kind of world-building and plainly, if you do not know the exact facts of a situation and if you have no evidence, don't assume that the non-evidence is evidence itself.

Consider Zipporah, Moses' wife. Then consider the Ethiopian woman. We don't know what is really going on here. (The Bible isn't a slave to chronological order as we know.) Zipporah might have died. Moses might have divorced Zipporah. Moses might have married the Ethiopian woman as a second-status wife in ADDITION to being married to Zipporah. Or Zipporah might be the Ethiopian woman. Strangely, Moses' father-in-law Jethro (Zipporah's father, also called Reuel) doesn't seem to be upset with Moses about Moses' marriage to the Ethiopian/Sudanese/Midianite. When we start assuming things about the state of Moses' marriage, then we start creating all kinds of funky theology. We simply do not know.

Paul's wife is never mentioned in the Bible. Peter's wife is. The apostle John may or may not have been married. It seems Paul was not married at the time he wrote his letters. But he may or may not have married later in his life. If someone tries to give Paul a wife, (or keep him forever unmarried) he or she is arguing from ignorance. One simply does not know what the facts of the situation might be.

Another example of people arguing from ignorance occurs when a reader takes a small comment in the Bible, misunderstands it because he doesn't understand the language of the King James Version or the language of the original text, then spins an entire story around it. This happens in many sermons which speak about the lives of Bible characters. One person who seems to suffer most from this is Zipporah, Moses' wife. Although Moses' father-in-law Jethro is present, people assume that the Ethiopian/Midianite woman is not Zipporah. And in order to fill in the blanks, they spin a story about divorce and desertion and say that Zipporah's holy comment "you are a husband of blood to me" ("There is a blood covenant between us." Ex 4:25,26) is an insult against Moses. Zipporah was a Midianite, a descendant of Abraham's son, and the daughter of a priest. The

Midianites had remembered the circumcision although Moses, a Hebrew, had apparently forgotten it. But Zipporah's comment – in the minds of those who don't understand the situation – has been used to build an entire back-story that is not really plausible.

The same mistake of “arguing from ignorance” occurs in the story of Job's wife. The last chapter states that God gave Job more children after Job's trial was finished. Many pastors go on to read events into this chapter that simply aren't there. They say that Job's wife dies. But nowhere is it written in the book of Job that Job's wife died. This is a case where the underlying assumption that only a man's pain matters – and a woman is evil if she does not understand her husband's pain – and that God didn't care that Mrs. Job also endured loss. They forget that sorrow and the death of a child often causes grief-filled friction in families. But their underlying inability to see God's concern for women as well as men leads to this case of arguing from ignorance.

Consider the case of Salome. Sometimes we read the Bible with a bit too much prurience. We really have to decide whether Herod lusted about Salome or not. Another time when we see sexual commentary when it probably isn't there is in the case of Zipporah. Many assume Zipporah's comment about the bloody husband to be about sex and that she meant to be coldly castrating. She probably was talking about a blood covenant between herself and her husband.

Assumptions often lead to theology. Sometimes assumptions are right, mind you. But we should always be aware we're assuming and we should be sure our assumptions are valid. Sometimes, they may not be. For instance, many people call Gabriel an “archangel.” Well, that might be true. But then again, it might not be. I suppose we assume Gabriel is an archangel because Roman Catholic tradition or some other tradition says so...or maybe we think that God is like a big CEO in the sky and only important folks are sent on missions. It's possible that being sent on missions to humans is part of Gabriel's duty but that doesn't mean “he's close to the big guy therefore he's got to be a super-important angel.” In heaven, all angels are close to God. So unless you know why you personally think Gabriel is an archangel, best to just think of him as an archangel.

Another case of assumptions occurs when we want an easy theology and are caught in an either/or mode and can't make room for a third possibility. The Bible speaks of hell and death. Are they the same place? The Bible tells us of hell and of heaven but it also tells of “being cast out into outer darkness” (Luke), “being outside the gates of New Jerusalem” (Revelation), of “those who don't believe in Jesus not coming unto the father” (John), of being forbidden to enter the great feast (Matthew), and of “not seeing the face of the prince.” (Ezekiel.) Now all these descriptions of non-

heavenly places might or might not be hell. But there might be a third permanent afterlife. When John writes that outside the gates of New Jerusalem are the fearful, the unbelieving, the sodomites, etc...is he talking about them being in hell? Or is he saying that literally outside of heaven – saved from hell but somehow permanently excluded from heaven—are those who believed in Christ but who simply lived bad lives? Honestly? I don't know. But it's something to ponder.

Another time when assumptions are made occurs when the human “result” of an incident is interpreted by a Bible reader as God-ordained. Like arguing from ignorance, this occurs when someone takes certain facts found in the Bible and uses them to draw a spiritual conclusion that may or not be true. Humans often believe that a good ending means God has blessed something and conversely that a bad ending means God has punished a person. This is often true, but we must not forget that God is gracious and He does not think as we do. Just because the result of an incident is blessed doesn't mean God wanted the incident to take place.

For instance, I heard someone say that Bathsheba was the only woman David ever loved because God chose Solomon to be king after David. This syllogism is not true. We do not know if Solomon was fated to be born. Nor do we know if David and Bathsheba were madly in love with each other. What we do know is that God is gracious. Consider this: Cain received a mark of grace; does this mean that God wanted Cain to kill his brother? Adam and Eve sinned and ate the fruit; this caused Jesus to die to redeem us. But this does not mean that God wanted our first parents to sin. God graciously blessed David with Solomon. God graciously sent His son. One of God's major traits is his ability to take the worst mistake a human can make and create a wondrous blessing out of it.

As for assuming that David and Bathsheba were each other's true love, Bathsheba does show up later in the story as a queen of great influence. (1 Kings 1:31) But just because she shows up doesn't mean that David loved her any more than he loved his other wives. It is not only love that can bind people together but sorrow and guilt. Because of their adultery, David and Bathsheba had to bear the guilt of the deaths of Bathsheba's husband Uriah and her grandfather, Ahitophel. It could be argued that when Ahitophel told Absalom to have sex with all of David's wives, Bathsheba was excused from rape because she was Ahitophel's relative.

The point is that like Rumpelstiltskin, pastors and Bible writers often spin an entire life story – death, desertion, divorce – from little to no facts. This sermonizing from ignorance has created more assumptions in Bible study than most other pitfalls.

## Read Biblical Passages in Context.

**T**his is fundamental in all reading. But many people pluck verses and even whole chapters out of context. When we go to church, we rush from verse to verse as the preacher tells us. That's good. But after church - when we're by ourselves at home - we should return to the passages to read all the verses in context. Sometimes, we must read the entire paragraph, chapter or even the entire book before we can understand what a Bible prophet or author is really saying. Biblical writers are notorious for digressing from their main point and then returning to it through another line of thought. You won't get the entire story if you study only one verse. (It is, of course, good to memorize favorite Bible verses but this is no substitute for reading the entire Bible passage.) This is especially important if there is a chance that nearby passages comment on or qualify the verse that has been taken out of context.

I remember an incident in college when an atheist challenged me on the Bible. He said, "The Bible says 'we must forgive our enemies' and yet it also says 'an eye for an eye.' It also tells us not to judge people but at the same time it lists all kinds of things to judge people by. It contradicts itself." This student did not know two things. The first is that the prophets often spoke two apparently contradictory phrases in close connection to each other to make a point. The collector of the book of Proverbs puts these two proverbs together: "Answer not a fool according to his folly lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly lest he be wise in his own eyes." (Proverbs 26:4,5)

Jesus often put contradictory comments together in the same conversation, the same sermon. (Matthew 5-7) In the case of forgiveness, he said, "you have heard about the eye for an eye business but now I'm telling you to forgive your enemies." In the case of judgment, something else occurs that the student is not aware of. There are many meanings for the word which is translated "judge" When Jesus said, "Judge not, lest ye be judged," he was talking about judging the holiness of another. When he later stated, "Do not cast your pearls before swine," he was speaking about the discernment needed to spare one's self a great deal of emotional hurt by sharing one's heart with someone who does not understand it. If the student had read the entire Sermon on the Mount in context, he would have understood that there was no contradiction. The same thing also applies when we encounter the phrase "judge not."

Sometimes a writer will state quite clearly what he is writing about and why. Sometimes not. Let's examine Moses' purpose in writing the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.) We'll use Moses' books because these are the first Bible books most people encounter when they try to read the Bible.

"Genesis" means the "beginning" and speaks about the beginning of creation, man, sin, the people of Israel, the hope for a savior. The Book of Genesis begins as follows: "In the Beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Most people simply start reading the Bible from the beginning without asking when this verse was originally written or why Moses wrote it. When they start reading it, they don't really know that Moses is the author because Moses himself has not appeared. He does not appear until the second book of the Bible, which is Exodus. And Moses doesn't talk about himself. All the beginning writer knows is that they are reading a holy book and they are faced with a statement. They don't really consider that it must first have been written at a particular time and for a particular group of people. Nor do they ask what it could all be leading to.

But when Moses brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt, he had a large philosophical job ahead of him. (Exodus 14) He was now the leader of a people who had grown up in a culture of many (Egyptian) gods. These gods compartmentalized the world into little territories. Tradition states that the books of Moses (The Law) were written for these escaped Israelites in the middle of the desert. Moses had to teach a battered group of former slaves that their God - who had seemingly deserted them - was not only a loving powerful God but the God who made and owned heaven and earth. He had to wipe their minds clean from all the bad theology and confused thinking they had received during the years of their captivity. The first thing to do, logically speaking, would be to tell them about the Unknown God they had forgotten. Thus he gave them the Creation story. In his story, he shows them that their God created was the god of the stars, the sun, the moon, the day, the night, the land, the sea, the fish, the wild animals, the domesticated animals, the creeping things, humans, everything. In this way, the Egyptian way of compartmentalizing the world into little territories owned by little gods would be wiped from their memory.

But there was even more for these newly-freed people to learn. Moses had to teach them the spiritual history of the world. He had to tell them about faith in God and that the first sin was still alive and well - humans distrusted God's love and were incapable of loving Him. He had to show them how addicted humans were to their own righteousness and how disdainful they are of their fellow men. He told them about the first religious war (the story of Cain and Abel), how humanity took advantage of God's love and misused and usurped God's grace (Lamech), how all the other

nations gradually fell away from God (The Nephilim) and why God chose their faithful --but nevertheless unworthy-- ancestors (Abraham, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Judah) to be the forefathers of a people chosen to show the world the greatness of His name. [(Later the writer of Judges will add his own capping touches by turning the reader's sexual, religious, and hierarchical, cultural expectations upside down.)]

Moses had to teach the people the complicated lesson that God had chosen their nations above all the nations of the earth and yet that although they were God's special people, they had not earned the blessings but God had the blessings because of God's love and faithfulness. These people who had been enslaved for four hundred years had to learn that they were truly God's people. And yet they and their ancestors were no better than all the other peoples on the earth. These people who had been treated harshly by cruel masters had to know that they themselves were no spiritually better than the people who had oppressed them and that their own ancestors had oppressed others who were different. (Hagar, Shechem) This is a tough teaching. He had to let them see the great vision of their people, that in the future all the religions and destinies of the world would revolve around Israel, its people and Israel's God; and yet the people of Israel were not to hate, feel superior to or mistreat others because of this great vision of their destiny.

How does he go about it? How could they be chosen above all people and yet in no way better than other people? By showing them a world and an ancestral history that depicts how the imperfect human mind, their ancestors included, dealt with the great visions and Vision God had given them.

As he tells the story, he continually plays with their expectations by showing them that God's ways are not man's ways and that the flaws of the good guys beside the good qualities of the bad guys. Cain works hard tilling the ground but his hard work gets him no respect from God whereas Abel kills a lamb and is accepted. The beautiful Rachel is not their primary ancestor but the outcast rejected Leah. The slave-girl Hagar, a slave like themselves, has a wonderful encounter with God while the prejudiced slave owner Sarah is shown as petulant and as harsh as their Egyptian masters. He even uses the same phrase to link Sarah with their Egyptian owners: Both Sarah and the Egyptians are said to "deal harshly" with their slaves.

Moses also shows them what their ancestors did when they received a vision of their destiny. He writes about God telling Abraham that, "in Abraham all the people of the world will be blessed." But what does Abraham do? On the one hand, Abraham shows remarkable holiness in not having a materialistic attitude towards his inheritance. He lives in tents. He allows Lot to take the

greener pastures. He digs great wells and allows others to steal them from him. Good so far. But what is Abraham's attitude toward his spiritual inheritance? A kind of holier-than-thou mentality. With the exception of Melchizedek, Abraham tends to think that people from other nations have no relationship with God. He doesn't trust the Egyptians to behave properly towards another man's wife and so deceives Pharaoh by claiming that Sarah is his sister. Later he is amazed to realize that the Egyptians fear God. That's one of the first lessons Moses tells his people: other peoples also fear God although they don't have the same relationship with him that Abraham does.

Through the story of Ishmael's birth, Moses depicts the dangers of trying to bring about a vision about through merely human means. Yet because he describes Hagar's enslavement to Sarah with the same words he uses to describe the Israelite's enslavement to the Egyptians, the newly-freed Israelites, a nation of former slaves, cannot help but identify with a woman slave, although she was Egyptian. Egyptian though she may be, her plight – a mistress who dealt harshly with her, who treated a pregnant slave as harshly as the Egyptians treated pregnant Israelites – was just like theirs. They know that Sarah knew her son was the one chosen by God, but they also hear that God has plans for Ishmael's descendants because they too are children of Abraham. They even find out that they are bonded to the Egyptians, “their brother.”

The list of people who receive divine insight about their future and in their painfully human way "took the ball and ran with it" is almost heart-rending. Jacob obviously has been told by his mother that God appointed him to rule his older brother and has an eye on Esau's birthright. Later, not satisfied with getting the birthright from Esau, he uses a ruse to steal the firstborn's blessing. Joseph's visions of his own future, however true they might be, create problems between him and his brothers because Jacob – who already showed signs of compartmentalizing his family – is ready to make Joseph head of the clan by giving him the embroidered cloak of the Canaanite ruling class, and Joseph is a tattler who lords it over everyone.

But Moses also uses the story of Joseph to show that even though God may tell the destined one about a glorious future, God often omits telling about all the suffering and sorrows that precede the glories of the finalized vision. Moses also showed the danger of racism that often accompanies a divine vision. He was well aware that “religious” people often use their religion to destroy others. In the story of Dinah and Shechem, (Genesis 34) we see religion, racial superiority, and divine vision being combined in a devastating manner.

Dinah goes out to visit the women of a nearby town. One can imagine life for Dinah among all these brothers. While there, Shechem the Prince of Sychar sees her, falls in love with her and

seduces her. But Dinah's brothers are so outraged that she has been seduced by a non-circumcised person, someone not included in the divine vision. But Jacob and the king – Shechem’s father – want to settle matters with propriety, after all the kids are in love with each other. Dinah’s brothers use the act of circumcision-a religious act, to murder an entire nation. In showing them this bit of family history, Moses shows his people that all peoples are capable of using religion to harm another and that the Israelites, God’s people, have also committed genocide just as the Egyptians attempted to do.

And yet, before and after and during the telling of the patriarchal story, Moses manages to show that the other nations in the world had fallen short of God’s glory too. They had intermarried with fallen angels and fallen into sin. The Sodom and Gomorrah story also validates the taking over of the Canaanite land. The land of the sinful nations is taken from them and given to a glorious promised holy people...who don’t deserve it either. Do you understand now how important the author’s intention and how large the idea of “context” often is? Moses did.

## **Questions to ask yourself when reading a Bible study**

## Reading BIBLE STORIES

When reading a narrative story, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do I need to read another section in this Bible in order to understand this passage better? Are there other Bible passages that complement this one?
2. Is this story about God, about humans, or about the devil?
3. What does this story tell us about God? What attribute(s) of God is shown?
4. What happens in this event? What is the spiritual or social situation?
5. Who is (are) the main characters? What is his obstacle, flaw, or virtue?
6. What evil, temptation, or trial is the main character subject to? Is this evil from within his mind or outside of it?
7. How is God's relationship with this person shown?
8. What blessings or promises does this character have from God?
9. Are there other characters in this story? What purpose do they play?
10. How do these events affect future events?
11. Is this event –or character-- mentioned again anywhere in the Bible? What do future Bible writers think of it?
12. Compare and Contrast this Bible story with others similar to it?
13. Do many ministers speak about this particular Bible passage?
14. What is one the main message or result of this particular story?
15. Is this story for all Christians at any stage of their lives or is it written for a specific situation: marriage, financial trouble, illness or crisis?
16. Is there anything about this story that would offend modern Christians?
17. How does this story fit in with the main aspects of Christianity: reliance on God, loving God and one's fellow man, the substitutionary work and salvation of the world through Christ, the goodness of God and the evil of this present world?

Exercise:

Read Psalm 107. What events does this psalm describe?

Read Psalm 139, Genesis 1, and Isaiah 40.

## EPISTLES AND LETTERS

When reading an epistle, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Who is writing this letter?
2. To whom is he writing it? What people are in the congregation? Jews? Greeks? To certain people in the church? To one person? To a specific minister?
3. Why is he writing it? What situation has prompted his writing it?
4. What are the main earthly concerns of this writer? How many topics does he tackle in this letter?
5. What are the spiritual doctrines mentioned in this letter?
6. What does the writer say he is writing about?
7. Is this a private letter or a letter to be read to the entire church?
8. If there is a “therefore,” what is it “there for”?
9. If there is a verse you know well, read the verses before and after it.
10. In how many different directions does this writer take us? How do all these different directions fit into his purpose of the letter?
11. What proofs, if any, does the writer use to prove his main point? Does he appeal to emotion? Scripture? His reputation?

Exercise:

Why did Paul write to Philemon? Can you use other events mentioned elsewhere --the book of Acts or other epistles—to fill in what happened?

Why did James write his general epistle?

To whom did John write his third letter? Why?

What did Jude intend to write about? Why did he change his mind and write about something else?

What do you think was happening in the church of Colossae? What do you think the people were arguing about?

Who wrote the book of The Revelations? Who is it written to? What does he mean when he says he is writing to the servants of the Lord Jesus? Is there a difference between the servants of the Lord or the bride of the Lord or the body of Christ? Is he writing to Jewish Christians or to Gentile Christians? Is he writing to Christians of his time, of our time, or of all time?

## **DOCTRINES, SACRAMENTS, and OPINIONS**

In Christianity, doctrines are not merely something to be believed. The rituals and doctrines we practice contain spiritual power. When encountering a doctrine, ask yourself:

1. How do we know this Bible verse is important to a particular doctrine?
2. Is there a possibility that this is the Bible writer's own opinion?
3. Find all the Bible verses regarding this doctrine?
4. Read the passages in at least two other translations.
5. St Paul tells us to rightly divide the word of truth. This means you should look for all the Bible passages which speak on this issue.
6. There is a God-side and a human-side to every command or doctrine. For instance, we are told to love others as God loves us. When looking at a doctrine, ask what is the God-side of this doctrine? What is the human side?
7. What does the mission statement or creed of your denomination state about this particular doctrine? Why?
8. Most denominations believe the same things on the important issues. They generally believe everything found in the historical creeds – the Apostles' Creed, the Athanasian Creed, etc—and differ only on minor doctrines. If your denomination differs in a doctrine from other denominations, find the verses that support your denomination's view? Find verses that do not support it.
9. Why is this doctrine important? What is it supposed to accomplish in a believer's life?
10. Is it possible that this doctrine was changed by the New Covenant, or by the death and resurrection of Christ?
11. Often doctrines come about because of the mistranslation of a particular word, a cult-leader's misreading of the King James Version, bad reading comprehension or Scripture-twisting? Make sure you understand all the words in this passage, and that you understand the culture that produced this Bible passage?
12. Are there any specific requirements about how this particular doctrine or sacrament must be done?

Exercises:

God gives healing virtue when hands are laid on us for healing; it is our responsibility to trust, obey,

give thanks, and confess one's belief in His word. Study the concept of "laying on of hands" You will see that the God-side states that something is given when a minister of God lays hands on someone— healing virtue, a spiritual gift. What is a believer's human responsibility when hands are laid on him? Do a concordance search.

Every word or command of God is like a seed. When God speaks a word into a believer's life, that word has the power within it to heal or to accomplish what God sent it out to do. Read the story of the parable of the seed. Or read the story of Peter walking on the water. What was the command, seed, or word? What is the human-side or the human responsibility?

Jesus told us that when we pray we must believe that God has answered us, and then we will receive what we have believed. Read about the incident of the cursing of the fig tree? What does the cursing of the fig tree say about waiting, seeing, and believing while we pray?

Paul states that if we live under the law of sin and death we cannot be under the law of love. Either we live legalistically by faith in our righteousness or we live as God's children by faith in God's loving grace. The early Christians worshiped on the Lord's Day because it was the day of Christ's resurrection. They collected their tithes on the Lord's Day and St John received his revelations on the Lord's Day. The Spirit of God descended on Pentecost, the fiftieth day – seven weeks and a day-- and the festival of first fruits, the jubilee. It symbolized a new birth of grace and new freedom from the law. Compare this with Psalm 118: This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Study the book of Galations. What does this say about the freedom Christians have in Christ? Is there any rule about how or when Christians should pray?

Paul states it is best not to marry, unless one is burning with passion. In Genesis, God declares that it is not good for the man to be alone. The writer of Proverbs says he who finds a wife finds a good thing. Write an article about divine commandment, human experience, societal opinion.

Examine The Preacher's (Ecclesiastes) comment about never having found a good woman in 1000. Examine the story of Deborah and Barak. Research the city of Corinth and the worship of Bacchus. How does this connect to Paul's attitude toward the Corinthian women? What do you think about women preachers?

1. Read Paul's letter to the Colossians to see what Paul says about rules and regulations.
2. If you have not read the fifteenth chapter of the Book of Acts, please read it.
3. Do a search in your concordance for the word "tradition."

4. Compare Jeremiah chapter 31:33, Isaiah 58, Isaiah 66, the book of Malachi, Mark 2:23-26, John chapter 16.

5. Go to the library and find a book on religious traditions.

## **POETIC images used in Prophecy or Psalms**

When reading a poetic or inspirational story, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What imagery does this poem use?
2. What would this image mean to a reader in the writer's time?
3. What would this image mean to most modern readers?
4. What does this image mean to me?
5. What are the symbols in this Psalm or Song? Which will I use?
6. Are there other Bible books that also use this symbol?
7. If this is a poetic or symbolic word in the middle of a prophetic or narrative book, how do I know this is a symbol and not literal?
8. How far can I push this symbol? Can all aspects of this symbol be used in my interpretation? Or is there a place where I'm stretching matters?
9. Am I being literal when I should be symbolic? Or vice versa?
10. Have I done a concordance search to see if there are other references to this imagery? What have I discovered?
11. What does this symbol show about God or the Christian life?

Exercises:

Examine the symbol of the fig tree. Does it always mean Israel?

Do a concordance search for the words, "three men."

Do a Bible study on the phrase "a certain man."

Do a Bible study on the phrase "tower" or "fortress."

Do a Bible study on "tongue, word."

What do you think of the phrase: "Sleep in their graves" Is this symbolic? -- Is this just a euphemism for death which says nothing more than that a person has died? Is it literal? If it is literal, then those who have died are sleeping until God "wakes" them. But is every cemetery literally full of sleeping people? Is it both symbolic and literal? If so, then "sleep" is literal and "in their graves" is symbolic. It's convenient to accept one part of the verse as symbolic and another part as literal, but such dishonesty is slick scripture twisting based on a person's need to do away with an immediate hell.

## PROPHETIC

When reading a prophecy, ask yourself the following questions:

1. To whom is this prophecy addressed?
2. Why has this prophet spoken the prophecy? What event caused him to speak it?
3. Was this prophecy God-initiated or did the prophet speak it of his own volition?
4. What exactly is the prophecy? What does it foretell? Does it give a time when the prophecy will be fulfilled?
5. What symbols do this prophet use?
6. Is there another prophecy like this one mentioned in another Bible book?
7. What does the other prophet say?
8. What historical Bible book(s) must I read in order to understand this prophet better?
9. What general prophetic theme does this Prophetic book fit into?
10. Where is the fulfillment of this prophecy? How do you know this?
11. If this is an end-time prophecy, are there doctrinal disagreements about this prophecy? What does your denomination believe?

Exercise:

Read the book of the prophet Amos. If you were a modern-day Amos, how would you update this prophecy?

Do a concordance search for words and phrases such as “Day of the Lord” or “lamb” or “feast.”

Most Bibles have margin notes. Read one of the gospels and compare the prophecies with the life of Jesus.

## **MIRACLE STORIES or stories about the Supernatural**

When reading a story about a miracle, ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) Was this a small miracle or a large one?
- 2) Did God perform this miracle unasked by humans?
- 3) Was this miracle done by one of God's prophets? Did the prophet feel the need to ask God's permission?
- 4) Was this a communal miracle which required all God's people to pray?
- 5) What created a need for this miracle?
- 6) How did this miracle occur? What happened exactly?
- 7) How did God's people react to this miracle?
- 8) How did God's enemies react to this miracle?
- 9) What does the miracle being discussed prove about God?
- 10) Does this story give any insight into how we may achieve miracles in our lives?
- 11) Did God's prophet trust God more because of this miracle?
- 12) Was (or can) this miracle be repeated by followers of other gods?
- 13) What would unbelievers say about this miracle?
- 14) What does God say about miracles?
- 15) What small and great miracles has God done in your life?
- 16) What small and great miracles has God done in the lives of those you know?
- 17) Do you still have a day to day reliance on God?

Exercise:

1. What reason does the Bible give for God raising Jesus from the dead?
2. How did the Sanhedrin react when they heard that the tomb had been opened by angels?
3. In John's first epistle, he warned against believing every spirit. In Acts, the Ephesian town clerk said it was an undisputed fact that the goddess Diana sent down her image to the town. The Egyptian magicians also did miracles. What does this say about the supernatural?

## HEALING STORIES

When reading a healing story, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Who is healed in the story?
2. What kind of illness or disability did he have?
3. Who asked for healing? The sick person or someone else? Or was the healing miracle given by God unasked?
4. Did Jesus or the healer say anything to the sick person or to anyone else before the healing took place? What was the answer from the sick person or the petitioner?
5. Was the sick person required to do anything? Why?
6. How did Jesus or the healer cause the healing? What methods were used? Why do you think this particular method was used?
7. What kind of sickness was this?
8. Did the healing appear immediately? How long did it take for the healing to manifest?
9. What did Jesus say after to the healed person after the healing? Why do you think he said this?
10. What was the response to the healing? By the sick person? The family or friends? The religious community? The bystanders?
11. What was the disciples' response?
12. What does Jesus say to the disciples after the healing?

Exercises:

- 1) Before Jesus healed a blind man, he took the blind man very far out of the city. This city was Bethsaida, a city Jesus had rebuked because its inhabitants were so hard-hearted and faithless despite the many miracles done in them? Why do you think Jesus told the man not to enter into the city again?
- 2) What about Jesus' hometown of Nazareth? He could not do many miracles there.

## Some meditations on the stories.

**W**hen reading a Bible story, it often helps us understand the story best if we meditate on what happened before, during, and after God moved in the lives of those who encountered Him. Let me share some meditations I wrote on several Bible stories.

### The man by the pool of Bethesda: *No intercessor at all*

Verses: John 5: 1 -15

**Summary of the story:** A man waits for years for a supernatural miracle that occurs when an unseen angel stirs the water. He has no friend who will wait with him to intercede with him. Jesus meets the man and asks the man, “Do you want to be healed?” The man is healed when Jesus tells him to take up his bed and walk.

**His story:** There is something called a desperate hope, true...but it is hope nevertheless. I have heard of miracles happening to the desperate. Our religion is filled with stories of these miracles. We are taught to believe and trust on and rely on the Maker, the Almighty, the Creator of all. He knows all. He loves all, especially the poor and afflicted who wait on him. So, was it so very wrong of me to trust that a miracle could touch my puny and forgotten life?

Those who do not understand desperate hope live at ease in king’s palaces. They do not understand the hardness of life. Those who are not oppressed by illness, sorrow, afflictions and troubles...they do not understand how a drowning man will clutch at a straw. They walk by and shake their heads at we invalids who sit here on the five porches laugh at us who sit here waiting for the waters of Bethesda to roll.

When I heard their mockery of my desperate hope, I would tell myself that the Maker saw their mockery and my need. He would reward me for holding onto this silly desperate hope of mine. Yes, I told myself, The Holy One of Israel, would heal me. There was no other way for me to be healed. I had not accepted the permanence of this pervasive illness. I would hope in the God of my fathers.

This was the reason for my hope: at certain seasons, the cause unknown, the time unknown, the waters of this pool of Siloam here at Bethesda are stirred by an angel. At that time, the first person to leap go the water is healed. I do not know why this happens. But I know it does. I,

myself, have seen it with my own eyes. Some people have said that the waters come out from beneath the priest's altar. Some people say it is a mere natural occurrence, water coming up from Hezekiah's tunnel. Others, the mockers, have said, "Would the Holy One of Israel, play such cruel games on his people? This way of healing is almost a gamble and a God who would create such unpredictable and random healings surely cannot be believed...and who gets healed? Not the sickest man, but the man who has strength enough to run, the man with loving friends to intercede and put him into the pool."

I admit it: sometimes their words would burn into my spirit. I felt ashamed of my strange hope, my only hope. But I hoped against hope. I hoped even when I had no hope left. I told myself that the Maker of all men and He who has a special place in His heart for the sorrowful...had his eye on me...even as his eyes are upon the ant and the little sparrow.

We never knew when the waters would be stirred. Sometimes, it would not move for weeks, sometimes months. And we would stay here.. A hardy band of hoppers, waiting together. But all togetherness would leave once the movement of the water began. Yes, when the water stirred, it was every man for himself. And I would start --this poor diseased man-- towards the water. (I would sit so close to the pool sometimes, guarding my spot, preventing anyone from taking my place. I, who used to have the chief place among the beggars in the marketplace...turning to religion, what a laugh? I forgot about begging alms. All I begged for was healing. I was not satisfied with this prognosis. I wanted a better life. And so there I was, my body a pitiful traitorous mass whose sole purpose was to drag itself to the pool first.

After a while, not months, but years, I realized that all sick and wounded men are selfish. We want to be healed first. Our families are selfish. They want their own people to be healed first. But I had no one. No one to stand in the gap and intercede for me, no one to help me.

I promised the Maker of all things that if He would send someone to take me to the water, I would not forget this place. I would not forget this misery-filled portion of my life. Instead, I would make sure I was there to help others who had been similarly afflicted. It was a promise I meant. Unlike the betrayer of our ancestor, Joseph, who forgot his promise as soon as he was freed, I intended to keep my promise to the Lord. But the Dear One did not hear my promise. Or maybe he heard it but it did not concern Him. The Great One, as we all know, is inscrutable in His wisdom and sends sorrows to those He loves.

And so I lay here. And the longer I lay on this courtyard brick, and the longer I waited, a numbness and a silence built up in me. The betraying body was not bad enough. The lost years of

promise were not bad enough. The poverty that had entered my life were not enough. The Maker had left me without a helpful friend. I had no one to help put me in the pool.

People must live their lives, I understand. They have to earn their living. And for the most part, people know only what they know. They don't understand suffering if they've never experienced it. And for the most part, they do not like being acquainted with grief. The house of mirth is vastly to be preferred than the house of sorrows. People have no time to stand here waiting shamefacedly for a miracle in some afflicted soul's life...no matter how much they pity. I understood that. My mind understood that, at least. But I had no one. Life is a hard, cruel, mean-spirited and unfair thing. Suffering and poverty are loving siblings; they walk hand in hand. And their younger sister, isolation, is never far behind. The heart does not understand that. And I had been here for so long.

One day a man came by. I did not know it was Jesus. I did not know who Jesus was. I was not looking for Jesus. The man asked me if I wanted to be healed.

I told him that I had no one to put me into the water when it stirred. My eyes pleaded with him to stay and wait with me.

But he only looked up at me and with pitying eyes, he said, "Get up, take up your bed and walk." And for some reason I believed him. I got up. And this body was perfectly healed.

The man told me I should not sin anymore or something worse would happen to me. And I believed him. Who would not believe a man who had just healed him of a disease of 38 years standing?

So I started on my way, praising the Almighty that he had not forgotten me. I was carrying the mat I had lain on for so many years. That was when the priests saw me.

"Why?" they asked, "are you carrying your bed on the Sabbath day? The law forbids carrying any burden on a Sabbath day."

I almost laughed. I had carried my burdensome body for 38 years, a burden heavier than my mat. And no one had cared.

Suggested topics for study: Rejection, Looking to God and not to men, The isolated sufferer, false miracles.

Study Questions:

1. Have you visited the sick lately?
2. Have you ever had a desperate hope? What was it?

3. Have you ever known someone with a desperate hope? What was your reaction?
4. When is someone's desperate hope silly?
5. How would you respond to someone who said "I have no one to help me."
6. What do you think caused the supernatural stirring of the waters?
7. Define spiritual tiredness? What is the difference, if any between "fainting" and being spiritually tired"?
8. Why do you think Jesus asked the man "Do you want to be healed?" What do you think the effect of these words were?

**The paralyzed man:** *Loving intercessors*

**Verses:** Matthew 9: 2-7, Mark 2:12, Luke 5: 16-20

**Summary of the story:** A sick man's friends interrupt Jesus's preaching, tearing down the roof, to bring their friend to him. The man is healed when Jesus when Jesus forgives him and takes up his bed and walks away.

**His story:**

What bothered me most of all was being exiled from my own body and from the world. My days were filled with the sound of disembodied voices and the sight of feet walking past my head, out the door and into the world. All around me were the sensations of life: I could smell cumin and garlic cooking on the stove and yet I was unable to walk outside to lift the pot cover. I missed conversations or --even worse-- heard them dimly heard. The men of the household were in town or were too tired to carry me everywhere. I lay there on the floor, ants and beetles crawling across my face and neck, powerless to flick them away.

Some men dream of silver and some of gold. Some of riches, women, power. Before I became paralyzed, I used to dream of such things. But laying in my family's house day after day, it seemed to me that the normal activities of a normal day were the sweetest activities a man could indulge in. The banal boring normal life is a wonderful thing.

A day is long. It is many minutes and many seconds passing slowly slowly by. Before the paralysis, when I was well, I used to hate to see the sun go down. There was always so much work left to do. The work was never finished by nightfall. But after the paralysis, time flowed slower than honey and not so sweet. I yearned for the night. Sleeping was hard, yes. But sleep brought escape, unconsciousness and dreams. And I had wonderful dreams. In dreams, I walked again. I lifted yokes from others' backs, helped women fetch water from the well (women's work, yes...but ...to lift, to do manual labor. What a blessing work is!).

The days of my paralysis were lonely too. My friends were good. They visited me. But they had their own lives. And their lives rarely brought them inside my house. I saw no friend unless they made an express point of visiting me. I heard no outside news unless someone made a point of specifically walking in to tell me. And as for the normal delights of life...eating and so forth...I ate what was given me. I could not even go to God's house to worship him. And always there was my poor family. They needed a man's arms and legs working around the house...and instead they ended up being my arms and legs. What a terrible time they had of it.

My family and friends were kind. Their kindness was hard for me to live with, almost

unbearable. The kindness affected me badly: I was driven between two extremes: guilt and ingratitude. I either felt they were doing too much for me and not attending to their own lives or I accused them of never doing anything right. More often than not, it was the latter. For instance, I would accuse them of never coming when I needed to urinate. Or when I hungered or thirsted or when the loneliness and isolation of laying on the floor all day was driving me insane. Everything was on their schedule, I complained, and my hunger pangs and need for human conversation had to wait. Out of self-pity and pain, I argued constantly with them. This only made a bad situation worse. As a man, I should've been out there helping the family earn its living and there I lay on the floor ...useless, sorrowing, and demanding. My family was patient, but my complaining was a hard thing to endure and sometimes I imagined they were avoiding me. This was understandable: they had to look at me every day. It must have been heart-breaking. Who wants to be continually reminded of how bad life can be? I understood: sometimes one has to turn one's face away...even if one is family. Sometimes, they had to get away from me.

I resented that at first...after all I couldn't get away from me, why should they? But after a while -- a long while-- I grew to accept that my caretakers were only human. I suffered, yes. But there are some things in life no friend or family member can ever understand and although it hurt I had to accept that.

I wondered why God had been so hard on me. It seemed like such a terrible punishment for so small a sin? (Whatever the sin was...and I wasn't sure what the sin might be.) And surely, others had sinned as much as I had. And in the same way I had. Why had they escaped unscathed? Liars, adulterers, cheaters walked the streets of Judea. Healthy, happy, guilt-free, unpunished by God. But me? I had the bad luck to be noticed by God. I could not talk to Him; he seemed so unfair, so hard. Why had he pointed his arrows at me? Why was I his target? I regretted what I had done. I regretted every sin from the great ones down to the minor ones. I did not know what sin brought this down on me. There are so many laws on the books, so many things that a righteous God demands. And what man is there who is so good that he has no sin? And so I lay there thinking and thinking and dredging up every sin I could think of. "Is this the cause of my illness, Father?" And many of my neighbors were only too glad to oblige. "Surely," they said, "you must have done something very evil for the Lord to shut His ears to your prayers. I prayed and prayed for forgiveness. But nothing happened. I lay there wondering why He didn't hear me. After all, The Most High is Holy and above the earth and sky: His thoughts are not our thoughts. And although He is merciful, he is also a harsh and righteous Judge who doesn't listen to sinners and who cannot

be bribed. What, I asked myself, was I to do? There was no mediator to stand between us..to lay his hand on both of us. And always, there was that pressing thought: why me? Why not my friends or someone else in my family? All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Why did God's all-seeing eye have to land on me?

So I lay there everyday wishing I could undo the past, undo whatever it was that I had done, make my life better than it was. I begged and bargained with Him. And after a while one realizes that there is no hope left. When my friends came in their spare time, they would say, "God knows what you're going through. Be patient under the mighty hands of God. The Almighty God is holy and He knows what is best."

One day as I lay there, watching the feet pass by, enduring the day and wishing for death, I heard feet entering through the door. There was excited chatter, bustling about... I could not lift my head to see what was going on but soon, I recognized my friend's voice as he approached me.

"We're taking you to see the healer," he said. "A man named Jesus is preaching in the streets. To the rich and to the poor. To good men and prostitutes alike. Some people say it might be the Christ. He is healing all who come to Him."

I looked at him as if he was crazy. "A healer?" I said. "The Christ? What is the Christ doing healing people? And why would He heal me? If it is even Him... We've been waiting for him for so long. Why should He come now?"

"He'll heal you," they said.

"When did God start healing people? Healing went out with the prophets. Don't you know the days of miracles are past?"

"Never man spoke like this man. You haven't seen what we've seen. And the stories we've heard about him--"

"How do you know he'll heal me?"

"He'll heal you. People say he is a kind man. He must be. Everyone's there: The house is surrounded."

I wanted to laugh. "Surrounded uh? And how are you going to get me there?"

"We'll carry you."

I shook my head. The idea seemed ludicrous and just plain embarrassing. "You're going to carry me through the streets?"

I can't say I believed them. After all I hadn't seen this man's miracle. And our righteous God hadn't been healing anyone for a good four hundred years.

“All this healing business is hear-say?”

“No,” he said excitedly, “We’ve seen it with our own eyes. And while we watched, our spirit burned inside and it seemed as if God was telling us to come and get you.”

“He didn’t tell me,” I said.

But the more they talked about the healings they had seen and the kindness of the Preacher Jesus, the more faith I gained. I told myself that even if he only asked God to forgive me of my sin, and of all the terrible things I’d brought on my family, I would be happy. I agreed to go with my friends. My family stood looking on. And these wonderful friends of mine lifted me and carried me through the door and out onto the streets.

They carried me about two miles. I had imagined the rabbi would be in the street preaching. But when we arrived in the center of town, he was nowhere to be seen. We found out that he was in someone’s house...surrounded by crowds of people. He was not healing anyone then...but he was teaching.

I told my friends to turn back. “Why interrupt the rabbi?” I said. “Who are we to be so vain as to interrupt that man?”

They did not listen. “Do you want to be healed?” they asked. “This is a good man. He has a smile that seems to say he has seen all your sins and He still loves you anyway. Believe us when we say this: we only have to get to him and He will heal you.”

We looked at the tiny house. Crowds were streaming out of it and around it. “And how do you suppose we’ll get in?” I asked. Then I looked up and saw that the roof was empty. There was no one on the roof. I don’t know where I got the idea from. Perhaps it was God. Because I’m not the kind of person who goes around thinking of ways to embarrass myself. I am also not a destructive person. I respect other people’s property. But somehow... “Tear the roof off!” I said. They smiled at me, surprised. “Tear the roof off,” I said again. They did. And they lowered me through the roof right in front of everyone. Possibly the most embarrassing thing I’ve had to endure in my life. But tears were in my eyes. All I could think was that God had given me some very loving friends...who would have to spend the next few days repairing someone’s house. If God healed me, good. But if not, the love my friends had shown me was enough.

When the preacher, Jesus, saw the faith of my friends, he stopped preaching. He walked over to me. “Son,” he said to me. “Your sins are forgiven you.” The words came into my soul like a sweet ointment. It seemed as if that was all I wanted to hear.

And then I heard a kind of horrified hush in the room. And although no one said

anything...there was something in the air...a kind of gasping and wondering about who this man thought he was. And then, as if He could read their minds, he turned to them and rebuked them. He said, "Which is easier to do? To say 'Your sins are forgiven you'. Or to say 'Rise take up your bed and walk.'?" Then he turned to me and told me to take up my bed and walk. And just like that I got up and took up my bed. The joy was undescrivable. The glory that came to God from my friends and family was unending. People kept repeating over and over: "We've never seen anything like this. Never, ever. Let the God of righteousness and mercy be praised."

**Suggested topics for study:** guilt and its connection to illness.

**Study Questions:**

1. Have you ever had to be totally dependent on the kindness of others? How did this feel?
2. What does this say about intercessors "bringing people to Jesus"?
3. What did Jesus say was the sick man's need?
4. How do you feel about the spiritual fact that an illness can be rooted in sin?
5. What is the difference between true guilt and false guilt?
6. Are you ever afraid of God's holiness?
7. Do you ever feel unworthy of healing?
8. Do you feel sickness represents God's judgment on you or is the reflection of a corrupt world?
9. Do you feel God doesn't have time for your concerns, that they are not "big" enough?

**The lunatic boy:** Lord I believe, help me to believe.

**Verses:** Matthew 17: 17-21, Mark 9: 22-42, Luke 9: 37-43

**Summary of the story:** A man brings his epileptic son to the disciples to be healed. The disciples try but nothing happens. The man waits for Jesus who finally heals the boy.

**The characters' narratives:**

The parent of a regular child can't possibly understand the dread I felt in the beginning of my child's illness. At first it was just a discomfort: the child did something a bit odd. I noted it -- thought it a bit strange-- told myself it would go away. But the strange behavior, affliction, what you will.. doesn't go away. Rather, it becomes more frequent, more noticeable. And after a while such a parent cannot hide the truth from himself: his child is suffering, his child is in pain. In short, there's something "different" and "wrong" with his child.

And thus it was with my son. And this was no passive illness that allowed the child to suffer alone. This affliction had a purpose: the child's destruction. During the day, I had no peace. My wife's eyes and mind, my own eyes and mind, are ever alert. We never knew where he would walk. To the cooking fire to fall in? To the lake, to drown?

And at night, while he slept, we watched and thought of the hopes we had for him. We thought of the mad, sick, people we saw wondering in the streets. We remember the grief-stricken faces of people whose children have died. We try to clear our minds of the advice of well-meaning know-it-all friends. They think they know...they don't know. And on the day my son was healed, there was something else we had to endure, our last spiritual hurdle.

On the day Jesus and his followers came to town, I stood in the crowd with my son, waiting. You may imagine the trouble and pain it took dragging this child to the healer. My son can be very stubborn sometimes. Communicating with him was hard. But we finally got there...through the crowded streets. I had hope....it was small and faint, but it was hope nonetheless.

When I got there, Jesus was nowhere to be seen. He was on top of the mountain. Praying, resting, talking to God like Moses. I don't know. He just wasn't where I wanted him. And the longer he stayed away, the more the crowd grew, and the more the sick people arrived. At first, my son and I were one in fifty and then one in a hundred and then one in two hundred. And after awhile it just seemed as if the world was one large sick crowd waiting for a deliverer. And who was my son, and who was I that we should be noticed among all these people? So many needy people and Jesus was on top of the mountain. How could he be reached?

His disciples were healing people. I marveled. He taught them well. They healed so

many... Never had I seen such a sight in Israel, no not in all my life. So many deaf and sick and maimed people healed. It strengthened my little faith. They knew how to pray. Their prayers were effective. My hope rose for a miracle. I imagined my son and I returning home and giving glory to God for giving such gifts to men. They worked hard, those men. And at last, after waiting for them to come to us, it was finally our turn. I brought my son forward.

“Please to pray to God to heal my son. He is a lunatic and the spirit wants to kill him.”

They prayed. Nothing happened. They prayed again. Nothing happened. Or rather, this time the trouble got worse. It was as if the evil was mocking us. And that’s when Jesus’s disciples began to look troubled. They started looking nervously into each other’s faces. But God was silent. No change at all occurred in my poor son’s condition.

This troubled me greatly. Everyone else had been healed by his disciples. Everyone except us. I am not a man who feels easily rejected. But let me tell you: being the only one there who hadn’t been touched by God was distressing. I wondered about my holiness, I wondered about the holiness of those praying for my son. I wondered if there was a limit to the rabbi’s healing gifts...what if there was a point beyond which man’s prayers couldn’t go? And then there was my poor son: how was all this non-productive praying affecting him? Surely, he had some inkling that a great failure had occurred. I started to leave.

But then I told myself: these men are only followers of the master. They themselves are not the master. I remembered the Great Woman in our scriptures whose son was not healed by Elijah’s servant. I remembered how that woman refused to give up and went to the prophet himself...and the prophet healed her son. I thought to myself: God gave us these Scriptures to encourage and teach us. He wants me to persevere. I will wait for the rabbi himself. Yes, I told myself, the prophet will do what his followers cannot. And so I waited. And waited. Two or three hours until he came down. And in the meantime, a disturbance rose up: the crowd and the teacher’s followers were having loud arguments about my son: why wasn’t he healed? What kind of power did they really have? Were they wise enough or good enough? “Here is a spirit,” someone said. “These men have no power over spirits.”

And then all around me, I heard philosophical and theological discussions. The priests saying God did not heal through this man, Jesus, that this teacher couldn’t heal my son... Oh they had so many reasons why I should not believe, so much learned theology. And there were the disciples...looking almost embarrassed when they glanced at my son, their great public failure. And we stood there, my son and I the distraught center of all that arguing, disputing and debating. I tried

not to listen, but soon, the little faith I had when I arrived started to dwindle away. But I did not walk away. I kept wondering if Jesus could indeed heal my boy. I told myself I had come this far; I might as well go through to the end and wait to see Jesus.

And then I saw someone coming down the mountain. And I heard someone else say that it was Jesus. I watched. He came down from the hilltop and looked at everyone: they were still arguing and they raced towards him...still arguing. I rushed to Jesus and cut them off, having my say before they could open their mouths.

“If you can heal him, please heal my lunatic son. Your disciples tried and couldn’t do it.”

Then he did something that surprised me and pretty much embarrassed those followers of his. He gave them a good talking-to, told his disciples they had no faith. But he was kind to me. He asked me how long my son been ill and got some background information. And then he turned to me.

“If you can believe,” he said, “All things are possible to him who believes.”

His voice had a compassionate other-worldly authority. But his words stabbed at my heart. He had put the entire business of healing my son on my faith. And after listening to those priests and all that religious debate, I had almost no faith left.

I could only make a meager confession: “Lord,” I said. “I believe. Help me to believe.”

And then, with great authority and power, he told the demon to leave my boy. And that demon did. Praise God, God is able to give us more than we are able to ask or wish. He commanded the spirit and it immediately left my boy. And within the hour my son was every whit whole.

And then his disciples came up: “Why couldn’t we cast the devil out?” they asked. They seemed to be more concerned with **their** power and **their** theology and why **they** couldn’t cast the demon out...not with my boy at all. The scribes and the teachers of the law were even worse. I could see it in their faces: no, they weren’t happy at all. They didn’t rejoice in the fact that my boy was healed. I turned and as I walked away, all I could hear was grumbling, disputings about God’s will and the fine-points of the law.

**Suggested topics for study:** Sick children in the Bible. Emotional and physical disability. Demonic activity against children. The problem of evil. Fasting and Praying.

**Study Questions:**

1. This is yet another story where the sick person is not the one who asked for healing. Who is the intercessor in this case? Why couldn’t the sick person ask Jesus?

2. Have you ever seen other people's prayers get answered while yours remain unanswered? What did you think?
3. What did this parent "Believe?" What didn't he believe?
4. What is the difference between going to Jesus directly and going to his followers? Are there times when it matters? Does it matter?
5. What was Jesus's response to the problem?
6. What are the different kinds of fasts mentioned in the Bible?
7. Have you ever lost your faith because of the theological arguments of those around you?
8. What do you think the scribes and the followers were disputing about?

Exercise:

Study the healing of the Woman with the issue of Blood.

Study the healing of the blind man from Capernaum.

Study the healing of the Shunammite's son.

What do they have in common? How are they different?

## Character Studies

**W**hen studying a Bible story, we meet many characters whom we must get to know if we are to understand the story well.

Questions to ask when meeting a new Bible character:

1. What are the key verses used to describe this person?
2. What is this character doing when he or she is first mentioned?
3. Is this description a description of the person's total personality or just a description of the character at a stressful moment in his life?
4. What words do the Bible writer use to describe this person?
5. Can we make any assumptions about this person's goodness?
6. Do you think the Bible writer wants us to like or dislike this person?
7. Does this person's goodness or moral behavior matter in this instance?
8. Does this person's faith matter in this instance?
9. Does this person speak? If so, what are the exact words?
10. What does this person need?
11. Who does this person look to for help? God? Satan? Other humans?
12. Is this person a part of God's people?
13. Is this person mentioned in another chapter or in another Bible book?
14. What is the end result of this person's life? Does this person succeed because of faith? Does he perish for lack of wisdom, faith, or goodness?
15. Does this person suffer?
16. Do you feel you understand the motivations of this character and that you have a right to judge him?
17. If good comes to this person, does he deserve it?
18. If evil comes to this person, does he deserve it?
19. Is this person mentioned in secular history?

Exercises:

Read the story of Mary and Martha in the gospel of John. Do we know everything about Martha from this incident? Can we assume that we know all of Martha's personality from this small incident?

Read the book of Job. What do we know about Job's wife? Can we judge a woman who lost all her children and everything in her life in one day? Do you think God judged her?

## Word Studies

**B**iblical word difficulties fall into many categories:

**1. A Greek or Hebrew word or phrase which has been translated differently in different parts of the Bible.**

The Greek word “pistis” for belief is sometimes translated as faith. The Greek word “sozo” is sometimes translated as salvation, sometimes as deliverance, sometimes as healing. The phrase for “full of grace” used with Mary is translated in Ephesians as “accepted in the beloved” and elsewhere as highly favoured.

**2. For those who use the King James Version: words which have changed in meaning from Elizabethan times.** It is a good idea to use two modern translations in addition to the KJV.

For instance if we look at the word “ascended” The word “ascended” in Elizabethan times meant something more like “taken up” or “actively rising one’s self up or climbing up.” Thus ascending into heaven means something different than actually being “in” heaven. Thus Acts 2:34, “David is not ascended into heaven”, does not mean that David is not “in” heaven. Rather, it means David did not **rise up bodily against gravity** into heaven in the way that Jesus did. Ephesians 4:9-10 clarifies this meaning and so does John 3:13, Psalm 68:18, Judges 20:40 and Revelations 11:12 among others. In fact, the Bible makes it clear in Ephesians 4:8-10 that ascensions into heaven began when Jesus led captivity captive.

**3. Slangs are translated but because these slangs are not connected to their culture misunderstandings occur.**

The phrase “add coals of fire to their head” doesn’t mean putting someone in hell. In many cultures, ancient and modern, hot coals would be carried on the head for various reasons. The phrase therefore means “warm a person up” or “enlighten their brains.”

## **Bible Study format**

For those who wish to write Bible studies, the typical Bible study format is as follows:

Title, hook, or Bible Character Name

Bible verses being discussed

Summation of Bible Story

Commentary and Analysis

Moral – one-line theme

Ending Prayer or Spiritual Challenge

Author Website

Author Bio

## Types of Bible Studies:

**B**ible studies may be done singly or as a series.

1. A Bible Study Series can be thematic. Thematic articles can be about anything, as long as you have several Bible verses to discuss: The Holy Spirit or the Trinity: John 15:26, I John 5:8, Matt 3:16, Is 48:16, 1 Cor 6:19, Eph 2:18, Acts 10:38, Rom 8:11, 2 Peter 1:21, Rom 15:13, Heb 2:3, 1 Peter 3:18; or even in Genesis where God creates the world with the Spirit and then walks in the garden and later visits Abraham as one of the three visitors.
2. A certain symbol, a Bible character, Marriage, word, virtue, prophets, prayers in the Bible, the Parables, Worship Songs in the Bible, stewardship and finances, etc.
3. Character Studies: Women, Bad women, Prophets, converts in the Bible, Compare and Contrasts
4. Seasonal: Holidays, Feasts in the Bible, Mothers in the Bible, Fathers in the Bible.
5. In-depth Examination of a particular Bible book or Writer: John's Epistles, Prophetic Books
6. Philosophical: Old Testament Prayers, Paul's Prayers, The hard sayings of Jesus
7. Bible studies can be simple retelling – These Bible studies vary, depending on the age of the audience. If the audience is older, more commentary and examination of the story is added, in addition to more adult topics.
8. The Bible and Current Events – These kind of Bible Studies deal with religion's impact on society. For instance, politics (Christianity and Welfare? Christianity and War? Christianity and Pacifism? Christianity and the Courts.) This kind of Bible study can be quite controversial.
9. Christianity and other great Christian books – These Bible studies are usually a combination of Bible studies, an examination of an author's life, and a book review. For instance: C S Lewis and the problem of pain and grief, War and the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
10. Defending Christianity – Christian apologetics, Christianity and Cults, Christianity and atheism, Christianity and other religions, Christianity and human philosophy. Discernment and wisdom is often needed when a writer engages the deceptions of the modern (and ancient) world. Bible study writers have to be aware that they live in a world which has its own ideas about Christianity. This world has stories built upon lies, built upon agendas, built upon schemes, built

upon self-delusions, built upon mis-readings. Some of these stories have become solidified over the years, decades, and centuries and are now religions and “churches” of their own. Even if they are not religions, they create doubt by being shadow religions, and shadow beliefs. A Christian must learn to stand up against them.

Questions to ask yourself when tackling someone who thinks she knows that Christianity is false:

#### Research

1. When is the first mention of this particular anti-Christian lie?
2. What exactly is the legend on which this lie built?
3. Does this legend have anything truthful in it?
4. Challenge the “proof” documents of the other religion; verify the proof documents of Christianity.
5. Don’t trust any old proof that comes your way.
6. Question the agenda behind the new truth.

# **Pitfalls of Bible Interpretation**

## **Don't Mistake the Bible's Depiction of an Ugly Situation as a Biblical Endorsement or Mandate.**

**I**t would not occur to someone to think that a newscaster was endorsing war simply because he reported from a warzone. But many people often believe that the Christian God endorses everything said or done in the Bible. Over the centuries, the Bible has been used to “prove” that certain races are inherently inferior to others, that slavery is God’s will, that women are inferior to men or should stay in abusive marriages, and countless other questionable practices. Consider the racist writings of the early Mormons and those contemporary Christian churches who feel spiritually compelled to preach against inter-marriage between whites and blacks.

Many people have turned from the Bible because of these bad theologies. One of the reasons the Nation of Islam in the United States was created was because many Black Christians in the southern (and northern) United States got tired of racist Christians and the racist God they preached.

If we look at what many preachers in the past did with the story of Noah, we can see how racist assumptions color the story. (Gen 9:25) According to the chapter, after the Biblical flood, Noah created a vineyard, grew grapes and discovered wine. Noah ends up liking wine a bit too much and gets drunk. This isn’t a saintly thing to do but it is understandable. The world in which he had formerly lived had been cursed because of Adam’s sin, and doubly cursed for Cain. The cursed ground was such a problem that people before the flood made reference to it in the names they gave to their children. Loosely translated Noah’s name means “God will free the world from the curse and give its inhabitants comfort because of Noah.” (Genesis 5:29)

Imagine then that the rains have finally come to the reborn earth, fecundity such as the world has never known. Blossoms are everywhere. Noah is enjoying the joys of a renewed earth. The trouble, however, is that he is drinking all this in a world that has recently been destroyed. We are not told why Noah is drinking so much wine. Perhaps his wife has died. Perhaps he was bored. Perhaps he simply loves wine. These are all speculations. But there is such a thing as survivor’s guilt and perhaps the need to forget the horrors he has endured.

The day came when Noah drank so much that he was “uncovered” in his tent. (Genesis 9) His son Ham saw his nakedness and humiliated him. I highly recommend a study on the word “uncovered” and “nakedness” as it is used in the Bible. No one quite knows what happened what

Noah being uncovered really means. But it was obviously an embarrassment to Noah and a source of amusement for Ham. The upshot of this incident is that Noah cursed his grandson, Canaan.

First, we must ask ourselves why Noah cursed his grandson and not his son? Why should the descendants of an evil person suffer for his father's sins? Only a western country would ask this question. Much generational cursing occurs in the Bible and in many other cultures. Other cultures understand that children are often cursed because of their parent's sins or blessed because of their parent's goodness. Consider one of the most tragic families in Greek myth: the descendants of Laius and Oedipus.

Oedipus came from a family whose curse began when King Laius would not give up his young lover when the boy grew older. (Pederastia – a kind of legalized pedophilia was accepted by the ancient Greeks while homosexuality was frowned-upon.) King Laius' descendants ended up being cursed with some unnatural sexual conflict or other because of this. Sexual sin and strange sexual attractions worked their way throughout the family until Nemesis and Justice were satisfied and the balance of female and male was achieved. So Noah's cursing of his grandson is par for the course in ancient writings.

But we really should ask ourselves are the curses and blessings of a drunken man are worth much? Is God bound by them? After all, words are powerful things in the Bible, and a father's blessing – or curse– is considered mighty indeed. In addition, an injustice or humiliation done by a child against a father opens doors to all kinds of spiritual trouble. (Exodus 20:6) Whether or not the father is drunk, but what purpose does Noah's curse serve in the great scheme of things? And why does it lead to this notion of a people who were fated to be enslaved forever?

Moses is telling his hearers that the Promised Land towards which they are journeying is rightly theirs because the original inhabitants, the Canaanites, are cursed. Moses later lists the countries descended from Ham. These descendants have names with the "im" ending which is the angelic suffix. They can only be descended from the Nephilim giants. This compounds their crimes because the giants had caused so much havoc in the world.

But does the passage in any place state that Canaan's descendants were black and that God wanted blacks enslaved perpetually because black people are inferior to other races? It does not. This passage is related only to show the newly released Israelites that they should have no qualms about destroying the people of Canaan, who are doubly-cursed people. Although Moses repeatedly tells his readers about the evil of the Canaanites and the graciousness of God towards the Israelites who aren't really getting the land because they deserve it, he never equates the Canaanites with the

black race which is what many racist Christians have done over the centuries.

It is interesting to note that the instance in which Jesus became very enraged was a moment when he saw racism in action. He threw the money changers out of the temple because they were cheating the foreigners who had come to praise God. He reminded them that God's house would be called a house of prayer for ALL nations but they had made it into a den of thieves. Also interesting to note is that the only time God actually came down from heaven to rebuke someone face-to-face was in the case of Miriam and Aaron's prejudice against Moses' Ethiopian wife.

God is not a racist as we can see from His reaction to Miriam's prejudice against Moses' wife and Jesus' reaction to the money changers cheating the foreign believers who had come to the house of prayer, God's house. The situation of slavery pops up elsewhere in the Bible. Hagar is a slave, so is Onesimus. (Letter to Philemon.) Does this mean that God thinks slavery is fine and dandy? No. A close look at Scripture will show that much more is going on in many of these stories. And yet, many Christians have complained that Paul does not tell anyone in the churches to give up their slaves or to rise up against slavery.

True, he does not. Rather, he tells slaveholders and slaves that they are brothers who owe each other love. This is vastly more revolutionary. Paul's mind is not on a world that he believes might be passing away at any minute. The Christians in Paul's time did not have their minds on earthly government. They were busy expecting the imminent return of Christ and looked forward to the time when the universe would be folded up like the leaves of a book. The thought of overthrowing a world system that had already been conquered by Jesus' death would not have occurred to them. Their minds were concerned with loving their neighbors and loving God.

There is also the matter of safety. Modern Christians who think Paul should have told slaveholders to give up their slaves forget that Christians were a persecuted minority. Paul's letters were carried by messengers across thousands of miles and could easily have been intercepted by government officials or other powerful people. The very act of reminding slaveholders that they were brothers to slaves could have gotten Paul's persecuted community in more trouble. Christianity has not always been a powerful and safe religion.

Here is another example of people erroneously assuming that the Christian God endorses a particular mindset. Because of the treatment of women in the Bible and because of some of Paul's statements, many modern women have complained that Christianity is anti-women. If they read the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs, the gospels, and the book of Judges, they would hardly think the Christian God is anti-women. Certainly, Jesus was not sexist. But sexism, and classism have

influenced Biblical interpretation as much as racism has influenced it. Feminists and chauvinistic male preachers have said that Paul's letter to the Corinthians was written to show women their place.

But let's look at Paul's letter to the Corinthians, (1 Cor 14:34) the letter which has caused so much confusion, anger and oppression of women throughout the ages. At the time Paul wrote this letter, Corinth was a bustling cosmopolitan center. Busy international trading ports often were meeting grounds for different cults and religions and so Corinth's sophisticated inhabitants believed in one or more of many cults, religions and philosophies. It was the center of the worship of the God Bacchus. Devotees of Bacchus - the Bacchantes - believed in an ecstatic religion in which the spirit of the god Bacchus usurped the spirit of the believer (with aid of alcohol and dancing) and brought ecstasy. The followers of Bacchus were primarily women. The Corinthian female worshipers were going overboard with the spiritual trances and confusing the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit with Bacchus' spiritual gifts. And since they had come from a culture where women's spirituality was all the rage, they carried this Bacchic spirituality into the church. This led to a feeling that women were more open to the controlling of God's spirit than men and the Corinthian women felt that they knew more about spiritual matters than the men did. Paul was simply trying to show Corinthian women that their cultural spiritual practices were not to be brought into the church.

Note that in his other letters to other churches, Paul does not make a big deal for or against women speaking in church. Rather he says that "in Christ, there is no male or female" (Galatians chapter 3.)

## Don't Assume You Know Everything about Bible Culture

**P**eople from different countries have different cultures. People from different times have different ways of doing things. Paul's letters, written to churches all over Asia Minor, are a good example of cultural challenges. He wrote most of the letters in the New Testament (The other letters in the New Testament are written by Jesus' best friends: James, Peter, and John and Jesus' half-brother, Jude. There is also the Revelations which was written by John, but which John is unsure.) Paul's attitude towards dealing with other cultures is "when I am in Rome, I behave like a Roman. I am become all things to all men so that I can save some." (1 Cor 9)

Paul knows the social and theological aspects of the Mediterranean cultures, therefore he can well understand the pitfalls his new fledgling churches might fall into. Spiritual counterfeits are many. His letters are also like visual snapshots of the troubles happening in a certain Christian community. As such, they are like any other letters one might read.

Have you ever found a letter on the street and picked it up just because you were curious? Once, on a walk downtown with a friend, we saw a letter ahead of us on the sidewalk. Approaching it, my friend glanced at me with a raised eyebrow, "Want to?" she asked. (My friend was always more curious about such things than I was.) She picked up the letter.

Reading it was like attempting to figure out a puzzle. First, the writer used cultural slang we didn't understand. Secondly, he (we figured out after a while that a man had written it) was writing about a situation we knew nothing about, something the addressee fully understood so the writer didn't have to explain the entire context but we the snoopers were completely in the dark. Thirdly, the writer was writing from jail and seemed to be trying to get all his thoughts down on what little paper he had. Fourthly, we didn't know the personalities of the writer, the recipient of the letter or of any of the individuals mentioned in the letter. This is very much like reading the letters – the epistles – in the New Testament.

Although we understood a great deal of what is happening in the New Testament letters, we cannot fully comprehend everything because we are not really acquainted with Paul (or James or John or Peter or Jude.) We do not know the addressees well, or the situation they were in when the letters were written. So, when we read the epistles (letters) in the Bible we just have to know a little

about the churches (addressee), the situation they're facing (personal and cultural troubles) and why the writer (Paul) wrote the letter.

A pastor or a Bible study writer should therefore understand what a particular Christian community was like and why Paul wrote a letter to that specific Christian community at the time he wrote it.

Look at the beginning verses of the epistles. What do they remind you of? For those of us who have worked in offices, the letters feel like inter-office memos. They give us a little bit of information but not much. The beginning of Paul's letter to his friend, Philemon goes something like this, "From Paul who is in jail because I serve Christ and Timothy who is like my brother." That says a lot, but it doesn't say all that is needed. We still don't know where Paul is exactly. We aren't even sure if Timothy is merely visiting him or actually in prison with him. We might have to read Paul's other letters or Luke's book, The Acts of the Apostles, to get more of a fix on what's happening. But at least we know a few things.

The New Testament letter-writers wrote in the style of their time. The letters begin by telling the reader who the letter is from. Sometimes the writer describes his job or his official title. Then the writer tells whom the letter is addressed to. (The letters in the New Testament are named after the people who wrote them or after the church they were written to.) But all these letters were written because the churches for which they were named had some trouble they needed Paul to address.

Reading the epistles is like piecing together a mystery together. Not an insolvable mystery, of course, but a human one because one is listening to one side of a conversation. For instance, the first part of the Corinthian conversation - the first letter Paul wrote about the situations affecting the Corinthian church - is missing. Since the first letter is lost and the letter we know as First Corinthians is really the second letter and the Second Corinthian letter is really the third, we have to work with what we have.

One must know a little about Corinth to understand why Paul wrote these letters to the church. Corinth was a large city where many cultures and religions met. For this reason, Corinth was especially religious. The spiritual crisis in the Corinthian church stemmed from the town's culture which had more gods, spirituality, philosophies and religions than any one city could handle. These religions and philosophies sometimes counterfeited or conflicted with the gospel as Paul preached it.

Like Athens and its statue to "The Unknown God," Corinth wished to cover all its spiritual

bases. It was one of the centers of the worship of Bacchus, the God of wine. Worshipers of Bacchus were primarily women and often fell into trances and religious ecstasy. There was also a great deal of Gnosticism, a philosophy which said the flesh was unimportant as long as the spirit was cultivated.

You can imagine the confusion caused by the gospel and the Holy Spirit in this atmosphere. The average person could hardly tell the difference between a trance brought on by Bacchus and one brought on by the holy spirit. Paul therefore had to tell his church that “all things should be done decently and in order” and “the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet” because the Corinthian women were confusing the spiritual ecstasy of Bacchic ritual with the supernatural workings of the Holy Spirit. It might seem basic for Christians to be to be drunk in the spirit and not with wine, but these women had come from a culture where women’s spirituality (and a little wine) was all the rage, and they carried these cultural notions of drunken spirituality into the church.

Gnosticism was also causing problems in the congregation: a man was having sex with his step-mother. One of the main tenets of Gnosticism was that those who were spiritually in the know were so enlightened that sins of the body could not taint their pure spirit. Most Christian Gnostics didn’t even think Jesus suffered bodily on the cross. So here was a man in a sexual relationship that was wrong yet he considered himself spiritual, because he felt his body’s sins did not affect his flesh. The members of the church also belonged to that same Gnostic culture and they didn’t consider the pairing sinful either. (Whether the woman was divorced or widowed is not known. The Jewish law forbids sexual relations between a man and a woman who has been with his relative if that relative is alive. This would have been troubling enough, but implications indicate her former husband was still alive.) The trouble was that Gnosticism had been mixed in with the Christianity of the Corinthian church and Gnostic ideas of spirit and love were being mixed with Christian ideas.

In his letters, Paul tries to help this very confused church. He is, however, far away from them with just so much paper on hand and many thoughts swimming around in his head. He also doesn’t know when he’ll be able to send them another letter, therefore he tries to answer all their questions and do as much teaching as he can within the epistle.

His letters give many specific answers to unspecified questions and situations, clear and unclear. From these answers, one can surmise Paul’s teachings. He reminds the Corinthian church that the body is the temple of God, that a sexual sin can defile the spirit, that Jesus really did die on the cross, that God’s definition of the highest form of spirituality was love and not “wisdom” or

working spiritual wonders, that the Holy Spirit could be subjected to the spirit of the prophet therefore being spirit-filled people didn't mean being disorderly and waltzing around the temple in a trance. He even had to remind them what real love was like.

This letter, therefore, which is written to a specific explains general spiritual truths for all churches. Yet it is up to the reader to decide if everything said to the Corinthian church is meant to be spoken to all churches.

Paul's letter to the Colossians was written to set another congregation on the straight path. The culture of the Colossians was one that was very influenced by the stoics. They also valued external signs of holiness such as fasting, vegetarianism, and ascetism because Colossae was also in the middle of an idol-worshiping region and had many citizens who believed in the Epicurean philosophy of "eat, drink, and be merry." The Colossian church was surrounded by so many different kinds of religions that they were developing a rigid Christianity that insisted that all Colossian Christians behave the same way and tow the line. And they were also letting the philosophies and spirituality of the region affect the simple teachings of Christ. On the one hand, a church that believes in sacrifice and rigid regulations isn't particularly bad in a pagan unruly city. But the Colossians, like the Corinthian church, was tainting the gospel with their culture's pagan, Epicurean and stoic traditions.

Paul had to tell them that extreme asceticism and extreme gluttony, show of external piety and self-denial including what he calls "will-worship," and even the need to make one day more special than another did not show the true knowledge of the gracious gospel of Christ.

The churches in Rome and Galatia had similar problems, discerning between traditional legalistic views, cultural spirituality and the grace preached by the apostles. Rome was a mixed congregation and many of the Believers in Galatia were of the Jewish heritage. Some of these Jewish converts were upsetting the faith of the Gentile believers by insisting on certain Jewish ceremonies. These "Judaizers" insisted on the circumcision of new converts, abstaining from certain foods, and worshiping on the Sabbath. Paul was greatly bothered by this and considered this a return to legalism. In Galatians 4:19, he calls this a return to enslavement to the "weak and beggarly elements."

He knows he has to walk a fine line. He does not want to offend Jewish converts but he doesn't want to dilute the gospel either. (Paul wasn't above expedience of course and had pleased Jewish converts by having Timothy circumcised even though Timothy was a Christian.) In the fourteenth chapter of Romans, Paul walks the fine line yet again. He states that some people esteem

one day more highly than another; others consider all days alike. He does not take sides as to what day on which to worship but he asks his hearers to be fully persuaded in their own mind. The Christians of Paul's day "broke bread daily in each other's house." So that alone should put an end to any legalistic rule about when, where, and how many days a week a Christian should gather with other Christians in a specific building to worship. The Early Christians had Eucharist every day in everyone's house. Modern Christians are not likely to invite everyone in their church to their home. Nevertheless, we would hope that all Christians keep all days holy. And it would probably make us all much more emotionally and physically healthier if we actually had communion every day. There is healing in the body and blood of Christ.

**Title: Study to Answer: Why do Christians worship on Sunday, the first day of the week?**

Verse: Be fully persuaded in your own mind. Romans 14:5

In the fourteenth chapter of Romans, Paul states that some people esteem one day more highly than another; others consider all days alike. He does not take sides as to what day on which to worship but he asks his hearers to be fully persuaded in their own mind. The Christians of Paul's day "broke bread daily in each other's house" because no church had been built and they had been kicked out of the synagogue. They did not have any legalistic rule about when, where, and how many days a week a Christian should gather with other Christians in a specific building to worship. A Christian, after all, should keep all days holy.

If you read St Paul's letter, you will notice that the congregations in each of the churches he wrote to had differing opinions about many doctrines and church rules. Paul, Peter, and James all spoke against divisiveness in their letters, stating that arguments about unimportant issues upset the faith of new Christians. In Paul's opinion, "Real Christians" should not waste their time arguing about matters such as this.

In the twenty-second chapter of Matthew, various sects came to Jesus to ask him questions. These differing sects all considered themselves Jews. Every religion has sects. And each sect has a pet question. The Herodians had their questions. The legalistic scribes and Pharisees had theirs. The Sadducees – who don't believe in angels, spirits, or the resurrection– had theirs. The Sadducees told a story about a woman who was married to seven brothers who all married her then died. To make matters more complicated, she had no children. They were like many sects whose after-death theology differs from that of the majority of Christians: they had a "what if?" scenario which did not deal with truly important issues but with some odd situation that was created to prop up their ideas. "So," they ask Jesus, "in the resurrection, whose wife will she be?"

Jesus' answer was: "You do greatly err, not knowing the power of God or the Scriptures. Besides, God is not the God of the dead but the God of the living because all are alive to Him." He dismisses their question without answering it, then adds his own question which is one they had not thought of: Just who is the Messiah's Father?

That is the important issue. It would have been stupid in the Early Church Age for people to

create an entirely new congregation based on a question so unimportant as what day to worship. It is equally stupid now. The Lord is at hand. The harvest is white ready to harvest and tares have been thrown into the field. Christians have better things to do than to try to convert other Christians to their exact way of thinking about EVERYTHING.

But the question must be answered. Why do most Christians worship on Sunday? And why does Paul say that it really doesn't matter? (And I won't even go into the fact that the Seventh Day in one time zone might be the first day elsewhere or the sixth day somewhere else...depending on where on earth a worshiper is. Certainly, God is above all times and all zones. Does he want us to schedule our rest day by Israel's time-zone? Or does he expect us to shift zones when we travel?)

But why is the first day of the week important? What does it signify? Read Hebrews Chapter 4:1-12. The new rest symbolized by The Lord's Day is connected with resting in the power of the work, trusting and resting in Jesus' salvation and the power given to us through His spirit.

The answer is this: Christ, the new Adam, has brought a new creation, a new world and a new Sabbath which supersedes the one which the "old Adam" lost. As Jesus himself proclaimed when he was in the synagogue and reading from the book of Isaiah, God created a Jubilee for us. This jubilee is connected with the Ancient Jewish Pentecost. The fiftieth. The day after the 49 days... $7 \times 7 + 1$ . This Jubilee is the day of deliverance, the Day of the Lord, the Rest which we may enter in. Psalm 118 declares: The stones which the builders rejected is become the head cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing and it is wonderful in our eyes. This is the Day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it. And this is what we do. We rejoice and are glad in that day.

Paul and the early church worshiped on "The Lord's Day," which was the first day of the week (Sunday is the first day of the week, Saturday is the seventh day.)

The early church worshiped on the first day for many reasons:

They were not allowed in the synagogue if they believed that Jesus was the Christ. Jesus was raised on the first day of the week. That is why they called it The Lord's Day. The Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, which was the day after the Sabbath. The old testament promise of the Jubilee fifty days after the high Passover was fulfilled when the Holy Spirit descended. Jesus was crucified and the Church, the new Bride, the truer Eve was born from Christ's wounded side via the Holy Spirit on a day --seven times seven weeks plus one day-- after the Sabbath Passover when Jesus was in the tomb.

Therefore God has blessed the Lord's Day, the first day of the week --a Sunday in our words-- in many ways. Even going so far as to give his Revelation to John on the first day of the

week. (Revelations chapter 1)

The worship on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, was so established in the early church that Paul told the churches to collect their tithes on the first day of the week, (1 Cor 16: 2).

But the most important aspect of The Lord's Day is that it represents the arrival of God's true rest. God's true rest is mentioned several times in the Bible. The true pentecost of seven perfect weeks plus one day. The New Day of the New Week of the New Creatures....The Redeemed Man.

In Genesis, we are told that on the seventh day, God rested from his labor. In Hebrews chapter four, the writer of the Book of Hebrews talks about entering the true rest of God. He uses verses from Psalm 95:11, Genesis 2:2, and Psalm 95:7,8 to discuss the true kingdom rest. He links the salvation of Jesus, bringing His people into the promised land, with the promise of True Rest.

Thus, the real rest is the rest created by Christ's creation of the new day. It is no longer a legalistic enslavement to the law, but an entering into the true Rest and finished work and blessings of the New Day which the Lord has made.

Jesus has given us all things. By worshiping Him on this new Day, we acknowledge that He has made all things new...and that we have a new rest. Bodily rest, to be sure, was given to us. But a deeper rest. Those who enter into this True Rest which was prophesied know that through Jesus name, we are given physical healing, spiritual authority over demons, and eternal salvation because the authority and power of the Holy Spirit has been given to us in fullness.

As the last day of the week was blessed because God rested after he created earthly man, so the First day of the week is also blessed because of Jesus's great "It is finished" when the new Adam created a new heavenly Creature, the sons of God.

If Paul, a Jew of the Early Church, could write letters to the Colossians and to the Romans stating that people are not legally bound to certain minor spiritual matters -- if he can begin resting and worshiping on the First Day-- then we modern Christians should not get so upset about particular days.

We should not argue over unimportant aspects of the faith, since the apostles prohibit this. Some beliefs that certain denominations hold dear simply do not matter. Arguments among Christians do not further the cause of Christ, especially when we it seems we get fixated on certain issues that are not important to salvation. But we should "study to answer" to know why we believe certain truths. Did Apollos save me? Or Paul? No, Jesus saved me. Did my denomination save me? Did believing certain unimportant truths save me? No. The main truth is the blood of Jesus. All

other differing theologies are not important in the long run. Brothers and sisters, let us draw people to Christ, not to our denomination. 1 Cor 3:4-20

But there is also the issue of entering into God's true rest. God's true rest is mentioned several times in the Bible. In Genesis, we are told that on the seventh day, God rested from his labor. In Hebrews chapter four, the writer of the Book of Hebrews talks about entering the true rest of God. He uses verses from Psalm 95:11, Genesis 2:2, and Psalm 95:7,8 to discuss the true kingdom rest. He links the salvation of Jesus, bringing His people into the Promised Land, with the promise of True Rest. Thus, the real rest is the rest created by Christ's creation of the new day. It is no longer a legalistic enslavement to the law, but an entering into the true Rest and finished work of the New day. That is another reason why Christians worship on Sundays. Jesus has given us all things. He has made all things new...and we rest in His new Day. Bodily rest, to be sure. But a deeper rest. The rest that knows that through his name Jesus gave us physical healing, spiritual authority over demons, and eternal salvation which we rest in. Those who think of the Sabbath only as a day of physical rest don't go further into the cause of this New rest...a new day of finished work, the Jubilee, the Pentecost – the seven full weeks plus one day. As the last day of the week was blessed because God rested after he created earthly man, so the First day of the week is also blessed because of Jesus's great "It is finished" when the new Adam created a new heavenly Creature, the sons of God.

Like the Sadducees whose sect focused on one small aspect of spirituality, many Christians belong to sects that major on something Paul or the other apostles would consider minor. They focus on what separates rather on what brings people together and they can be quite vocal and scornful of Christians who do not follow their beliefs. Although Paul states that specific days of worship don't matter to God and that each worshiper should be fully convinced in his own heart about the holiness or non-holiness of a particular day, he also urged us to study how to answer. It is difficult answering a member of another sect without getting into an argument over words, which Paul also prohibits. Therefore strive to be careful in who you offend. But if you happen to offend a Christian who believes that you must believe everything that she does, study how to answer.

The apostles were faced with two holy days. They could worship on the seventh day, which was the Jewish Sabbath. Or they could worship on The first day of the week which was the day on which Jesus was raised from the dead, the day they called "The Lord's Day." Those who claim that we should worship on the Sabbath day are saying that the apostles were wrong to choose to worship on the First Day.

Should we say the apostles were wrong to celebrate the day on which our Lord rose?

Paul's tone in his letters also change often depending on whether or not the church to whom the letter is written is exasperating or inspiring. His letters to the church at Thessalonika were written to Christians who lived in one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire. It was also one of the places where Paul had some of his greatest spiritual tests and tribulations. It had a large Jewish population which persecuted him through slander and through the law. As happened in Rome, he had to argue that God and His Messiah didn't belong only to the Jews but were for all people. But the most problematical situation that had arisen was that believers in the Thessalonikan church had heard a disturbing report, supposedly from Paul, that the Day of the Lord had come already. One isn't quite sure what they made of this. Did they think they had been left behind after the rapture? Did they think that the world would now be destroyed? Were they waiting to be killed by the Antichrist? No one knows. But one of the results of this rumor was that some of the people were just sitting around doing nothing because if the world was coming to an end, why did they have to work or contribute to the Christian community? Paul not only had to clear up this particular mess but he had to defend himself against the criticism and slander.

Paul reminded the congregation of his last visit and what he had said then about Jesus' return. He reminded them about what he had said about the Antichrist and told them not to believe everything they heard. (He is very harsh and impatient with the Corinthian and Thessalonian congregations, which he had founded, unlike the Roman congregation where he has a more polite tone because he was writing a letter to people he did not know.)

The letter to the Hebrew believers is also another letter which has a different kind of Pauline tone. This letter is traditionally ascribed to Paul, but some modern scholars have said that the book must be written by someone else because computer analysis shows that the writer of this letter uses words Paul rarely uses. Some have even said the letter was written by Apollos or Priscilla. I have no problem believing that Paul's letter to a primarily Jewish Christian congregation would be different from one written to a Gentile or mixed church. Why shouldn't Rabbi Paul speak to his own ethnic and religious group - people who understood Jewish tradition, scriptures, and history - in a different way than he would Gentiles who came into Christianity from pagan religions? It is only logical that Paul would use words he did not normally use with non-Jews.

In the letter to the Hebrews we can see that the Jewish believers were suffering because of their conversion. Paul wrote this letter encouraging them to the "better covenant" and exhorting

them not to turn back from the true path because of persecution. The most famous chapter of Hebrews is chapter 11, commonly called the Faith Chapter. In this chapter, Paul uses the stories in the Old Testament to describe how faith is equated as righteousness. He also writes about cruel mockings, a theme which will occur more and more in these.

Paul's letter to the Philippian church is one of the most joyful of Paul's letters. It was written to the church at Philippi whom he really loved. And no wonder, they were a generous, loving and considerate group. (Phil 4:15) As recounted in the sixteenth chapter of Acts, Paul went to Philippi after he had a vision of a man from Macedonia saying, "Come over to Macedonia and teach us." He obeyed the vision and a great deal of suffering started for him and the Philippian church. He had to leave town because of the persecution and later ended up in prison. This letter was written while he was in prison.

The city of Ephesus was the center of worship for the goddess Diana. In the book of Acts, we read about the riot caused by Paul's preaching because the men of the city were outraged against Paul because they felt he had insulted Diana. The church in Ephesus had some of the same problems of the other churches. It was a truly multicultural church with Jews and gentiles, slaves and slave-owners, rich and poor. As such, Paul also had to tell them about true spiritual wealth. In addition, the letter seems to have been written at a time when some doctrinal dispute was threatening to get out of hand. The church at Ephesus was one of Paul's favorite churches but it also had its share of suffering because of Alexander the coppersmith and the worshipers of Diana. Paul had to show them they were already unified and one people in Christ; that they should be drunk with the spirit and not with wine, that everyone in the church had a special place, that they not compromise their holiness by allowing the sins of their culture to taint them, that they had to be bold in declaring their faith and cling to Christ rather than return to philosophies, morality, and spirituality found in the city, perhaps going so far as to break off their relationships with old friends and acquaintances. (Eph 4:17; 5:11) But above all, he wanted to encourage them by showing all the blessings they had gained through Christ's victory.

Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus are called pastoral letters because they are letters in which Paul tells pastors how to take care of the church. Paul's letters to Timothy also encourages Timothy who it appears was both young and shy, a troublesome combination in a pastor.

Paul's letter to Philemon was written to ask for mercy for an escaped slave, Onesimus. Philemon and the church in his house were asked to take Onesimus into the fold as a spiritual brother. Paul asks his friends to accept a runaway slave's return. It is a simple letter that shows that

despite the powers that be, Love, brotherhood and forgiveness can change the world.

Each city and its culture were different. And the churches reflected the people in it. A letter written by an African pastor to a mission church in New York would be different from a letter written by that same pastor to his home-church in Africa. The upshot: knowledge of the cultures of each author or of each city an author lives in will help us understand the Bible better.

## **Don't Use One's Race, Class or Cultural Prejudice to Interpret the Bible.**

**T**his is related to some other chapters in this book but I feel it should have a place of its own, however small that place may be. We have already discussed how people who are racist often interpret Noah's curse as an endorsement of their prejudice. We see this is a mistake caused by misreading the past and this mistake has created much social injustice such as slavery and many dangerous cults.

But this small chapter is about human nature. Quite simply: we tend to understand and like people who are similar to us. Even worse, we tend to assume that those whom we honor are probably like us. A rich upper-middle class man will probably assume that God is like him, in taste and proclivities. Thus anything in the Bible that is unlike him will either offend him or be turned about to a more pleasing state.

Two small illustrations will do: I remember a priest who visited our parish. He stated quite forcefully that to him "God was not Daddy." Now this kind of sentiment is allowed in movies such as *The Poseidon Adventure* or in self-help magazines, but should it be said in a church where helpless little old ladies look to God daily for their help and sustenance? The priest was quite free to state his opinion but because he was young, virile, healthy, and came from money, he could well live without Bible verses such as "Our Father in Heaven" or "The Lord is my Shepherd."

I remember another priest who stated, also quite bluntly, "I don't get the Psalms. They seem like they shouldn't be in the Bible." Again, it is quite all right if he does not "get" the Psalms. But what does it say about him? Obviously, the neediness, the anger, the emotional relationship between God and the Psalmists, makes such a self-contained person quite uncomfortable. But does he have a right to remake God after His own image or to dismiss certain passages from the Bible because they have little to do with his emotional, intellectual or financial make-up?

A priest or writer who has never had the sufferings of a Job, for instance, might feel the urge to call Job a whiner. Much of this is because we are not like God, we do not understand everyone's life. But a writer and minister must understand that he is using his limited life experience to make a statement about someone else's life and to make a theology out of suffering. Women who have never wanted children find themselves annoyed when they read the story of the battle between Rachel and Leah; they simply cannot see why children are so important. The Biblical women's need for children seem old-fashioned and unenlightened. But these modern women don't understand that

the women in Biblical days did not have Social Security benefits to tie them over when they became older. A son was a good protection in one's old age.

Sometimes we believe that if we were in a certain person's position, we would behave better. But if we are unable to identify with a beaten slave like Hagar or with a cast-off wife, like Michal we will be judgmental towards a Bible character's behavior. We are also showing our human tendency to identify with the people of praise and renown instead of the wounded.

Some people don't like the imprecatory Psalms - those Psalms in which the writer cries out for revenge against his enemies. They think that a religious person shouldn't sound so hateful. But these psalms show an honest relationship between God and His people. Bible people didn't hide their feelings from God. Moreover, the people who judge the writers of the vengeance psalms have probably never seen their children split in two by foreign invaders. It is hard to understand when we do not really understand the life of the writer. This kind of "easy interpreting" of other's pain has made many a Christian devotional seem cold to the reader. The point then is if at all possible to be as compassionate and as understanding of all Bible characters as you can. Try to identify with all the characters in the Bible. Age, life change, and sudden change of circumstances will open your eyes to the virtues of stories you had previously mocked.

**Sometimes there are Biblical threads that weave through the Bible. The threads resonate throughout the book and are geographical, generational, spiritual, or thematic.**

**W**hen we read the Bible we must be aware that stories are linked to other stories. Themes run through the Bible, geographical areas are mentioned and re-mentioned. Consider the story of Shechem and the Samaritan Woman at the Well.

Shechem

Genesis chapters 4:19-24 and chapter 34

The Bible is full of stories in which a religious ritual or a spiritual vision is used wrongfully. It may be argued for instance, that Lamech misused the notion of forgiveness and grace by not only absolving himself of a crime but by appointing God as his protector. But Lamech used religion after he murdered the young man. The destruction of Shechem is the first in which a religious ritual is used as a planned pretense for genocide.

As the story goes, some time after Jacob pitched his tent towards Shechem. Unlike the towns of Sodom or Gomorrah, the Hivites were hospitable to strangers. During her visit, Dinah meets the prince of the region. But it seems to have been a fairly common occurrence that the patriarchs inevitably met up with the kings and princes of towns they visited. Having great wealth and property would definitely bring sojourners to the attention of royalty. Generally also, people of all ethnic groups are also lovers of novelty and like hearing stories about foreign cultures.

So it is not strange then that the prince of the city – he is also named Shechem– would have heard about the nomad's daughter as she made her tour of the city. One can imagine the women of the town taking Dinah around, showing her a good time, and listening to Dinah's stories of her travels. Dinah's voice in her own story is not heard and we can only guess about the specifics of her first encounter with the prince.

She probably arrived in town with a companion, a female slave or her brothers or some of her father's herdsmen. Perhaps the women of the town came to her tent to retrieve her and decided to lead her to the prince's abode. Whatever the case may be, Shechem immediately was attracted to Dinah and seduced her. Nor does it seem as if Dinah, who was probably a teenager, was against the

seduction.

As they lay together, Shechem fell in love with Dinah and spoke “kindly” to her. Many Bibles put an alternate meaning here: he “spoke to her heart.” This alternative translation would imply that Dinah also fell in love with him. Sadly, this possibility is rarely mentioned in Bible studies without the caveat: “We must warn teenagers to be careful with their hormones.” Admitting that Dinah’s and Shechem’s love had any validity or – God forbid!- was part of God’s will would only complicate matters. Loving Dinah as much as he did, Shechem went to his father and asked him to get him Dinah as a wife.

Sometime after this, Jacob found out that his daughter has been defiled. It is not known how or when Jacob learned about this momentous sexual event in his daughter’s life. Perhaps one of the serving women who had accompanied her into the city told about the incident. Perhaps Dinah raced home weeping, perhaps she returned with eyes lowered, perhaps she raced to her mother Leah and told her that she had found the man of her dreams. We do not hear the “story” Dinah told her parents. We do not hear how Leah reacted to the story. All we know is that Jacob was disturbed about the incident. But nevertheless, he kept his peace until his sons came in from the field. This was not only a sexual defilement because the young lovers were not married but it is an ethnic-spiritual violation. Shechem belonged to the wrong ethnic group, and Jacob’s sons, like Jacob’s grandfather and father before them, had no desire to mix with the Canaanite people, whom they always assume to be lacking in morals or ethics.

Hamor, Shechem’s father now becomes the focus character of Moses’ story. Shechem tells his father that he wants Dinah and will give anything for her. The father now has to travel to Jacob to ask a wife for his son. There is no talk about the seduction. Some have argued that the culture was lax with a scattershot morality. But the greater probability is that the two fathers, understanding the delicacy of the situation, didn’t speak about the obvious. The fact that Hamor wanted to give her a dowry shows that, as Moses subtly points out, the young man was very honorable. Shechem has asked his father to get Dinah for him at any and all cost. Hamor is now in the delicate position of mediating with both Jacob and with his own countrymen. Hamor is an interesting character. He seems genuinely trustful. It doesn’t seem to occur to him that Leah’s sons will not keep their word. Perhaps he thought Jacob’s family would be happy to be linked with his royal family. Perhaps both he and his son were just terribly naive or very honorable. But Hamor speaks of love, family, community and alliances. Shechem’s sin was a case of doing first things last and of putting the cart before the horse. But Moses declares him honorable and so implies that a sexual

sin, a sin of losing control of one's sexual appetites does not necessarily make a person evil.

Jacob who had worked seven plus seven years to get Rachel understands passionate love and he understands promises. No doubt he wonders why Shechem didn't have the self-control he had. But he understands that the boy is deeply in love. Hamor is willing to give any dowry Jacob demands. But while Hamor speaks of unity, hatred is in the hearts of Jacob's sons.

The brothers feel a combination of tribal and family insult. They are aware of the family prophecy. They have envisioned the future greatness and uniqueness of their descendants. Not only was Dinah, a daughter of Israel, God's prince, seduced, but she had been seduced by a foreigner whose land Israel's descendants were fated to own. As we saw in the scene where Jacob prepared to meet his brother Esau, Jacob was well on the way to creating a family hierarchy. Growing up in this atmosphere, no wonder Leah's sons gave themselves permission to destroy foreigners. The brothers assert that they cannot give their sister to an uncircumcised man: it would be an offense to them. Dinah's brothers demand that all the men of the city become circumcised. A covenant, oath, marriage contract is drawn up, the center of which is a religious ritual. But while Jacob is appeased, Leah's sons are still angry.

Like the woman at the well, another future ambassador to Israel, Hamor communes with the men of the city. He is a practical man, and he gives his people the economic reasons for aligning themselves with Israel. He also reminds them that the new sojourners are peaceful people. All the men of the city give their assent and are circumcised. Shechem is especially pleased. The men are circumcised. Three days later while the men of the city are still sore from their circumcision, Simeon and Levi enter the city and murder them all.

I have listened to many Bible studies where pastors assess Simeon and Levi as Jacob assessed them. "Instruments of cruelty are in their hands." (Gen 49:5) The brothers are cruel. And deceptive. But even though ministers see Simeon and Levi clearly, they often do their best to convince Bible study classes and their congregation that the murdered destroyed city somehow deserved what it got.

The reason for this is complicated. For good or ill, American Christians have been taught to identify with Israel in many ways. Our historical ideas of manifest destiny which helped propel the country to move west is nothing more or less than our forefather's tendency to think of this large continent as the promised land and the native people as Canaanite types who were fated to disappear because they were not God's people. Combined with the notion of a pure good people is the balancing idea of an impure mixed people. As I heard one pastor say, "God didn't want his

people to be watered down.”

Certainly the fear of being “watered down” is understandable. The “water down” theory states that God was determined to keep His people pure because he wanted to keep the Hebrew culture uncontaminated by false religion and to preserve the Messianic genetic line. As Moses tells the story, the Canaanites were appointed to slavery anyway because of Noah’s drunken curse. And it mattered not whether the curse was spoken hastily or by a drunken man, the curse or blessing of an ancestor was powerful. The Canaanites were also doomed because their ancestors could be traced to the Nephilim. But if God wanted to keep the people of Israel pure, it was not necessary that Jacob’s children should sin against the laws of hospitality, against their oath and against a peace treaty in order to accomplish His aim of purity.

This “water-down” theory is often so aligned with unspoken racist ideas about eugenics when this sermon is preached that Christians who belong to certain minority groups can only cringe when pastors begin speaking about it.

It seems to me that Prince Shechem might have had some further influence on his countrymen and brought about true conversion. It is interesting to note that when the city of Shechem pops up in John 4 when Jesus met the woman at the well, the motif is repeated. The inhabitants of this town once again have an encounter with a representative of God’s kingdom and this time the joining of themselves to God or His people is at last accomplished. In both cases also, a member of the “community” preaches to fellow citizens. In both Moses’ story and John’s gospel, the community is given an evangelist, but in John’s story God Himself comes to speak to the community. “We believe because we have spoken to Him ourselves.”

In order to shore up their notion that Dinah’s marriage was somehow wrong, ministers sometimes say, “The Hivites only wanted Jacob’s property.” They reason that Hamor mention Jacob’s wealth in his attempt to persuade his countrymen therefore that was the reason the town assented to the regionwide circumcision. Certainly some of this is true, but let us not forget that at this point two peoples are now mixing religion and mischief. Yet Bible readers often feel we must find Hamor’s speech more sinful than the more murderous plans of Levi and Simeon.

Let us also not dismiss the persuasive ability of a kingly father who wants to give his son the woman his son is in love with. The request is a difficult one. I am a woman but I imagine a circumcision is painful, especially when a man is older. Isn’t there a possibility that some of the people wanted to do this for their king? Even more complicated? Isn’t there the slightest possibility that God had placed a yearning for Israel’s God in the heart of this people? When Moses wrote that

non-Israelites accompanied the Children of Israel during the Exodus from Egypt, we know that some of this “mixed multitude” were spiritually confused at best, evil at worse. But isn’t there a possibility that some of the non-Israelites who joined themselves to Israel when they left Egypt actually felt the call of God?

Simeon and Levi had decided on a plan to use the religious ceremony of circumcision as an act of mass murder. In addition, they decided they would destroy not just Shechem alone, but the entire city. This is not a case of an eye for an eye. The sinner was only one person: Shechem. But such is the nature of revenge --especially religious revenge-- the entire town was to be punished.

Simeon and Levi -- Levi, the ancestor of the future holy tribe was a murderer just like Moses was. And how does Levi murder? He uses the spiritual instrument of circumcision as part of the plan. It could also be argued that these newly circumcised Hivites were now part of Jacob’s extended family, Levi’s spiritual brothers, part of the seed of Abraham. Even if they did not fully understand the meaning of circumcision, they did understand it as a symbol of alliance and family. Imagine for a moment a hill of discarded foreskins, the blood of slain men, and weeping women and children everywhere. No wonder Jacob feared for his family’s reputation and safety. It is interesting, to ponder how often clannishness, and cruelty is coupled with spiritual rituals and sermons. In today’s world, many a minister has used the pulpit as a way of wreaking vengeance upon some person or race they wish to destroy or humiliate.

Notwithstanding the old rabbinic tradition that Dinah became the wife of Job, Dinah’s story ends at Shechem. Those ministers who don’t use her story to speak about the dangers of teenagers marrying people of the wrong race often interpret it as another instance of Jacob reaping the lies he sowed in his youth. But Dinah is more than that. She is one of the first examples of a “living sacrifice” who suffered in order to keep Israel safe and pure. (The others being Esther, who marries a man she does not love and presumably never grows to love; and Jephthah’s Daughter, who depending on the translation one reads may have died or may have been a living sacrifice.) One would so wish that Israel’s daughter would’ve had a more glorious story.

This particular area is mentioned again in II Kings 17 when we hear about how the Samaritan people were transported to Israel. That’s a great little story. But we’ll bypass it and go to the story of the Woman at the well.

Woman at the well

The Samaritan woman who spoke to Jesus at the well is often used as an example of a "bad" woman. Modern readers don't understand that middle eastern men of that time could easily divorce women for any kind of reason, childlessness, talking back, old age. They also forget that during Bible times, poor women without families had few choices when life dealt them a harsh blow. The much-divorced Samaritan woman may have had a big mouth or been unable to bear children. The fact that she ended up with a man who was "not her husband" is more likely the effect of destroyed self-esteem rather than sin. The plain truth is we cannot easily judge a situation we know so little about. John didn't tell us the backstory. People always forget that back in the day a guy could divorce a woman simply because she was childless or had a big mouth or --god forbid-- was sickly.

Many Christians behave as if the "woman at the well" divorced herself or had been the one who initiated the divorces. From what I can see from her conversation with Jesus, this woman had a mouth on her...and spoke her own mind. A good trait perhaps but back in the day, women weren't supposed to answer back or have their own minds.

When people go on about how bad she was for "having so many men" I say, the woman tried to have good marriages but somehow she was constantly being rejected. She finally fell in with some guy who was either using her, or still married to another woman or who was as much a loser as she was.

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The other thing they completely miss --the most important thing-- even though they talk about Jesus being the "seventh man" in her life, is that a man meeting a woman at a well is always used in the Bible as a symbol for marriage. Sure Jesus didn't marry the woman, but that John chose to use the old patriarchal symbol for marriage to show that Jesus was symbolically married to the woman as a symbol of Jesus being married to the church is something they don't even touch. I think what annoys me most of all is the lack of true thinking that occurs in many sermons about

the "bad" people. We Christians have a kneejerk dislike for evil even though we're supposed to be aware of our own sinfulness.

But when I think of the Woman at the Well see a woman literally thrown out, who has to fend for herself. She is offered marriage and a home time and again, but not an accepting patience husband. But Guess what!! She was the first missionary to spread the good news!

### **Don't Use Your Denomination to Interpret the Bible.**

**C**hristianity has many denominations. Mainstream Christian denominations such as Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Methodism, Episcopalian/Episcopalianism and Lutheranism adhere to the creeds that rose out of the Council of Nicea; their mission statements share the basic Christian doctrines but they have different ideas of sacraments. Sects such as Seventh-Day Adventism, Mormonism, and the Jehovah's Witnesses disagree with many basic Christian tenets. The Seventh-Day Adventists follow the teachings of Ellen G White. They do not say whether they consider her a prophet and they do not consider her writings "another gospel" and yet where her views challenge the Bible, they choose to believe Mrs White's "interpretation." This often goes so far as to making Jesus seem like a liar when He mentions hell. As for the Mormons, they call their book "another testament" of Jesus Christ although St Paul warns us that if any come to us with "another gospel" they should be anathema. Strangely, there is no "original" Book of Mormon. All we have is a translation of a book from a manuscript that doesn't exist and that vies with all known pre-Columbian Native American history. It is recommended that one avoids reading material by certain sects because often they fixate on issues not important to salvation, or they seem intent on proving that all Christian denominations (except theirs) are wrong in this one matter, or they turn the seeker's eyes away from Christ. Remember, the key point of the gospel is this: to convict the world of sin because the world believes salvation can be earned and the world does not believe on Christ's atonement, and to show the righteousness and lovingkindness of God to a world which murmurs against him, and to show that Satan and the demonic beings of this world are judged. Any religion or sect or denomination that doesn't do these are not preaching the gospel.

However, even true denominations of Christianity have their own biases. While they do not behave like the sects and teach their adherents to despise other Christians, they nevertheless read the Bible through the tinted glass of their denomination. Most denominations agree on the main points of the religion. However, there are differences even among the major denominations and no denomination has it all right although many have it mostly wrong. As a writer of integrity, it is best if you read the Bible for yourself without too much denominational baggage telling you how to interpret your understanding of the Bible. This means that if you're doing a study on a particular issue, you might want to borrow religious books on that topic from friends of all denominations.

Some denominations have allowed racist views to creep into their literature. Consider the

racist writings of the early Mormons and those Christian churches who feel compelled to preach against inter-marriage between whites and blacks. Some denominations make wholehearted pronouncements such as “the age of miracles are past” or “God wants you to pray to a particular person or in a particular way” in order to have your prayer heard. The point is that you should search the Scriptures in order to see if certain beliefs you profess are true. If you believe them to be true, then realize that the issue might be controversial. In such a case, prepare your case. Have evidence to back up your belief.

Let’s discuss one belief system, which two denominations profess. This is the notion of soul sleep, the belief that when a person dies, he or she is uncreated, resting in the mind of God, only to be recreated at the time of judgment. At that time, they will enter heaven or be destroyed in hell.

Most religious notions come about because of bad reading skills, confusion, and a wish to have matters be different than they actually are. It is fair to say that if you or I wanted to, we could create a system of beliefs, publish it in all media and in one hundred years we would be deemed a respectable denomination. That unfortunately is how religious matters work.

But let us consider this matter of death as “soul sleep.” The verses generally used to back this up are found in the third chapter of Ecclesiastes primarily, but other instances where death is described as “sleep” can be found throughout the Scriptures. In addition, the state of “the dead” is often mentioned in the Bible.

Consider Psalms 115: 17-18. Note that verse 17 states that the dead praise not the Lord, neither any that go down into silence. However verse 18: says “But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and for evermore.” Verse seventeen taken out of context implies that the dead don’t praise God in heaven. But verse eighteen indicates that someone will be praising God forever. So what does this mean? How does the Psalmist define the word “dead?” Does he use it to mean people who are physically in their graves or people who are walking on earth but spiritually dead to God? Compare this with Jesus’ use of the word “dead.” The point is that someone might take verse 17 and say the Bible contradicts itself. But since verses 17 and 18 are in such close proximity to each other and since both verses are spoken by the same writer, a reader cannot easily say what the state of all the physically dead might be.

Jesus told a parable about a rich man named Lazarus who ended up in hell. Those who believe in “soul sleep” say this story was “only a parable.” The implication is that Jesus told the parable for reasons other than a description of the immediate after-life. But aside from the fact that Jesus was very careful with what he said, the characters in the story – unlike all the other Parables—

actually have names. In addition, the definition of a parable is a story that uses physical natural everyday things to describe spiritual things. A description of hell is by no means an everyday occurrence. This is a case of a denomination making a story symbolic when it probably isn't.

When Jesus was transfigured on the Mount Moses and Elijah appeared to him. They had died, but the evangelist writes that they came to talk to Jesus about His upcoming death. Did the disciples see sleep-talking prophets? Notwithstanding the fact that other verses are found which indicate that there is much "activity" and "wakefulness" after death, those who believe in "soul sleep" choose the verses that prove their case. Although the Bible shows that the human senses are extensions of the soul and that people can "see" events with the eyes of the soul that human eyes of flesh cannot see, "taste" matters with spiritual tongues, "hear" with spiritual ears, people who believe in soul sleep believe that a human's ability to interact with God in heaven ceases when that human dies. They even go so far as to say that Jesus' story about the rich man in hell was merely a teaching parable not based on fact, but one aspect of Jesus's parables is that they all seemed like slice-of-life stories based on factual events. One finds one's self wondering what happened to Enoch who "did not see death"? Is he the only human with God now? Certainly, if he did not see death, his soul can't be asleep. So where is he?

In order to believe in "soul-sleep" this denomination must ignore more verses than it acknowledges. This is where denominational biases show up, when the preponderance of evidence for the other side is simply ignored. Quite simply, they ask those in their denominations to believe that the activities mentioned in Psalm 16:11; Psalm 17:15; Matthew 8:11; Luke 16; John 17:24; II Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:21, 23; Hebrews 12:23; Revelation 4, 5, 7, 12; Revelation 5:9; 6:10; 7:15; 14:3; 20:4 are all done by the dead in their sleep.

This is where a writer's integrity or finances will determine the course. Most Christian publishers are sponsored by a specific denomination. If you are a writer who wants to write Bible studies, you will have to decide what markets you will write for and how you will deal with those Bible verses that challenge the beliefs of the magazine's publisher.

## **Don't discard Israel, and remember Jewish Tradition**

**S**t Paul tells us that Jesus came to break down the dividing wall between Jews and Non-Jews, but over the years the wall has been rebuilt. It began with Constantine who is the Roman Emperor credited with stopping the persecution of Christian. He, and later Theodosius, also changed much of Christian worship. For better and also for the worse.

According to Constantine, he saw a vision in the sky of a cross. Then he heard a voice which stated, "In this sign you will conquer." St John tells us that we should not believe every prophet or spirit but we should examine supernatural signs to make sure they are from God. And looking at this vision, it does seem as if the vision doesn't need to be examined, after all Constantine is being told to trust in the sign of Christ. But in the book of Acts, we actually have an episode where a little girl with a demon prophesied the truth about the Gospel. So even demons can seem to be pointing to the gospel. But, if we believe that Constantine actually saw this vision – which is questionable— and that this vision came from God, let us examine what exactly the sign is telling him to do. Is he being told to conquer the world, or to conquer himself? Is he being told to align the Messianic Church to the Holy Roman Empire? And, if God did give Constantine a mission, did Constantine do it properly?

I have no doubt that Constantine made many mistakes. Jesus is the only prophet of God who is perfect. And the reason for this is that Jesus is God-With-Us and only God can be perfect. So what did Constantine do that was so wrong? Like Luther, who was very anti-semitic in his later years, Constantine rejected Israel and the fact that Christianity is basically a Jewish religion. This has contributed much to replacement theology and to the church's idea that that the church "replaces" Israel. Indeed many have persecuted Jews thinking they were doing God's will.

Most of Christianity's confusion and denominational problems come from cultural issues. Denominations are born in different cultures and these cultures affect how Christianity is practiced. This is acceptable in many ways because Christianity is fluid enough and "easygoing" enough to accommodate and mirror the Roman Empire or African cultures or Appalachian America or New England America. But the problem persists in that wherever these denominations are formed or molded, the creators of these denominations often have forgotten Jewish tradition.

Constantine, for instance, was not a great lover of the Jews. Nor did he like home churches. If you study the churches in the New Testament, you won't see any separation between the Gentile church and the Jewish church. In Israel, where the church was growing to about 10,000, churches

were primarily Jewish. In Europe and Asia where the larger cities had both Jews and Gentiles, churches had mixed congregation. For four hundred years, the typical church service took place in a believer's home. It consisted of singing, music, dancing, eating a large meal and in the midst of this love-feast the Holy Spirit would enable believers to prophesy, heal, cast out demons. There was persecution of course yet the church grew. Repentant sinners were being baptized, and babies were also baptized and dedicated. (The New Testament only shows the baptism of sinners and doesn't show what believers did with their children, but early church history shows that believers followed a Jewish tradition of dedicating their child to God and this was often infant baptism.)

But Constantine didn't like home churches. A person in power wants to know what his subjects are doing and if churches are baptizing, marrying, burying etc the government simply can't keep track.

Not only Constantine, but also the Church Fathers tended to ignore or be ignorant of Jewish tradition. Would Augustine have equated the forbidden fruit with sex if he had understood Jewish theology? Would theologians have come up with the Sethite theory (to explain the Sons of God marrying Daughters of Men) if they had understood Jewish rabbinical tradition? Would the folks who said Blacks were the children of Ham have developed that racist theory and rationalized slavery if they had studied Jewish theology? Would Jehovah's Witnesses have translated "spirit of God" as "Active force of God" if they respected Jewish tradition? or even the Hebrew language? Would the reference to Israel in the Book of Revelations as the woman surrounded by the 12 stars have been translated into a symbol of the Virgin Mary if Israel had been honored and understood? Would Seventh Day Adventists have come up with the idea of soul sleep if they understood the Jewish ideas about death? Would the Mormons have come up with their very Masonic-like temple services if they understood the symbols behind Jewish temple ceremonies? Would Jews have been called Christ-killers if Luther hadn't scorned at the very people who gave us our Christ?

But the worst thing Constantine did was this: He separated Christianity from its Jewish roots.

At first, early Christians had two holy days: The Sabbath and The Lord's Day. Constantine forbade Sabbath worship. In the epistles, St Paul – a Pharisee-- didn't demand any special day of worship. He said Christians could consider one or the other day holy or they could consider all days holy. But Constantine knew that Jews would not give up the Sabbath and by demanding only one day of worship, he knew he would get rid of them.

Constantine also removed the Jewish ordinances and festivals. Many Christians say that

Jesus only gave two “ordinances” to his church, yet if you read the Bible, there are many times when the Holy Spirit states that such and such a festival or ordinance is instituted forever. For instance, we are Passover is an ordinance forever. In addition, Jesus said that not one jot or one tittle of the Law would pass away. I’m not saying that we should do all these things as a legalistic thing but the church has lost much by forgetting its Jewish roots.

He allowed former pagans – he had decreed that Christianity was now the universal religion—to put an “accursed” thing in Christian places of worship. This, more than anything else, helped to separate Jewish and Christian believers. Constantine had formerly belonged to the Mithraic sect and his Christianity was greatly affected by it, and when he decided that pagan temples were now to become Christian temples, something had to be done to the statues of Isis and all those maternal figures. Constantine saw nothing wrong with keeping the statues. The pagan worshipers simply continued worshiping in their old ways but renamed the statues as the Virgin Mary and Jesus. The Jewish Christians had been taught from an early age not to bow down to any engraved images and Jews simply could not allow this This was the major reason why Jews began to leave Christianity after Constantine came to power.

Constantine also affected how the church hierarchy operated. As a former member of a mystery religion, Constantine accepted the idea that there were those who “knew” and were “initiated” and those who were simply not so wise, those who ministered and those who were ministered to. The ones who wore the mithra – hat of the initiated—wore special clothing and were called “Father” and the rest just weren’t smart enough to know the deep things of God. Thus the religious books were to be hidden from them, or explained to them. This also was not a Jewish tradition. After all, Jesus simply walked into a synagogue and began speaking about the Bible. Any son of the covenant could speak about the Law and the Prophets.

The effect of not understanding the Jewish roots of our faith has given us a lot of stupid, unclear, wrong, or incomplete understanding of the Bible. A small example might be the lack of understanding among many Christians. For instance, during Jesus’ time many sick Jewish people tried to touch the hem of his garment. Most Christians don’t really understand that this shows the common people’s belief in Malachi’s prophecy that the Son of Righteousness would arise with “healing in his wings.” “Wings” was the common meaning of the fringes on the end of the Talith (prayer shawl worn by pious Jews).

It has caused us much spiritual detriment, and has been the cause of a lot of Anti-Jewish

hatred and the present “replacement theology” which states that the Christian church has “replaced” Israel. It has not. Jews and Christians are both to be built up into “one new man.” Reading the apostles then going on to read the Church Fathers is probably one of the most discouraging upsetting grievous things than can happen to a Christian. One expects greater wisdom as the church age progresses and instead one meets with simple ignorant thoughts, or Greek philosophy or something like Origen’s “allegory” in which Bible scholars loosen a Biblical story from its Jewish moorings and build some very stupid theory out of whole cloth. Witness, again, Augustine managing to turn the story of the forbidden fruit into something about the evils of sexuality. When we consider that modern Christianity –Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox—are based in the works of the early church father, we wonder what Christianity would have been like if Constantine and other theologians had allowed Judaism to be a strong force in Judeo-Christianity.

This does not mean that all Jewish tradition should be accepted simply because they are Jewish. For instance, many modern Jewish traditions – such as the tradition dating from the mid nineteenth century that states that the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 refers to Israel and not to Jesus is very wrong. As is the inclusion of the Birkith Mah-hinim, a curse which synagogues included in their liturgy in the early church days in order to weed out believers in Christ. But we’re not talking here about new traditions created to make Christianity wrong, or old esoteric traditions such as the Kabbala. But there are other interesting traditions that Christians could ponder. For instance, Talmudic tradition states that Keturah, Abraham’s third wife, is in fact Hagar. “Hagar,” they say, “is not really a name but a word that means “stranger.” Keturah was then Hagar’s real name. We’re talking about the riches of Jewish history and the accepted wisdom and traditions which helped to create and interpret the Bible.

We can only hope that as we go through these last days the church will become what God meant it to become. Permanently and powerfully. And Jewish and Christian.

## Don't Turn Bible Characters into Sacred Cows or Scapegoats

**L**ook at the story of Hagar and Abraham, Michal and David. These aren't simplistic "good guy/bad guy" stories. Many people, for instance, often judge the numerous prostitutes and divorced women that turn up in the Bible. They are often harder on these women than the Bible prophets are.

As the years have passed, I find myself avoiding certain Bible study topics. I know, for instance, that in a Bible study on Esther, I will have to endure talk about Vashti being a self-willed hussy, or I'll be forced to see Esther's story as a romance -- which it most decidedly is not. There seems to be a mindset among pastors, televangelists, Bible study writers, and filmmakers to find good guys and bad guys in every Bible story. But, often, the Bible story is not that simplistic. The pastor or filmmaker sometimes wants to depict a particular Biblical villain as a "bad guy." Generally, the pastor or Bible Study leader is not inclined to show any empathy for a Biblical villain. I believe the Holy Spirit is a great author who does not tell simplistic stories. As a writer, literature major and Christian, I want Christians to stop having a knee-jerk 'judgmentalism' towards these "bad" Biblical characters.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote, *"The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?"* (Jer 17:9)

Bible-believers are well-aware of that, and we consciously strive to make our hearts pure. And yet, deceptions and self-delusions persist in our subconscious. And often these deceptions occur when we interpret Bible stories. Throughout the generations, false teachings have veiled God's words from us. The reason for these veils of misunderstandings are many: adherence to denominational doctrine, not searching out the scripture for ourselves, lack of education, and human sinfulness. Our carnal minds, ignorance of many Biblical cultures, and our own human sinfulness often "see" messages in the Bible that simply aren't there. Biblical mis-interpretations are also deep-seated because people are attached to doctrines, preachers, sermons, denominations and teachings -- whether these teachings are true or false. Often we don't research Bible culture as much as we should or we bring our own societal prejudices into Bible study.

Most Christians will agree that racism, sexism, and social class has affected Christian doctrines throughout the centuries. But we often believe that we are in a generation that is finally freed from false interpretation of Scripture. However, this is not true. Many preachers and Bible

teachers still turn Bible stories into simplistic "good guy/bad guy" stories based on subtle racism, xenophobia, sexism, and societal or class issues. Certain Bible characters are either treated with extreme disdain or with such glowing praise that a listener wonders if the Bible hasn't been reduced to a book of sacred cows and scapegoats.

It's bad enough that many Bible readers often judge the numerous prostitutes and divorced women who turn up in the Bible, often ignoring the historical fact that the ancient Israelites generally had no place for poor widows or for women who had been cast out by their husbands. Readers are often harder on these women than the Bible prophets are because the Bible writers understood their own culture. Consider such Bible stories as the story of Hagar and Abraham, Michal and David, Job and his wife, Lot and his wife, Esther and Vashti.

In Bible studies on the book of Esther, Vashti is made to seem like an arrogant self-willed queen who is not submissive to her man. Preachers – usually men but women are just as guilty of this—often behave as if Vashti the trophy wife should have flaunted her beauty in front of a bunch of drunken men. They portray Esther as the perfect wife who researches her husband's need and cares about his ego. Because of fairytales such as Cinderella, the temptation is to portray the book of Esther as a kind of romance -- which it most decidedly is not. Nowhere are we told that Esther is in love the king. Indeed, Esther is more a wounded orphaned young woman whose past life history has taught her the necessity of pleasing a male cousin or any powerful authority figure in her life. Esther is a living sacrifice who must share her husband with other women in his harem –including his demoted former Queen. She is Jewess who would rather have had children with a loving husband who saw her every day rather than a busy work-obsessed husband she saw one every three weeks. Yet male ministers portray this as the perfect love story.

Another character who would have fared better if women had been preaching about her is Job's wife. The male-focused mentality of many preachers have trained church-goers to consider a man's pain as the only important consideration. Bible readers are trained to forget that Job's wife suffered also. This training consists of a subtle ignoring and dismissal of Job's wife's sorrows. We don't consider that, Job's wife has experienced the same multiple horrors that her husband has. And her word's to Job, "*Why do you still retain your integrity? Curse God and die*" (Job 2:9) was probably more of a cry of pain than a rejecting dehumanizing of "her man" because she was tired of his boils. I've heard Christians say that Job's wife gave him the wrong advice. This shows a complete lack of understanding about the nature of grief. Grieving people do not "give advice." Everything they say is a mournful heart cry. With the exception of the boils, Job's wife has suffered

every grief her husband has. But she is never seen as a sufferer in her own right, only as someone who gives the wrong counsel to her grieving husband. Any grieving parent can understand Mrs Job's words. In addition, we forget that Job and his wife do not have a Bible. In one day, a series of supernatural destructions apparently sent by God has destroyed their lives. What do they know about Satan's power to attack good people? Yet we I even heard a prominent minister state that God got rid of Job's horrid wife and gave Job a young wife so Job could have children again. Where does one begin to judge such a statement? Are we to believe that God didn't care about Mrs' Job's heart and that God couldn't heal her aged womb?

Other examples of Bible characters who have suffered at the hand of sexist male preachers are Lot's wife and Michal, David's first wife. Preachers rail against Lot's wife because she looked backward at burning Sodom. The Bible is unclear about whether she had both unmarried and married daughters. But even if we accept the KJV translation and assume her daughters were only betrothed, should we forget that Mrs Lot had sons-in-law who would die in the conflagration? Lot himself didn't want to leave his sons-in-law in the city. And if we judge Lot's wife because she looked back we are showing our tendency to limit our love only to those in our immediate family. When Jesus tells us to *Remember Lot's wife*, Luke 17:32 he's telling us that on the day when one is taken and another left, we must harden ourselves even in the loss of family members. Yes, and even those who aren't family members. Yet many Christians have been taught that she looked back with lust for the evils of the city, although the narrative says nothing like this. An interesting linguistic note is often missed. The Semitic phrase, "*to turn into the pillar of salt*" Gen 19:26) is often used in much the same way as we Americans use "she was petrified." To be petrified doesn't mean to be turned into wood but to be heart-stricken, almost to the point of death. But many people choose to believe that God created a supernatural destruction just to punish her for looking back.

As for Michal David's wife, many preachers often speak with spiteful satisfaction about Michal dying childless. After all, they say, she mocked God's anointed and was arrogant. They see justice in the fact that David never went to bed with her again. They seem to think God was punishing her as well. Yet they never speak about what happened to David when his treatment of Michal rebounded to him years later when David's son Absalom, slept with David concubines, (at the suggestion of Ahitophel, the grandfather of Bathsheba, who had seen what David did to his grand-daughter.)

But Sexism isn't the only reason for judgmental Bible Study. Class and Race also subtly figure in the theological mix. In the battle between Sarah and Hagar, all Christians are trained to

side with Sarah. Yet, when writing the story, Moses through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, takes great pains to show the spirituality of the Egyptian slave woman Hagar. Even more interestingly, he reminds the Israelites that they and Hagar were both slaves by using the same words to describe both Sarah's treatment of Hagar and the Egyptians' treatment of the Israelites: "*Treated her harshly.*" (Gen 16:6, Ex 1:11-14) Moses' marriage to an Ethiopian woman and his being raised in an Egyptian household makes Moses less patient with Sarah's elitist/racist reaction to Hagar's son playing and teasing his younger brother. "*The son of this slave woman will not be heir with*" Isaac. (Gen 21:10) Yet, in Bible studies and church sermons often preachers often behave as if Hagar is an uppity slave woman who doesn't know her place. They forget quite conveniently that Abraham divorced Hagar and sent her out into the wilderness. And they ignore Hagar's great faith confession: "*The God who sees me.*" (Gen 16:13) Hagar's simple confession shows great spiritual truth and insight. Yet it is the kind of deep Truth that is able to teach the small child and the wounded adult about God's love and care of His children.

This racism often becomes a kind of xenophobia which has contributed to preachers who subtly divide the world into "bad races who always do bad" and "good races who always do good." While it is proper to acknowledge that Israel is God's special people, we Americans have to be very careful that we don't believe in the Manifest Destiny of Americans or the supposed basic evil of foreigners. We can see this prejudice in the way we often focus on the Israeli-Arab conflict. In many 9/11 sermons Hagar is picked out for particular scorn although the most of Abraham's descendants – Midianites, Asshurites, Dedanites, and Edomites are a few examples-- also warred with Israel and merged into the Arab nations. One can see that because Mohammed said he was descended from Ishmael and because of our own ideas about slaves, Abraham's marriage to Keturah and his lawful descendant Edom are ignored. Our cultural minds cannot help but focus on Ishmael, the child of the slave who wasn't supposed to be born. Indeed, if we consider the prophecies, we would have to admit that Ezekiel, Obadiah, and most of the prophets aim their end-time prophecies at Edom (Esau). Consider Obadiah verse 10: Because of your violence (The Hebrew word Hamas is incidentally the name of the Palestinian military group) against your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you.

If we examine the typical sermon about Zipporah, Delilah, and the Women at the Well for instance, we can see some very unpleasant things about our view of foreigners, especially foreign woman. In the case of Zipporah, we don't honor her as a woman who was a descendant of Abraham's son, Midian and the woman who reintroduced circumcision back to the Israelites when

Moses himself had forgotten it. Rather, instead of seeing that Zipporah was speaking about the blood covenant, most preachers say that Zipporah's comment "*You're a husband of blood to me*" was meant a literal sexual insult to Moses. Indeed, Zipporah has troubled many ministers. Depending on their opinion of her race, she is made to be either Moses only wife or bad wife with preachers using Numbers 12 as a passage about "*not touching the Lord's anointed*" rather than a chapter about God's hatred of racism.

Another woman whose race and "foreign-ness" has caused her to be seen as a bad-gal is Delilah. Although the Bible does not say one way or another, it is generally assumed by preachers that Delilah is not an Israelite. The basis for this assumption is the subtle belief that foreign women of a lesser race are seeking to destroy our innocent men. Delilah is a betrayer, yes, but she is made into a harlot and a foreigner. Often she is turned into a city-slicker. It is quite possible that she is a nice Jewish girl from the country who was in love with Samson but trapped with no way out. But preachers feel no desire to explore this. They don't even explore the fact that the Philistines were threatening to kill her parents.

Sexism, racism, and create misreadings. And these mis-readings affect our cultural views. In the case of Delilah, one wonders which came first. Is it our dislike of foreigners that makes us assume certain things about Delilah? Or has the continued sermons about evil foreign women affected our view of life. Our innermost thoughts does affect our interpretation of Scriptures, women, other races. We end up equating carnality with "impure races." Our political views, our treatment of our neighbors, and our ability to understand the pain of others is affected by these erroneous interpretations.

As I wrote earlier, if a verse in the Bible conflicts with a Christian's life-style, that Christian often does one of four things:

- (A) Immediately agree with the verse as it is written and change one's way. This is the action of a believer who is pure in heart.
- (B) Group with others who have a different interpretation of the verse and dig our heels in by refusing to change her ways. This is what many of us do because we are already too set in our prejudiced and hateful ways. Many slaveholders and racist and sexist ministers choose this option. We often feel no guilt because we have chosen to not let the Holy Spirit touch that part of our heart.
- (C) Search out the Scriptures to see if it is true. This is a painful route but it is the action of a Christian who is determined to root evil from her heart.
- (D) Recognize the truth of the Bible verse, but continue to live with guilt because one doesn't want

to change one's lifestyle.

God has told us not to *“add anything or take anything away from”* his word (Rev 22: 18-19). But racism, classism, and sexism are deceptions that enable us to “add” and “subtract” in subtle ways. God however desires wisdom in the hidden parts of our heart. *“Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord ... (Lam 3:40 NRSV)*

The Bible is not a book speaks of "sacred cows" (Abraham, Rachel, Sarah, David), and scapegoats (Hagar, Vashti, Potiphar's wife, Michal, Delilah, the Woman at the Well). (If you don't know your Bible, you'll have to get your concordance now in order to understand who some of these people are.) It is well-rounded and we have to “rightly divided the word of truth.” I actually got into an argument once with someone because she said Absalom, David's son didn't really like Tamar, his own sister. According to her, Absalom was next in line and wanted to get Amnon out of the way and therefore used Amnon's rape of Tamar as an excuse to kill everyone else. Aside from the fact that David had another son, Daniel, who was second in line to Amnon, the Bible clearly states that Absalom truly loved his sister Tamar.

One of the major purposes of the Bible is to show humanity its sin, its lack of faith and lack of love. It was not written as a fairytale with good and bad characters. Creating Bible studies which seem to be done by rote or traditional patriarchal interpretation leads to writing that is judgmental. I love the Bible and desire to see more compassionate Christians and more compassionate honest Christian discussions. The rigidity, dishonesty, and facile judgmentalism we encounter in Bible studies turns many Christians - new and mature - away from the Church. Christianity is not simply a “moral” religion which tries to lay down the law of good and evil. It is a way that shows people that even the good are flawed. Reading a Bible study in which we can understand or not easily dismiss someone like Potiphar's wife, or Cain or would open our hearts to others. We have had too many men, too many powerful, too many rich, too many secure people interpreting Scripture for us and we have swallowed their interpretations without thinking.

## **Have a Sense of Humor.**

**J**esus was the Word, and as such, He could have His puns. He made many jokes. When he saw Nathaniel, he described him as “a true Israelite in which there is no guile.” That was a pun on the meaning of the name "Jacob" and “Israel.” When his disciples realized they had power through faith? to do both destructive and creative acts, they wanted to call thunder from heaven, he called them the "Thunder Boys." The jokes have a bit of truth in them, but they are nevertheless jokes. Jesus is not humorless. If the Western Text of the Bible is write about translating Jesus’ comment as, “It is easier for a rich man to enter heaven than for a camel to enter the eye of a needle,” then that is also a joke. The Bible is full of jokes. People who can't recognize a joke when they see one often turn a simple joke into a sermon. Even worse, they believe Jesus to be humorless and unapproachable.

Humor gets a bad rap sometimes. True, St Paul told believers to be serious and Solomon says it is better to be in the house of mourning than to be in the house of feasting. They are right. But a joke now and then shows that God is not some stiff-upper-lipped Englishman in the sky who has nothing better to do than to slap people for not behaving.

## **Don't be too Quick to Think that the Bible is Contradicting Itself or is Mistaken**

**T**here are many reasons why an author may think the Bible is contradicting itself. Sometimes, this requires close reading. Sometimes it simply requires knowing the Bible better, or rather, knowing the Biblical *culture* a little better.

For instance, folks in the Bible and the Bible writers have a penchant for nicknames. Firstly, many Bible translators have problems transliterating and translating places and people. Just as the names Mary, Maria, Marie, and Myrrha, are all transliterations of the name of Jesus' mother; the name Jesus, Joshua, and Isa, are close approximations of the name of the Christ, our savior. This kind of transliterations also occur in the Bible. For instance, King Ahaseurus (Esther, chapter 1) is a transliteration of King Xerxes. He is also called Khashayar. Someone who doesn't realize this might say that there was no King Ahaseurus in Persia. But if they speak the name and listen to it carefully, they will hear how the Jewish tongue pronounced the name Xerxes.

Secondly, people in the Bible sometimes have more than one name.

In the book of Genesis, it is written that Esau had three wives (Basemath, the daughter of Elon; Aholibamah, his uncle Ishmael's daughter, and Judith, the daughter of Beerli the Hittite.) And, in another place, the Bible tells us that Esau married Adah whose father owned a well. Someone who is not accustomed to the Biblical habit of throwing nicknames around might say, "The Bible is making a mistake. Who is Adah? I thought Esau only had three wives. How can God write a book with such a mistake in it?" The simple answer is this: "beerli" means "well-man" or "owner of a well." Judith's father was Beerli (well-man) and Adah's father owned a well. So Judith and Adah are the same person.

Another instance is where Lot is called Abraham's "nephew" in one chapter in Genesis (KJV) then called his "son" in another chapter. The reason for this is that many words cover relationships in the Bible. Sometimes the word "descendant" might mean "brother" or "son" or "relative."

Another reason people might think the Bible is contradicting itself is because they forget that a story might be told from different perspectives. Consider the Gospels. Why are there four Gospels?

The writers of the Gospels want to tell us that Jesus is the human life of God. They also believe that God is a being with three different persons: the Father (God up there in the sky, away from all of us earthly mortals.) God the Holy Spirit (God as He works and lives in human beings.) And God as a man who lived on earth for 33 years. That's a lot to say. Each Gospel-writer has his focus, the lens through which he views the events of Jesus' life. This does not mean that the Bible is slanted to one side or that the gospel writers forgot certain aspects of Jesus' works and remembered others.

As a Jamaican-born woman who lived in the country, I can honestly say that many Westerners don't know what it's like to grow up in an oral culture. Most modern readers do not know this. Communication and printed materials are so common in our time that modern folks and Westerners don't have to rely on their memories. Our memories and histories are stored for us on photographs, TV's, VCR's and CD's.

Some of you might have to tell your adolescent readers about those pre-VCR days, pre-TV days when moviegoers memorized movie scenes because they knew they would never see those movies again. It is only in the last hundred years that the average person has been able to own - or even read - the printed word. Before our democratic era, the common man did not have tools of memory. They had to memorize songs, faces, stories, family histories. When my mother was growing up in the small rural Parish of St Ann's, only the schoolteacher had novels. The children would gather around as the professor read Dickens, Homer, Shakespeare. The children would listen and memorize whole paragraphs. Even now, my mother - and I - can recite the opening chapters of many a classic literary story. People from countries with a large poor or illiterate population often develop a powerful oral tradition. Even now, if one is a frequent traveler to places rich in the oral tradition, one can re-encounter an old friend who will repeat word for word one's conversation of many years ago. I personally have no doubt that the disciples remembered Jesus' words accurately. These eyewitnesses viewed actions and words they considered important and holy. They respected words and they respected conversations they considered divine. They were not going to fiddle around with the words of someone they considered holy. Moreover, these eyewitnesses were not alone while they listened to Jesus' sermons. They had companions. Words remembered wrongly would soon be corrected.

But why four different versions? Why four Gospels?

A child who is a fan of television court dramas know how concerned the actor DA gets when there is an actual eyewitness to a crime. They always ask the same questions: “What exactly did the witness see or hear?” “Is the witness an objective party?” If the witness is objective, is he/she trustworthy...or should his words be taken with a grain of salt?” The DA often compares what each witness says. The Bible is full of witnesses. The Gospels are *evidence*.

Earnest searching Christians throughout the decades have lost their faith because they believed the “higher critics” who said that some portion of the Bible was wrong. These earnest Christians did not “research the research” by looking at new archaeological records or at Christian literature which might affirm the Bible. Instead, they accepted the “new wisdom” of the higher critics as the “last word” on the Bible.

But new archeological discoveries have proven the critics of the Bible wrong. For instance, the higher critics did not believe that Ur of the Chaldees (Abraham’s hometown) ever existed. They also didn’t believe that there was such a nation as the Hittites or such people as Solomon, David, or even Pontius Pilate. Nor did they believe that a place called Jericho ever existed. They contended that if it ever existed, the walls of its city could not have fallen inward because physical science doesn’t work like that. Yet, over the past decades, all these peoples and nations have been found. Archeology continues to prove the Bible right and the higher critics wrong. Those who believed in the higher critics and sneered at the Bible should have continued their research or refrained from making decisions on matters they did not research. The Bible has not made a mistake. It never does.

Tradition states that the Gospels were written by Matthew, a disciple of Jesus; Mark, a companion of St Paul’s; Luke, a doctor/researcher and friend of Paul’s; and John, Jesus’ best friend. On first glance, you might not see the necessity of reading all of them. Then you might find yourself asking, “Why are some stories told in one Gospel and neglected in another?” There are three reasons. Time, distance, and audience. Time passes. Mark’s Gospel, for instance, is the oldest in the Bible. At the time it was written, some events were still well-known in the Christian community, and Mark had no need to write about certain events because everyone knew about them. He neglected other incidents also because those stories affected real people. Writing about those people might have put them at risk. By the time, the later Gospels were written, the people in these stories were safe from danger or dead. For instance, one Gospel neglects to mention Lazarus, another mentions him in passing (as if we already knew the story), and only John tells the entire story. John gives us a clue when he says that after Lazarus was raised from the dead, a conspiracy

arose to kill him.

Another reason is that the Gospel writers wrote for different audiences. Matthew wrote primarily to convince the Jewish people that Jesus was their king. His genealogy includes kingly references but also some of the most famous (some would say ‘infamous’) women in the Bible. A culture far from Jerusalem might not consider Matthew’s genealogy important.

Let’s go back to our eyewitness analogy. Imagine yourself and three of your friends on a street corner. A car accident occurs. You and your friends all give eyewitness reports to friends and families. One eyewitness says the car was hit by a blue van. Another says the passenger in the back of the struck vehicle was a child. Some one else says the struck vehicle hit was a convertible. Someone else says the accident occurred during rush hour. Another person says the accident occurred before dinner. Another might say that “Jack” was not looking at the road. And still another person says the red car was stopped at the corner. If you were at the scene of the crime, you no doubt would understand how all these observances work together. But, seen from our viewpoint years later, there might be confusion and discrepancies. (Who, after all, is Jack?) There is, however, no dishonesty or mistake. If you remember that each eyewitness has his own vantage point and his own ways of looking at the situation, then you’re on your way to some inspiring reading.

### **The Gospel of Matthew**

St Matthew was a Jesus follower of Jewish who had been a tax collector. He wants to show Israel that Jesus from Nazareth is the Promised Messiah mentioned in Scripture. He is concerned that they acknowledge him as a King with a spiritual kingdom. Why? Because the Jews of his day were oppressed by Rome. They wanted a real-life literal kingdom. A spiritual kingdom seems like a poor substitute. Matthew has to show them how the nation has sinned and he has to show them that they really do need a King who will deliver them from their sins. Because he is writing to a primarily Jewish audience, he reminds them of Bible verses that predict the coming Messiah. But his background as a tax collector makes his Gospel resonate with grace and forgiveness. He starts his book by listing the genealogy of Jesus, showing that Jesus is a descendant of King David, and a member of both the religious tribe of Levi and the royal tribe of Judah. He also does the very odd thing of including women in Jesus’ genealogy, specifically women with very immoral pasts. The genealogy also shows that the time had come for the prophecy of the Messiah to be fulfilled.

Because of his audience, Matthew often mentions people without properly introducing them. He assumes the reader is a Jewish person who will know whom he is referring to. The former tax collector's Gospel is usually the first Gospel that is read by new Christians?

### **The Gospel of Mark**

The Gospel of Mark is a short book which was written primarily for Roman believers. This is the book to read if you're rushing through the Bible. Scholars believe that this book was one of the first accounts written on the Life of Christ and that Matthew and Luke borrow heavily from it. Mark was converted to "The Way" - that was what Christianity was called back then— by Peter and he is a companion to St Paul. While Matthew depicts Jesus as the King of the Jews and Luke shows Jesus as the savior of the world, Mark is primarily concerned with depicting Jesus as a servant of God devoted to doing His Father's will. Mark doesn't quote a lot of Jewish Scripture because his intended audience - probably the converted non-Jews in Rome - doesn't know a lot about Jewish history.

Mark's Gospel is fast; he doesn't tell many parables. He is more concerned with the actions of Jesus, the Servant of God. It's good to remember that many Christians in Rome were poor or enslaved. In depicting Jesus as God's servant, Mark is showing that God's ways are not man's ways. In God's eyes, the poor and the enslaved are rich and free. Because of its brevity, the gospel of Mark can be easily memorized by anyone willing to try.

### **The Gospel of Luke**

Luke is not an actual eyewitness to Jesus' life. He is a researcher. As he tells us in the beginning of his Gospel, he had heard many accounts about the life of Jesus. But Luke thought these accounts were lacking in some way. So he took matters into his own hands and decided to write as truthful and full a Gospel as he could. (There are some very odd Gospels of Jesus from this time. These stories have the boy Jesus healing little birds and doing other "special" deeds.) Luke was an educated Greek doctor so one can only imagine his compulsion to set matters down properly. One can imagine how these fairy-tale stories would've annoyed an educated person.

St Luke writes primarily to non-Jews. In the introduction, he addresses the reader as "Excellent Theophilus." The name means, "Lover of God". Theophilus may or may not have been

a real person. It might simply be Luke's way of describing all believers in Christ. Luke's personality and concerns are evident from the beginning. Check out the way he writes Jesus' genealogy. Whereas Matthew's list of Jesus' ancestors goes back only to Abraham, Luke's genealogy goes all the way back to Adam. Luke even calls Adam, "the son of God." He is the only Biblical writer to do this. And by doing this, Luke makes all of humanity God's children. It is common in our time to call humanity's first parents "Adam" and "Eve". But in Luke's time, this was quite radical. Each culture had its own name for the first parents. But Luke so accepts the worldview of the Hebrews that he uses the Hebrew names - Adam and Eve - for humanity's common ancestors.

Both of Luke's books - he also wrote the Acts of the Apostles - are full of historical references. He mentions the governors of several region and the two censuses. This makes Luke a pretty tempting target. Scholars who try to trip him up often find that Luke's history is flawless. (For many years, modern historians argued with Luke about Governor Quirinius and the two censuses. They thought Luke had his dates all wrong. And they only heard of one census. But inevitably, Luke was proven to be right.)

A humanist, Luke often refers to Jesus as the Son of Man. A funny aside here: Luke is so confident that he got all the information on Jesus' life. Yet he completely neglects the wise men and their worship of Jesus. Was this a conscious act done in order to make Jesus more of a "common" man? Did Luke simply not get the information?" Or did Luke simply not like magi? (Please read Acts for his description of Simon Magus.) As you read the Gospel, you will notice Luke's deep concern for the poor. He is the only writer who writes Mary's Magnificat. The song is reminiscent of Hannah's song in the book of Samuel. And what is the song about? The triumph of the poor over the rich. For a real eye-opener, read Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount then read Luke's version. Whereas Matthew writes, "blessed are the poor in spirit," Luke pretty much equates material poverty with spiritual poverty and writes, "blessed are the poor."

As a doctor, Luke's medical experience pops up frequently. When he tells the story of the woman who went to all the doctors and wasn't healed, he adds the interesting touch that she lost all her living on the doctors. Only a compassionate doctor would add this touch. His description of Jesus' miracles and of Jesus' death has some medical touches. As a Greek doctor, Luke also a Gentile believer. It has been said that he wrote the Book of Acts to show the Jerusalem Church, headed by the somewhat Gentile-disliking James and the cowardly Peter, that God's Holy Spirit was indeed working in the Gentile churches and that Paul was not an apostate.

## **The Gospel of John**

Tradition states that the gospel of John is written by the beloved disciple. No one is quite sure who this beloved disciple is. Most people agree that the beloved disciple is John. (The phrase, “the beloved disciple,” doesn’t appear until the middle of the book after the resurrection of Lazarus. And because of this some people are convinced that the beloved disciple is Lazarus.)

The beloved disciple, whomever he is, begins by telling the reader of his reasons for writing this Gospel. He tells the reader that he is a witness of the Light and he is writing this book so that we might know what the Truth is and that we may have fullness of joy.

The book was written at a much later date than the other Gospels. Some scholars date it to 90 AD. This will explain why the author of this book seems so intent on clearing up misconceptions. He constantly asserts and reasserts the truth, using the Hebrew slang, “truly, truly.” He always seems to be answering some comment or objection. He tells us, for instance, that “John the Baptist was not the True Light; John came to bear witness to the Light.” Why, one wonders, does the writer of the book want to make such a comment? We hear later, in Luke’s other book, The Book of Acts, that some people were walking around with the baptism of John the Baptist only. In addition, centuries after Jesus’ death, cults still exist that believe that John the Baptist was the Messiah.

The writer of John’s Gospel tells whole episodes that the other Gospels decline to mention. While the other Gospel-writers mention Lazarus in passing, the writer of John’s Gospel tells the entire incident. He confides in the reader that the priests were out to kill Lazarus - after Lazarus was raised - because of Lazarus’s miraculous raising from death. The author of the Gospel of John is so privileged to information, one wonders how he knows so much. When Jesus is taken captive and held in the high priest’s house, the writer of John’s Gospel knows the name of the high priest’s servant. And while Peter (one of Jesus’ disciples) cowers in fear in that same house, betraying Jesus at every turn, the “beloved disciple” walks around the high priest’s house fearlessly because the high priest “knows” him. The writer of John’s Gospel even knows the name of the people in Herod’s household. In addition, John’s Gospel recounts some of the more intimate conversations between Jesus and his disciples. One of my favorite conversations occurs in the last chapter of the

book. The Gospel writer tells us, “There is a rumor going around that I won’t die. It was a misunderstanding. Jesus didn’t say, I wouldn’t die.” He then goes on to explain the conversation that started this rumor. Peter had seen the beloved disciple leaning on Jesus’ and had asked, “What will this man do?” Jesus’ response to Peter: “If I want this man to live on earth until I return, what is that to you?” (Along with Jesus’ parable of a man named Lazarus in hell, this is one of the comments that makes some believe that the author of this book is Lazarus. They reason that Peter wouldn’t have asked such a question for no apparent reason. ) The book of John is full of intimate moments like this. It is also full of symbolic passages that deal with words like “life” and “Truth.” Yet it is also the most intimate of the Gospels. And one believes everything he says because his words have the ring of truth.

I know I’m being long-winded here but I’d like to comment about those rumors that state that important higher-ups in the Catholic church (or Christianity at large) have tampered with the Gospels and hidden away some secret knowledge from the rest of us. Conspiracy theorists tell us that a large collection of secret writings are hidden away under the Vatican, the catacombs or elsewhere. These statements are often mouthed by people who consider themselves more spiritually “in the know” than the rest of common humanity. These folks obviously do not realize that translating the Bible is always the effort of a diverse group. Scholars of differing denominations and religion, scholars of ancient Greek and Hebrew, scholars of history and cultures all work together to translate the Bible. True, certain books were not accepted in the Bible; but these books are not hidden. Published versions of these supposedly secret writings abound; they are on bookstands across the country. Many books were written during the years of the early church by all kinds of people. Of these “many books,” only ten were given any serious consideration by the early church. And of that ten only two came close to being included. They failed because the church’s policy on inclusion was simple: chosen books had to be written by people who knew Jesus or by the first disciples. Books written by disciples of the disciples were not included although they also contained truth. In short, the “rejected” writings were rejected because they were found to be hoaxes or tainted with strange agendas, or too far from the events. As for the idea that books in the Old Testament (the Jewish Covenant) were tampered with or changed during the ages, the Dead Sea Scrolls more than adequately prove that the Scriptures we have in our Bible are none too different from the Scripture of early Israel. The scribes who meticulously copied and re-copied Biblical texts made few errors. For instance, the variations between the version of Isaiah found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the version found in our Bible are minuscule and does not change theology at all.

As for those “missing” gospels, or missing letters, it is agreed among most theologians that those missing books, not the ones published in collections called “Lost Books of the Bible” but those that seem to be missing, aren’t really missing at all. Those Old Testament prophetic books mentioned in the book of Kings, Chronicles, etc – the book of Gad the prophet, and the book of Iddo the prophet or the book of Enoch – are probably intertwined in the Bible we now have. Gad might have written the book of Samuel for all we know.

As for the “lost books of the New Testament,” Peter’s real gospel, the Q gospel that many nay-sayers believe speak of the “real Jesus” is probably the book of Mark. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul mentions that a letter from Laodicea was on its way. Laodicea and Colossae were always connected in Paul’s mind because they were in the same region. Scholars disagree about this letter. There was an old “letter to Laodicea” which seems to have been a kind of hodge-podge of Paul’s letter to the Galatians and his letter to the Philipians. St Jerome rejected it. Some modern scholars consider the lost Laodicean letter to be nothing more than the letter to Ephesus. They believe the letter went from town to town and became renamed in its travels. Others consider the Laodicean letter to be the letter to Philemon.

Genesis 3:15

Matthew 1:1, 2:2, 2:15, 2:23, 8:20, 21:11

Exodus 12

Lk 1:78, 2:11

Job 19:25

John 1:1,9,14,29; 8:12; 8:58; 10:11; 11:25; 15:1

Psalms 118:22

Acts 3:14, 7:52

Song of Solomon 2:1

Eph 1:22

Isaiah 7:14, 9:6, 26:4, 40:3, 53:3, 60:16

Romans 11:26

Ezekiel 47

I Corinthians 1:45, 10:4

Daniel 9:25

I Titus 1:17, 2:5, 6:15

Micah 5:1-5

I John 2:1, 6:35

Zechariah 9:9, 12:10

Hebrews 1:2, 4:14, 12:2

Malachi 4:5

Rev 1:8, 1:17, 3:14, 5:5, 19:13

**Search your mind for assumptions, man-made traditions, and Second-hand interpretations and “knowledge” which cause error.**

**O**ne of the most frequent errors in Bible study occurs when people read a Bible passage either too quickly or with some traditional assumption. Reading quickly makes a reader miss important points and often leads to assumptions.

Assumptions and quick reading have led to, on the one hand, embarrassing mistakes and, on the other, to wonderful traditions.

Most people, and this includes most Christians, tend to believe things because everyone else does. For instance, Christians often say that all the Arabs nowadays are descended from Ishmael and that all the problems between Jews and Arabs are caused by Ishmael. They don't ask what happened to all the other Arabs and Egyptians that existed before Ishmael was born? Did all the other tribes disappear? They don't consider that there was a prophecy about Esau's descendants and that the warfare between the Arabs and Jews probably descends more from Esau than from Ishmael? Although Esau and Ishmael intermarried (as did all the other descendants of Abraham's three wives) the prophets speak mostly against Edom when they talk about end-time prophecies. But since Mohammed said he was descended from Ishmael, we Christians also speak this.

When you read a Bible text, it's a good idea to ask yourself: "Am I seeing what is actually written here? Or am I adding what I've heard into the mix?" I'm not saying that all traditions are wrong. Many of them aren't. But I'm saying that you must see exactly what the Bible is saying. Consider for instance, the many descriptions Jesus used when talking about heaven and the afterlife. He spoke of people being put in hell, people being cast into outer darkness, people who would not see the Father. John, in Revelations, said that inside New Jerusalem were holy people; but outside of it were whoremongers, cowards, sexual immoral. Many Christians have assumed that all these places describe hell. Perhaps they do, perhaps not. But it is quite possible that "outside the gates of New Jerusalem" means just that. That there will be believers who will have immortal life because they are saved by their belief in Jesus yet they will forever not be able to see the Father or enter heaven because they lived lives of immorality. Jesus saves all sinners but does a saved person who believes in Jesus but who continues to sin grievously go to hell? Or heaven? Or is there some other place? This is what I mean by searching out our assumptions.

In the past, these mistakes were known to just a few. Only priests and ministers published books, for instance. The average person had little time to read the Bible or challenge the majority opinion. Thus the assumption of the few became the second-hand knowledge errors of the many. These Assumptions are still everywhere. They can be seen in movies and in sermons we have heard. And for those who read their Bible, the sad fact is that if we are convinced of something, it is hard to not “see” it even if it’s not there.

To understand how an error of assumption can become traditional and lead to second-hand knowledge, let’s consider the three wise kings from the east who came to the stable on the night of Baby Jesus’ birth. How many men? Were they wise? Were they kings? Were they from the east? When did they arrive? Some of these assumptions are true, of course. But some are not. Read the passage in the Book of Matthew now. Re-read it. Notice anything? Not yet?

First, many people believe that three wise men visited Jesus on the night of his birth. Does the Bible say this? No. The wise men had been following the star for two years, since the birth of Jesus. Therefore they arrived two years later after Jesus was born. In addition, nowhere are we told that these particular men were kings. They might have been. But they might have been merchants. It would be nice symbolically if they were kings. But all we know is that they were wise, probably Magi. The Wise men are called Magi. Magi were followers of Zoroaster, a religion centered near Persia at the time of Jesus’ birth. But the term ‘magi’ was also used loosely to refer to people who dabbled in wisdom and esoteric spirituality. We cannot assume then that we know much about the actual homeland of the Magi.

The Bible also doesn't say how many wise men were actually present. Re-read the story: How many wise men were there? The Bible doesn't say, does it? The word “men” is plural so there must have been at least two. Maybe three. Maybe twenty. Tradition assumes that there were three wise men because of the three different kinds of gifts, gold, myrrh and frankincense - and because of the three races of mankind. But one cannot assume that each man brought a different gift. All we know is that they came from the East and that they represent the calling of the non-Jew to Christ. The night of Jesus’ birth - celebrated on Christmas - is primarily for the Jewish people. Twelve days later - the twelfth day of Christmas, also called Epiphany - is the day that celebrates the Wise Men’s coming to Jesus and God’s inclusion of the Gentiles. This is probably why we like to think that the three wise men represent all the races of man, yet if we take this traditional tack, aren't we leaving out the Native Americans?

Another story that is full of assumptions is the story of Samson and Delilah. If asked to

describe Delilah, most Christians will say she was a prostitute. But was she? Re-read the Samson passage in the book of Judges (Chapter 13) Do you see what happened? A Bible verse describing Samson's visit to a harlot occurs just before the verse in which Delilah makes her entrance. But close reading, by male Bible teachers, has turned Delilah, a girl caught in the middle of a war, into a harlot.

Another instance of a tradition formed around an assumption made from quick reading is in the Book of Hosea. Hosea is told by God to marry two women: Gomer, daughter of Diblaim (who represents Israel) and the unnamed second wife (who represents Samaria.) Many people read quickly and assume that Hosea only had wife. But the description of the two women are so different that only if one is influenced by traditional viewpoints will one be unable to see that there are two women involved.

Many Christian scholars are divided as to whether or not God commanded Hosea to marry one or TWO women. They do not study the Jewish tradition. Also, puritanical issues and their dislike of the idea of polygamy makes them avoid thinking of this issue. Polygamy was not God's best but it was practiced. Often if someone's brother died, the surviving brother (whether he was married or not) had to marry his brother's widow to bring up children in his brother's name. The Bible, for instance, doesn't state whether or not Boaz was married before Ruth asked him to redeem her. And many Bible readers, not knowing or acknowledging that a concubine, although she was a second status wife, was as much a wife as the first wife. The interpretation of Hosea Chapter three depends on how the translators translate certain words. For instance, Hosea 3:2 can either mean "bought her" or "got her back" and this is a case where the translators morality and ethics affect the way the word is translated. It will surprise many Christians to find out that the supposed meaning of a Bible passage changes depending on where one is located. As said before, some passages in the Western Text of the Bible are often very different from those in the Eastern Text, the text which the Eastern Church accepts.

Gomer, Diblaim's daughter, is a temple prostitute, practicing the religion of the neighboring Canaanite countries. God tells Hosea to marry Gomer, adopt Gomer's illegitimate children and to have other children with her. In the end, Gomer is a symbol of Judah. She and Hosea have three children and each are given symbolic names that represent God's plans for Israel and Judah. Then, if that isn't trouble enough, God asks Hosea to marry another un-named woman, this one an adulteress. This woman now becomes Hosea's concubine, a second-status wife and symbolizes Israel (or rather the racially mixed spiritually-confused Samaritans.) Hosea is told not to behave as a

husband towards this woman, nor to have children with her although she is under his care and is his property, because a husband-king will be long in coming for these Samaritans. This odd family with its collection of children and step-children symbolizes God's love for Judah and Israel. Both women, like Israel and Judah, are not perfect women. But Judah, the former prostitute, and Israel, the adulteress are constantly making comparisons among themselves. These comparisons are laughable in God's eyes because neither woman understands spiritual faithfulness. Ephraim and Samaria, the capital of Israel, is described as a silly dove. She may not have the status of the first wife but, like the Samaritans, she is still related to her husband in some way. The land of Judah might be a less flighty than Israel but that's not saying much. (Ezekiel also compares Israel and Judah to two prostitutes Ez: 23) Quick reading of a passage you're examining and interpreting should be anathema.

We must say to ourselves: Do I believe this interpretation of this passage simply because a Super-Evangelist or my pastor or my church's tradition says this? Or is this verse saying something else? A classic example is: "Speaking the truth in love." Ephesians 4:14-16. Many Christians seem to think that "speaking the truth in love" means telling someone else about their sin "in a loving manner." While there are verses elsewhere that could mean that, if we really study this particular verse we will see that the verse is talking about speaking God's TRUTH as opposed to the false deceitful winds of doctrine. What Paul is saying is that if Christians are going to disagree with each other because of false doctrines, the true Bible-believing Christian who sees what God has actually said should not argue with the deceived person in a hateful manner but speak about what is written in God's gospel. The verse is telling you about speech directed towards the church community as a whole and not towards a particular specific sinner.

Consider the assumption many make that the "rich young ruler" who left Jesus grieving left because he was NOT going to follow Jesus. Truth to tell, we don't know if the rich young ruler was going to follow Jesus or not. All we know is what the evangelist said, "the man went away grieved because he had many possessions." It is just as easy to believe he was grieving because he was going to give away those possessions as it was to keep them. (Mt 19:22, Mark 10:22)

Other instances of second hand interpretation come in the form of proverbs which everyone assumes fell straight from the mouth of God, or at least from the Bible. Maxims such as, "God helps those who help themselves", "God doesn't give you more than you can handle", "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." While all these have more than an ounce of truth, the fact remains that as spoken, none of these verses really occur in the Bible. For instance, the phrase, "God doesn't give

you more than you can handle” is not really in the Bible. What appears in the Bible(1 Cor 12:13) is “God will always provide a way out of temptation.” Nowhere does it speak about God giving people troubles and weighing those troubles in a balance. Nor does it even vaguely imply that the troubles we humans encounter are God-given. How many people have lost faith because someone tried to comfort them by saying, “God took your father with a heart attack but God knows best!”? Perhaps the truth would have been better. “Your father died because he didn’t exercise and didn’t take care of himself.” But then again, perhaps not.

## Don't Assume that People from Another Time were Not as Smart as People Living in our Age

**A**s Westerners in the twenty-first century, we often think that perhaps people in other countries and people in other time are not as technological or as intelligent as people in “the civilized world.” American kids are especially provincial in this respect. We often believe that other people are stupid “primitives” who latch onto a supernatural explanation for every occurrence. Many modern day readers assume that we are less likely to be “fooled” into believing something is a miracle. But people have always been smart, cynical and untrusting.

Consider Samson and Solomon who were good men whose hearts led them astray. But unlike Samson, Solomon does not honor his own religion. The Athenians of St Paul's day tried to cover all bases by making a statue to the “unknown God.” Solomon, too, covers his bases with rational fair-minded philosophy. He is a confused lost victim of comparative religion. In the end, love, work and happiness are the only things that give some kind of meaning to life. Sounds pretty modern to me?

Ecclesiastes contains the thoughts of a powerful, self-assured, highly educated man whose wisdom, although great, is limited wisdom to what is found under the sun. Many people go about quoting verses from the Bible out of context. They should be especially careful about quoting from Ecclesiastes. It is a philosopher's honest confusion. But it is also a cynical book, telling us more about its creator's mental turmoil than it does about God.

The Preacher's wisdom is worldly, cynical and bitter and should be taken with a large grain of spiritual salt. Solomon is also credited with collecting many of the Proverbs and in writing the Song of Songs (also called the Song of Solomon.) After reading all these books one can see that people of all cultures have always thought deeply about life. We moderns are not the height of human intellectual thought. Others preceded us. And often came to the same conclusions.

## **The Authors of the Bible Books are inspired by the Holy Spirit but they have different personalities**

**T**he Prophets are a tough lot. They can make the reader feel confused, guilty and angry. They always seem to be in blaming mode. Sometimes they seem like ranting judgmental maniac. Moreover, the places, people and long past situations they talk about seem to have immediate spiritual value to modern readers. Reading the prophets is like being plunged into an ancient history class. And yet, for all this, they all have different personalities.

The first thing to remember is this: these prophets are very human. Some are spiritually attractive, some you might feel a strong connection with, some might annoy you. These Bible writers, then, are a lot like people we know.

Some prophets didn't want to be "sent" by God. Just as Moses, who had a stutter, complained that he had to speak to the great Pharaoh of Egypt, quite a few of these prophets complained about the spiritual task they had been given and they felt trapped by God. And, like Job, many were sorely tempted and tormented by religious people. Consider Amos: He reminds me of an anti-war activist. Joel seems like an employee of the Red Cross, scanning a devastated countryside. Jeremiah is a lone stand-out speaking a message no one wants to hear. Ezekiel's wife is killed by God and Ezekiel is told not to grieve about it. Daniel is almost super-human in his spiritual perfection. Jonah runs away from God because God wants him to preach to a nation he justifiably hated. Obadiah is angry that his country's enemies are seemingly getting away with murder. And Hosea is told by God to marry two women who will cheat on him.

Bible writers all write to convince people to turn to God but within that large framework, there are other purposes. If you believe that all the Bible writers are talking about the same thing, or if you believe they all have the same mindset and personality, you'll miss a great deal.

The Bible defines a prophet who has been sent with a message from God. The message usually has some conditions. The Prophet tells the king or the people that a particular action or set of actions must be done or undone. Or else. Sometimes the message is about God's future plans, something that will happen no matter what humanity does. Their messages usually concern the actions of God's people or the actions of those who oppress God's people.

Prophets are not fortune-tellers or casters of spells, although some do have miraculous powers. The prophets generally do not go around talking about jobs or love matches unless those

love matches figure in the greater scheme of things. Some prophecies are messages of doom and trouble ahead. Some messages are messages of comfort. But even in this God speaks to each prophet differently.

The Prophets of God heard God in many ways. Some heard him audibly. Some heard him by “the strong hand” of circumstances and coincidences. Some prophets had dreams. Some had messages that came by symbols or by providential coincidence and synchronicity. Often the prophet gets plunged into a deeper relationship with God whether he wants to or not. Some saw visions. If the vision is a vision of God, the vision is sometimes called a theophany. Many theophanies occur in Scripture. Two of the more memorable are the visions in Isaiah and Ezekiel. These theophanies often come unasked for. Sometimes these visions are examples of God's love, sometimes they show His anger.

Some other things to keep in mind when you're reading prophecy.

First: try to read the history books first, especially the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles.

Secondly, try to “listen” to the prophets as you read and not merely “read” them. Think conversationally. Each prophet is like a speaker with his own style. Listen to them as you would listen to a speech, a poetic oratory, a politician's state of the union address, a proclamation, a spoken memoir or a sermon.

Thirdly, use your concordance as you read in order to get your bearings.

Last of all, know to whom the prophet is speaking. One prophet might use the word Israel to only mean the kingdom of Israel. Another might say Israel and mean both the kingdom of Judah and Israel.

*Some major themes of the Prophets:*

As you read the Prophets, you will come upon many verses that seem to be speaking of the same Events. No one prophet tells everything about all these events. Messages and comments are scattered everywhere and must be strung together like pearls upon a necklace.

This stringing together phase is where differences in interpretations take place. Readers have to decide which verse is or is not applicable, which verse is symbolic or to be taken literally, which verses are referring to what event or what person or what group. And the reader has to find all of the verses that refer to a particular event. Many Bible prophecies might leave you with the

following questions: “Is this prophecy for my time, the prophet’s time, some other time in the past or the future?” “Is this prophecy over and done with or is there another aspect of it yet to come?” “Is there another prophecy that this can be aligned with?” One reader of prophecies, an Ethiopian eunuch mentioned in the New Testament was reading from the book of Isaiah and asked someone to help him interpret the verse. His question was “Is the prophet talking about himself or some other person?” The message is sometimes for the prophet’s listeners and their near future and also for a future events centuries away.

For example, many of the prophets wrote about a powerful, glorious Savior who would help Israel against her enemies. This glorious Messiah would make Israel and its religion the center of the world. But other prophecies --sometimes made by the same prophets-- also speak of a suffering Messiah. This leads the reader to ask: Are these two different Messiahs? Or are the triumphant and the suffering Messiah one and the same person? Is the Messiah being seen from two different perspectives? Does the Messiah come twice or once? Is the prophet talking about someone who would come in the prophet’s own lifetime? If not, when will this Deliverer come? Christians interpret these verses in one way and Jews another. A non-religious historian might interpret in yet another way. Christians believe that the suffering and triumphant Messiah are one and the same: Jesus Christ. Jews do not. A Christian might back up her interpretation by saying, “In Biblical prophecy, there is often a time gap between one phase of a prophecy and another? Remember Moses’ prophesy of the Seed of the woman who crushed the Serpent’s head with his bruised heel?” Or Remember Joseph’s dream of his future glory. Joseph received no hint of the slavery and imprisonment that would precede his rise to glory and power. The most important thing to remember about prophecy is that it is meant for contemporary listeners living at the time of the prophet, for believers throughout the ages, and for those believers at the end of time.

You are free to interpret any verse in your own way. But remember the pitfalls, especially when you are dealing with a part of the Bible that seems to be speaking about Final things.

### **The Final Events**

The prophets often speak of events that will take place at the end of time. One verse interpreted in a literal way can create doomsday cults. This same verse, interpreted in a symbolic way can put an entirely different spin on an event, creating a more mystical non-historical view of events. Matters get even worse when people bring cultural issues into the mix. An anti-communist for instance can assume a verse is speaking about Russia, while an anti-Catholic will say the verse

depicts the Catholic Church and yet another interpreter will think that the verse is speaking against New Agers. It is not up to me to tell you what to think, however. My purpose is to help you write as insightful and honest and mindful a Bible study book as you might wish.

The same concepts occur many times throughout the Bible. This repetition, alone, should make the reader consider the concept important. One can hardly reject certain concepts as inapplicable, if they keep popping up all over Scripture.

The first great concept is this: the earth belongs to God and a day will come when God will take it back. The future destruction of the world is linked closely with The Day of the Lord. Depending on your interpretation, you might see it as a long literal day, a symbolic length of time, an occurrence inside or outside of time. Certain events connected with the Day of the Lord are the purification of humanity, the earth, and heaven. There will also be cataclysmic events in the earth and universe. Interpretations vary as to which disaster or destruction is the effects of sin, events created by God, or events created by humanity.

Another great concept is the culmination and end of evil. One phrase that is often used is "the fullness of time." One metaphor often used is the "reaping" metaphor. Most of us are not farmers and so we aren't quite sure what "reaping" means. "Reaping" is what a farmer does when his food crop is ripe. When grapes are ready to be picked from the vines, they are reaped from the vine. This means they are collected. In the last days, goodness will be ripe, but evil will also be ripe. But will be ready to be reaped. Sometimes the Prophet mentions a great battle on earth and in the heavens. One of these battles, which will take place in the Field of Megiddo in the Middle East, is called Armageddon. The nation of Israel will play a great part in these events.

Closely aligned with the idea of full-blown evil is the "The Man of Sin." This being is mentioned in Daniel, the Books of Thessalonians, and the Book of Revelations. While we aren't sure who this person is, we can glean some knowledge about him. We know he will "seek to be worshiped as God" and that he will deceive the world with a great lie.

This Great Lie seems to be a delusion that will spread across the whole world. We don't know what this great lie is. Throughout human history, we have had instances of great lies being told to many cultures. The German people believed Hitler's great lie that the Jews were less than human. The Germans also believed the great eugenics lie that their people were "superior" to other people. Other countries have indoctrinated their people. In the early twentieth century, everyone in China studied Mao Tse Tung's little red book. The Bible speaks of "rumors of war." Rumors of war is a phrase that means "propaganda." During the last days, propaganda will be rampant.

However, we don't know what this great lie will be. The Bible tells us that this lie will lead to a false unity and a "Great Falling away from God." This is not to say that people will stop believing in God. It means that people will have a false idea of God. Scripture writers who discuss this great lie hint that discernment is needed. Remember the story of the Tower of Babel? It was a depiction of a false brotherhood of man. The prophets imply that a time will come when mankind will unite together against God as He truly is.

Other prophets also tell their readers what to look for. They give us "signs" of the end-time. A sign is a symbol or a series of events that make us know that something is coming. Have you ever stood in front of your window and looked at the sky? Sometimes, you can tell that a rainstorm is coming simply by looking at the clouds. You can read the signs of the times, so to speak. The prophets give us a few signs to look for: they tell us that the knowledge of the Lord will be spread throughout the world. They tell us that people will become increasingly selfish, cruel, violent, and proud. They tell us that many new diseases will pop up and that there will be famine, earthquake, wars, media manipulation and propaganda. These signs are to help us read our times. Sometimes people go wild reading "signs." They go too far and often assume they know when the world is supposed to end. Sometimes they even name dates. Looking through the prophets, you will realize that this is not a good way to go. Prophecy is hard to pin down. Signs give us a "feeling" that something is coming. But that is all. The time of the end is unknown to everyone. The Bible tells us that only God knows.

The prophets also speak about the life hereafter, Heaven, hell, and in-between. Much difference in opinion occurs in these interpretations also. There are differing opinions on the last judgment --when (before, after or during), where (in heaven or on earth or after death), how many (some interpreters have counted as much as five judgments), who are involved (God's people, God's enemies, sinners, non-believers, angels.)

These Bible passages also comment on how people will fare at the end of time. When you read, you will have to decide if a verse is applicable to all of Israel, law-abiding Jewish people, God's people, Christians, Sinful people or the world at large, You will also have to decide if the event described takes place at a certain limited allotted time in the future or if the event will be everlasting. Some believe that only God's people will be alive at the end of the world. Others (like the writer, Dante, believe that the universe will have joy and grace...with people who are God's true children at the top and others --who are non-perfected but nevertheless his loved creations all participating to some extent in God's joy. The nation of hell or Gehenna --a kind of garbage hole

where people found useless to the universe are placed-- really takes form in the New Testament. The Old Testament refers to the land of the dead and often deal primarily with Israel's future. Some believe hell will be destroyed once and for all. Others believe that both hell and heaven will continue forever.

Those are some pointers to help you on your way. You might wonder why God sprinkles information among His prophets. After all, wouldn't it be easier if He simply told us everything we need to know about a certain situation? Why does He make us play a puzzle game? Jesus explained why God is typically so mysterious about His information. In the New Testament, you will read where Jesus's disciples ask Him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Jesus replies that He speaks in parables in order that some people will not understand certain truths. One wonders why a loving God would speak in parables to the blind.

Jesus often talks about the children's bread. One possible meaning of this --and like many Bible verses, there might be many resonances-- is that certain Truths and blessings are spiritual treasures that are made specifically for God's people. Some Biblical truths can be used by those who aren't God's people too. The tool of faith is one of these treasures, for instance. Anyone may use the principle of "When you pray desiring something, believe that you have it." or "We walk by faith, not by sight." Many modern writers who are not religious have discovered the "power of positive thinking" and "creating their own reality."

Others reason why pieces of information are scattered like a jigsaw puzzle across the pages of Scripture are these: Firstly, prophets receive information on many level. A prophet who is given a comforting message might only have pieces of the puzzle that are applicable to the need to comfort the people of his time. Another prophet, whose concern is the sinfulness of Israel or humanity, will speak of God's wrath.

Another reason for the puzzling nature of prophecies is that they are like "found treasure." The Bible writers encourage us to read the Bible and to mine Scripture. Those who love God, the idea of His coming and the thought of pleasing Him read Scripture daily. The more they read, the more they know God. If all the truth they needed were in one easy accessible place, the need to study the word would not be present.

## **The Major and Minor Prophets**

The prophets are divided into the major prophets and the minor prophets. The major prophets in the old testament are ISAIAH, JEREMIAH, (who also wrote Lamentations), EZEKIEL and DANIEL. The major prophets are major because their books are bigger. The minor prophets are “minor” because their works are shorter, not because their messages are any less important than the “major” prophets. On the whole, these prophets spent a great deal of time telling God's people what God's people didn't want to hear. After you have read them, you might agree with St Theresa of Avila's comment to God, “No wonder you have so few friends, the way you treat them!”

Some Passages to study: Psalms 2, 24, 47; Isaiah, chapters 53, 66; Lamentations 3; Ezekiel chapters 13, 14, 36-43; Daniel 7, 1-28; Micah 4:1 -5:15; Zephaniah 2:4 - 3:20, Zechariah 11: 4-14, 14:1-21; Joel 3:1-2; Hosea 1+2; Matthew, chapter 24; I Thessalonians 4:13, 5; II Thessalonians 2; I Timothy 4; Jude, The Book of Revelations.

## Don't Let Your Discomfort with Sexual Issues Affect How You Understand the Story

**W**e are often more prudish than Bible characters. Try to imagine a typical parent reading The Song of Solomon to his child at bedtime Bible study or pre-dinner devotionals. Rarely happens, right?

But some readers read sexuality into stories where sex is not involved; as in the supposed relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus, or John the disciple and Jesus. (See the section on agendas.) They also dismiss sex from some stories that explicitly mention sex. They do this because they are unable to imagine Bible “saints” doing “something like that.” In the story of Ruth, for instance, we are told that Ruth “uncovered Boaz's feet.” Many Bible readers will assume that Ruth lifted Boaz' clothes from his feet as a symbolic action. Nope, that’s not the meaning. She did much more than that. And although everywhere else in Scripture, the euphemism “uncover” is used to describe a sexual or intimate act that implies some nakedness, Christian readers allow our moral priggishness to color certain events in the Bible. In a Bible study geared towards a general audience, there is no need to write about what Ruth actually did when she “uncovered” Boaz’s skirt. But if you are writing a story about sexuality in the Bible, you might want to mention it. Of course, it would open a whole can of worms and create many questions on sexual limits for the unmarried.

It might also be a good idea to use your concordance to find out what the phrase “to uncover the skirt of” generally implies in the Bible. A few readers might not be convinced that the word “uncover” actually means what it means. Tell them to get their concordance and look up every reference for the word “uncover.”

Many Bible love stories occur within the context of larger stories. When we read about Jacob and Rachel, we know that we are also being told about the history of the tribe. The Ruth story is about how a foreigner whose ancestors (Moabites) were forever restricted from being included in the nation of Israel, became the ancestor of King David and the long-awaited Messiah. (Incidentally, the Messiah Jesus turns out to have a long line of “interesting women” in his lineage – Rahab, a harlot; Ruth, a Moabite; Tamar a Moabite; Bathsheba, an adulteress. Matthew makes a point of pointing this out. Few Bible writers have explored this.)

Biblical love stories work on many levels. The story of Ruth is about family love, the role

of the convert in Israel, the beginning of David's dynasty, and the spiritual role of the redeemer-husband who buys the spouse out of the hand of another. The story about Esther is hardly a love story no matter what people might think because nowhere is it mentioned that Esther fell in love with Xerxes or wanted him as a husband.

But there are also sex stories. Again, contrary to what romanticized films one may have seen, the story of Bathsheba and David is more of a lust story than a love story. The story of Amnon's lust for his sister is also a sex story. And of course there is the Song of Solomon, a poetic play about a woman who is looking for her lover.

Some portions of the Bible can be fodder for hormone-ravaged teenagers. And Song of Solomon is definitely one of those stories. It is a book parents rarely read with their teenagers and yet it is probably one of the best books to use to teach children about sexuality. In fact, the entire story of Solomon's life, his work, his marriages, and his writings would be great teaching tools to show a teenager the risks and dangers of love, lust and sex.

The first thing to do when doing a study of this book is to feel comfortable with the sexual descriptions in this book. Not only do we hear descriptions about a woman's breast, we actually have the heroine's brothers also describing those breasts! Unless the reader is in a harlequin romance kind of mood, love poetry is not something one delves into on a whim...especially when the reader is expecting something "religious." But as I have said, in the Bible, love and religion often go hand in hand.

## Be Aware Your Own Agenda Will Cause Misinterpretation

**R**acial, sexual, political and class agenda have been the major cause of Biblical misinterpretation. Many a minister has allowed race, sexual orientation, class, and politics to interpret a verse. There is a saying in the Bible: "Seek and ye shall find." If an atheist opens the Bible hoping to find that it is a horrible little book, she will find that it is indeed a horrible little book. She will only look at what offends her "sensibility" and will - because of her agenda - not see what the Bible is actually talking about.

I must say, first of all, that an agenda is not always a bad thing. People have agendas for many reasons, both good and bad. Ministers with a "homosexual," "racial" or "feminist agenda" have had experiences that have convinced them of the rightness of their particular agenda. The trouble occurs when a writer uses the Bible in a dishonest or imbalanced way. They latch onto one verse above all else and do not "rightfully divide the word of truth."

A writer of Bible studies and devotionals should be, above all, mindful. Agendas and controversy often go hand-in-hand. One writer's honest examination of a Bible story is a reader's call to action. Or, if the writer is the one who has the agenda, then the writer will have to work hard to convince a possibly unconvinced audience. For safety's sake therefore, a writer should not stumble into controversy. She does not want to be unaware that she has written some off-the-cuff comment about Jews, blacks, whites, the poor, the rich, the bond, the free, Arabs, women, men, gays, abortions, etc, etc, etc. The writer who is unaware that the Bible passage she is exploring will cause controversy or anger is not up on her current events. She should therefore either be prepared to give an answer to her detractors or to simply avoid the dangerous shoals of an agenda.

Let us see what happens when controversy pops up in Bible studies. Let's use the topic of homosexuality. Some homosexual priests and theologians have said that the Bible is not against homosexuality. When the subject of Sodom's sin comes up, they say the sin was "inhospitality." They also say that the Biblical definition of homosexuality is "sex connected to idolatry." There may be a little truth in these assertions. But the majority of theologians believe that the Bible plainly states that the act of homosexuality is wrong. That does not mean that those who believe this should go about wildly talking about the evils of homosexuality. Remember your audience, and remember the feelings of people who may not wish to be slammed by some Bible-thumper when they are not prepared for it.

That said, I'm pretty easygoing about most stuff but I do kinda get annoyed when I hear

people making great leaps of thought that leave them to wrong conclusions. In this case, the great leap of thought that often occurs in gay evangelical circles. For instance, there is the Christian gay community's assertion that Jesus blessed the union between the centurion and his servant.

The gay christian movement are Bible believers who want to prove, by using the Bible, that God blesses homosexual relationships. I can understand this. If one is a true Bible believer, it must be definitely devastating to love God and yet to feel that God doesn't approve of one's beloved. So if I were gay and a Bible-believer I'd be trying to do what the Gay evangelical movement is doing: trying to prove that Jews and Christians throughout the ages have misunderstood the Bible. But I don't have an agenda to prove. My only agenda is sane exegesis. So whenever I hear gay Bible theology, I feel I'm being asked to believe a bunch of desperate crock.

Among this is: A) the sin of Sodom was really B) Jesus and the beloved disciple were lovers and C) Jonathan and David were lovers. It takes a lot of wishful thinking to prove that every reference to homosexuality in the Bible is really only about Baal worship.

The fact that Jesus' opponents -- the Pharisees and Judas-- didn't once hint that Jesus and the beloved disciple were getting it on does seem odd, since the Pharisees would surely have used that bit of information to hang Jesus with. Unless the gay evangelical movement wants us to believe that the Pharisees didn't see anything wrong with homosexuality. The beloved disciple is the only one who calls the beloved disciple the beloved disciple, and heck I'm Jesus' beloved disciple too.

About Jonathon and David. Tons of middle eastern poetry and figures of speech have this kind of praise of warrior-brothers "love." Gay Christians should check the war poetry of the time and realize that Israel is part of a regional culture. Their historical writing style and their poetry has similarities to other poems and warrior epics of that region. Plus if gay Christians are going to say that David was in love with Jonathan, why don't they go all the way and say that it looks that David's lust for Bathsheba shows he obviously was healed of his homosexuality later on in life? Or at least admit that gay folks can be attracted to folks of the other sex? David so wanted Bathsheba that he betrayed his good friend just for a night with her.

But moving past those examples: Let's get to the particular assertion that when Jesus healed the centurion's servant, he actively blessed a same-sex relationship. This interpretation begins with the interpretation of the word "pais" which, they argue, is a word everyone in the Greek world and Roman Empire would've known was the word for a same-sex partner. Know what? Paul's letters often use a lot of words that don't seem to show up elsewhere in other found archeological manuscripts. So, we really don't know if the word "pais" can mean anything other than a sex

partner. But, let's say that the gay theological church is right as far as that goes. One begins to wonder why one gospel writer (Luke 7:2) declares the Centurion's "servant" was dear to him -- "pais" to him but another (Matthew 8:5) called the servant a "servant" but doesn't mention the pais part. Although I'm still not really convinced the centurion was homosexual, I'm not deeply invested in him not being gay. So for argument's sake, I'll say, "Okay, let's assume the Centurion had a young lover who was also his servant."

The modern term "gay" is a construct not really known in the old world. When modern folks use the word, they mean a person who solely has same sex relationships with adults. By such a definition, Alexander the Great would not be "gay." Nor for that matter would Oscar Wilde. Back in the day, the person who only solely had relationships with a same sex adult was not common. Alexander the Great was greatly in love with his wife AND his adult male friend/lover. Oscar Wilde fell in love with youths and deeply loved his wife.

Pedophilia in the form of pederasty was fairly accepted back in the Roman Empire. Not homosexuality per se because it was considered unmanly if two adult men sexually loved each other. (Consider that the curse that befell the house of Oedipus began because King Laius simply would not give up his boy lover when the kid got older and Laius was in love with him, an unseemly thing to do he kidnaped and raped him. Everyone descended from Laius had love issues after that. Falling in love with a bull, a mom, not falling in love, falling in love with a son-in-law.) So yeah, certain kinds of homosexual relationships were okay....if a man had a young boy lover, that is. And if he had a homosexual relationship with a man, (Hercules for instance) he dang well had better have a wife. But for the most in the Greek and Roman empires homosexual relationships between two adult males were frowned upon. Only pedophilia was acceptable. So the assumption is that this Centurion had a pais, and no other wife because the emperor had put a ban on certain centurions having heterosexual marriages. And this particular pais was a mere servant and for some reasons not in any kind of superior position. That's a lot to swallow but let's swallow that just for the nonce.

The thing that gets me annoyed is that they say that Jesus blessed the homosexual relationship. Uh? Where did they see that? First of all, in Luke's version of the story the servant is dying and Jesus DIDN'T meet the Centurion personally. In Matthew's version, the servant is paralyzed, in pain but not dying and the Centurion DOES personally meet with Jesus. The question is: "Whose version is right?" If all the aforementioned sex partner stuff is true, why doesn't Matthew mention the whole "pais" business? Presumably because that kinda thing just wouldn't fly

with his readers. (Interesting, considering the fact that Matthew doesn't shy away from discussing some of the immoral women in Jesus' genealogy. Interesting also because this would challenge the gay theology ideal that the Pharisees may have seen nothing wrong with homosexuality.)

Luke however, mentions the "pais" bit. Is it because he probably thought his readers would understand the situation and not really care? But then, why does Luke not have Jesus meet the Centurion in person?

There are two people in the Bible whom Jesus healed whom Jesus didn't meet personally. One was the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman. The other was the Centurion. The daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman was not in town. The Centurion was. So why didn't Jesus go to meet this man of great faith? Luke tells us that when Jesus was "Not far from the house" the Centurion sent friends to tell him not to come. Hey, the man had great faith and Jesus wasn't far from the man's house. Yet, Jesus didn't go to the man's house to see him. At least not in Luke's version. Certainly should make any theologian, gay or otherwise, wonder why Jesus didn't personally walk into the house of someone who has so much faith.

The gay theologians try to have both sides of this situation by collapsing both versions of the incident. Either it's just a regular servant and the Centurion meets Jesus, or it's a pais and the Centurion does not meet Jesus.

If we're going to use a Bible verse to prove any kind of human agenda, we better know what we're doing. And we better not be slick about it.

Matthew had his agenda: to prove that Jesus was king and the one who would bring in Israel's kingdom. Luke had his agenda: To show that Jesus was the savior of all humans. Matthew was a disciple of Jesus. He walked with Jesus. Presumably he saw what was going on first hand. Luke, on the other hand, heard the story second-hand after research. Strangely, the Luke version feels a bit odd to me.

In Luke's version the Centurion is so aware of his "unworthiness" that he sends wave after wave of people to plead to Jesus for his dying friend. First he sent the elders of the synagogue, then he sent his friends. I wonder why the Gay movement doesn't examine the meaning of the word "unworthy" with as much determined hoopla as they examine the word "pais." They seem to assume the Centurion was just tossing off the word. But one can understand that if this servant was indeed the Centurion's pais, the Centurion would have been feeling very unworthy...and would definitely understand why Jesus would NOT want to come into his house. The rulers of the synagogue kept telling Jesus that the man was "worthy" because he had built them a synagogue...but only the

Centurion and Jesus knew what went on behind the walls of the Centurion's house. But what is really odd about Luke's version is that the conversation just doesn't work the way Luke has written it. In Matthew's version, the Centurion tells Jesus, "I am a man under authority..etc." In Luke's version, Luke has the Centurion telling this entire faith statement second hand. Did the Centurion say, "Tell Jesus I said, 'I am a man under authority. People listen me. I listen to my superiors. Etc.'" It just seems odd. Unless it was written in a note to Jesus from the Centurion."

But both stories have these things in common: A) The Centurion loved Israel and had built a synagogue. B) He was very loved by the people. C) He had a lot of faith in the God of Israel. D) Jesus praised the Centurion for his faith. So, if the Centurion was homosexual he had a love for God's people but not enough to actually comply with actually listening and obeying what God has ordered in God's law.

The gay Christian movement says that Jesus didn't rebuke the centurion. Jesus wasn't the kind of person to rebuke people second-hand. Besides, why rebuke a person who seems to be well aware of his sin? Moreover, Jesus came to the lost sheep of Israel. He doesn't drop the Law on people who live outside of the Law.

Whatever the situation, I try to walk the borderlands. I try to be fair. But I will challenge bad theology whenever I come up against it. And I will speak up against any kind of wrong interpretations or wrong conclusions I hear someone spouting. Hey, I'm still open to being convinced but so far none of the arguments have made any sense.

Again, I have said that if a verse in the Bible conflicts with a reader's life-style, the reader is faced with four choices.

(A) Believe that the Bible is the True Word of God and agree that the Biblical verse disagrees with her lifestyle but live unaffected by the Biblical prohibition.

(B) Believe that the Bible is the True Word of God and agree that the verse disagrees with her lifestyle and change her lifestyle.

(C) Believe that the Bible is the True Word of God but that the common interpretation of the Biblical verse prohibiting her lifestyle is the wrong interpretation and is being used by rigid judgmental people to make other people feel guilty.

(D) Believe that the Bible is not the Word of God at all but only a collection of sayings by wise but misguided people.

Tackling a controversial issue takes a great deal of bravery. And whatever side you take, be careful. But let us see how this business of agendas plays out in how the Sodom story is depicted

by “interested” parties. Many Bible stories are battlegrounds of interpretation. The story of Lot and the cities of the Plains is one of them.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah begins with a scene of the heavenly council. Whether it’s a small Bible verse as in the discussion of the creation of humanity, heavenly councils pop up several times in the Bible and the reader gets a glimpse of some discussion in heaven. As God visited Babel to see the tower humanity was building, so God planned an on-site visit to the Cities of the Plains because the "cry" against Sodom and Gomorrah had gone up to heaven. We don’t know who cried. Perhaps the “cry” was the collected prayers of good people who were victimized as they passed through town or maybe the earth itself cried out. Whatever it was, the reputation of Sodom and Gomorrah stunk to high heaven.

God, therefore, came down in human form and - while on his journey to Sodom - visited Abraham and tells him his intentions about examining Sodom. Abraham had family in Sodom. His nephew, Lot, chose the green pastures near Sodom and had settled in Sodom with his wife, his four daughters, and two sons-in-law, who were native to Sodom. Abraham knew all too well that Sodom was full of wickedness. But he is determined to haggle with God until he gets a promise that Lot will be saved.

So far the story of Sodom and Gomorrah can be used by a writer to discuss spiritual intervention such as intercessory prayer, or even something on God’s many human appearances before the birth of Christ. You may even want to turn the story into a discussion of spiritual bargains. After all, spiritual bargains pop up quite often in the Bible. But often we cannot avoid controversies. You might try your best to side-step the homosexual rape issue when suddenly you get a letter from a reader or a student with a raised hand saying you didn’t mention anything about homosexuality or another letter from an indignant teenager telling you that God is homophobic and hateful towards homosexuality. Someone might ask you, for instance, “Why do you want to prove that the Bible does not accept homosexuality?” What the questioner is really saying, “So you want to prove the Bible is against gays so you can pick on gay folks?” When agendas are attacked or sensed, emotions run rampant. You must therefore not make the mistake of answering or writing indiscreetly. It is not a bad idea to have all your friends read your article before you publish it. Have them tell you any and all of their objections. Ask them if you seem arrogant, prejudiced, biased, ignorant, etc? A good friend will tell you what sentences or phrases in your articles might be unclear. Jesus said, “be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” And I cannot help but repeat to you that tackling controversial issues requires a great deal of knowledge on your part.

Now then, the idea that the Bible does not forbid homosexuality is found in many churches. There are many Bible studies out there which deal with this issue. We can divide these groups into two mutually exclusive sides: those whose agendas are to prove that the Bible does not consider homosexuality a sin, and those who believe that the Bible considers homosexuality is a sin. I have included below a few of the arguments of the pro-homosexuality side along with some counter-arguments. There are many more. But this is to show you how necessary it is to be well studied on any topic you intend to tackle.

A Bible writer who believes that the Bible does not say homosexuality is a sin might say: "People who say the Bible are against homosexuality are picking and choosing verses and are not seeing the overall theme of the Bible which is the saving Grace of Jesus."

The Writer who does not believe in the Gay Biblical agenda will respond that the gay Bible evangelical also picks and chooses and does not use the Bible or the scripture as a whole either. They will point out that when it comes to interpretations of grace and faith, gay evangelicals say what they want to and neglect the passages that show that although God is gracious and Christians are free from the law, yet behavior is still important and Christians are told to flee sexual sins.

The writer with a Gay agenda may come back with, "Grace is God's unmerited favor towards us. It is God's mercy shown to His people. God's unmerited love towards us abolishes the notion of the Law. Through Jesus, the Law has been canceled for Christians and Christians can do anything they want including having homosexual relationships." (You will notice that this particular point uses Bible verses to sure up the point.)

The Biblical answer would probably be something like, "Jesus said he came to fulfill the law and that one jot or one tittle of the law will not pass. Jesus came to fulfill the law for our sake's. Jesus said to the Pharisees, these you should have done and not left the other undone. The law still exists for those who wish to be under it, except that it does not give life as Christ gives life. Does God change and allow some sins for Jews and not for Christians? God doesn't change and He is still the God of all people."

This might lead to Agenda Point three: Christ set us free that we might live a full life; therefore we should not be subjected to anything that makes us feel enslaved. A gay person should not be forced to live a chained life.

Which, in turn, might bring this Biblical Answer: Freedom does not mean the freedom to sin. Don't take descriptions of grace Col 2:14 out of the context of the entire epistles. Col 3:5 shows that even though we are under grace we can't go on sinning. Gal 3:24 and Gal 4:2-6 shows

that for those under Christ, the law was a guardian. Rom 7:6,7 tells us that we would know the meaning of sins if the law had not taught us; Galatians 5:18; Galatians 5:25; Galatians 5:16; Romans 8:1. As you can see, by this time you are involved in a controversial battle of the Bible verses. The next thing that is likely to occur is talk about the “actual” Greek meaning of Bible words.

This is where a lack of honesty might creep. There will be discussions about Old Testament practices, pagan deities of Canaan, temple prostitution. The pagan stories of Baal and Ishtar are all smoke and mirrors designed to show that the only kind of homosexuality in the Bible is the kind referred to in Sodom or Canaanite countries, temple prostitution. Again, it is well to remember that agendas and wounded hearts are often tightly bound. The person with a Bible agenda sincerely wants to heal his heart and the heart of others. If a Bible study writer says the Bible doesn't show any kind of “Good” homosexuality, the response might be that David and Jonathan, Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, Ruth and Naomi. The next gay argument might be: The sins of Sodom were pride, fullness of bread, abundance of idleness, disregarding the poor, haughtiness, committing abomination, worshiping Baal, but it wasn't homosexuality. They will say this although Philo and Josephus both plainly say that same-sex relationships were the primary problem with Sodom. Other early Jewish writers outside of the Bible and writers of other Middle Eastern countries also speak of Sodom as being characteristically about same-sex relationships. In addition, there are certain apocryphal books, such as the Testimony of Benjamin 9:1, Testament of Nephtali 3:4, 3 Maccabees 2:5, Jubilees 16:6

At this time, the supposed “real” meanings of certain Greek and Hebrew words will be brought forward. The meaning of Toevah for instance, or ZIMMAH. History will be rewritten. The argument will continue into linguistics, not cultural history. There will be talk of PHUSIKOS, PHUSIS, PHUSISY, ARSENOKOITAI, ARSENOKOITE, ARSANE, KOITE. The writer intent on clearing the air of the smokes and mirrors created by these agendas will show the meaning of the whole list of words, root words etc. The point of all this is that if you are going to enter into any kind of controversial area, study linguistics, history, culture, etc. Be prepared to be courageous enough to tell someone with an agenda that they are plainly not speaking the truth. Or avoid the subject entirely.

## Know the Difference Between a Symbol and Something Literal

**I**f a Biblical passage is obviously symbolic, do not take the passage literally. If the Biblical passage is meant to be taken literally, do not make it into a symbol.

The Bible says that when Lot and his family fled the sulfur-burned cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's wife looked back and turned into a pillar of salt. Many people have questioned this verse and tried to explain it. Some say that she actually, literally turned into a pillar of salt. Some say she was covered up with sulfuric salts. Some say she was radiated and burned and her remains were salt. Those who know ancient middle eastern slang, know that the phrase "to be turned to a pillar of salt" is a middle eastern slang which means something like our "petrified." (We use the word "petrified" to mean shocked or afraid. But it literally means "turned to stone.") In that case, Lot's wife might simply have died of fright. As a poet and writer, I much prefer the literal actual turning into salt business, but my faith does not fall or rise with this interpretation.

This is a story that is rarely discussed in Bible studies for younger children. The many problems involved in discussing it are the idea of a just God who simply does not forgive the Sodomites for their attempted rape of the angels. Many children are so indoctrinated with the idea of a loving God that they might not understand the idea of a relentlessly just God who would allow Mrs. Lot's to die because she looked backward. Others might fixate on the image of a woman turning into a pillar of salt. An older child might understand metaphors, and you could try explaining the meanings of English words like "petrified." If you believe that Lot's wife was actually turned into a pillar of salt, you might have be brave to say it in some circles. In other circles, you would be equally as brave to say that she merely died of a heart attack. This is one of those Biblical passages that can cause wars. One type of Christian will say that you lack faith in God's miraculous power; another will say you are a believer in fables. You might say that she was covered up with the debris that flew after the destruction. Or that the heat from the flaming city "dehydrated" or "desiccated" her. Or you might say that God is Creator and can turn human flesh into anything he wants. Or you might simply say that you don't know. You might even be brave and say that it is not clear from the passage that God killed Mrs. Lot. After all, it is possible that God knew the devastation would be so bad to look at that instead of punishing Mrs. Lot, he actually wanted to protect her from the horrendous site of her town being destroyed.

## Understand what images are signs, symbols and types and what signs aren't.

**T**he Bible is full of symbols, types, signs, and recurrent images. converts who lived “outside of God’s kingdom.”

Christians for the most part understand that the brass serpent, the cities of refuge, certain portions of Joseph’s life, Moses’ life and Samson’s life all point to Jesus. It’s all right, then to write that when the people said to Moses, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us?” that the verse was a foreshadowing of the fact that Jesus would be like Moses, who was also rejected by those He came to save. It is also quite fine if a Christians says that there are 30 or more aspects of Joseph’s life that represent Jesus, the rejected savior who rose from rejection by his friends to save them. And of course, a Christian might see Samson as a type of Jesus who destroyed his enemies in his death. But this would only fly in a Christian Bible study. Don’t try it in a Jewish Bible study unless you really feel you have to. Or you might offend a Jewish reader.

Also, do not go over board with micro-interpretations of allegories or symbols. The symbol of the garden, the vine, the vinedresser, the weeds, the wine-press, etc are all well-known Christian symbols. But don’t go overboard with symbols by trying to make every aspect of a symbol group match every point of theology. Don’t start saying things like “the cedars of Lebanon represents this sin or country” or any symbol which you aren’t entirely sure of.

In addition, allow that a symbol may not mean the same thing throughout Scripture. It has been said that “yeast” means “sin” in all Bible stories. Perhaps. Perhaps not. It might mean sin when we speak of the unleavened Passover bread but does it mean sin when it is mentioned in the symbolic Eucharistic communion wine of “new life”? Or does it mean “sin” when Jesus says, “the kingdom of God is like yeast which a woman took and put in dough until all the dough was leavened?”

One important thing to remember is to either make the entire sentence literal or symbolic. One cannot have both. Consider the phrase: “Those who sleep in their graves” Is this symbolic? Is this just a euphemism for death which says nothing more than that a person has died? Is it literal? Those who believe in soul-sleep say it shows that people do “sleep” and forget everything after they die until God “wakes” them. Then what does it mean when we hear of Abraham and others being “gathered” to their fathers? Especially since Abraham’s body was far away from the body of his

dead father? Is it both symbolic and literal? Many people who believe in soul-sleep often dismiss the rest of the phrase, the “in their graves” section. Those who believe in soul sleep don’t believe that people are sleeping in tombs and sepulchres. But shouldn’t they? After all, they say they want to acknowledge all aspects of God’s word. They will however tell you that “in the graves” is just symbolic. But such haphazard division of a Bible phrase is Scripture twisting.

Many sects have created strange philosophies because they chose to see something as symbolic but usually the problem is not so big. Sometimes not understanding a symbolic theme makes us miss a subtle truth. So the main point is to be insightful about symbols, types, analogies, to not go overboard and to not be dishonest to make a convenient spiritual point. Consider the theme of the unmarried woman and unredeemed who needs a kinsman redeemer. I’ve mentioned a little of this earlier.

Orpah, Tamar, and Ruth

Book of Ruth, chapter one plus Genesis 38

Many Bible love stories occur within the context of larger stories. This is also true about the conversion stories. Generally speaking, the old testament does not convert itself with the conversion of Gentiles. This is not to say that conversions do not occur. The Ninevites, for a time at least, turned towards Israel’s God as did Nebuchadnezzar. Although the prophets saw the Day when the Gentiles, the people who lived in darkness, “those who were not called My People” would see a Great Light, the conversion of an average gentile like Rahab, Naaman or Ruth was not written about by the historical writers of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, unless that conversion was connected to the safety of the nation of Israel.

The story of Ruth is both a conversion story and a love story. Ruth loves her mother-in-law, her mother-in-law’s nation, and her mother-in-law’s God. It’s a story that works on many levels: family love, the role of the convert to Israel, the bringing-in-of a Moabite into the law, the beginning of David’s dynasty, and the spiritual role of the redeemer-husband who symbolizes God. But it is primarily a story about Ruth.

Most Christians know the story of Ruth. While the judges were ruling in Israel, a famine occurred in Israel. The famine was so bad that a man from Bethlehem-Judah left Israel to live in Moab, taking his wife, Naomi, and his sons with him. While in Moab, these sons married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. (This marriage was forbidden by the Law of Moses (Deut 23:3 and Neh 13:1) which stated that a descendant of a Moabite will never be accepted into God’s people even

into the tenth generation. Legally speaking, David is probably not a true Israelite because of the constraint in the law against Moabites and their descendants. Certainly Ezra and Nehemiah would have had trouble accepting Obed, Ruth's son and David's ancestor. But holy circumventing of a written law is a motif this appears often in the Bible. It appears again in the book of Esther.) After Naomi and her family had lived in Moab for ten years, the father and his sons died. Only the women were left.

This presented a problem. Having nothing left for her in the land she had emigrated to, Naomi determined to return home. Her daughters-in-laws loved her but as widows any hope of prosperity, safety and a future life rested in staying with their homeland and finding new husbands. The time had parting had come and Naomi begged her daughters-in-law to leave her. They refused, but at last her pleas won the day with Orpah, who kissed her Naomi goodbye. Ruth, however, declared she would never leave Naomi, Naomi's nation, or Naomi's God.

Ruth is a wonderful character and many sermons have lauded her praises. But I will not speak of her. My concern is with Orpah who has been disparaged by many for returning home. I have heard preachers say that if she had truly known and loved Israel's God, she would never have gone back into a sinful heathenish place like Moab simply because she wanted a husband. But let us examine this.

During the time of the judges, there was enmity and continuous warfare between Israel and the Moabites. Naomi and these foreign widows were returning home with no money, property or man to protect them. Widowhood during Biblical times was not pleasant. Many divorced or widowed women were poverty-stricken and some turned to prostitution. Others had children who were sold into slavery. The Law of Moses sought to protect women by forbidding unfounded divorces. It also protected widows by commanding men to marry their brothers' widows in order that the women would have children who could retain their father's property. But Ruth was childless and the family property had probably been sold when they left Israel. The upshot was, Ruth and Orpah not only had poverty to look forward to but racial oppression. Therefore Ruth's decision to return to a place where she was likely to meet discrimination was brave indeed. But should Orpah be denigrated because she did not trust Providence enough to go to an unknown country where her people were hated? It's your decision to make. It's your Bible study after all.

All the blessings that fall upon Ruth's head come about from a combination of Providence, female intuition, obedience to the wisdom of her aged mother-in-law, and female wiles. Considering the Law of Moses, Naomi's age, and the historical treatment of widowed women the

outcome of Ruth's life is wondrous indeed. But once again, we should remind ourselves of how truly remarkable this outcome was.

Ruth, and Tamar are symbols of foreigners who need to be redeemed and they can be compared to the other foreigners/non-Israelites discussed in the Bible. These usually fall into six large categories:

- A) sojourner/converts living permanently in Israel --The widow of Sarepta in Sidon,;
- B)large groups – soldiers, countrymen, the discarded foreign wives of Israelite men;
- C)converts who are destined to leave the nation of Israel --Hagar, Ebed-Melech, Queen of Sheba;
- D) Kings, priests, sorcerers or other powerful people who were enemies of God or God's people – Haman, Balak;
- E)strangers living in their own homeland who encounter one of God's people and whose conversion status is unknown -- Judah's wife, the daughter of Shuah, Shechem, Orpah, Tamar;
- F) strangers living in their own homeland who encounter one of God's people and are converted --- The Ninevites, Ruth, Naaman, Nebuchadnezzar;
- G) Kings, priests or sorcerers who know the true God– Balaam, Melchizedek;
- H) Kings, priests, sorcerers or other powerful people who were indifferent to God or whose attitude to Him is unclear or unknown– Pharaoh's priests, the Chaldean wise men, Potiphar, Xerxes, Joseph's father-in-law.

This is by no means a complete list but I want us to consider the case of those possible

## Don't Try to Take the Supernatural Out of a Story

**M**iracles challenge our ideas of the way things work. We associate the supernatural with childhood and naiveté. And if we are to deal with the Bible and our audience, we have to face our suspicions and objections (or our reader's objections) upfront. Many people question the miracle of Jesus walking on the water. Others dislike the idea of God creating the world. Some people get annoyed when Christians say that the Bible is a supernatural Book that has been supernaturally preserved by God. The very idea that God could actually be alive and working in history and in everyone's life is something others find offensive. But what are we to do with those prophecies, those miracles, those talking donkeys and muttering snakes? Whatever your belief in the supernatural or man's ability to engage in the miraculous, it is important to be aware of this bias, which is not as modern as many people think.

The incidents in Jesus' life are found in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In reading the stories about Jesus' life, you will encounter many supernatural occurrences. Those who dislike the supernatural will find a way to make even the greatest miracle seem "only natural." We must face a question: Were these witnesses who wrote the gospels and the book of Acts people as smart as we are?

Modern people and many children often think that perhaps people in other countries and people in other time are not as technological or as intelligent as modern people. American kids are especially provincial in this respect. They often believe that people of other lands and other times are stupid "primitives" who latch onto a supernatural explanation for every occurrence. Part of this is ignorance; they simply do not know that miracles can and have happened. Part of it is a kind of intellectual indoctrination against a belief in miracles. Part of this is a distrust of other people; we simply do not respect other people's intelligence enough to believe anything other folks say. And part of this is the natural mind's inability to believe what it cannot see or has not seen with its own eyes. Whatever your belief in the supernatural or man's ability to engage in the miraculous, it is important to be aware of this bias in the modern mind.

A writer who believes that all the miracles in the Bible actually happened certainly has a great God who is unlimited. At the same time, such a writer will have to contend with an audience which might not believe in the kind of God she believes in. On the other hand, a writer who believes that the miracles in the Bible are only fairytales will have to deal with an audience made up of

people who believe in miracles and will have to respect their beliefs. She also will have to resist the urge to be patronizing to those of us who believe. The most important thing she will have to do, however, is to make sure her “explanation” for the miracles is a solid one. It’s easy to dismiss a miracle in such a way that one feels satisfied with one’s explanation, but the explanation might not pass muster for those who know their Bibles or Bible history. Sometimes these explanations don’t even pass the judgment of common sense. This is seen often in the examination of the aftereffects of miracles.

Many writers and ministers who do not believe in miracles have said that the miracle of the loaves and fishes was not a miracle of power but one of love. (Luke 9, John 6) They say when Jesus blessed the little boy’s lunch, the crowd was so touched that everyone shared their own lunches. And suddenly hidden food started appearing out of everywhere. People who take this tack often neglect the statement that most of these people had been miraculously healed and had been following him for several days. There is also the aftermath of the miracle. The crowds wanted to make Him a king. If this were merely a lesson in sharing, certainly the disciples would not have been amazed. Human nature is surprising but not jaw-dropping. A writer who uses this “primitive people are ignorant” tack should be aware of the prejudice behind her mind set before she sets pen to paper. The writer should also be aware that this kind of miracle also happens fairly frequently and is documented in many places where missionaries or persecuted Christians have been without food.

The debunkers of the miracle of walking on the water often say the disciples were so freaked by the night that they "thought" Jesus was walking on the water when he was really walking out on a stretch of land. But surely fishermen who have worked on the water all their life aren’t about to be communally freaked out or mistaken? In this case, the debunked has made several errors: they have forgotten that these are fishermen who knew where landfall was, that the fishermen are humans and humans have always been cynical, that Peter also walked on the water. This is a case of the aftermath of a miracle proving the miracle. Peter was in the middle of the lake when he started out towards Jesus and began to sink. If we conveniently neglect to mention this, then we can create a Bible study in which Jesus and Peter conveniently stood on bits and pieces of land at the opportune time.

There will always be a problem when God, imagination and science are all mixed up together. Have you heard about the Jefferson Bible? Thomas Jefferson believed in God. But he did not believe in miracles. In fact, he thought that all the supernatural incidents and miracles in the

Bible made the Bible ridiculous. Therefore, in his commonsensical way, he created a "better" Bible in which anything supernatural was removed. The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels Compiled by Thomas Jefferson. He removed a lot. No more Jesus walking on water. No more audible revelations from God. All that was left in Jefferson's Bible were good philosophy.

There are two problems with Jefferson's Bible. The first problem is that the Bible is not just another manual on how to live an ethical life. The Bible is about the Spirit of God which enables people to live a good life. Christianity tells us that goodness is hard to achieve without God's supernatural help. Can you imagine trying to obey everything Jesus told us in the Sermon on the mount without God's Holy Spirit helping us? Can you imagine trying to love your neighbor as yourself without knowing that God's own Spirit would work with you? Human goodness without God's supernatural power and love is impossible.

But there was something else wrong with the Jefferson Bible: Jefferson's lack of imagination. When I say "imagination", I don't mean merely accepting the story as an imaginative but symbolic and meaningful myth. I mean really accepting that such miracles as Eve being made from a rib really could happen. Recently, I saw a "spiritual" author on a talk show. He made a parting swipe at people who were unimaginative enough to believe in the miracle of the fishes and Jesus walking on the water. I wish he had been close by so I could tell him about the countless stories which missionaries have related, stories about food being miraculously supplied. But let's look at a few miraculous events in the Bible which many, including Jefferson, found hard to swallow. In the past these miracles might have seemed downright impossible. But now, with modern science, they don't seem impossible at all.

Let's start with that rib business. According to Moses' account in Genesis, God caused a deep sleep to come upon Adam and then he made Eve from a rib taken from Adam's body. Many Christians have been laughed at for believing this story. But now this story doesn't seem far-fetched. Lately, humans have begun cloning animals. In the process of cloning, a cell is taken from one animal. That cell is then processed and later becomes a duplicate of the first animal. The Eve story of course is greater than cloning. Eve was not a duplicate of Adam. And she was female with XX pair of Chromosome while Adam was male and had XY chromosomes. God is the creator of the human race and as such he knows more about genetic manipulation and creation than even the most honored human geneticist. What humans are now beginning to discover, what humans may never succeed in achieving - the cloning of a human being - God did eons ago.

But what about all those prophecies Jefferson considered too weird and unbelievable? Wars in the sky? That is now possible. In the book of Revelations, we read that all the eyes of the world looked on the bodies of the two prophets in the street of Jerusalem. We also read in Revelations that the coming world leader would force everyone, everywhere --slave or free, rich or poor-- to wear a mark when buying or selling. In Jefferson's time, all this would not have been considered possible. But in our time, we know about television and the bio-chip. We know that these once seemingly impossible depictions could very well happen.

As a child, I remember coming across this very same passage about the mark. The idea of a universal mark didn't bother me. What bothered me was the phrase: "slave or free." It seemed to me that John the Revealer, the writer of the Revelation was wrong when he said slaves would have to have this mark. After all, as far as I knew, slavery was over with. No slave existed on the earth. I attempted to work my way through the passage. Maybe John meant people who were spiritually enslaved to sin. Maybe he meant people whose bosses treated them like slave. But then news programs began to show us that slavery still existed in certain parts of African and the Middle East. The Bible is right.

As Christians, we are called to trust God's word. Jude tells us in his book to hold to the faith of our fathers. Sometimes this is hard to do because our minds can't make sense of certain issues. The world, our eyes and our minds tell us one thing, but the Bible says another. From my experience, I can only say that we should not be like Jefferson who cut and pasted out a Bible that satisfied his mind. When we pick and choose what to believe in the Bible, we are showing that we trust our opinions more than we trust God. God's truth is true always, even if, for a time, we are too scientific, too unimaginative or too uniformed to believe it.

## **Private Interpretations or Bad Reading Comprehension Skills Cause Faulty**

### **Bible studies**

**T**his is one of the toughest rules to follow because this rule, more than ever, has the possibility of hurting the feelings of a writer. We all like to believe that we are sufficient. We like trusting our knowledge. But unfortunately sad but true - many people in the western world do not read well. Others read well but don't know the basics of reading comprehension; they read by guesswork and don't follow the Bible author's line of thought. Plainly said, a writer must know how to read and follow a Bible author's often rambling digressions. No, I'm not saying that Paul and the other Bible author's ramble. At least not in a bad sense. Remember the rules of writing and discourse have changed over the past centuries. Back in the old days, no one insisted on sticking to the point. In fact, a writer was considered quite skillful if they had something of a conversational writing style. Digressions, asides, convolutions were a regular standard part of writing. Their listeners and readers knew how to follow a line of thinking through all the various emotional, personal, paths a writer might take. This means that many Bible passages simply cannot be taken out of context. If you're skilled at listening to a digressing rambling speaker, you know how to keep silent and hold your opinion until the entire speech is finished. Many of the well-established Christian cults were created, not because someone read the original Greek, but because some self-reliant solitary person simply misread, mistranslated and misunderstood the Bible or the King James Version of the Bible. They studied only a tiny section of an entire passage or decided on some private interpretation of a particular text. Trusting one's self too much is dangerous. And it certainly helps to have some good resources or a few knowledgeable friends check out one's opinion.

The Book of Mormon, for instance, was supposedly translated by 18th century Americans but its word choices and styles are distinctly Shakespearean, as if the "translators" copied from King James. It even uses the word 'oxen' which was a KJV word meaning a castrated cow, but castrated cows were unheard of in the Americas, as were all large domestic animals. This is one of the reasons why the Mayan's who were so good at math and who understood the concept of "zero" did not invent the wheel. Aside from the buffalo, the western hemisphere was devoid of animals who could be used as beasts of burden.

No text in the Bible is of any private interpretation. Note Paul's dramatic vision on the road

to Damascus. See how Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, describes the vision as it occurs. Then he later describes this same vision twice as Paul relates it to different people. Paul wasn't satisfied to trust only to the vision or any new insights given to him. He asked the elders of the church at that time Peter, James and the others if he was theologically right.

Reading something out of context can also mean forgetting the constraints and culture of the time and interposing one's own cultural restraints on a story. There is another kind of assuming which Jesus called "straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel." In this particular kind of misreading, mental and intellectual leaps and suppositions are made because the reader does not know the rest of the Bible, does not use the "precept upon precept" method, or is determined to put a meaning into a text which doesn't belong there.

Consider the phrase, "thorn in the flesh." Among Christians, this has come to mean a kind of physical suffering which one must endure because God has given the suffering as a blessing. The thorn in the flesh is closely related to the concept of "a cross to bear." These phrases are often used in many Christian writings. And the would-be devotionalist should be aware that these phrases have caused great comfort to some, great distress to others, and annoyance to many.

How did this come about? In one of his epistles, (2 Cor 12:17) Paul writes that because he had an abundance of visions, he was burdened by a "thorn in the flesh," a messenger of Satan sent to buffet him so that he might not be exalted because of the visions. Paul recounts that he asked God to remove the thorn but God said, "My grace is sufficient for you." This is all Paul said. Assumptions and suppositions have been made. Although Paul uses a phrase that was elsewhere used in the Bible ( Numbers 33:55, Judges 2:3) to describe persecution caused by demonic activity (something like our phrase "a pain in the neck" but much more deadly) many Christians gloss over the phrase, "a messenger of Satan" and create a situation in which God and Satan are working together to keep Paul's pride down. Paul says that the Satanic messenger was sent to prevent him from being exalted in his visions. But he does not state that exaltation was a bad thing. Many Christians, who have not had a multitude of visions, often refer to their illnesses as their thorns in the flesh. Why? Their situation barely resembles Paul's, but the nature of suffering is that it seeks an answer and therefore people will define their illnesses as a thorn or as their "cross to bear." The Bible Study writer who aims to destroy long-standing traditions such as this is going to have a long and controversial row to hoe.

The New Testament phrase "carrying one's cross" can be modernized to mean "carrying one's gallows" or "carrying one's electric chair." In the Bible it is never used to describe an illness,

but is something a believer willfully picks up in order to crucify the flesh, the affections, and the world to himself. Those who believe that Paul had a thorn in the flesh or a cross to bear often strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. They even go so far as to describe Paul's long-term illness that God would not cure by saying he had bad eyes, was a homosexual, or had some kind of disgusting health issues. Why?

In one of Paul's letters, (Gal 6:11) he writes, "look what large letters I write when I write with my own hand." The problem here is with the words "large letters." The reader in English should be aware that there are two possible meanings: Paul could mean large handwriting or a missive that takes many pages. Considering the forged letter the Thessalonians had received stating that the world had ended, it might be a good idea for Paul to remind people of how big his handwriting is. But...considering (also) that when a person dictates a letter he is often less chatty than when he actually writes it himself, the phrase could also refer to the length of the letter. However, this small gnat has created the camel of Paul's supposed blindness. This assumption comes about for many reasons. The first is that English Bible readers are assuming that "large letters" refers to Paul's handwriting. A study of the Greek will show that the word he used for large referred to the quantity of the words and not the size of the handwriting. But those who believe that Paul had eye problems will turn to another phrase in which Paul states that when he had first met the Galatians, he was sick and "if it were possible, the believers would have given him their very eyes."

Forgetting that the phrase could be a slang term which might mean something near to our slang term "she would give her right arm for me," those who have swallowed the camel of Paul's long-term sickness say that Paul says he was sick. They forget that he said he was sick "at first." (Gal 4:13) And they neglect to compare the historical record of the Book of Acts with the Galatian epistle. If they did some comparison, they would have noticed that the Book of Acts states that Paul was stoned and left for dead in one town and had to flee to Derbe, Lystra and Galatia (Acts 14) the next day. After such a harrowing experience, no doubt Paul was in bad shape. The pain would be all over his body, not just his eyes. The same kind of suppositions and lack of common sense reading occur in Bible studies about many Bible passages that deal with illnesses. Paul tells Timothy to stop drinking the water when he was at a certain place but to drink wine instead because of his bad stomach. This is taken to mean that Timothy had a lifetime of stomach troubles. It seems to me that Timothy seemed to be susceptible to a kind of Mediterranean Montezuma's revenge, bad luck for a missionary but not a disease per se. Later Paul writes in one letter that he

left his friend sick at Miletum. Again, those who wish to swallow a camel called “cross to bear” will forget that this same friend turns up later in another book, perfectly healthy.

All this is to say that a Bible Writer must know the mindset and needs of her audience. A devotional for sick people might not want to challenge people on their use of the “cross to bear” or the “thorns in the flesh” metaphors. This is an ethical moment which is up to you the write. You can choose to use the debateable meaning of these phrases because of the emotional attachment many suffering people have towards these phrases. This would be the more expedient and safer way to go. Or you can choose to be honest and invite controversy or bring pain to those who don’t want to know a truth. It’s up to you to decide whether the truth you will say will set people free or will make them angry with you.

## **Remember that Some Words, Names or Slang Can Have Many Different Meanings and Different Translations of These Words Can Affect Interpretation**

**T**he Hebrew word “ruach” can mean “wind,” “spirit,” or “breath.” When a translator sees “ruach,” he has to decide which word best translates its meaning. For instance, Genesis 1, declares, “And the ruach of God moved over the waters.” Is Moses describing the wind, God’s spirit, or God’s breath? This is not a problem that is peculiar to Hebrew. No doubt, the English word “spirit” creates a similar problem with foreign translators.

The name “Adam” means “man,” “soil” and “red.” As one looks closer, one can see how these names are related. The first man came from the soil and his skin was colored red like the soil. Translators can choose to translate Adam as a personal name or as a generic term for humanity.

Slang and idioms are even harder to translate. When Jesus' mother told him to do something about the wine shortage at a wedding reception, he answered her with an idiom. The King James translates his answer as, "Woman, what do I have to do with you?" This is a literal translation. But the actual meaning of the very friendly phrase is something like, "Woman, what is that to you and me?" A speaker of Aramaic with a knowledge of Hebrew words and speaking styles would readily understand that Jesus was being friendly to his mother and agreeing to do whatever she asked, but the view of a modern Christian depends on the translation read. Some wonderful sermons have been written and spoken about why Jesus harshly dismissed his mother and other equally wonderful sermons have been written about the opposite - about Jesus being friendly to his mother. No doubt God uses all these sermons, but a speaker of Aramaic and a student of Middle Eastern linguistics would know what Jesus actually said and actually meant.

To better comprehend how misunderstandings can occur, let’s consider how a non-English speaker four hundred years in the future might react to the question, "What's up?"

He might assume the speaker is asking, "What is up?" Or he might think the speaker is asking the meaning of the word ‘up.’ Or he might translate it rightly as "What is happening?" The translated meaning will depend on the skill, education, and insights of the translator. Translating is both a skill and an art. In addition, all languages have words which have more than one meaning. A translator often has to make an educated choice. That choice can change the outcome and meaning of a Bible story. Different translations can cause differing interpretations. Sometimes a translator’s

choice of a single word, yoked together with ignorance of Biblical Culture or human prejudices, can cause differing interpretations.

One small example occurs in Genesis 21:9,10. The KJV states that Sarah saw Ishmael mocking Isaac. Some translations of the KJV show the alternate meaning in the margin: “playing with.” Newer versions simply state: Sarah saw Ishmael playing. The question then is, “What exactly was Ishmael doing with Isaac?” Most Christians have used the KJV version to show what they consider to be Ishmael’s bad disposition. They say he was mocking Isaac. But most Bible’s and the KJV’s marginalized meaning seem to show that Ishmael was simply involved in brotherly play with his half-brother. This is what offended the slave owner, Sarah, so much. She did not want her son – who was fated to be the head of a great people– to be even remotely connected to the son of a slave. She does not say, “Cast them out because Ishmael is hurting Isaac.” She says quite clearly, “Cast them out because they are slaves and I don’t want my son and that son of a slave to be equal heirs.” Yet, because of the KJV translators’ choice the personality of Ishmael has been maligned. See what a simple word choice can do?

Another example occurs in the book of Judges where we read about Jephthah, one of Israel's Deliver-Judges. Jephthah had a daughter whom he loved dearly. (Judges 11:30) Having a particularly bad time in a battle, he told God that if God allowed him to win the battle, he would sacrifice to God the first living thing that came out of the door to meet him. He won the battle. But unfortunately, when he returned home, the first living thing to run out to meet him was his beloved daughter. (We are never told this daughter’s name.) To say the obvious, Jephthah was distraught. But he had made a vow to God and keep it he must. He sacrifices his daughter. But what exactly does this sacrifice entail? Your answer depends on your translation. Or rather, on the choice your translators made.

The writer of Judges tells us that Jephthah's daughter cries for her lost virginity and for her childlessness then goes to her fate. He ends his history by saying that once a year the women of Jerusalem went up to mourn Jephthah's daughter. Remember our discussion of the story of Joseph and Potiphar? Remember that I pointed out how different the English and French translations are? In the English Bibles, Potiphar is a “chamberlain.” In the Bibles of other cultures, he is a “eunuch.” Both can mean the same thing but when an English-speaker hears chamberlain she doesn’t think of eunuchs. Consider also the meaning of the word “affliction.” In Shakespearean times it meant “attacked.” Now, its meaning is something more like “sickness.”

In Jephthah’s story, the mystery concerns the word "mourn." Many English translations

have notes in the margin of the Bible explaining alternate meaning of translated words. In the case of Jephthah's daughter, the word "to mourn for" also means "to comfort" and to "commiserate with." If the KJV translators had chosen to translate the word as "comfort" instead of as "mourn" our entire idea of the story would be different. You now have a choice. You can accept the translation as it is found because you believe Jephthah's daughter was sacrificed or you can decide to do some research as to what exactly is the meaning of "sacrifice?"

Did Jephthah actually kill his daughter? Even though God-fearing Jewish people at that time were forbidden to practice human sacrifice? The evil neighboring nations sacrificed their children, but the Hebrews were not supposed to. If one chooses to believe he killed his daughter as the "sacrifice" then one has a dead sacrifice and someone who has broken the law by doing what he considered right in his heart. It's up to you to decide.

Other Bible writers never mention Jephthah's daughter. If she had been killed, maybe a song would have been created for her and she would be given a name among the heroes. All we have are the women of Jerusalem going up yearly to "mourn" for her virginity. If a woman died childless, she was considered cursed. So, was she grieving for her life? Or was she a kind of living sacrifice - St Paul uses the phrase, "a living sacrifice"- whom the daughters of Jerusalem went up to visit every year? The thing to remember is that the translators could have simply chosen to use another word and the meaning of the entire story would have changed.

Here is another example. Remember the phrase, "The Love of Money is the root of all evil." (1 Ti 6:10) The Greek word *hubergrubion* means "covetousness" and is made up of two root words which mean "love of" and "money." Placed together, these two words mean "covetousness." The KJV translators, however, broke down the word into its technical meaning and translated it by its components: "the love of money." Hence, "covetousness" becomes quite literally "the love of money." A better translation would read "Covetousness is the root of all evil." Not convinced? Think what would happen if someone translated strawberry as "berries of straw" or if the word "wholesale" were broken down into "whole" and "sale."

Other examples include modern people understanding the angel's phrase "there shall be time no longer" as meaning "time will no longer exist." The phrase actually means, "there shall be no more delay because the prophecy is about to come true." This misunderstanding is based on not knowing Elizabethan English. Consider how many people think "world without end" means "the world won't end" when it really means "forever." Another kind of misreading occurs when someone simply ignores what is written and assumes something else is meant. Consider Paul's

thorn in the flesh, which Paul defines as “the messenger of Satan to buffet me.” Misreadings, bad translations, human sin and the need to excuse the church’s lack of faith has led to a belief that Paul had a “thorn in the flesh” which could not be healed. But Paul doesn’t say that his thorn in the flesh was a sickness. He said it was a messenger of Satan, and the word translated “messenger” is always translated as angel or messenger in the Bible...except in this instance. Another kind of troublesome language problem comes because people are nitpickers and want to discredit the Bible. Someone might say for instance, “Why does the Bible say that Jael is the greatest above women? (Judges 5:24) I thought Mary was the greatest among women? See, the Bible is contradicting itself.” No, the Bible isn’t. As Bullinger, the great Bible scholar tells us, There is a difference between being greatest among and being greatest above. Jael is the greatest and most blessed above women because she preserved the nation of Israel when the Phillistines had begun stealing the Israelite women when the women went up to draw water. If Jael had not existed, Israel’s descendants would have been contaminated. The rest of the Bible, the Bible itself, and even Mary might not have existed.

It seems obvious to say that a person’s idea about a word’s meaning can affect their understanding of a Bible verse. That should seem obvious, but sadly most people never question their understanding of certain words and phrases. For instance, the word “salvation” can mean “deliverance, wholeness, freedom from sin, freedom from hell, freedom from disease, or healing.” If a person thinks that salvation only refers to saving a person from hell, they won’t understand that a verse that mentions salvation also refers to healing. The same can be said of the word “gospel.” People who think the gospel means deliverance from hell will not see anything but that meaning when they read the word in the Bible. Other words or phrases that need to be clarified are, “the kingdom of God,” “everlasting life,” and “eternal life.” A person who thinks these phrases all refer to a life in heaven after she has physically died, will not understand the verse in the same way that a person who believes that “The Kingdom of God is within you” or that “we have the life of God within us now.”

The last problem with language belongs in the “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing” category. These are folks who like a little mystery or who know a little and don’t know enough to understand that the little they know is very little indeed. Professor Harnack of the higher critics was one of these. He said that the Book of Hebrews was not written by Paul and was written by someone else, possibly a woman. Bullwinger states, that Harnack didn’t see that the thoughts and slangs are Hebrew but the slangs had been put into the Greek language.” Others have said that the

book has a feminine sensibility therefore a woman should have written it. Some also say that Hebrews is so theological and because the writing is stylistically different from other writings of Paul that Apollos might have written it. But, in my own opinion, this is the only letter where Paul writes to his own people using his rabbinical style of teaching. Of course he wouldn't write to a church of Gentile believers or a congregation of mixed believers in this way. Some writers have even gone so far as to say that "me" in verse 32 refers to feminine authorship but they don't see that the verb "to tell" is a participle and is a Greek masculine.

For the most part, these linguistic glitches do not make or break Bible stories and if you want to do linguistic Bible studies, you are free to do so. Most Christians like learning something new and are open-minded. This kind of Bible study is not as controversial as others. But know your audience.

A writer must also be aware of vocabulary and semantics. Similarities, differences, close-calls, counterfeits and reflections tend to creep in. Often assumptions are made by both reader and writer. A reader or writer might read a Bible phrase such as "dying to self," and might assume a meaning the Bible writer did not intend.

Many major religions share some of the same tenets. C. S. Lewis calls this the "Tao of religion." For instance, from the beginning of time, it had been considered wrong to murder (except in war) to sleep with another person's spouse (again, except in war) and lying is almost universally frowned upon. But other aspects of spirituality also seem similar, when they are –when examined– quite dissimilar. The modern Bible Study writer, in a need to seem ecumenical or in a bow to political correctness, might be tempted to see similarities between religions... similarities that just aren't there.

I was at a birthday party at the house of a Moroccan friend. Accompanying me was a female friend of mine, a New Ager. At some point during the celebration, the conversation got around to politics and to how narrow-minded fundamentalist Christians were. My friend stated, "Those right wing Christians believe that only they go to heaven. They don't realize that Allah (the God of Islam) and Yahweh (The Judeo-Christian God) are alike." I suspected she felt they would be pleased to see how open-minded she was. After all, hadn't she compared their God to the Christian God in a sweeping all-accepting way? She got several cold stares. Obviously, she had offended them with this "accepting stance" of hers. To the gathered group, the overly gracious Yahweh was nothing like the unapproachable relentless Allah. Allah has many names but none of them is "Love." Although the Christian God is just, he also continually states that He is love. My friend had

blasphemed by saying something so uninformed. The fact is that all religions, all gods and all heavens are not the same. Even the definition of humans are different. In the Christian world view, humans are divided into three groups: Jews who are God's special people genetically; Gentiles, which is defined as people with no knowledge of Yahweh; and Christians, who are "a new creation," "a peculiar people," and "sons of God" who have God's power residing in them and who are entirely a new and different kind of creature. Furthermore divisions among Christians are not made in the normal way. According to Paul, "in Christ, there is no male or female, Jew or non-Jew." Paul pretty much divides Christians into those whose minds are on God and those whose minds are on earthly matters. Other religions divide humans differently: by caste, by sin, by sex. Vocabulary, culture, and history must always be kept in mind.

Even among Christians, there are differing opinions about life, the hereafter, Heaven, hell, the last judgment, spirits, and most everything else. Here are a few concepts – we'll call these the "close-but-dissimilar" categories– that a writer should use great care in discussing.

#### *Incarnate God:*

Many spiritual writers will use a phrase such as "God within" and assume all their readers know what they mean. But let's examine this: The Christian believes in a three-personed God. They believe that there is one all-powerful God who lives above and outside His creation. This aspect of God is called The Father. Christians also believe in another aspect of God, called the Holy Spirit, is God "within" or God as He works inside humans. And the last is the concept of God in a human life, God who incarnated and lived on the earth as Jesus of Nazareth. Depending on one's religion or modern mindset, any of these aspects of God could be meant. Polytheists, Pantheists, or Panentheists believe in something like the Holy Spirit. Devout Muslims believe in God above all things, untainted and untouched by human sins. Hindus believe in many gods who have some share of the universe. But these gods are often limited in their reach. So then, the writer must be careful to understand what the phrase "God within" might mean to himself or to his reader: God in man? Incarnation? Evolving into godhead? The idea of an incarnation occurs in many religions. But once again, the differences outweigh the similarities. In Hinduism for instance, the gods also incarnate. But these incarnations occur in order that the gods may pursue evil-doers, not to save them. In Christianity, God incarnates specifically to save the lost. Jesus said he did not come to the perfect but to those who are un-whole. So although Buddhism shares the same notion of man and godhood, Buddhism is about a mere man evolving into godhood, not about God coming down to live as a

perfect man.

The evangelical insistence that there is only one way to God would be understood by Muslims who also believe in only one way. But religions such as Hinduism (which through its history learned to absorb many gods) and such philosophies as the New Age movement would consider Christianity narrow-minded. The Bible declares that all spirituality and supernatural occurrences are not from God. Someone who is considered a prophet in another religion would be termed by the Bible a “false prophet.” A Hindu might accept Jesus Christ as the divine Guru and avatar of Hindu tradition or that He is the living personification of the Ganges, the river that frees souls from the wheel of reincarnation by ultimate forgiveness and freedom from karma. But polytheists and animists might consider it dangerous and unholy to slight minor gods.

*Death: Is it a natural part of life?*

For the Hindu, death is part of the process of living; one evolves towards goodness through death. The Christian idea is that death is a curse and utterly unnatural. Strangely, a good Hindu cannot defile himself by touching death, whereas the Christian preparation towards death is less scornful and fearful.

*Dying to Self: Stoicism? Self-denial? Love of self? Taking up one's cross?*

An uninformed Christian writer might say that both Christians and Buddhists share the concepts of “Dying to self.” True? Not really. Christians are told that except a grain of wheat fall to the ground and die it cannot bear fruit. This is connected to the triumphant death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. The concept of Good Friday implies that something horrible gave birth to new life for all. But both concepts are not similar at all. Christians believe that goodness cannot be attained without Christ. They do not believe a human can evolve into goodness. For Christians, Goodness, strength, wisdom, and all the other virtues are gifts given by God who works within to help. Christians are told to “take up their cross” and to “crucify the world to themselves.” Christianity is not a stoical religion because it considers life joyous. Nor is it like Hinduism which considers everything “maya” or illusion. In Christianity, the believer turns away from the world because the world as we know it is dead or passing away, not because the Christian hates the world. Often in Christianity when an apostle or prophet speaks of someone who is “dead,” the meaning is not someone whose soul is separated from his body, but someone whose soul is separated from God.

*Goodness: What is goodness and what is the human attitude toward it?*

The offense of the Christian religion – and it is a religion that is offensive in many ways– is that it declares that humans hate goodness. Or if they like goodness, they only like Good when it serves their purpose. The Christian believes that if the typical human were to get his hands on God, he would kill Him.

*Heaven: What is meant by heaven? Is it Now? Then? Now and then? Nothing? Everything? Human? Transcendent? Peopled?*

The Christian's idea of the kingdom of heaven is a tricky one. There is the heaven to come, but there is also a kind of heaven-within-you kind of spiritual attainment which the violent take by force with their childlike faith. Whether discussing the kingdom of God within or the coming kingdom of God, Christians don't believe people can attain to heaven on their own. The religion hardly trusts humans to behave properly.

For Hindus, heaven is different. In Hinduism, reincarnation is part of the karmic wheel. It is not a ladder as Americans --who are progressivists -- tend to believe. In Hinduism, people rarely progress through karma because one sin or another will pull them back down. For a devout Hindu, freedom means being free from the karmic wheel. This could happen if they happen to die in one of the holy rivers, the Ganges for instance which seems to be a symbol of gracious forgiveness. So a devout Hindu's idea of heaven would be dissolving into a nirvana of nothingness. In Buddhism nirvana is not the attainment of heaven with one's soul intact but a melting into nothingness and truly losing all aspects of the individual. Total annihilation. The Christian idea of a heavenly afterlife is of a city where all (men and women) believers will "become like God, because they will see Him as He is." In Islam, a man gets seven wives (which may be good for my husband, let's say, but not for women) And no devout Muslim would ever think that humans could become like God.

*Life: Fate? Determinism? Destiny? How much control does God have? How much control does God give to humans?*

Only a Christian idealist would say, "I can't believe in a good God who allows sickness." The idea that God owes His people a good life would be laughable to those whose god tend to be fatalistic or uncaring about their small lives. Allah, for instance, has not promised his people some

of the joys Christians or American-born Muslims might expect. Nor did Allah ever say he was “love.”

*One's neighbor.*

Some religions, such as Buddhism, teach their adherents to love all men because we are all part of The Other. Other religions demand that we love only those within our religion. Christianity teaches that we should love our neighbor and then challenges its believers to understand that one is to become a neighbor to all people by showing love to them. Other religions have strict caste systems describing how much love and respect one should show –or not show– to people who are the “Other.”

*The Body*

The official Biblical Christian view is that "Our bodies are the temple of God's holy spirit." The body is therefore holy and not to be defiled. Paradoxically,

*Prayer*

In the Bible, there are many ways to pray. Jesus tells us for instance that hypocrites like to make long prayers in public so they can be heard of men. Many of us have been in church services where we hear people make long prayers...and the person doesn't seem to know God. In fact, the prayers often talk to God as if God doesn't know them. But the prayer sounds so holy and so refined and so good. Jesus told us that when we pray we must speak to the mountain (the problem, the sickness, etc) and order it to leave. But most of the time when we pray we ask God to move the mountain. Jesus told us not to make it a habit of using repetitions when we prayer. But some people in some denominations pray by repeating the same thing over and over again. St Paul said that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man, yet sometimes prayers are made to intermediaries asking those intermediaries to ask God to do something for us. I say all this because one Christian might mean one thing when he uses the word “prayer” and another will understand it in another way.

*Evil: Does it exist? How much power does it have? Is evil “good” for us?*

This is another concept that a writer needs to examine in order to write clearly. The Bible speaks of three basic evils from which all other evils stem: the world, the human heart, the devil. Many religions and denominations have different attitudes towards all these evils and a writer

should be able to assess not only what her idea of evil is but what her audience might think of a particular Bible passage.

*Prophets, teachers, false prophets, sons of God.*

Although Christianity is one of the mainstream religions, it is also very connected to the pagan and the folkloric. Every aspect of it in some way or some denomination touches on all major and minor traditions. One can see the honoring of the saints in Catholicism as connecting to ancestor worship for instance. Jesus' life recalls the 33 signs of the hero (according to Joseph Campbell.) In addition, there are the concepts of blood sacrifice, the wounded healer, the great deliverer, the dying god who gives his follower's his life, resurrection etc. However, Christians believe that Christianity is the most clear revelation of God, the true and perfect fullest light and that pagan religions are only hints, fore-shadowings and counterfeits. Christians are taught that the truest revelation is in the Bible. It insists that the Biblical Christian truths can only be known by God's Revelation connected with human preaching. (The idea of a Crusade is not Christian but was an accretion of the Islamic idea of Jihad. And despite the Inquisition, Christianity's idea of spiritual war is a warfare in the mind of the believer, a renewing of the mind against the deceptions of the devil and the philosophies of the world. Christians war by transforming their minds with God's word and aiming to have a mind like Jesus Christ.)

**KNOW ALL THE BIBLE BEFORE ATTEMPTING TO TEACH IT.**

**A** Bible writer should have read the entire Bible at least once before attempting to write any kind of Bible study. She should read it more than once, preferably at least once a year. The Bible continually refers to itself. Although written by many writers in many places, it is one large continuum, a community of writers who often discuss Bible previous characters or events previously mentioned.

Basically, the Bible might mention a particular Biblical character in one Book, but be forewarned then that the person you are reading about --and whom you intend to speak about in Sunday school next week-- might be mentioned in another book later on. The meaning of that character's life is therefore not entirely finished if you only deal with his first appearance, or if you only deal with his appearance in for instance the Book of Kings. Sometimes the character's main story is in one chapter, and other mentions of him pop up in later chapters, like commentaries or sidebars. Other Bible prophets supply other missing parts of the narrative.

The reverse also happens. Names of characters and places pop up in one Bible book as if the author expects you to know what they're talking about. For instance, you're in a book of Psalms and the author mentions "Our father, Abraham." Now you will have to find out who Abraham is. Or you're in one of the prophetic books and Samaria is mentioned; now you must find out what Samaria is and why this particular author mentioned it. If you don't know who Jacob or Elias is, you will find yourself at a loss when a Bible writer mentions these names.

Since characters are referred to in one book (or chapter) and then mentioned again later in another book (or chapter) it is a good idea to withhold your judgement of a character before you have used your concordance to study all the references and appearances. Consider the story of Moses. We hear a little about him in Exodus chapter 2, then we hear about him in Acts chapter 7, then we hear more about him in Hebrews chapter 11. Moreover, a few psalms are attributed to him. If we only read the story of Moses in Exodus chapter two, we think Moses murdered the Egyptian as a kind of accident. But when we read Stephen's version of the event, we realize that Moses was killing the Egyptian to start what he thought was his divine destiny.

Consider the Nephilim: The Angels Who Left Their First Estate. (Gen 6, 1- 4.) This story is one of the most mythic parts of the Bible. The entire episode seems like a fairy-tale. Sure, we find love/lust stories between angels and human women in other religions but in our Bible? Many find this hard to swallow. For many reasons, it raises an eyebrow or two. It's mythic, which makes it

suspect. And it deals with angels having sex with humans. This is just the kind of story which needs to be examined thoroughly. Therefore a writer would do well to find echoes of it throughout the Bible. It is best to find all references to the story if you have a controversial point to make.

Moses tells us that when humanity began to populate the earth, the Sons of God looked down upon the Daughters of Men and saw that they were beautiful. These “sons of God” took these daughters of men as wives...as many as they chose.” The children born of these unions were called the Nephilim, (the “destroyers” or “the Fellers”). The story is short but powerful. But it will not be believed by anyone who isn’t comfortable with the supernatural or with sex. This story has also found its way into sermons on miscegenation and race-mixing. The biggest problem is the problem of angels and humans having sexual intercourse? The discomfort with this passage is the reason why there is so much controversy about this verse. Again, finding all the mentions in the Bible to a particular situation will help you to prove your case.

Let us begin with the meaning of the phrase, “The Sons of God.” This is what causes most of the problems. For most people, this is the first time angels are specifically mentioned in the Bible. This seems like a good point to tell you a little about angels. Moses writes about them without giving them a formal introduction. No Bible writer ever stops in mid composition to say, “Here is what I know about angels.” In the Bible, our knowledge of angels is usually gleaned, here a little, there a little. Again, it is a case of the more we read, the more we know of them.

The word angel means messenger. One of the more dramatic images of angels is found in the description of Jacob’s dream in which he saw a ladder ascending from heaven to earth with angels walking up and down on it. Angels are active in the interaction between heaven and earth. They seem to be activated by prayer. They have names which they may or may not disclose. They help good people and are often ruthless towards evil people, slaying evil people whenever they deem necessary. They follow God’s will and yet seem to have a great amount of free will in how they will deal with humanity. They have territories beneath them. They have kings and princes. They have different languages. We know that angels do not marry. They seem to be primarily male. They are many and varied. There are seraphim, cherubim, angels, archangels, dominions, powers, principalities. My favorite angels are the cherubim. The cherubim is an angel who represents within himself all the living creatures on the earth. They stand beside the throne of God. As shown in the book of Ezekiel, they are a terrifying sight.

In addition, there are angels who live outside of heaven. Scripture tells us that once there was a great war in heaven. One third of the angels rebelled against God. Many myths have stories

about wars among the gods. The Judeo-Christian scripture tells us that the fall of these angels was similar to the fall of mankind. The chief angel wanted to be like God. There seem to be many kinds of fallen angels. Some are able to roam the earth and visit heaven from time to time. Others are chained in everlasting chains in the center of the earth or at the bottom of the Great River. And there are still others whom God's people will judge. Fallen and Demonic angles also have their hierarchies and principalities and dominions.

It is possible that angels are not as they used to be. Both human and angelic life seem to have changed since the beginning of time. Once angels seemed free to do whatever they wanted. But it now appears as if good angels are now made unable to sin. Nor can I conceive of a bad angel suddenly deciding to go straight. Humanity and animals are therefore not the only beings in the universe; other beings have existed or do exist. The history of humanity is not solely in the hands of God and/or man; other entities are intertwined in mankind's fate. This is what we know so far about angels. Now let's get to the story.

When Moses tells the mythic story about the relationship between the sons of God and the daughters of men, he seems to be neutral about it. Later on, when Paul and Peter mention the incident, they speak of these angels who had left their first estate (their own spiritual kingdom) and lusted after strange flesh. Now something else has been added to our knowledge of events. The writers after Moses mention God's hatred for the destructive descendants of these unions. It is clear that a person who has read only Moses' writings about this event might be tempted to think that God had no problem with the angel/human copulation.

Readers of this incident divide into two camps. One group understands the phrase "the sons of God" to mean angels or supernatural beings. This is by far the most traditional and popular view. Throughout the rest of the Bible - and in the writings of many cultures - the phrase, "sons of God," is often used to describe angelic beings.

But another group prefers to believe that the phrase, "sons of God" refers to the "Good" descendants of Adam and Eve. According to this group, the Sons of God are the children of Seth; the daughters of men are women belonging to the Cain tribe. In order to believe this theory, a Bible reader would have to believe that although all the children of Eve were now fallen, that somehow the children of Cain were more evil than the children of Seth. (I've often wondered if this Cain/Seth theory isn't a subtle racist indictment against mixed marriages.) Moses makes it plain that one act of disobedience affected both sets of descendants. The descendants of the first parents are all sinners because the First Parents ate the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. Cain's act

of Murder, although a terrible sin, is not enough to separate Cain's descendants from God. And neither is Seth's goodness enough to make his descendants a "Good" tribe. Everyone is already "fallen." Besides why would marriage between two human tribes result in giants?

You can easily guess why some interpreters feel comfortable with the Cain/Seth theory. We think of angels as sweet, innocuous, pure and simple. Who wants to think of angels having sexual intercourse? With human females no less? Let's ponder the implication that the angels have the creative ability to make their bodies suitable to the bodies of human females. This would mean that angels had some creative power. And when we ponder the descendants of these angels, we would have to think about an angels' "genetic" code. After all, these "sons of God" had descendants. Moses then tells us that there were giants in the earth "in those days and also after that when the sons of God came into the daughters of men." So then these giants - children of angel/human relationships - existed even after the flood. This race of giants is discussed by Moses, by the writer of the Book of Joshua, and by the writers of the Samuel, Chronicles and Kings. Remember Goliath? In the New Testament, Paul, Peter and Jude all seemed to have believed this Genesis story. Jude compares the angels who left their first estate and went after strange flesh" to the Sodomites. Peter and Jude tell us that some angels who left their proper place and went after strange flesh are now bound in everlasting chains under the earth. Who are these evil angels chained in the earth? Why are they chained, especially if Satan and the other demons are supposedly allowed to roam free? (The Book of Hebrews makes the point of saying that Jesus was born a Man because Man was promised a redeemer. No angel ever was. The implication is that these beings are spiritually lost.) Paul, a rabbi and scholar, went far as to say that women must cover their heads when they pray "because of the angels." Surely the rabbis and people of Jesus' time believed that these "sons of God" were angels.

As a writer writing about a controversial Bible verse, you will have to use all the Bible verses that prove your point but you will also have to acknowledge the points of those who disagree with you. Many of mankind's myths are full of Gods and half-Gods. This is not such a big deal although many Christians will not like the idea of a Bible writer saying so. They dislike the idea that the Bible is like a lot of other religious literature. But similarity does not imply sameness. The Bible will not be undone by a few mythic Nephilim giants who are at any rate different from the giants found in fairy tales. Every TV viewer knows that Hercules is a half-God. The Norse and Greek myths tell stories of gods and humans, gods and animals, and humans and animals. Centaurs (horse/man), minotaurs (man/bull) and mermaids (fish/women) abound. If your reader is capable of

hearing it, you can simply say, “Obviously, where there is smoke there is fire. It would be strange indeed if other scriptures from ancient cultures depicted these strange beings and our Bible did not. It is possible that the world was different back then and different species could interbreed with each other until God put a stop to it.” But it is necessary for you to emphasize that, unlike other Scriptures, the Bible-writers are not in awe or worshipful of these half-gods. Anything less than the One God of gods is not worthy of worship as far as Moses is concerned.

You might need to explain why God was so angry...after all these angels were only “in love.” Please think through your answer carefully. Remember, it’s okay to say you don’t know. Moses didn’t make any moral comment on the marriage themselves and he does not say that God argued with the sons of God about their marriages. Nor does Moses, who was married to an Ethiopian woman, give his own opinion of these matches. Scripture simply records the consequences of these relationships. The KJV translation of “The Fellers” (the name given to the Nephilim) is vague. One can hardly tell if the giants were good or bad. If your Bible study is only on the book of Genesis, you need not mention God’s judgment on the angels. But if you don’t mention the other Bible passages, you are also losing much of your evidence about this human/angel marriage episode.

Some Bible scholars have said that this love-match business was a satanic plot to muddy up mankind’s genetic make-up and to prevent the coming of the promised deliverer, the “seed of the woman.” But Moses seems to blame everything on lust/love; and so does Saint Paul. Moses writes that angels were so enamored of the beauty of the daughters of men, they took “as many as they wanted.” The sinfulness of humanity at that time, combined with the supernatural powers of the angels, was bound to create beings who had no control over themselves, and bound to bring about God’s wrath. The Nephilim were, in fact, quite bad...so bad that they had to be destroyed. Yet they kept showing up in various regions in the land of Canaan. The world was already violent, selfish and cursed. The Nephilim, the Fellers, the Destroyers were the last straw. So Moses’ intention in telling this story seems to be to fill up the cup of Canaanite sin. He wanted to show that the approaching Israelites had every God-given right to take over the land of these people who were descended from demons.

If this is the tack you want to take in your Bible study, a concordance search on the word “giants” might be in order. The ancient Greeks used the “-taur” ending for creatures who were half man and half-animal: centaurs, minotaur, etc. The Bible also has a special ending for angels: “-im.” The most famous classes of angels are called the Cherubim and the Seraphim. God is sometimes

called Elohim, the Lord of Hosts, the King of Angels and Men. Have your reader search through the concordance.

These semi-human giants appear throughout the Bible and are called Nephilim, Rephaim, Asheroth Karnaim, Shaveh Kiriathaim, Horim, Zamzummim, Avim, Anakim, Emim and Mizraim (Egypt.) These words are sometimes translated Destroyers, Giants or the dead. In later Scriptures, these giants exist primarily among the Canaanite nations. Readers of the Bible can hardly fail to notice that God is relentless in wanting the children of Israel to destroy the Canaanites and the Phillistines. Perhaps this story holds a clue. Often, children's imagination are sparked by these stories. When my son noticed that Egypt, the father of the Egyptians, was also called Mizraim (Genesis 10:13), he said, he knew how the pyramids were built: the giants lifted those heavy stones. We can smile, but hey, you never know.

The upshot of Moses story is that God said, "I will not allow His Spirit to stay in a human forever. People will live only one-hundred and twenty years." There are usually three interpretations of God's comment.

1. I will not allow people to live as long as they are now living. From now on, they will only live to one hundred and twenty years.
2. I will not allow any human being to be immortal... even if they are part angels. This might have been a tough thing for the angels with their mortal wives - to take.
3. I will not allow these humans to live on like this. Humanity will be finished in one hundred and twenty years. (The flood did occur about 120 years later.)
4. Any combination of the above. Bible prophecies are notorious for being fulfilled in two ways.

You are free to choose whatever meaning you wish. As long as you have used Bible references to study the entire event, you are well informed. A thought to ponder, though: you never know what might pop up when you write a Bible study. A feminist friend once became quite offended at the idea of women being "used" by angels when I told her about this story. So it's not only the racist or the priggish who are upset by certain themes. But don't let the offense keep you from reading the Bible.

## Know Your Own Personal Psychological History and Hang-ups

**Y**our personal and family history can give you a sympathetic understanding towards certain Bible characters and can even make you understand some Bible stories better than other people understand them. But personal history can also get in the way.

I remember a Christian woman who could not read the story about Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29 and 30) without spouting venom against Leah - and God. “How,” she would ask, “did God allow Leah to steal Rachel's husband?” There was no talking to her; the story obviously hit a raw nerve. Granted, we all like a good love story; the romantic in us want the lovers to be together but one takes a story as one finds it.

Other people have other Bible stories that “get their goat.” There are people who are offended that Moses' wife was Sudanese. And whether or not she is Zipporah or a second wife, the woman in Numbers chapter twelve is avoided by racists who refuse to see the fullness of the story. Instead, they choose to interpret the incident in only one way.

I must say that I am not innocent in this regard either. I don't like King David much. (His story is found in the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.) My parents were divorced when I was quite young and I have a predilection for being on the female side of most arguments. On the one hand, that is good. The world needs more female Bible study writers. But there is a balance to this and one must find the proper balance. If you find yourself becoming unreasonably angry with a Bible character or a Bible story, examine yourself prayerfully. If you can't do that, ignore the story and move on.

One should also suspect a possible agenda when one finds one's self with a “favorite” verse or a particular axe to grind. There is nothing wrong with a devotional writer declaring that a particular Bible verse is a favorite or is especially meaningful to her. And there is nothing innately wrong with having favorite Bible verses. But sometimes – these favorite Bible verses can show a selfish agenda. We humans often grow in knowledge and in wisdom but not in knowledge of ourselves. Even as we grow, our basic personality traits remain the same. We aren't only intellectual beings; we are emotional beings with histories. Our emotional history affects how we make intellectual judgments. C. S. Lewis once stated that he had often met atheists who believed they had intellectual reasons for disbelieving in God but whose unbelief, it was apparent to all but

themselves, seemed rooted in more emotional issues. How many of us know people who don't believe in a heavenly father simply because they had troubles with an earthly father or authority figure?

As writers of Bible studies and devotionals, we write in order to communicate to others all the insights we receive from a Bible passage or verse. Very often, writers choose to communicate what is near and dear to their hearts. The question then is: Is what is near my heart imbalanced, rigid, wounded, or unfair? Am I being a know-it-all? Am I blinded to some important aspect of a story because of some emotional or intellectual rigidity?

The good thing is that if we are skilled writers, our emotional "slip" won't show. We can write racist or biased interpretations of story after story. We can make God be what we are by simply ignoring certain facts and never be found out. But sometimes our bias does become apparent to a few. A bias once recognized will rarely be forgiven. In matters such as this, it is best to remember Lincoln's well-known comment: "You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time."

Another word of caution is needed. Remember that you will develop a fan base. Every good writer does. Some people will swear by your words. For this reason one must be as honorable as possible and try to avoid writing that encourages spiritual imbalance.

Balanced spiritual writing not only affects Christians, but it affects the way the non-Christian world sees us. The Bible tells us that we must love the Lord with all our minds and all our souls and all our strength and our neighbor as ourselves. (Luke 10:27) In my life I have seen many articles and devotionals declaring that Christians should "speak about their faith boldly." (Timothy I and II) There is nothing wrong with these articles. For the most part, it is good advice. Christians should not be timid in declaring their faith. Standing up for one's faith is always a good thing but it does not mean that one should bulldoze others all the time. Many of these bulldozing Christians will say, "Paul tells us in the book of Timothy to always speak about our faith." But they often forget that wrong choices lead to regret. Nor do they think on the balancing proverbs: "Without knowledge, even zeal is not good." These Christian writers who exhort other Christians to be brave in speaking their faith often use Paul's letters to Timothy as their evidence that this is what God wishes them to do. But Timothy was not a typical evangelist. He was quite timid and young. To read Timothy's letters and take the advice written in them as advice for all Christians without regard for a particular situation is an example of not "loving God with all your mind."

Paul's advice to a young timid pastor is meant for all the church, for all pastors or for all

young men. But have you noticed how people who already have a tendency to be pushy always use these verses found in Timothy? Is pushiness boldness? But how many times have you heard an insensitive person use verses in Timothy? And that is a problem, isn't it? Not only do some people obsessively take to scriptures not meant for them, but they encourage others to do likewise. Such is the power of communication. Many "favorite verses" are mirrors of our own wounded psyche. A mirror is not always a bad thing. By studying our favorite verses prayerfully, we begin to understand God's word in a balanced way and knowing our own wounded personality and its needs.

Bullies will very often use the Bible verse, "A wife should be subject to her husband." Yet they neglect the connecting verse: "And a husband must sacrifice himself for his wife just as Christ sacrificed himself for the church."

Sometimes disciplinarian parents will use the verse, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord?" Yet they often forget the connecting passage: "And you parents, provoke not your children to anger?"

A Christian who tends to be judgmental might write an excited exhortation pleading that we should "Keep away from every appearance of evil" yet the article might only concentrate on the way women dress, as if woman is temptation incarnate. Insensitive Christian writers might write a Bible study about the need to "speak the truth in love" to all sinners no matter what, but never mention that Paul lists gentleness and forbearance as the heights of spiritual maturity. At the same time, a Christian who tends towards wishy-washy principles might love the verse, "Judge not lest ye be judged."

A Christian writer who is against welfare might write a Bible study on the verse, "Let each man bear his own burden" and totally forget about verses that say we should share with the poor. Christians who are insensitive and "unacquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53) will be inclined to write articles deriding depressed Christians and telling them they don't have faith and that they should "rejoice in the Lord always." On the other hand, certain Christians who indulge in depression or certain people who over-indulge in their sensual appetites might use the verse which states, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" or write fatalistic articles about accepting our flaws instead of changing them because God is in control of everything and we are all weak humans. Is there any wonder how one pastor or writer can use a Bible verse that declares that God should always be first in our lives in order to avoid caring for his family, while at the same time another will say "The Lord wants us to take care of our families first?"

A lazy Christian might say, "The Lord will supply all your needs" while someone on the other extreme, a workaholic or too self-reliant Christian, will say, "The Lord helps those who help

themselves”? A phrase that is not in the Bible, by the way. A rigid person might write an article about worship and the joy of the liturgy and use the verse, “Let all things be done decently and in order” while someone who dislikes too much order might use the verse, “Quench not the spirit” Or “Be drunk in the spirit.”

I remember hearing a minister who had not been educated in a college saying, “The Lord will teach us all things” and we should “not trust in worldly wisdom.” Then, not too soon afterwards hearing another minister, who was very proud of his education say, “Study to show yourselves approved.” I have cringed a few times when reading Bible studies by ministers who write as if they were put on earth to rule over a small kingdom (the old “priests are kings of the earth” idea) as if God created a class of people whose members would always be permanently better and wiser than everyone else. And yet I do believe that people should not go off by themselves to form little churches and cults in the woods somewhere. The important thing is balance.

As writers, we should remember the adage that states that a bad piece of writing tells us more about the author than anything else. But we should also remember that unbalanced writing is a dangerous weapon. We need to know ourselves. We need to know what we have written. We need to see if our “slip” is showing. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” This is especially true if we are writing something which will be shown in the public sphere.

Of course sometimes a reader cannot ignore the story. I remember being at an Episcopalian church in New York City. A statue of a male Jesus had been taken down from a crucifix and replaced by a female statue named Christa. Many women - nuns, priests, laity - said they felt closer to this female depiction of the female side of God because of their bad sexual histories and because men had made such a mess of the culture. The women felt the crucifix was "spiritually" true. But I was not impressed by Christa; I felt Jesus as a female was literally and spiritually untrue. Plain and simple, Jesus was a man. But this is how many people deal with aspects of the Bible they find personally bothersome.

My psychological issues always pop up whenever I have to deal with a male character who treats a woman badly. No, I’m not some super-feminist. But I was abandoned by my father and I know the plain truth that many women have been abandoned by their husbands. So whenever I have to deal with David, my eyes kinda gloss over and I can feel anger rearing up inside me as I read about him

Those who encounter David are usually put in one of five categories:

A: Good guy

B: Bad guy

C: Good guy but David's mistreatment of him is not so important in the grand scheme of things.

D: Bad guy but forgivable because he helped David

E: Good guy but David didn't like him so I will dislike him too.

I'll be totally honest here and tell you that I don't like David much. He is not a perfect man and his parental skills are abominable. We Christians tend to feel that his only sin/and crime was "in the matter of Uriah the Hittite" and Bathsheba. Even worse, although his treatment of Michal, his first wife, is unfeeling and often cruel, he is excused for his treatment of her and poor Michal gets blamed. Many Christians use Samuel's phrase and call David a man after God's own heart. But they often forget that this compliment was used before David became king. As Bible readers we should be aware of how certain characters are described and when. For instance, Absalom -David's son- builds a tower to his sister because his wife was childless. Unlike his dad, he seemed to be committed to one wife, childless or not. Later a daughter is born and he names his daughter after his sister. Moses, a murderer, later called himself "a meek man, above all the people on earth." We believe Moses changed. A hasty man can become meek, can not David also lose his heart?

When the people of Israel decided that they did not want God to rule over them because they wanted to be like other nations with kings, palaces, etc, God gave them the earthly king they wanted, Saul. Saul made the mistake of not separating church and state and was rejected because he dabbled in religion when he was king. David, the youngest son of Jesse, is then anointed king by Samuel, the last great judge of Israel. Naturally Saul develops a dislike against David. He knows that Michal, his daughter, likes David. He gives Michal to David in marriage, in the hope that newlywed life will keep David occupied. But Michal and her brother Jonathan become David's protector. Between the both of them, David's life is saved more than once. Note, that Michal saves David as her brother does, but male preachers gloss over this. The rivalry between David and Saul become full-blown civil war and the next thing Michal is taken away from David and given to another man. This man worship and adores Michal. Meanwhile David travels through the country during his battles and makes it a habit to reward women who help him by marrying them. When he finally defeats Saul's army and holds the kingdom firmly in hand, he finds Michal and -in one of the most heart-breaking scenes in the Bible- wrenches her away from her new husband who follows

her caravan calling plaintively for her until it disappears out of sight. Later, when David in a moment of victory dances through the streets, accidentally exposing himself, Michal sneers at him with, “You’re acting like a dirty old man, showing yourself off now to all the slave girls.” David doesn’t try to understand where this comment came from. Instead he says he was dancing before the Lord and Michal will not be getting any of what he’s going to give the daughters of Israel. This is the David who forgave all the murders of his cousin Joab and who forgave his son for raping his daughter. David kept to his unforgiving spite and Michal was childless for the rest of her life. Most male preachers behave as if this was a good thing and that Michal deserves her fate, not realizing that David had to eat his own words later and lost all access to his other wives after his son Absalom spitefully dishonored his father by sleeping with all the wives and concubines.

(2 Sam 6:20 and 2 Sam 16, 17.) Preachers will speak – almost spitefully about the fact that Michal was arrogant and therefore her husband had every right to never sleep with her again. They seem to think God was punishing her as well. Yet they never speak about what happened to David. His curse on Michal rebounded to him because later Absalom slept with all of David’s wives and concubines, (at the suggestion of Ahitophel, the grandfather of Bathsheba, who had seen what David did to his grand-daughter.)

If we can identify with a scape-goated Bible character's behavior such as a beaten slave like Hagar or a cast-off wife like Michal, we will behave better and be less judgmental and self-righteous towards those people in our lives. As Christians whose Lord was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, we are not supposed to identify so easily with the people of praise and renown while rejecting the wounded, the hurt and the poor. It does not become us or our calling as we sojourn through this world.

Before David appears on the scene, he is called “A man after God’s own heart.” After he attains the kingdom, he still loves God and is steadfast in his faith but he is never called a man after God’s own heart ever again. Some would argue that to some extent David, like Saul, started out strong and ended up weak. Only Jesus is perfect.

David is not the kind of person anyone would want for a king. And although, he is not truly the king when he is anointed, he soon wins everyone over, including the common people, the army and Saul’s own children. Saul realizes that God is no longer with him. This causes one of the most dangerous rivalries in all of the Bible. Saul is fighting to return to God’s grace. But he is also

fighting for his throne, against David and against God. The story of Saul, David, and their families is one of the great adventure sagas of the Bible. There is conspiracy, betrayal, broken trust, wives, concubines and children galore. David is not a perfect man. His treatment of Michal, his first wife, is unfeeling and often cruel. His parental skills are abominable. Those people who only show their children the "good" parts of the Bible will usually avoid the David saga. After all, how are we to deal with a person who is a man "after God's own heart" who is so inept at family matters? Even worse, how are we to explain that this chosen king --God's hand-picked man-- is not to everyone's liking?

The story of David is an interesting example of this tendency to make scape-goats of certain Bible personages and sacred cows of other. David's is one of the great sagas of the Bible. Conspiracy, betrayal, broken trust, wives, concubines and children abound.

For many years, despite the Bible stories, many scholars refused to believe that a group called the Hittites existed. These scholars said the Bible could not be trusted to be archeologically accurate --and many "intellectual Christians" lost their faith in the Bible. Then history proved the Bible right. It is the same with David. It is only recently --in the past decade-- that archeological evidence confirmed that a king David actually existed. After ages of silence, in the 1990's, archeology finally confirmed an Israelite King named David. No doubt, further archeological discoveries will tell us more.

In the meantime, we have the Bible's description of David. People who find the Bible boring inevitably find some excitement in the story of David. David's story stretches through the historical books and the Psalms. He was a poet, shepherd, king, soldier, father, husband, a betrayed friend and an adulterer. He was the man whom God called "a man after my own heart." You will like David or dislike him. He is a conflicted imperfect individual. The best way to understand David is to read the Psalms he wrote. The best way to read about David's life is to divide it into a series of relationships.

He is David, the son of Jesse, the youngest of his brothers and sisters. He is the anointed king of Samuel, the last great judge of Israel. He is the destroyer of Goliath, the attendant to King Saul, the best friend of Jonathan, the husband of Michal, betrayer of Ahitophel and Uriah, the father of Absalom, Amnon and Tamar, the old man lying cold and chilled in Abishag's bed. Each of these stories weave themselves through the others.

Because David is seen as a great king and a man after God's own heart, Bible readers tend to do what people do when encountering a hero. They love his friends and hate his enemies. They

minimize the sins he does and maximize the sins of others. Like Abraham, he is a sacred cow...and this inevitably leads to a large collection of scapegoats. I have put in parentheses the general impression one gets in Bible studies when the life of David is discussed.

1 Sam 14:49, 1 Sam 18: 20-28, 1 Sam 19, 1 Sam 25:44 2 Sam 3:13, 14, 2 Sam 6:16-23; 2 Sam 21:8,  
1 Ch 15:29

## **Old is Not Always Wrong; the New is Not Always True**

**M**ost cultures value tradition. Others believe that everything old is useless, bad, and inapplicable to modern life. The people of the west often strive to create "modern" twists on Scripture which they consider more culturally applicable. They assume that new interpretations of Bible passages are better than old interpretations. A friend once told me that African-Americans are really the true Jews. She believes this because the group she belongs to -- the Black Jews (who are closely related to Rastafarians)-- have interpreted Deuteronomy, chapter 27 in the Bible as being a history of African-Americans. The newness of this interpretation and its "racial-relevancy" is what makes it so interesting to her. But it isn't true.

It is hip to think that we moderns are all deep and wise. One example of this wisdom is the belief that there is such a thing as a new philosophy, a new interpretation or a new religion. The Book of Ecclesiastes states that there is nothing new under the sun. Those who know their Bibles know that not only does the Bible mention philosophies that are very much like some of the newer theologies, but it also answers them. Those who research history will also see that these "newer" philosophical thoughts can be found in old books.

NEW does not mean TRUE. The reverse is also true. Old does not mean "false" or "wrong." As science progresses, it throws many old truths away only to have to return to pick these truths up again. A century ago, epilepsy was treated by restraining certain carbohydrates and gluten from the diet. People used leeches and maggots to "bleed" people. Herbs were used to cure diseases. Medical Researchers have now begun to look backwards to some of these "old" ideas.

Some Christians will mix modern trendy movements into their interpretations. This is fine and good. Progressive thinking has helped the church discover many insights which the former generations could not see. But sometimes the need to look for the new, edgy interpretation of a story goes overboard. When someone starts using the "Birth Order" philosophy to explain Jesus' behavior, or if they say "Jesus was Type A," or if they give us a Freudian historical Jesus who is repressed and who does things for reasons He doesn't understand and doesn't know why He does these things, then we are in flaky territory.

Often the tendency to praise what is modern leads to belittling and mocking what is past. The trouble with this approach is that most of us aren't historians and mocking the past can often make us look foolish because we often will show that we don't know what we are talking about.

A few minor examples: I remember listening to a professor tell a Shakespeare class that

Hamlet had a deep Freudian love for his mother. “Why should he be so fixated on his mother having a sexual relationship with his uncle?” he asked. The professor ignored a few historical facts: one, that King Henry VIII had tossed off his first wife because he stated his marriage to her was incestuous, according to the Bible books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. This would be an example of Shakespeare showing himself to be a true Elizabethan who thought Queen Mary, her sister, was the product of an incestuous union and therefore not a rightful heir to the throne. The second historical fact is a semi-religious one: Shakespeare puts Hamlet, a product of the old divine right of kings mentality into Wittenburg, Luther’s breakaway theological seminary. Hamlet was not only a prince, but a seminary student with new religious thoughts swirling around his head. Of course such a prince is going to get bent out of shape because four months after his father’s death, his mother is having sex with his uncle.

I once heard a man making fun of an old blue law. Blue laws are laws that are still on the books, have some moral issue concerning them, but are pretty much useless nowadays. The law he was mocking prohibited the drinking of alcohol before voting. He commented that people in the old days were so puritanical. Well, that may be so, but the voting system in the United States was so prone to dishonesty that many people were plied with drink by corrupt officials, taken in a drunken state to voting booths and forced to vote in this state. Edgar Allan Poe is reported to have had been a victim of this kind of illegal voting.

One last word about this “old is bad; new is true” mentality. A fixation on the exotic and boredom with the commonplace has caused many Christians who have never read the great books of Christianity to suddenly declare that they have found Christianity insufficient, useless, offensive or deficient in some way. All people are allowed to be offended by a religion and to find it useless. But they ought to be clear on where exactly the offensiveness and uselessness consist. And they should know the history and deep truths of their religion. Often, people who are “searching for truth” never search the books of their religion.

### **Beware of Interpretations Influenced by the Media.**

**T**he media has trained viewers and readers to accept storytelling in a specific way. Many Bible characters are often stereotyped and at odds with the actual depiction in the Bible.

Recently I saw Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*. Notwithstanding several flaws, it wasn't a bad film. Creative differences aside, there are moments when Gibson seems to be working from stereotypes instead of from the actual gospel text. I was particularly amused by his depiction of Barrabas, whom he depicts as a kind of dirty toothless unwashed nobody. Gibson is allowed his interpretations. And I understand that he wanted to show the contrast between the unpalatable Barrabas and the martyred Jesus. But the contrast is Gibson's not the Gospels. In the Gospels, Barrabas is called variously a robber, a troublemaker, a member of the resistance. Some translations of the Bible show that Barrabas' first name was also "Jesus." Therefore when Pilate's statement to the crowd was something like, "Do you want to save Jesus Barrabas (the son of the father) or the other Jesus, the one called 'The Christ.?'?" But even if a reader does not understand the subtlety of Pilate's question, Barrabas is meant to be a symbol of a deliverer who is "good in the eyes of humans" and Jesus is supposed to represent the "spiritual choice" which humanity never accepts. But the media love of simple dichotomies confuses the essence of the incident.

There are other examples where cultural storytelling norms and stereotypes or the expectations of the media turn a Bible story into something other than what it is. The Esther story, for instance, is turned into a love story, which it is not. The story of Esther is about a woman who is a living sacrifice and who gives up her life in order to save her people. Nowhere in the story of Esther is there even a hint that Esther is in love with the king. But our culture is so enamored of romances that they turn this story into a full-blown romance.

In movies and modern books, very good women are often innocent, almost ignorant and bad women are always wise and savvy. Modern movies show people who believe in the Bible as judgmental, hypocritical, repressed and rigid while at the same time, they show non-religious people as open-minded, happy and honest. But religion doesn't make people sexually uptight, chauvinistic, or dumb. Religious people also have their stereotypes. But life --and the Bible-- is more complicated than this.

A few examples: David was specifically chosen by God because he was something of the runt in the family, but he is always depicted as a strapping handsome warrior. Physically, nothing

could be further from the truth. St Paul is shown in films as harsh, rigid, “pious.” We all think we know what piety “looks” like: repressed, reserved, serious; or on the other hand: mystical, flighty, and almost childishly innocent.

## **Be Aware of the Possibility of Offending Churchgoers**

We all know that social, political and racial bias exist. In part 12 of this section, we mentioned the possibility of offense. But there are other times when you should also be aware that you might offend people. There is nothing wrong with writing controversial interpretations of the Bible. The thing is to “be aware” that denominational biases exist. Some Bible studies or devotionals seem relatively safe and then suddenly a writer receives a spate of letters or emails piling complaint upon complaint.

Consider the following verse in Psalm 118: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the head cornerstone. This is the Day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” A Christian who writes a devotional about being happy to go to church on Sunday to worship and enjoying The Lord’s Day might offend Seventh Day Adventists whose prophet insists that people worship on the Sabbath. While all Christians understand that the Seventh Day is in fact the Sabbath, most denominations worship on The Lord’s Day, the first day of the week, the day Jesus resurrected, because they believe that Jesus created a new thing in the world and because the New Testament states that the disciples worshiped on The Lord’s Day. St Paul speaks about this in two letters, Colossians 2:16, 17 and Romans 14: 5, 6 and declares that God has given believers in Christ the liberty to serve him when they please. But, as a writer, if there is a chance that an article which casually mentions going to church on Sunday will offend Seventh Day Adventists or going to church on Saturday will offend other Christian groups, it is best to leave the day unmentioned in the article, unless you feel pressed to get into controversy.

A writer can also annoy someone’s denominational when they accidentally speak against another denomination’s origins. Most Christians follow Paul’s warning that “if anyone, even an angel, brings a new gospel to you, let that person be accursed. Members of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, like Members of Islam, believe that an angel brought them a new revelation about Christ. Unless you are really, really knowledgeable in apologetics and religious dialog, don’t go near controversy in a Bible study.

Other issues that cause problems might be the charismatic or Pentecostal movement. While many Christians of the mainstream denominations will simply shrug at a charismatic in their midst, they do not preach against it and they might tolerate or even accept an article on the charismatic

movement. But it is part of Baptist doctrine to believe that “The days of miracles are past” and that “The charismatic renewal and ‘talking in tongues’ is from the devil.” I once asked a Baptist friend what she thought of the Shroud of Turin and she said the devil had created it to deceive people. A writer should therefore know when she is standing in a minefield, slogging through mud, or in friendly territory.

Another potential point of contention is the Virgin Mary. Consider the following Scripture passages. Psalm 69: 8-9 “I am a stranger to my mother’s children because the zeal of thy house has eaten me up.” Christians believe this is a prophetic reference to Jesus. (John 2:17) Non-Catholics have no problem with the phrase, “my mother’s children.” Therefore a Non-Catholic writer would see no problem in using this verse in a list of prophecies about Jesus’ life as John did in verse two. But Catholics would be offended. Although first century Jews did not share Augustine’s idea of the ugliness of sex, most Catholics assume that Mary and Joseph never had sex after the birth of Jesus, because sex was defiling. This is not a Jewish concept but an Augustinian one. All the same, if you are not a writer of the Roman Catholic denomination, it’s best to know if your writings will be seen by a Catholic reader.

Assumptions can also come from movies or from our culture. Many people forget that the Last Supper should look more like a Jewish Passover than a Catholic Mass. Or they assume that Jesus was clothed on the cross. He was probably naked. Or they assume that his hair was loose around his shoulders. He probably wore his hair in a pony tail or braided. A painter or writer who dares to depict a naked Jesus on a cross will probably end up in a great deal of trouble.

Other denominational upsets can come from the usage of a simple word. Some Christians do not use the word Easter; they use Resurrection. Others don’t like the word “priest.” The main point is to be aware.

As an example, let’s consider Psalm 69. The last part of verse 9 (“The zeal of thine house has eaten me up.”) is quoted by the writers of Matthew’s gospel when Jesus chased the money-changers out of the temple. In quoting it, they indicate that this particular Psalm is a prophecy of Jesus. Verse 21 mentions, “In my thirst, they gave me vinegar to drink.”) The problem, however, is that a Devotionalist might run into a Roman Catholic who believes that Mary was always a virgin. Roman Catholics believe that all mention of Jesus’ brothers refer to the children of his step-father, Joseph, not Mary’s children. Some Bible translations simply translate the verse as “brothers” or as “relatives.” The KJV Version, however, follows the version found in the Hebrew Bible. Therefore

the writer wishing to use this passage with a Catholic magazine might be well-advised to use a translation which “fudges” the issue a bit.

Another point: Jeremiah’s question: (“Can an Ethiopian change his skin or a leopard his spot?”) has also been known to rankle a few black Bible readers. Jeremiah was probably not prejudiced but one never knows what will offend.

Problems can also occur outside the Bible. Different denominations have differing definitions of certain traditions, sacraments, ceremonies and rituals. The council at Jerusalem fifteenth chapter of the Book of Acts had to deal with the same issue. The Council at Nicea later solidified Christian belief about Jesus divinity.

The Bible and Christianity are full of traditions and ceremonies. Some Christian ceremonies, such as weddings, are similar to ceremonies in religions in the rest of the world. Other ceremonies and traditions, such as “crossing one’s self”, making the sign of the cross across one’s chest, are peculiar to Christianity. Some rituals are only seen in certain denominations, making the sign of the cross for instance. Christianity is a religion that eschews “external” shows of piety. Jesus said, “Those who worship God must worship Him in spirit and in truth.” In another place, He tells His disciples that they should not let others see them praying or doing acts of charity. St Paul tells the Colossian church that holiness does not depend on how, when, where, or what actions are done. And the book of Judges and the events on the day of Pentecost show that piety is not dependent on posture, sitting position, race, education, class, or any other thing. Yet, many religious actions are required by Scripture. Some of these religious actions are important to individual Christians.

Many are based in cultural or ethnic tradition. Many Christians, for instance, have a family Bible Reading at bedtime. Others would never think of going to bed without saying a bedtime prayer. In this respect, Christianity is a religion which allows great freedom in the way one approaches God. Christ gave us many sacraments before he left the earth. A sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." This means that something done on a small scale by humans affects the spiritual unseen world in a profound manner.

Many Christians will often say that Jesus only gave the world two ordinances, and that He gave no sacraments. They mean water Baptism and communion. But God gave Israel many ordinances -- The Father ordained that Passover should be celebrated forever. So those Christians who want to limit the idea of sacraments to only what Jesus ordained are clearly omitting the Jewish traditions. How blessed they would be if they attended a Messianic Jewish church and understood

the blessings of some of these Jewish festivals.

The funny thing is that because Christianity is a religion that has so many varied cultures, we often find it difficult as a whole to decide what exactly is a sacrament. Are there two -- as medieval Episcopalians used to believe? And modern Baptists believe? Or are there seven -- as modern-day Episcopalians and Roman Catholics believe? Or are there a whole lot more?

Again, the answer depends on your denomination, on how much power you believe our Lord Jesus gave us individually or corporally, and what you believe about the way the spiritual world affects the physical world.

Some of the major sacraments are:

1. Marriage: a vow between two people which joins their eternal souls together while they live on earth. This means that the visible act of saying "I do" and signing the marriage contract creates a spiritual and invisible bond.
2. The laying on of hands for ordination: God's spirit sets a person apart and ordains them as a pastor, priest, missionary, writer, teacher or some particular work. St Paul reminds Timothy to "neglect not the gift that was given to you by the laying on of hands of the presbytery." This means that something spiritual and invisible happened when the elders laid their hand (a visible act) on Timothy.
3. The laying on of hands for healing: James told people that the simple act of laying hands on someone and anointing them with oil brings the spiritual gift of healing into the sick person's life.
4. Baptism: the simple act of being sprinkled with water or going under water brings a person into God's kingdom, causes them to die to the powers of this world, and identifies them with Christ. Early Reformation Protestants argued that this is one of the two -- ONLY TWO-- ordinances that Jesus gave His people.
5. Confirmation: the visible, human act of confessing Jesus as your Lord and savior makes Him acknowledge you in heaven as His own, and activates our faith. Jesus said, "Those who deny me on earth, I will deny in heaven."
6. Confession: the simple act of telling one's sin to God, His representative, another human being, or one's self is able to affect the universe and restore a believer to God. Confession is also called "profession" when we speak the promises that God has made to us.

7. Communion: Jesus told us to remember him by drinking from the passover cup. Some Christians believe this is just an ordinance. Others believe the simple eating of bread and wine in memory of Jesus brings spiritual, emotional and physical healing and joins the believer to all other believers dead or alive. Some believe that we should be like the Jews who used wine in their Passover supper. Some believe we should use grape juice. Some believe only a priest can do communion, others believe that any baptized believer can take the communion...by himself, or with the rest of the congregation. I can personally attest to the fact that I have been both physically and emotionally healed by taking communion.

But there are other lesser known sacraments: the sacrament of forgiveness, for instance, frees both the sinner and the victim of anger and retribution. Most of these are considered ordinances by some and sacraments by others. From what I've been able to discover, those who consider them "ordinances" think that Jesus gave us these ceremonies but the ceremonies themselves don't have much power...that they are merely a form of godliness. I tend to think though, that doing these ceremonies without believing in God's power becoming activated by them is pretty silly and legalistic because God wants to pour Himself into our lives.

There are other ceremonies that touch upon the sacramental. These sacraments vary depending on the Christian denomination, the circumstances, the faith or the age of the person involved. Some denominations may consider them pretty weird or even non-Christian.

For instance regarding the sacrament of marriage, many Episcopalian churches have divorce ceremonies because they believe that people become connected and are somehow bonded with each other through the act of sex. It's a part of a sacramental understanding of the importance of the sexual act.

The signing of a contract is a fairly new institution, only about 3000 or so years. The Bible was created before, during, and after this signing of the contract. In some cultures, there is a bill of divorcement. But Jesus said, "if a man divorces a woman, he forces her to commit adultery. And he who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." In Jesus' phrase, even AFTER the divorce, there is adultery.

The divorce ceremony -- Done in some very progressive Episcopalian churches after arrangement with minister

Some episcopalian churches have a divorce ceremony in which people who have been divorced can come together in a ceremony with friends and family to acknowledge and bless their

past and their memories. The ceremony also allows the spirits of those formerly married to separate. According to the Bible, marriage joins the souls of the married people together. The spiritual logic behind this ceremony is that man really cannot unjoin what God has joined together, only God can unjoin them. That said, God is invited to uncleave the souls of the divorcing partners. I've never been to such a ceremony, thank God, having been blessed with a good husband. But from what I've heard from people who have undergone this ceremony, healing comes in a deep way and enables its participants to let go of sexual attachment, hate and grief. Because their souls are finally freed from the person they had set their hopes on, they can finally move on and forgive.

### **The Rachel Project**

This is a ceremony held by the Catholic church for miscarried and aborted children. The ceremony involves several sections including naming the lost children and giving them over to God's care. This ceremony is part healing ceremony, part eucharist communion, part burial service. It is healing in that the effects of miscarriage are often unseen, for instance the woman who lost children might develop a fear of bad things happening or of things never coming to fruition Or of creativity being blighted. The children born after miscarriages are also sometimes affected on a spiritual level. This ceremony enables all people involved to move on because everything and everyone has been placed in God's hand as opposed to remembering that one lost a baby somewhere who was flushed down the toilet or thrown out in the garbage behind an abortion center.

### **House blessings – Done in various forms by various churches whenever a Christian moves into a new house.**

This is both a ceremony for blessings on a new life and a protective ceremony for new housebuyers. Every house has a history. That history implies a dedication. Whether we know it or not, our house is dedicated to what we do most often in it. Some people can enter a house and after one night of sleeping in it, will realize that the people who formerly occupied the house were sexual deviants or worshipers of demons or sickly. Sometimes, something demonic seems to be lingering in the house. Through the intercession of other Christians the house can be dedicated, healed, exorcised or spiritually cleansed. (And again, the incidentals depend on one's denomination. Some churches swear by holy water or incense, some require priests or pastors, or baptized believers) Whatever the practice, the evil influences, memories, and spirits are sent away.

**Blessing of the animals – Generally held on St Francis Day**

This is a ceremony that upholds God's commandment that humans take care of their animals. It is a ceremony of praise and worship to God the creator. There is nothing funnier than processing through one's church on St Francis Day with one's pet cat, snake, dog, bird or whatever. I am a firm believer that a blessed animal is healthier and happier than an unblessed animal.

There are tons of strange Christian ceremonies all over the world which have their place. Some are more pagan than Christian, some are a mixture of both. Although, the Bible doesn't specifically tell us that all believers should get rid of old ceremonies, the Believer should be wary.

Some pagan ceremonies can be easily transformed into Christian ceremonies. Some of these pagan ceremonies often foreshadowed Christianity, and showed that God was preparing these pagan peoples to receive the gospel. Some ceremonies were not created by God or the apostles but are quite valid. Purim, Hanukkah, Christmas, and Easter, were not God-created festivals but God certainly approves of them. And they are like many of the great sacraments (an outward and visible sign of an inward spiritual grace) that Christ gave us. In their own way, they affirm that God's spirit affects the world and that God is in everything.

**Day of the Dead – also known as the feast of All Saints.**

This religious holiday is generally held in Catholic countries in Latin America. But many Catholics worldwide also find meaning in this ceremony. Like the Rachel Project ceremonies, it is also a festival that celebrates life in the midst of death and is a ceremony of closure. In the Latin American ceremony, the worshipers light candles and tell the dead that they are no longer with the living, that they are loved but that they must move on towards the path God has chosen for them. From what I've seen of this ceremony, it is most touching and meaningful for those people whose relatives died violently –as happens a lot in Latin American wars– or for when whole communities are decimated. Modern society is still attempting to work on this issue of closure. Witness the many flowered crosses that now dot roadsides, indicating the death of teenagers in accidents. But this old ceremony seems to have it all. The dead are told to move on instead of holding on to regrets of their unlived life and so are the living.

**Decisions to be made: Traditions, sacraments, ceremonies, rituals, and habits: which to keep, which to toss?**

Bible passage: The council at Jerusalem fifteenth chapter of the Book of Acts.

The Bible and Christianity are full of traditions and ceremonies. Some Christian ceremonies, such as weddings, are similar to ceremonies in religions in the rest of the world. Other ceremonies and traditions, such as “crossing one’s self” and making the sign of the cross across one’s chest, are peculiar to Christianity. Some rituals are only seen in certain denominations. These include crossing one’s self and making the sign of the cross. Many religious habits are required by Scripture. But some religious habits are performed because the act is important to individual Christians. Many are based in cultural or ethnic tradition. Many Christians, for instance, have a family Bible Reading at bedtime. Others would never think of going to bed without saying a bedtime prayer or praise time. My husband and I sing praises an hour every night and make intercessions for those on our prayer list. In this respect, Christianity is a religion which allows great freedom in the way one approaches God.

**So what exactly is a sacrament, a tradition, a ritual? And which ones are Biblical?**

When I was studying for my first communion --I am a charismatic Episcopalian, by the way if you ever wondered--, I was told that a sacrament is “an external sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” This means that the Church and God’s Holy Spirit work together to create a spiritual change within the person. And this spiritual change within the people involved is given lovingly and graciously by God. In the meantime, we know that something is taking place because of something that the person, pastor, or church member is doing on the outside.

There have been wild disagreements about what exactly is a “sacrament.” The Lutherans and the early Anglicans believe that a sacrament was “Jesus instituted.” By this, they meant that those traditions which Jesus began were sacraments and nothing else. Wars, hangings and burnings raged all through Europe over the doctrine of Baptism and Holy Communion. During the Reformation in England, the Protestant (Anglican) church accepted only two sacraments.

Many Protestants died rather than accept the Catholic Church’s decree that there were seven sacraments. These seven are now accepted by the modern Anglican (Episcopalian) church. Every denomination has its own ideas on what is sacramental. The Christian religion is sacramental -- seeing God in many acts and things— and this has added to the mix.

Since it is not my wish to focus on any one religion but on Christianity as a whole, I will describe as many sacramental acts as I can without too much comment. The important thing to remember is (A) these sacraments usually have some Biblical verse to back them up and (B) the power of a sacrament depends on the faith of the participants.

Some sacraments are only reserved for the clergy. This is one of the more contentious area of discussions on sacraments. The word “clergy” means preachers, priests, nuns, bishops,deacons, and others who have taken Religious Orders of some denomination. Opposing this word is the word “laity” which means the average regular Christian. This is where the dispute often begins. The Bible acknowledges that there are these distinctions: laity and clergy. But the distinction is not quite as clear-cut as many denominations have made it. For instance, in the Bible, all believers are made “ministers.” All Believers receive a “calling” and a “spiritual gift” to share with his Christian brothers and sisters and the world. The Bible also does not create a hierarchy of believers. To the Bible writers, clergy are no better than missionaries or the little old lady down the street. They are not in a permanent superior status, forever closer to God than everyone else. In fact, throughout the Bible, clergy are notorious for being far from God. God is always sending some shepherd-prophet to get the priests and nation in line. But many make sacraments only a matter of clergy.

The Biblical view is that most sacraments are for everyone. The simplest universal sacrament is prayer. When we pray, we believe that this act of praying has accomplished something in ourselves and in the world. One specific prayer sacrament is the prayer of grace over our food. When we pray and ask God’s blessing on our food, we believe that this external act of praying has made the food safe for us to eat.

Other sacraments are for us at different stages of our lives. The sacrament of marriage means that when two people marry, through the act of the church, the minister, the marriage partners and the Holy Spirit, these two people become one person. This means that they are now joined in a special way that would never have happened if they had not married. And if they divorce, this connection between them still exists. This kind of spiritual bonding can only happen in a religious ceremony because in the religious ceremony, the participants ask God to make them one. But St Paul also talks about the sexual bond that is created when two people have sexual intercourse, marriage or not. This could lead to all kinds of unintended bonds and attachments.

Other sacraments that are “rites of passages” or dependent on some stage in our lives include, Baptism, Confirmation, The Prayer for the Sick, The Prayer for those near death, Extreme Unction, commonly called the Last Rites. Baptism is the spiritual inward grace of renewal. A baby

or adult is sprinkled with water, or dipped or plunged into water. This symbolic dying --being put inside the water-- and being raised to life --coming back out of the water-- means that the baptized person is now dead to this earthly life and born again into a spiritual life because of Jesus Christ. The issue of infant baptism is a touchy one with many Christians.

Some denominations believe that only adults can be baptized. Those who do not believe in infant baptism say that the Bible doesn't show any instance of children being baptized. Those who believe in infant baptism point out that the Bible records Baptism as an act of repentance of sinners. It doesn't show what external ceremony was performed for children of those already in the church. In addition, early church records show that children were baptized at birth, based on Paul's injunction that children of those made holy are already holy. Paul didn't say how long this holiness would last, however.

The Sacrament of baptism also serves different functions in the Christian community. The Eastern church believes that the work of Jesus destroyed original sin. Therefore, for them, original sin doesn't apply to a child of a saved person and therefore since the child is not a part of the fallen world, the baptism is equivalent to a circumcision. It brings the child into the family of God and forbids the evil one from touching the child. The Roman Catholic church, because of its belief that Original Sin is ever active requires a speedy baptism for a newborn child. Many a religious Roman Catholic grand-parent have nagged a new mother to get her child baptized as quickly as possible. Many a priest has rushed to the hospital to baptize a dying newborn and to give the newborn the Last Rites. Many a supposedly dying newborn has suddenly been healed by the sacrament of baptism. Many a dying person have been raised to new life again when given the Last Rites.

Other sacraments include the Laying on of hands. Once again, there are varying interpretations. Some denominations see the laying on of hands as something done once and for all by the bishop at confirmation. (Confirmation is the sacrament of Commitment and Publicly affirming that one belongs to God) In other denominations, Baptism is more like confirmation.

Some denominations believe that the Laying on of Hands can be done at any time by a priest. Some denominations believe that all believers can lay hands on each other, as an act of praying and healing. Some denominations practice the rite of laying on of hands as a means of transferring a spiritual gift upon a person they feel God has called for a special purpose. Writers, missionaries, singers are often prayed over and blessed with a laying on of hands. And some denominations do not practice the laying on of hands at all.

Many Bible verses deal with the importance of ceremonies, traditions and rituals. These

Bible sections include Paul's letters, the book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit, (commonly called the Acts of the Apostles) and the Letter to the Hebrews. Many Bible verses concern themselves with the abuse of empty rituals, and the cruelty and stupidity of those who trust in empty rituals.

In defining what is a sacrament, the thing to remember is Paul's verse: let each man be fully convinced in his own heart.

1. Some traditions are man-made.
2. Some man-made traditions include:” the three bells rung during the Episcopalian communion, bowing and crossing one's self when one enters a church are all traditions.
3. Some traditions are forbidden in the Bible and were the cause of many deaths during the Reformation. The Protestants argued that Jesus told his followers us not to use the word “Father” as a name for any of their spiritual teachers. Yet modern Episcopalians, a Protestant denomination, often allow their congregation to call the priest “father.” The Episcopalian tradition of ringing the bells during certain parts of the service rose out of a genuine need. The bells were used in earlier centuries to signal significant moments of the service to the illiterate congregation.
4. Some traditions arise out of spiritual respect for God. Genuflecting (or bowing before the altar when one enters a church) shows a respect for God and His church. Traditions are helpful in that they remind believers of their faith. But spiritual trouble arises when these traditions overshadow the real spiritual truth and become ends in and of themselves. Many people have gotten lost inside their traditions and left God far behind. They often become enamored of sentimentality, obsessively perform religious habits and/or fall into self-worship of their religious persnickettiness. This was the problem with the Pharisees of old. The Bible tells us to worship God in our spirit. But often our spirits remain untouched while we glory in our traditions.
5. Every denomination has its own ideas on what is sacramental. The Christian religion is sacramental --seeing God in many acts and things-- and this has added to the mix.
6. Some traditions arise out of spiritual respect for God. Genuflecting shows a respect for God and His church. Traditions are helpful in that they remind believers of their faith. But spiritual trouble arises when these traditions over-shadow the real spiritual truth and become ends in and of themselves. People have gotten lost inside their traditions and left God far behind. They often become enamored of sentimentality, obsessively perform religious habits and/or fall into

self-worship of their religious persnickettiness. This was the problem with the Pharisees of old. The Bible tells us to worship God in our spirit. But often, we do not allow our spirits to be touched or affected by the true sacraments of the church because.

*Doctrine, the Word and dogma: What must be believed? What is believed? Why must certain things be believed?*

Writers will also have to be aware of the very meaning of the word “doctrine.” Among Christian denominations, the word doctrine can mean many things. For evangelicals, Catholics, Charismatics and mainstream churches, doctrines are not merely something to be assented to and agreed upon but doctrines are affirmation of power, especially the power of the word of God and the blood of Jesus. For them, doctrines are closely related to sacraments or to the power a believer possesses. For some denominations, the doctrines of a church or of Christianity in general are rules, or out-dated narrow-minded belief systems. For other denominations, the doctrines found in the Bible are slightly changed because another holy book (The Book of Mormon, etc.) Or another prophet (The Seventh Day Adventist) has superseded the Bible and interpreted certain portions in a different way.

*Rules, regulations, doctrine, etc*

A friend once said to me, “I don't like the word ‘religion’ because it means ‘bound by’ and I don't feel that we are bound by anything unless we allow ourselves to be.” The Christian answer would be that one is bound whether one is conscious of the bind or not. One can either be enslaved to God, through connecting one’s spirit to His, or to one’s self, ethnicity, race, wealth, class, nationality, childhood traumas, family habits, inner vows, family curses, tribal curses, genetic disorders or anything else that binds people together.

People don’t like rules. A Bible writer will have to understand this because people tend to think that the Bible is a book of rules. Christians might argue that those rules set people free rather than binds them and that the fact that Christianity has so many different denominations and so many cultural expressions only goes to prove that Christianity is not as rigid as people think. But trying to prove to people that “being bound by rules” is a good idea is a hard sell for a writer. The reader must be able to see that they are not free. And the writer must resist the urge to give horrific prophecies about what may or may not happen if rules aren’t obeyed.

I'll finish this section with a comment about syncretism. As modern writers, we try to be open-minded. But syncretism and the Bible do not go together. The Judeo-Christian God is pretty insistent about being a jealous god. In writing about certain sections in the Bible which might seem unfair and culturally biased, an honest Christian writer should know her audience and then either fess up about her agenda, examine only what the Bible says or avoid the Bible passage entirely. It does no good to anyone, however, to pretend that the Bible is saying something it does not say.

If you have an audience that is open-minded about history, you might try describing how a certain denomination or cult came about. You can try to show that a religion can be started simply if someone has others to believe and follow him. This might show the unBiblical aspects of certain cults but at the same time, you might end up with a reader assuming that you are "picking" on another religion.

There is also the plain fact that many Christians don't read or know their Bible. And many Christians who have read the Bible don't like it. Some Christians like Christianity because of the beautiful and wonderful things it says. Others cling to the Bible because of the ugly things it says. It says some pretty hard things about human nature - "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?" The hard sayings of the Bible can be offensive. The Bible is a book which mocks religious people as people who say, "Stand not near me because I am holier-than-thou." and which suggest that people, especially the very religious are woefully self-deceived. Paganism, non-Biblical Christianity and many other religions draw people by their beauty and their praise of humanity's nobility and humanity's possibilities. Christianity draws people by its bad assessment of humans. The cross is the offense of Christianity. But that is what makes many people love Christ because He says something they - deep in their heart - have come to know as true.

The last "semantic" problem that might lead to misunderstandings is the use of jargon. Christians of all denominations regularly use words that their own circle or denomination uses but which a new Christian or a Christian from another denomination might not misunderstand. For instance, when a Roman Catholic uses the word "saint," they are probably using it to describe a person whose holiness has been recognized by a pope and the Roman Catholic Church. When a Baptist or a Charismatic Christian uses the word, they tend to mean anyone who is a Christian, someone whose holiness may or may not be recognized. Other terms may also cause confusion. One Christian may use the phrase "The Body of Christ" to refer to fellow believers. A Catholic might use it to refer to a communion wafer. A Quaker (The Society of Friends) will understand "communion" as a spiritual coming together of all souls present at a Friend's meeting; another

Christian in another denomination will understand “communion” as receiving the symbolic bread and wine. There are countless other words which cause confusion and which should be used carefully. Some of these words or phrases are “service,” “liturgy,” “meditation,” “enter into the Body of Christ,” “receive salvation,” and even “God, the Father.”

## **What If I read a Bible story and I'm Stumped for a Meaning?**

**S**ometimes you will read a story and for the life of you, you will not be able to find any meaning in the story. At this time, you might research what others have said about this particular passage. The interpretation of others might jog your mind. In addition, there is nothing really wrong in looking at the passage with the tools of modern interpretation. If the passage appears particularly Freudian, Dantean or Jungian to you, by all means go ahead and use those schools of thought to interpret the story. Bible stories are rich and can be read on many levels. The story of Jacob's wrestling with the angel, for instance, can be seen as historical with an actual battle between Jacob and an angel. Or it can be seen as Jacob fighting with his inner self. Or Jacob fighting with the guardian spirit of the place. The story of Jacob's dream of the ladder can be interpreted as a literal dream. Or can be spiritualized to discuss Jacob entering into the realm of the subconscious. If it makes sense to you, by all means explore the story in whatever way fits. Only, don't go overboard and try to fall into some trendy new psycho-babble. Turning the story of Rebekah and Isaac into a discussion of "Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus" or seeing the battle between Esau and Jacob as an example of "Birth Order in the Bible" would be going off track.

## Know a bit of History and Research culture

Sadly, many people nowadays hate the drudgery of research. Some Christians will even say, “I am a man of one Book, the Bible.” But being a man (or woman) of one book doesn’t mean that a person reads only one book. It means that all other books are judged by “one Book.” A vastly thought. A Christian who studies the Bible law will understand the principles of Bible law much better than one who doesn’t. I dare say that a Christian lawyer would understand the principles of Spiritual law much better than the average preacher. A creative writer can understand God as Author, Bible’s themes and storytelling much better than someone who doesn’t comprehend storytelling. A Christian physician can understand the miracles in the Bible better than someone who doesn’t understand physiology.

People sometimes don’t know when to research. And often it isn’t obvious that research is necessary. How many people speak about David’s slingshot as if it were something utterly unusual and miraculous? The fact of the matter is that during David’s time the slingshot was one of the major weapons of war. Many bas-reliefs exist showing Mediterranean and Middle Eastern warriors with slingshots.

Research is necessary. Some people don’t really have to research. They are sponges; they live to watch the science and history channels on television. But even these people “should” research. The sad fact is that the world is full of assumptions, untruths, misunderstandings and lies. How many people believe that the Medieval Church believed that the sun revolved around the earth because the Bible said so? Many. But the Bible states in Job that “God hangs the earth upon nothing.” It was Aristotle who said the earth revolved around the sun. The Medieval church got its astronomical “wisdom” from the ancient Greeks and not from the Bible. The Bible, if interpreted properly is never wrong. This lack of research is apparent in all areas of life. Most Bible writers simply do not know Middle Eastern history. This can lead to misstatements of facts. But others also have such a lack of knowledge of human nature that one wonders if they were born on another planet.

For instance, many Christians don’t know that during Jesus’ lifetime, four sects dominated Judaism: The Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots, and the Essenes. The Sadducees were intellectuals and did not believe in such things as the soul or the future resurrection. The Pharisees were devout followers of the law, and are the forerunners of modern Orthodox Judaism and

Judaism. Because of their insistence on the Law, they helped to preserve Israel's uniqueness for millennia. The Zealots were revolutionaries, somewhat like today's freedom fighters whose spirituality was tied up with their desire to free Israel from its oppressors and to keep the land safe. The Essenes were a mystical sect whose writings were found along with the Dead Sea Scrolls in Qumran.. Their writings show their belief in grace, a coming Messiah who would be from the lineage of David and who would atone for the sins of the world and who would appear again a second time at the end of days. They also believed in the triune nature of the Godhead, circumcision of the heart, and laying on of hands. Their writings indicate they even practiced a kind of Lord's supper ceremony and had a form of the Beatitudes even before Jesus spoke them.

Why is all this important? Because, understanding the Jewish roots of many Christian ideas will prevent the writer from making untrue pronouncements that begin with "Christianity was the first religion to..."

This lack of research has allowed people from Mohammed and the Mormon's Joseph Smith to the author of The Da Vinci Code to make misleading statements about the Bible.

Consider the Crucifixion. Historical ignorance towards the mechanics of this extreme form of torture has created literature and religions that don't stand up to the evidence. Theories such as the swoon theory, for instance. But before we get to the swoon theory, let's examine what went into Jesus' crucifixion and see what happens when there is a lack of knowledge of history.

On the night of His arrest, Jesus went to a garden to pray. The Bible records that so intense was the torment He felt, that bloody perspiration issued from his veins when the capillaries in his sweat glands ruptured. (This description is often doubted by those who lack medical knowledge of hematidrosis or bloody sweat.) After the arrest and the various, religious, political and regional trial he endured, the assaults to Jesus' body began.

First He was scourged or "flogged." The Jewish Law of Moses recommended flogging for wrong-doers. The Torah recommended 40 lashes. But the Jewish clergy of Jesus' time ordered only 39 lashes in case of miscount. A powerful deterrent, scourging was also used by the Roman Empire. A punishment in and of itself, scourging was often a precursor to crucifixions. The Roman soldiers used a Roman flagrum, a cat-o-nine tails made of leather whose tail end split into two or three thongs in which small pieces of bone, metal or glass were attached. The scourging left the skin ripped from the back, torso, and legs, with exposed tissue, leading to much loss of blood. Already hypersensitive from the hematidrosis, Jesus' skin would have been even more sensitized to the scourging. The soldiers further assaulted Jesus by plucking out hairs from His beard and forcing

Him to wear a crown made from a thorny large-spiked plant. In this weakened condition, Jesus then carried the crosspiece of His cross to Golgotha, the Skull Place where He was to be crucified.

Sleepless, beaten, stumbling ahead under a heavy load, bruising His forehead and possibly breaking His nose after falling several times, Jesus was so battered that the Roman soldiers forced a passer-by to carry His cross. Arriving at Golgotha, the soldiers stripped Jesus of His clothes, exposing His beaten body to the elements and set about nailing Him to the cross. Thick seven-inch Roman spikes were thrust through His wrists and one nail through both ankles. Then He was lifted up for all to see.

Crucifixion was a precise art. Depending on how quickly or how painfully the authorities wanted the punishment to be, the accused criminal could be crucified in many ways. Jesus was charged with treason unlike. It was necessary, therefore, that Jesus suffer as a deterrent. But Jesus' crucifixion fell before a holy day and a dead body left hanging on a cross would be a sacrilege to the Jewish people. Therefore Jesus had to die painfully but quickly. The right kind of cross was needed.

Scholars disagree as to the exact cause of death in crucifixion. The probable causes were a combination of shock, suffocation and cardiac failure. Suspended by his wrists, with his feet weighted down and fastened in one position, the crucified offender found movement difficult. The condemned had only two choices of movement. The accused could either pull himself up into a "T" position, arms outstretched in order to breathe. Or he could rest in the "Y" position, which took the burden off the feet but which made breathing difficult. A crucified man found it hard to move. And yet, he had to move or die. Some crucifixions, usually for people who were meant to linger, used ropes to hold up the outstretched arms of the condemned. Some crosses had a sedile built in. A sedile was a small stool-like apparatus on which the condemned could almost sit. In Jesus' case, no sedile was used. The importance of the knees - and the prophecy that his bones will not be broken is clearly seen. If the soldiers wanted death to come quickly, they broke the knees of the accused and prevented him from elevating himself in order to breathe. The soldiers would also give wine and myrrh to the dying men as a kind of painkiller and to ease the burning thirst crucifixion caused. At first, Jesus did not take the sedative when it was offered to Him, preferring to suffer the fullness of the pain. But knowing Scripture must be fulfilled, he drank it, lifted himself up in order to speak and breathe and shouted with his last breath, "It is finished!" ("Debt Cancelled.") After His death, the officiating centurion pierced Him in the side, through the pericardium of his heart, ensuring death.

Even with all this historical evidence of the gospels and the Roman Empire's effective skills,

certain theories arose after Jesus' death whose main purpose was to debunk Jesus' death and resurrection. These theories are all based on ignorance of the historical fact of crucifixion.

One of the first theories was first posited by Mohammed in the Koran. This is known as the Switch. Mohammed claimed that Allah switched Jesus with someone else and it wasn't Jesus who died but someone else. The real Jesus, Mohammed states, was sneakily taken up into Heaven by God. Thus in making God too good to kill an honest man, Mohammed makes God a liar and deceiver. The problem with this theory is this: even if the real Jesus did not die on the cross, where is the body? The Jewish Sanhedrin through their lie attest that the tomb was empty. The priests knew that Jesus died. They had seen His dead body hanging on the cross for three hours. And didn't the disciples notice that the body was not their leader? Mohammed believed in Jesus' Virgin Birth. But he did not understand why Jesus was born of a Virgin, which is that the redemption of sinful man came through the female line.

Honestly, if God makes one person look like another, then God is slick and dishonest. If God helped Jesus with His Holy Spirit, as many Moslems believe, why couldn't he save Him from the cross? And if Jesus could raise the dead, why shouldn't he raise Himself? If God rescued Him by raising Him to heaven, why make someone else look like Him? Why not show everyone that He had rescued Jesus? Isn't there a chance that what Allah meant when he said "this was not so" was not that God slipped another in Jesus' place but that Jesus did not die forever? God doesn't deceive but he does raise from the dead. Creating another being to look like Jesus would be deception and not Godly at all. The gospel states that Jesus was crucified. The Koran tells us to believe the people of the Book. If we don't believe the gospel, then we aren't agreeing with the Koran. Why didn't the "other man" defend himself and say he was not Jesus on the cross?

There is also the swoon theory. This is the most common theory and shows how far people will go in order to deny the resurrection. According to this theory, Jesus did not die on the cross. He merely fainted and then revived in the tomb. After reviving, He appeared before His followers then disappeared into the Roman Empire. The people who believe this theory are not knowledgeable about crucifixions, the facts the Bible declares, or the effects of trauma. Let's debunk this theory. Remember that Jesus died at three in the afternoon. His dead body hung in the Y position, after being pierced by a Roman lancia, upon the cross for several hours before sunset impelled the soldiers to take down the crucified bodies. Secondly, people in ancient times knew death much better than we do. They personally handled their dead. If the swoon theory is to be believed, then neither one in Jesus' family realized they were burying a warm body. Then, after the beaten

hemorrhaging body was placed in the airless cold stone tomb in a winding sheet weighed down with 75 pounds of gelatinous myrrh, Jesus revived from his swoon. And although, sleep-deprived, naked, bleeding profusely and hungry, He rose from the cold slab, neatly folded the linen he was wrapped in, rolled away the heavy stone overpowered several healthy professionally-trained guards. After this, He managed to discover where his cowardly disciples were hiding and traveled bleeding and naked through the city unnoticed until He found them. The disciples, in turn, when they saw Him were so crazed with hallucination that they immediately proclaimed that He was the Lord of life.

There are other theories which also subtly show a lack of commonsensical knowledge. One theory, often called the Passover Plot, and mentioned in the gospels as being invented by the Jewish leaders of the time states that the disciples stole the body while the guards slept. The first question here is: are these guards Roman soldiers - who would be killed if they slept - or Jewish temple guards? Another problem with this lie is that the guards are testifying to something that happened while they slept.” A sleeping witness is strange enough. But the lie is even stranger to accept because it doesn’t take into consideration the history of the disciples and our knowledge of human nature. Are we to believe that Jesus’ cowardly disciples - people who fled the arresting guards and deserted Jesus at the cross - stole His body, hid it, accepted persecution, death and mockery for years and yet never - not one single person – revealed the nature of the hoax? Surely, someone would have gotten tired of this kind of perverse life and death game and brought Jesus’ decaying body out from its hiding place for all to see!

Another theory is the disciples forgot Jesus’ burial place in all their excitement. Because of this, they thought that Jesus was resurrected. Surely, all the disciples could not have communally forgotten the same thing...for years! Once again, knowledge of human history and common sense declares that common sense is missing. Besides, if fanatics are roaming around declaring a resurrection, the Jewish or Roman authorities would have showed their stupidity by bringing the decaying body out for all to see.

Debunkers also try to say that the disciples were deluded about Jesus’ post-death appearances. The gospels state that Jesus appeared to women. Let us be real here. Any man two thousand years ago who wanted to create a religious tradition would not pin such an important event on women. Women were not to be believed. In addition, many say that the vision on the road to Emmaus in which Jesus’ uncle Cleopas saw him is a hallucination typical of those experienced by the newly-bereaved. However, the people in the Emmaus vision, do not recognize Jesus, whereas in the essential bereavement vision the bereaved always recognize the deceased. Other historical

inaccuracies surrounding the resurrection state that Jesus never said he was God or the son of God. But the Bible clearly states that this is what Jesus' declared crime of blasphemy was about he said he was the King of the Jews, the Messiah, the Son of God.

It is the nature of unbelief to try to disprove Jesus's claim and one of the biggest attempts at debunking comes from the Koran which was written by one man six hundred years after Jesus' resurrection, four hundred years after the Christian Bible was accepted, and two thousand years after the Hebrew Bible was compiled. Yet it goes so far as to say that these religions that came before it are wrong. Nevertheless, a careful study of the Koran – like a careful study of the Book of Mormon—will show contradictions and errors. There is even evidence that Mohammed's theology of Jesus changed throughout the years he wrote the Koran. And I'm not even talking about the Satanic Verses Mohammed thinks slipped in. In the Koran God is often made to contradict himself. (Like the Mormon God. Except that the Mormon God contradicts what he said in the Holy Bible.)

Here are a few examples:

Jesus is the Christ and was indeed born of a Virgin. sura 21:91 (Interesting that they think he has no human father and accept him as a prophet yet don't accept that He is a special "son" of God.) Mohammed believed he was sent specifically to the people of Arabia - a people who did not have a prophet of their own. He said:

"We have made it a Quran in Arabic, that ye may be able to understand." (Sura 43:3).

"Before this was the Book of Moses as a guide and a mercy; And this book confirms (it) in the Arabic tongue." (Sura 46:12).

"Thus have We sent by inspiration to thee an Arabic Quran: That thou mayest warn the mother of cities (i.e. Mecca) and all around her." (Sura 42:7).

"Verily this is a Revelation from the Lord of the Worlds: With it came down the Spirit of Faith and Truth to thy heart and mind that thou mayest admonish (warn) in the perspicuous Arabic tongue. Without doubt it is (announced) in the mystic Books of former peoples." (Sura 26:192-196).

"An Arabic Quran have We sent down that you may understand it." (Sura 12:2).

Read also: Suras 16:103; 41:3-4, 43-44; 39:28; 20:113.

Note the term "Arabic Quran." Quran means "reading" or "recitation" Mohammed was saying his book was the Version sent to his Arabic people. This implies that he thinks there was an Book not given to his people.

According to the Koran Jesus was better and unique above all the other prophets:

He was born of a virgin (Suras 19:16-34, 21:91), (Sura 3:47) was sinless (Sura 19:19) unlike the other prophets such Adam Suras 2:36, 7:22-23, Abraham Sura 26:82, Moses Sura 28:15-16, Jonah Sura 37:142, David Sura 38:24-25 and even Mohammed Suras 40:55, 47:19, 48:1-2, 33:36-38; and of course everyone else in the world.

Jesus also ascended to heaven (Suras 4:158, 3:55) (Sura 19:33). and he is the one who will return to earth and whom God will use to judge mankind, (Sura 43:61). In addition, Jesus came with signs to prove His identity (Sura 5:113). (Sura 3:49). No other prophet came with signs to prove how special they are. In fact Jesus is so special that Sura 21:91 says "We made her (Mary) and her son (Jesus) a sign for *all* people." ALL people.

But some portions of the Koran doesn't agree with the Bible or even with history:

For instance, the Koran – a book supposedly narrated by the angel Gabriel—states that Alexander the Great was one of God's holy ones and that he lived to a ripe old age. Alexander the Great lived a debauched life and died at age 33. The Koran also seems to confuse Miriam (Moses' sister) with Miriam (Mary, Jesus' mother.)

Other portions of the Koran agree with the Bible, even going so far as to affirm the Bible.

"Say ye: 'We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, *and* to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, *and* that given to Moses, and Jesus, *and* that given to all prophets from their Lord: WE MAKE NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ONE AND ANOTHER OF THEM.'" (Sura 2:136).

"Say: 'We believe in Allah, and in what has been revealed to us *and* what is revealed to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, *and* the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between one and another among them ...'" (Sura 3:84). But in other places, the Koran disagrees with the Bible and tells everyone should follow ISLAM, (Sura 34:28). The Koran honors Jesus Christ with many titles.

**Example (Sura 43:57), Teacher (Sura 2 :136), Witness (Sura 5:117), Righteous (Sura 6:85), Healer (Sura 5:110), mercy (Sura 19:21), messenger (Sura 5:78), prophet (Sura 33:7), servant (Sura 4:171), sign (Sura 19:34, 21:91), word of truth (Sura 19:34), honorable (Sura 3:45), blessed (Sura 19:32), sinless (Sura 19:19), and One confirmed with the Spirit of God (Sura 5:109).**

**It also calls Him the *Word of God* (Sura 4:171) and it commands its followers to honor Jesus Christ (Sura 3:45) and declares in (Sura 5:46) that the Gospel (Injil) of Jesus Christ is *guidance and light* to those who fear Allah. Sura al-Maryam 19:33 - "Peace on me the day I**

**was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive." In this verse is a clear confession that Christ became incarnate and died and was raised from the dead in the form of a prophecy and based on a miracle.**

So the Koran agrees with the gospel in many things. Some of the things it doesn't agree on include which sins which cannot be forgiven in Islam

Murderers can never be forgiven according to the Koran. "Whoso slayeth a believer of set purpose, his reward is hell forever. Allah is wroth with him and hath cursed him and prepared for him an awful doom." (Sura 4:93)

Those who leave the faith can never be forgiven either: "Lo! those who disbelieve after their profession of belief, and afterward grow in infidelity, their repentance will never be accepted. And such are those who are astray." (Sura 3:90)

Sura 5:75 states that this is impossible for God to procreate. Like the early Mormons, Mohammed seems to believe that Christians think God actually had sex with Mary.

They don't believe in God becoming man, but they believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. "How shall I have a boy, seeing that man has not touched me. nor have I been a harlot?" (Sura 19:20). The account goes on to say that "so shall it be! Thy Lord has said: 'It is easy for me,' and in order that we may make him a sign for the people" (Sura 19:20). Sura 21:91 and 66:12 stated about Mary that "who (Mary) guarded her chastity, so we breathed into her some of our spirit."

John 10:30: In the Gospel by John Jesus said, "I and My Father are one." He did not say he and his father are "two"! Christians therefore believe that God is one: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Muslims often think we believe in three gods. The Koran says that Allah supported Christ and strengthened Christ so that he could do miracles. (Sura al-Ma'ida 5:110). The Qur'an says he could not perform by himself alone, but always with the help of the Spirit sent to him by Allah. This means that Allah, his Spirit and Christ cooperated in active unity in the Koran.

The Arabic word for sign is *ayatun*, read together with Allah results in "Ayatollah," which means "the unique miracle of Allah." Christ is the true Ayatollah because (Sura Maryam 19:21) states: We will make him a sign for mankind and a mercy from "us"

Christ is the only male Ayatollah whom Allah himself appointed as a sign for all people. In him the striking texts of Genesis 1:26 and John 14:9 have been accomplished.

"In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful!" The Compassionate (al-Rahman) is God the Father, the Merciful (al-Rahim) is the Holy Spirit and the mercy (al-Rahmat) itself is 'Isa, the son of Mary. All three carry the same substance in themselves. Allah revealed to Mohammed: "We have not sent you except as a mercy for the worlds" (Sura al-Anbiya' 21:107).

If we study Suras Al 'Imran 3:39,45; al-Nisa' 4:171; Maryam 19:34 ... (Suras Al 'Imran 3:47,55; al-Nisa' 4:158,171; al-Anbiya' 21:91; al-Tahrim 66:12... Suras Al 'Imran 3:55 and al-Nisa' 4:158). ... Sura al-Ma'ida 5:116-117) and compare them to (John 1:1-14). (1 Peter 1:3-10; 5:10) (1 John 4:13-15; 5:12,20) (1 Timothy 2:4-6; 2 Corinthians 13:14) (John 11:25-26). (2 Corinthians 13:14)

Another case where knowing history is really helpful occurs when dealing with the Book of Mormon, which strangely is like Islam in many ways. While Islam believes in one God and Mormons believe in many gods, they do have the following in common: Founders involved in polygamy, an angel bringing another "true" book, the idea that the Bible has been corrupted, the woman's salvation being dependent on her husband, the search for a holy city, the emphasis on works, a sensual heaven where husbands have many wives. The seeds lead to the fruit. You know a religion's seed by its fruit.

We must research and study those --like Muslims and Mormons—who say our Bible contains errors while saying (with a straight face) that their books are error-free. The Quran for instance states in Sura 41:9,10,12 that the world was created in eight days. But in Sura 10:3 it says the world was created in six days. The Koran contradicts itself in many places. In addition, there are many historical inaccuracies. Certainly if God wrote the book, He should know history. If the Koran states that Alexander the Great (Surah 18:89-98) was a holy muslim who lived to an old age and history states that Alexander thought he could become a god, worshiped many false Greek gods, and died when he was thirty-three years old then we really have to figure out which is right. In Surah 7:120-125, the Koran states that Pharoah used crucifixion but the Egyptians did not. Crucifixion started with the Babylonian Empire and was perfected by the Roman Empire. The Koran is also very confused about both Judaism and Christianity. It states in Surah 20:90-100 that a

Samaritan helped to build the golden calf, yet Samaritans didn't exist until years later. It states that the Jews believe that Ezra is the son of God (Surah 9:30) and Jews never believed that. It states that Mary, Jesus' Mother, was the sister of Moses and Aaron. (Surah 19:28) It states that Christians believe in three Gods: Father, Mother (Mary), and Son. The biggest question is if Allah is the God who allows and commands the world incidents according to his supreme will, why did he allow Christians and Jews to continue believing something so wrong for so long?

Like Muslims, the Mormon Church states that the Bible is wrong, corrupted, badly-translated, fallible. I'd let this go because I don't like picking on other religions but hey, if a religion's genesis is rooted in picking on the Bible, I'll have to get into the fray. Unlike the Bible, earlier versions of the Koran or the Book of Mormon have mysteriously disappeared from sight. The Muslims claim that there has only been one version of the Koran but history seems to show this assertion as untrue. The various versions of the Bible are all available. Nor do most versions of the Bible disagree in content, merely in word choice.

The Tanakh (old testament) portion of the Bible had been accepted by the Jewish people for 3000 years. The Jewish people went through a big complicated process to make sure all the books were copied properly. For instance, the Isaiah found in the Dead Sea Scrolls is virtually the same as that found in modern Jewish and Christian Bibles. The New Testament Bible books were originals written by people who knew Jesus or the first disciples and were copied over and over and the group of Bishops simply added the stamp of approval on them to prevent the Gnostics from adding strange books. There are about 12,000 copies of them found from that time. Compare that with Ceasar's biography (12 books) and Oedipus Rex (2 copies) And all those copies agree with the exceptions of minor issues. So it's very hard to say that the Bible is wrong. For instance Paul wrote his letter to the church in Colossae. Copies of it were sent to Colossae. Copies of the copies were sent to the Laodiceans. Copies of these copies were sent to other churches and zillions of these same copies are found in Africa, Asia, and Europe. This occurs for all of the books in the Bible. The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, has many books and none of these books have any original documents.

While the Mormon God is "the god of this world," the Christian God says he is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the God of the heavens and the earth. In the psalms, David praises the God who makes the heavens in the same breath he praises the God who made earthly things. The Christian God makes a point of saying he's a jealous God and

that there is no other God beside him and to worship all other gods is idolatry. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 8:5, Paul mentions the demon gods and forbidden food people have been eating.

The Mormon church also denies the very notion of absolute grace which makes Christianity so unique. A Christian knows he is saved forever, that all her sins (past, present, and future) were paid for on the cross. A Mormon has to do a lot of his own work to actually be counted worthy to attain heaven. For Christians, heaven and sonship is a gift given to all people...even while we are sinners. Romans 3:10, 20-28 makes the point that it is Jesus blood alone that is the work we must believe in.

Romans 4:3-5 states that faith is credited as righteousness, not works. I Corinthians states that God has chosen the base, ignoble, mean things of the world to put to shame the noble and the great because He wants no one boasting in self-righteousness.

The Book of Mormon is also a scientific challenge. DNA has shown that the native Americans are not genetically like Jews. There are Jews in China, Europe, India, Africa, the US and they all share many of the same alleles...despite their genetic changes. But none of them have anything in common with Native Americans. The book of Mormon linguistically doesn't really sound like the Hebrew poetics or figures of speech. Native American languages have nothing in common Hebrew, Hebrew poetry, Hebrew thought, semitic or Egyptian linguistics. The Book of Mormon is wrong about history and geography. It mentions silks, chariots, horses, oxen, cows, chickens, steel, etc...when none of these were ever found in the Western Hemisphere.

The Book of Mormons seems obviously translated directly into King James Version and is written in a kind of pseudo Elizabethan English. Joseph Smith lived in 18th century America... so why write in a language that people in England spoke 300 years before? It's been repaired about 5000 times to get rid of these glaring mistakes so when someone says it is God's last word, I wonder.

Bible Books about Monotheism: Isaiah 43:10-11, Is 44:6-8, Isaiah 45:5-6, Isaiah 45:12, 18-22 Isah 40:22, Is 46:8-9, Job 38:31-33, John 1:3

The Bible says that God is three. It says about Jesus the same thing it says about God: Infinite, eternal and uncreated, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present, unchanging.

Psalms 91 says the heavens declare the glory of God. Why would the heavens -- with all those

different gods-- be declaring the glory of earth's God, if every planet as its own god?

Rev 2:18-19. John 1:48, 2:23 Rev 1:18, 21:5-7, 22:12-13, 16 Matt 18:20, 28:20

Jesus is called God. John 1:1, 5:18, 10:30-33, 20:28 Colossians 2:9-10 1 Tim 3:16 Titus 2:12-13  
Hebrews 1:8

Jesus is the Creator of all John 1:3, Colossians 1:15-17 Hebrews 1:10

Some interesting question pops up with one has different gods over different worlds: if Jesus is the savior of this world, and if good Mormons work themselves up to godhead, if they end up with creations who fall, will they also sacrifice themselves to save the people on their planet? If a comet were coming from another region of space toward us, could the Mormom god of this world stop it? Would he have authority to do so?

Churches have not added or taken away anything from the Bible. The different versions of the Bible are different in translations, not actual versions: some translations such as the Ebonics Bible are for people who don't speak standard English. Some translations are more heady. Some translations are just plain old. But all translations and all churches are never-the-less the same book. Compare the Bible verses with Mormon verses and read all those verses in context. You'll see how wrong the Book of Mormon is. The Book of Mormon has sections lifted from the King James Bible, where Joseph Smith "straightened out" sections...for example in Isaiah. But since when you read these sections in context, you realize he hadn't read the passage correctly. For instance if you compare Isah 2:9 KJV with II Nephi 12:9 (Utah version Book of Mormon) you'll see what Smith did. At first it looks as if he fixed the Bible, but then you realize he took something out of context because he didn't understand what Isaiah was talking about. The translators of the manuscript on which the KJV was based did not have the linguistic research we now have. Whenever they came upon a passage which did not make sense with their limited linguistic skills, they made it make sense by putting in italicized words. These italicized words were put in to show that the KJV Elizabethan translators were making a guess at the meaning of the passage. The Book of Mormon, which is supposedly translated from the golden tablets, have these same italicized words from the King James Version. Why would Joseph Smith put that in in his "translation"

Another point is this: Jesus didn't say that a burning in the heart was what would prove his words or his testament true. He said the gospel would be proved with power. Healings, etc.

Christians are also warned against false prophecies and false revelations:

In some of his prophecies, Joseph Smith said that men live on the moon are tall dress like Quakers and live to be 1000 years old. (The young woman's journal) Vol 3, p 263. Brigham young said men inhabit the sun (Journal of Discourses vol 13, p 271) Joseph Smith prophesied that Jesus would return by 1891 (history of the church vol 2, p182)

The Book of Mormon has been changed at least 5000 times. But how could it be when there is no original document to compare it against? The Book of Mormon tends to change whenever someone finds something ridiculous in it and challenges the Mormon Church, then the Mormon Church embarassingly, changes things around. The book was far more racist, silly, and scientifically wrong than it is now. The Bible has never been changed. In all the translations, the basic meanings of the passages have been changed. The Mormon church claims that Christianity has too many denominations but the Book of Mormon has about 3000 splinter groups...each with differing ideas of what the book of mormon really is.

Mormonism is not Christianity. I think one of the questions we have to ask ourselves is this: The Bible has over 12,000 copies from antiquity. All of these copies say pretty much the same thing...with the exception of some grammatical errors. The Book of Mormon is translated from a lost original. The golden plates. And these golden plates are lost. How can we know if something is translated rightly -- and what language it was even written in-- if the only copy of a document is lost?

The Bible has never changed. The Jewish scribe were methodical about copying everything perfectly. The Book of Mormon which has no original documents and no copies at all...has been changed 4000 times. Why has it been changed? Certainly if it was a work of God it would not be changed. Joseph Smith cannot judge the Bible. Like Mohammed he rewrites the works of many major prophets. The Bible contains no error. The Book of Mormon has wheat, barley, flax, horses, oxen, domestic animals, in the western hemisphere. None of which existed here.

For those dealing with Mormonism, here is an article from an ex-Mormon that may prove useful.

<http://nielsenhayden.com/GodandI.html>

A good book to read is also: Mormons Answered Verse by Verse by David Reed

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## Time and Culture Affect Bible Interpretation

I am always amazed at how unaware people are of the fact that although the Bible is God's word, that time changes. Right now, I see many people wondering if they should continue reading my book. Did I just say that time changes? Am I implying that the Bible is not for all time? No I'm not. Read on.

Let us look at the verse that says single people are better able to serve God than married people because a married woman is busy thinking about her household, her family and her husband. (1 Cor 7:32) This verse is used all the time by singles to show that they can serve God better than their married counterparts. Is this verse still true today?

In Paul's day, married couples lived in large groups with members of their extended family. Brothers, unmarried aunts unmarried sisters, grandparents, children all lived under the same roof. Single people had time to do spiritual work. An unmarried woman had chores, of course, but not as many as her married counterpart. Contrast this with the single person of our day. While many married women are at home, taking care of the house and then going to the gym, they generally have more freedom now than their single sisters. A single person nowadays has not only her own living to make, but she has to take care of her own household. Tell me: after getting up at 6:00 am to commute by train or bus to work and returning home at 6 or seven, the single woman is too pooped to do much for God. The married woman on the other hand, has greater freedom during the week to either visit the gym or the sick before the kids come home.

Another example: We live in the Modern world. The modern world is not like the world of the Bible readers. But neither is it the world of Columbus. In the time of Columbus, many believed that the world was flat. They believed this not because the Bible said, but because they studied Aristotle and this is what Aristotle believed. Despite the fact that the Bible says in Job, God hangs the earth like a ball in the air. But many people seem to forget that history affects everything. They complain that the Christian church created this belief in a flat world during Columbus' time. Not true. As I have said, Aristotle was greatly honored during the times of Copernicus and Galileo. The Church's mistake was not rooted in the Bible but in their love of Greek wisdom. Think of the Crusades. In the middle ages, many went off to battle in Christ's name when the Arabs took Jerusalem from the Jews and Christians who had formerly lived there. Whether or not the Crusades was a good idea, it would be good for a Bible study writer to understand that the idea of a physical "holy war" is not Christian. Christians are called to fight through prayer. St Paul says the method of

our warfare is not physical, materialistic or carnal but spiritual. The Crusaders borrowed the idea of Jihad, Islamic holy war, from the Koran. The Crusades were not a Christian idea.

Whether it is prejudice, discrimination or “science,” it is always a good idea to know if your particular “interpretation” of a Bible story is based in what the Bible actually says or if another culture has affected it.

## Beware of the Deeply Shallow

**T**his chapter is made specifically for devotional writers but can also be applied in certain instances to writers of Bible studies. A writer of devotional wants to share the insights she has received. It is as if Truth and Wonder are chomping at the bit, waiting to be let loose upon the race of life. But a note of caution here: Remember that you do not know the lives of your readers. A reader might be in the middle of a difficult situation. A reader might have experienced sorrows you have never dreamed off. Your insights into a Bible passage or an incident in your life might open a window of insight that might heal or help the reader through a day, a week, a month, a lifetime. Or it might cause a great deal of damage. Or, your devotional might mean nothing to the reader. Or your wonderful piece of wisdom might cause a reader to roll her eyes that such blatant sentimentality could be printed.

As further warning, let us consider the following phrases:

“God never gives us more than we can handle.”

“God answers prayers sometimes by saying “No.”

“It’s been ten years since my daughter’s suicide and we have come together to celebrate her death.”

These all fall into the category of “facile spiritual answers.” They seem deep to the would-be comforter. But they are more likely to bring offense and grief than comfort. These are hand-me-down spiritualities that are not particularly Biblical and they may not have been experienced by the writer. And even if they were a source of comfort to the writer, remember the old saying that “one man’s meat is another man’s poison.” Just as you might like chamomile tea and another person might be deathly allergic to it, remember that all spiritual meat is not right for everyone. Some writers might take this to mean that the reader cannot accept their gem of wisdom because the reader is not as spiritually mature as she is. But this is not necessarily true. The comfort which comforted you might not be enough for someone else. Words such as “all”, “everyone”, “everything”, “nothing,” etc are especially frowned upon. Be aware of this and in all your writings

try to be mindful of possible needed qualifiers.

The writer should be aware of word choices or the possibility of alienating a reader. This is especially important if the devotional is about traumatic events such as death, suicide, suffering, homosexuality, etc. Readers want to feel they can trust a writer. If a writer seems to be skirting an issue, to be unaware of a challenge to her argument, to be purposely avoiding or belittling an issue she will not be trusted. Remember, the reader of your devotional can always put down your essay if they become offended. They may even feel the writer is angry, harsh, judgmental or self-righteous. Devotionals and Bible studies share much with Sermons, their spiritual partner. However sermons are often oral, taking place before an audience. Speeches cannot be reproduced as devotionals without a little tweaking. Something that works wonderfully in one setting may fall flat in another. A great speech may fall with an embarrassing thud when it is read. Why? Because the human voice carries emotion. The printed text does not. A joke said with a smile in a sermon or speech might bring responsive smiles in one's church but read by those who don't know the writer, that same joke might seem arrogant or cold when read. Remember, if the reader doesn't know your heart entirely, you must explain all things to make her fully understand. In addition, a writer might neglect mentioning a particular point because her usual audience shares her point of view. (Heaven, hell, homosexuality, etc) But a larger audience is made up of people with differing experiences and beliefs. The writer does not need to curry favor with her audience, but she must be aware of what she has or has not said, and of what is "falsely obvious" to her or else she might seem deceptive, insensitive, or stupid.

Another kind of deeply shallow mistake can occur when a writer does a bit of scripture twisting by leaving intentionally certain portions of a Bible verse out of an article. It's a subtle kind of deceit. Consider the phrase, "Love and do what you like." The original statement was "Love God and do what you like."

This kind of tampering is often done when the writer has an agenda. As I've stated, there is no problem with agendas per se, but if one of your readers sees through your manipulations, you'll lose his respect immediately. Remember a healthy proportion of your readers will know their Bibles well.

Here are a few examples:

The Bible states:

“God is able to make all things work together for good for those who love Him.”

I have seen the above shortened to “All things work together for good to those who love.”

The Bible states:

“Now there is no condemnation in Christ and to them who are the called according to His purposes.”

The above has been shortened to “There is no condemnation in Christ.”

The Bible states:

“God is able to do exceedingly above all we are able to ask or wish according to the power that worketh in us.”

The above has been shortened to “God is able to do exceedingly above all we are able to ask or wish.”

The Bible states:

“If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, then you will know the Truth and the Truth will set you free.”

The above has been shortened to “the truth will set you free.”

The main thing to remember is that certain topics are hot topics. The act of comforting is an art, and those who do it well are usually those who have experienced great suffering and who know how to keep silent while observing another person’s life. What must be apparent to the reader is that you are being honest and that your devotional is the answer to your prayer or the resolution to the situation because you saw something that had the Lord's fingerprints on it.

We also fall into the danger of being deeply shallow when we explore characters whom we have been trained to see as evil. Some character studies follow which examines these often maligned characters.

## **CHARACTER STUDIES**

## Cain

### Genesis Chapter 4

**S**capegoats in Bible studies come in two wide categories: those people we dislike because they were in opposition to one of God's people whom we have raised to the place of "sacred cow." This kind of scapegoat is a scapegoat by association because if a sacred cow is created, then those who "oppose" him must necessarily be considered evil. This category of scapegoats includes people such as Hagar, Michal, and Job's wife.

The other kind of scapegoating is much subtler. These Bible characters are usually people who have truly done something reprehensible and evil. Thus, on the one hand, they really should be disliked. Yet, the scorn and dislike heaped upon them seem a bit excessive when God's loving grace and other characters in the Bible are studied. Often the character's evil is very like our own but because we have so demonized them we cannot see our similarity to them. In this category are characters such as Cain, our first "scapegoat." We should ask ourselves why Moses' crime of murder is so easily excused, yet Cain's is not? Why do we compare ourselves to Moses and yet never compare ourselves to Cain?

#

The story of Cain and Abel is full of many first: the first attempt to worship God, the first religious war, the first homicide, the first mention of sin, the first act of grace, the first city, the first snide pun. Readers of this story are right to be angry with Cain. After all, he murdered his brother. As someone who has committed fratricide, he is a horror to us. And he should be. Yet, by rushing to demonize him, we easily forget how very much like Cain most of us are.

In the beginning of the story we find two brothers. One, the first-born, is named Cain or "Gotten." The other is named Seth or "Vanity." Both were children of Eve "Mother" and Adam "Human." These children were born after the expulsion from the garden.

The story of Cain is a story about a character who commits a murder. It contains elements of bitterness, rage, grief, religious mania and temporary insanity. Lessons gleaned from this story are many and a listing of them is not necessary. Most Christians know that some sacrifices --however well-meant-- are not pleasing to God, that there is no redemption without blood, that humanity resents God's authority, that we are unable to bear our own religious imperfection. But why is Cain's remorse and God's grace not spoken of more?

One would think that Cain's remorse and God's subsequent protection of him would mark

him (pun intended) as one of the first recipients of God's grace.

When God tells Cain that the consequence of the homicide – one cannot really say that Cain committed murder because although he had seen an animal die it is unclear if Cain really knew that his brother could actually “die.” – Cain is remorseful.

He is told that the earth has rejected him and is at war with him. The ground, which was already cursed because of Adam's sin, is now taking particular aim at Cain because of this crime. Whereas the curse against Adam was that the earth would not yield its fruits easily, in Cain's case, the ground is not cursed but is a curser. It simply refuses to yield its strength to Cain. All the biological kingdom is against him. With both agricultural and animal husbandry behind him, all he can do now is to wander the earth and create a city, the only non-organic growth he is allowed. Cain is doomed to become homeless and a fugitive in the earth. But the problem is that Cain anticipates the Eye for an Eye law. He understands justice: Nemesis and the avenger will seek to slay him. The would-be avenger could be anything earthly or spiritual. He could be slain by his siblings, by angelic or demonic beings, by wild animals, by anyone. Whether this is paranoia born of guilt or a true spiritual understanding of the kind of thing that happens to murderers, Cain is inconsolable. His crime of murder was so heinous that all living things are horrified by it and wish to remove him from the world.

I have heard many ministers who preach against the evils of hell say that Cain feels sorry and is remorseful because he hates his punishment. My question is: what's wrong with that? They imply that such self-involved reaction is not really true remorse. But is this tendency to only forgive people who “really, really, really, feel guilty” Godlike?

Most of us are as self-centered as Cain. The more we become like God the more we are able to see the hurt we have caused our fellow humans. Selfish remorse, as far as I'm concerned, is a good start. But what often begins to happen in discussions about Cain is that once we begin to question how guilty Cain “actually feels” then we begin to give ourselves the right to withhold compassion from him because he is sorry only for himself. This is the beginning of the process, this is where we begin to lose our identification with Cain and to scapegoat him as someone whom we Christians have a “right” to judge and dislike.

We do this although God's grace and forgiveness is on Cain. When Cain cries out to God: “My punishment is greater than I can bear”, God gives him a visible mark of grace. This mark tells any creature --earthly or otherwise-- to that God is Cain's avenger. The would-be avenger is warned by the mark and Cain now becomes the first of many murderer-prophets, a living symbol of

God's forgiveness and grace. Cain later makes a heaven out of his hell, and finally creates an alternate Eden, a new home.

This is how the story ends, and yet we often prefer to see Cain as unforgiven. Why this relentless unforgiveness on our part? Why this refusal to accept someone whom God has accepted? Don't we sometimes do this even now?

Some will argue that the mark of Cain was put there to keep Cain safe. By using this argument, they want to hold on to the righteous judgement they have against Cain. But what if the mark of Cain was really a sign of salvation and grace? What then do we do? Would it be hard to accept the quite evil Cain as a redeemed saint? Would it be hard to accept a repentant sinner without continually referring to his past crimes? Are we not all evil people who have been redeemed?

The Christian community doesn't know for sure if Cain was redeemed or not. But we do know that Jesus said that only God is good. As students of the Bible, we often make two great mistakes. First, although we acknowledge God's grace, nevertheless we often try to see goodness in those people whom God has been gracious to. Abraham, for instance, had great faith. But he was a man who committed many sins. God loved Abraham because of Abraham's faith, not because of Abraham's goodness. Goodness helps of course, but God loves and rewards those who have faith in Him. Our need to impure goodness to a Bible character whom God loves shows that although we believe the gospel, we really are die-hard moralists.

The other error made by Christians in judging Bible characters is more self-serving. It is a problem of identification. Jeremiah tells us that "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9) When we intend to judge a Bible character, we often say, "if I were in this person's position, I would not have done that." For instance, we all say that we "understand" Cain's jealousy, yet inevitably we will say "but I would never have done that." Or we might say, "If what happened to Job and his wife happened to me, I would never tell Job to lose his integrity and divorce God." But the fact remains that we have indeed sinned in areas where we judge others. We have big logs in our own eyes and it is more than a little "self-serving" to identify with the Sacred Cow characters and to join the band wagon against the Scapegoat character.

In short, Cain is evil. But who isn't? Cain is given a mark much like the mark given to the servants of God in the book of Revelations. (Rev 7:3) Is Cain any worse than the rest of the redeemed? No. To sin in one area of the law is to sin in all areas. (Gal 5:3)

## LOT'S FAMILY

Genesis 19

**L**ot is a different kind of scapegoat. Unlike Cain, Lot did not commit a crime. Unlike Abraham his uncle, he was much like us. Many Christians, however, like to think of Lot as a carnal Christian who “pitched his tent” symbolically and literally towards Sodom. (Gen 13:12) Thus they see his story and the events surrounding the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a kind of come-uppance for Lot and his family. This “come-uppance” factor is a kind of righteous “serves-them-right” spitefulness that occurs in many Bible studies. In addition, the fact that Lot’s descendants traditionally merged with the Philistines and became the ancestors of the Palestinians...well, there’s a lot of spite involved.

Basically, the underlying feeling is that Lot deserved what he got because people who don’t do right have to suffer. We see this kind of thing also in sermons about Samson. Yet not in sermons about Noah. Or about Jesus. But if we read the Bible we certainly should understand that the end of a Bible character’s life or story may or may not be a judgement on that person’s life. The death of good people are more complicated than this. A good ending does not imply a good life, just as a good death does not imply that a character has lived a good life.

Few people are called “just” in the Bible. It is a huge compliment. Lot is called (2 Peter 2:7) a “just” man whose spirit was daily vexed because he lived among evil people. If we believe that the writers of Scripture spoke as the Holy Spirit moved them, then we should accept the Holy Spirit’s witness that Lot was a ‘just’ man.

But many sermonizers disagree with this. They begin by showing that when Abraham gave Lot a choice of choosing where he wanted to graze his flocks, Lot chose to live near Sodom because the land was green and lush. This, we Christians have been taught, is a sign of Lot’s carnal thinking: Abraham could look at something that seemed empty and doomed to failure but, seeing the invisible, he could imagine God’s power working in any atmosphere. Lot, on the other hand, we are told was so enslaved to his eyes and to the non-spiritual ways of seeing things that he chose the path that looked easy. Of course, this is partially true. But before we judge Lot, let us ask ourselves what we would have done if given the same choice. Very few of us would willingly choose to work in a field which seemed doomed to failure.

So Lot lived near Sodom and later actually entered the city and lived there. The writer of Genesis states that Sodom was such a wicked place that a cry against it had reached heaven. God

heard the cries when Sodom's cup of sinfulness had overflowed its brim. He therefore, in one of his pre-New Testament human appearances, to arrive at Abraham's tent where he told Abraham that He intended to investigate the city and destroy it. After seeing what later happens in Sodom—an entire town filled with men who have only murderous rape on their minds—the reader has no doubt that Sodom deserves to be wiped off the face of the earth, although one does wonder about who made the cry against it. One can only assume that the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah had been raping and destroying innocent travelers for quite a while. But isn't it also possible that Lot's own vexation against the place had also been part of the general cry against Sodom?

When Abraham heard God's plans, knowing he had relatives in the city, he made a bargain with God: He made God promise that if God could find ten good people in the city, the city would be spared. Ten persons would include Lot, his wife, his daughters and future sons-in-law.

As the story goes, angels were then sent to the city, and being supernaturally beautiful, they attracted the lust of the men of Sodom who demanded that Lot turn the angels over to them. Lot refused. He then offered his daughters to the lustful men.

The importance of hospitality was what prompted this; protecting one's guest was very important, even if it meant sacrificing one's family. The men of Sodom, however, wanted the angels. They grew enraged and reminded Lot that he was a stranger in a strange land and shouldn't bring his moralizing to them. This behavior only proved that the cry against Sodom was true. As the men of Sodom became more violent, the angels repaired matters by blinding them. This put a quick end to the problem as the men began stumbling about looking for someone to lead them by the hand. Disregarding them, the angels turned to Lot and declared that the city would be destroyed. Now Lot had to convince his family. His daughters and wife believed him but his future sons-in-law did not. At this point, this is where our tendency to scapegoat begins.

It starts out very often with ministers or Bible study teachers saying that Lot's sons-in-law (or future sons-in-laws) did not believe Lot's witness about the coming destruction of the city because Lot had compromised himself and lived among them as a backsliding believer for so long that they couldn't possibly take him seriously. Well, of course that kind of stuff happens. One cannot be quiet about one's morals and faith and then suddenly rise up and speak as a religious prophet and expect to be believed.

But why is this charge laid against Lot? In his day, Noah (Hebrews 11) prophesied about a coming flood. In our days, many Christians say that the end of the world is near. No one listened to Noah. And now modern Christians will mock. Therefore, the fact that the sons-in-laws or fiances didn't

believe Lot shouldn't be the first nail used to lock Lot in the "bad guy" category.

If we analyze the story, we would realize that since many of the men of Sodom were presumably blinded by the angels, the entire town should have stood up and noticed this great miracle in their midst. But, in the face of this astounding evidence, the sons-in-law still refused to believe Lot. Their refusal to believe Lot had little to do with Lot's reputation. The sons-in-law either could not believe that God interceded into human lives. Or they found the idea too unworldly to take seriously. But Lot's supposedly "carnal" compromising lifestyle is not the reason.

Something else: Lot was a sojourner in the city of Sodom. This meant his religion was probably different than theirs. How difficult is it for people with one type of God to actually be converted by a stranger, especially when the stranger tells them that "his" God is going to destroy their world!

Abraham met people of other cultures only when he had to. For the most part, he wandered in and out of the lives of gentiles and –with the exception of Melchizedek– he tended to believe the worse of the gentiles he meant, expecting them to behave immorally or unspiritually. But Lot was more cosmopolitan. He lived among other people and he was a holy man who lived in an unholy world. In many ways Lot was more like the typical North American multicultural Christian than Abraham was. When Peter writes in his second epistle that Lot's spirit was vexed continually because of evil he saw every day, shouldn't most Christians immediately feel a similarity to Lot? Don't we feel our separateness when we ask a non-Christian to refrain from cursing or taking the Lord's name in vain? But instead, malicious self-righteous judgmentalism enters the Bible study and Lot is constantly made to appear as if he deserves his plight.

As the story proceeds, the time arrives for Lot to leave Sodom. But Lot dawdles. Finally the angels have to take matters into their own hands and they grab Lot, his wife and daughters and drag them out of Sodom. When this is being studied, this is where another instance of "serves-them-right" judging pops up. This "serves-them-right" attitude is another way of scapegoating a character and turning them into "bad guys."

The angel had warned Lot's family not to look back as they fled the city. But during the escape, Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a "pillar of salt." A note about this "pillar of salt" is needed. There are many salt formations at the southern end of the Dead Sea and since many believe she was turned into a real pillar of salt, there is actually a formation that has been so named. Others believe that the sulfur falling from the destroyed city engulfed her or that she became dehydrated from the heat. But those who are knowledgeable in Arabian linguistics believe this

phrase “turning into a pillar of salt” is much like our English word, “petrified” which means “turned to stone” and which we use when someone is overwhelmed with. When we say that a person is petrified, we do not believe that they have literally turned to stone.

Everyone has his own reasons for his interpretation of the “pillar of salt.” It is, after all, a situation that almost seems to require an apology. People who consider themselves scientific cringe at the idea of God stepping into history to destroy a city just to do something so unnatural as turning a woman into a block of salt. But even those who don’t feel the need to apologize for the miraculous or folklore sometimes have a problem with this scenario. Kinder-hearted folks can understand the destruction of Sodom but they are uncomfortable with a God who seems petulant and who “fingers” Mrs Lot for destruction. The big question then is “Did God ‘do something’ to Lot’s wife? And if He didn’t, why do we want to believe that He did?”

Sadly, many Christians over the centuries feel a need to “defend” God and because of this, they feel that Mrs Lot should be judged. This means that they must find a reason to turn her into salt. The popular opinion is that Lot’s wife was carnal-minded and that the carnal concupiscence in her heart made her look back longingly on the carnal joys of the Cities of the Plains. But again, this is unthinking and heartless judgmentalism. Mrs Lot may have looked back, but certainly she had more important things to think about.

Depending on your Bible translation Lot either had four daughters –two married and two unmarried, or he had only two unmarried daughters who were engaged to men who were natives of Sodom, or he had married daughters and sons-in-laws. Once again, she should remember that Lot lingered. Isn’t it logical to assume that Lot is waiting for his sons-in-law (or his daughters’ fiances) to appear? Families and friends who had not escaped with Lot were now wiped out in the sudden heaven-sent flames. In such a situation, would not Mrs Lot look back in grief and loss? The heart of anyone who saw such a conflagration would probably fail them from fear, even more so the heart of someone who had lost someone she loved such as future or actual sons-in-law.

When prophesying about the last days in the gospel of Luke (Luke 17:32) Jesus warned, "Remember Lot's wife." Many think Jesus was judging her and showing how evil she was, but from the context Jesus did not seem to have disdain for her but sorrow. After all, the family separation and stress that will occur in the last days will be difficult. Two women will be grinding at the wheel, one will be taken and one left. Two people will be in a house, one will be taken one left. There will be tears wiped from our eyes before we enter heaven and those tears will be for those of our families who were “left.” The word “remember” does not mean "judge this person harshly." It

means, you will probably be in the same situation. You will want to look back, but no matter what you do, do not look back and do not fear. Jesus warned that in the last days emotional anguish and anxiety would be so common that people's hearts would be failing them because of fear? John in Revelations told his reader that God will wipe away tears from our eyes? (Rev 21:4) Isn't it possible that those tears will be, like the tears of Lot's wife, shed for lost friends and relatives, because some will be taken and some left?

The next building block against Lot and another episode which makes him easy prey for scapegoating is what happens after Lot escapes to the cave with his daughters.

Like Tamar who deceived Judah into having children, Lot's daughters felt that having children was expedient. The world had to be repopulated and they had no other choice but to do their part. His daughters devise a plan. They give Lot wine. We don't know where the wine came from or how long Lot was in the cave, but the entire episode echoes the incidents that happened after the flood when Noah became drunk.

The Bible doesn't say why Lot's daughters didn't press him to go to Zoar to find good men. Perhaps they thought the destruction was not localized and that all the rest of the world had been destroyed. Perhaps they thought that, like Noah's family, their family had been chosen to repopulate the world. As far as they could see, their father was the only man who could help bring children back to the world. As we read in Genesis, the girls said to each other, "There is no one else on earth who will give us children." It is obvious from their conversation that they thought they were the only family left on earth, and their father was the only man.

Perhaps this was shortsightedness on their part. Perhaps it was arrogance and genuine respect for their father's goodness. They knew how the just Lot was daily vexed (2 Peter 2:8) to live in that unholy city. He was probably the holiest person they knew. Perhaps their misguided expedience was brought on by despair and by a confused theology. Perhaps they knew that God had destroyed the earth by water in Noah's time and now believed the world (not just Sodom and Gomorrah) was entirely under God's wrath. Not knowing Abraham or whether his family had lived or whether he had a son, the girls felt they had no other way to create a holy human line.

Whatever their reasons, the daughters of Lot did that which was "right in their own eyes" and had sex with their father. We might also add that at this moment Abraham was having sex with his half-sister, Sarah. In addition, we aren't sure if God had forbidden incest yet.

One of the reasons Moses wrote this account is because he wanted to show the Israelites why the land of the Ammonites and Moabites were now being reassigned to them. Yet Moses also

showed the Israelites that they were related to these two peoples. And of course, Jesus would be descended from a Moabitess, David likewise. Therefore, the descendants of Lot would be redeemed in spite of their origins.

But when we study the story of Lot, we should examine ourselves to see our hidden motivations in believing certain things about these characters.

## Hagar and Ishmael

Genesis Chapters 16, 21, 37, 39

Christians consider Ishmael the symbolic and genetic father of the Arabs but in many of our sermons and Bible studies, we often treat both Ishmael and his mother Hagar scornfully and with disdain. Indeed, Ishmael is often treated him as an “interloper” who “really should not have been” except that Abraham made a “mistake.” Sermons abound in which Christian pastors say “Look what happened because Abraham wanted to do things his way. We ended up with an Ishmael. The world would be so much different now if it weren’t for Ishmael’s descendants, the Arabs.” The person who preaches this kind of sermon forgets two things: one, that Abraham had other sons by Keturah who are also part of the Arab people, and two that the descendants of Esau, children of promised Isaac, were also the ancestors of today’s Arabs.

This particular kind of scapegoating – the “offense of being born when one should not have been”-- seems strangely unfair, because this birth crime is never charged against other Bible characters whose births were also questionable. No one for instance ever says “Jephthah should never have been born because his mother was a prostitute.” But this is the first stone used to build a wall between the Bible student and Hagar, and as we have seen stone is usually added to stone until in the end a character becomes so enclosed within a particular image that the average Christian feels entitled, right and guiltless in mercilessly hating a Biblical scapegoat.

Thus although Hagar is the victim of her owners, she is rejected as an interloper and the fact that she is a slave is hastened out of the mind of the Bible student. If her status as a slave is mentioned, she is treated dismissively and –with a mentality that seems born from a colonial and imperial mind-set, depicted as an uppity slave who simply just does not know her place. This predisposes the Bible reader to dislike Hagar and her descendants. It also belittles the spiritual journey of one of the great saints of the Bible. Let us consider Hagar.

First, it must be stated that Moses, the traditional writer of the first five books of the Bible, is remarkably unracist and remarkably honest. As a former slave, and the husband of an Ethiopian wife, Moses understood the arrogance and hatefulness of racism. After all, his sister doubted his prophetic work because she didn’t like the fact that he had married an Ethiopian wife.

In all of his writings, we can see his heart towards the oppressed, the rejected and the downcast. He shows how Sarah uses God’s promise to treat Hagar badly, how Leah’s children used the religious symbol of circumcision to destroy Shechem, and how on a human level, people –like

Joseph and Sarah-- used a holy vision God had given them to feel they were better than other people.

Many wonderful lessons could be gleaned from the story of Hagar, but most are lost because we feel uncomfortable liking Hagar. Some Christians actually feel that God truly wants them to dislike Arabs. Why? Quite simply, we want clear-cut emotions. But Moses will not allow us to do so. Like a skillful modern writer, he duplicates imagery and word phrases and so lays a theme before us. Let us examine how he treats Hagar.

Many slaves appear in the Bible. Generally they are shown as likeable, helpful and loyal. Some, like Onesimus in Paul's letters, often symbolize spiritual adoption into God's heritage. But Hagar is best compared to another famous slave: Joseph. Arguably, Hagar and Joseph are the two slaves whose lives we know most about, and the similarities in their life stories are not accidental or coincidental. Why, then, is Hagar neglected while Joseph is continually praised? Could it be that we have within us a fairy-tale love of royalty that makes us identify with the lost "prince" Joseph and not with the outcast Hagar? I am not being facetious. Our Bible reading is influenced by our culture more than we think. We often see these stories through the veils of racism, sexism, classism, and yes, fairytales. Or else why do we insist on seeing the story of Esther as a love story when it clearly is not? But let us study Joseph and Hagar.

**Both Joseph and Hagar understood the effects of racism because they were both enslaved to people whose culture was different from their own.**

Joseph served the Egyptians. The number of times Joseph's culture is referred to only shows that he suffered among the Egyptians, who could not eat with him because he came from a sheep-herding country. Like Hagar, he was isolated from the Egyptians even as he preserved their life and culture. Like Hagar he served people who needed him but who did not respect his culture.

Hagar, Sarah's hand-maid, seems to have been the only woman in Abraham's retinue. Like Joseph, she too was cut off from family and friends. Just as the Egyptians considered Joseph likely to rape the wife of his master, so Abraham and Sarah also considered Egyptians morally lacking. So cynical were they about the morality of another people that when they arrived in Pharaoh's court, they lied and ended up in a deceitful marriage. Hagar was still Sarah's slave when this occurred and one wonders what she thought about this trick whose primary cause was the belief that her people were evil and immoral.

Of course it's common for nations with a manifest destiny to presume that they are morally

superior to peoples of other cultures. And Moses shows this.

**Both Joseph and Hagar had to contend with possible death because of class-consciousness and hierarchy on the part of someone who felt threatened.**

Joseph's father, Jacob, made him an embroidered overcoat with a long sleeve. Joseph's brothers were well aware that the ruling class of the surrounding Canaanite nations always wore long embroidered coats with long sleeves. (Gen 37:3) They knew Jacob's favoritism and could only suspect --probably rightly-- that their father was well on the way to making Joseph head of the clan. After all, Joseph knew the promise made to his ancestors and had already betrayed signs of thinking hierarchically. We know that Jacob had divided his children into groups as he journeyed to meet Esau. He probably did this more than once. Nor did it help matters that Joseph had developed a lordly attitude, snitching on them, because of his dreams.

The dream spoke of a particular future event when the brothers would come to him while he was in Egypt. But Joseph and his father seemed to have interpreted them to mean he would rule the clan. (Gen 37:9) By this time, Simeon, and Levi --Jacob's sons by Leah-- had already lost his favor because of the murder in Shechem and Reuben had lost his firstborn status by having sexual intercourse with Bilhah, his father's concubine. (Gen 34:22) Joseph was the son of Jacob's beloved wife. Fair or not, it was obvious that the ruler of the clan would be Joseph. The brothers decided to get rid of Joseph and change their father's plans and so they sold him into slavery.

We don't know exactly how Hagar became a slave. The history of her life before her enslavement is never told. This works against her in Bible studies because we meet her as someone of a lower class, a second-class wife who is also the slave of the head-wife. She would bear her aged husband/master's first-born son. The Bible and Middle Eastern history is full of co-wives vying with each other through child-birth. But although Hagar was the mother of the master's first-born son, she was still a slave. Sarah, conscious of her class and status, was not going to allow a slave's son to be equal to her own son. (Moses would later write: The child of the first-born wife-- even if that wife is hated-- will get the larger inheritance. Deuteronomy 21:15, 16) Sarah's declaration, "Cast out this slave woman and her son because he will not be heir with my son," (Gen 21:10) is often excused in Bible studies. Pastors say Sarah was jealous or they create a mean-spirited Ishmael to excuse Sarah's class-consciousness. In many countries where polygamy is allowed, men often marry young women in order to have children. Often, this causes contention. Either the older wife feels she is being pushed out by the young wife. Or the young wife feels

unloved and used. But Sarah's words speak more than jealousy; they speak of racism and classism.

Thirteen year old Ishmael (give-or-take) and his toddler-brother Isaac were together and -- depending on your Bible translation-- Ishmael was either teasing Isaac or simply playing with him. But this incident is often used by pastors to "prove" that Ishmael was an evil child. Why? Once again, because a case must be built against a scapegoat in order to preserve the piety of a sacred cow. I suspect the playful teasing was just that: brotherly loving teasing, the kind of games any brother would engage in with his younger sibling. After all, they seem to have been the only children in the retinue.

Whatever the actual incident, the sight of the two brothers playing as equals offended Sarah's slave owner's heart. The son of the slave was forgetting his place. Unforgiving and class-conscious as usual, Sarah jumped to use her power. People always speak as if Ishmael's personality is somehow responsible for the age-long Arab/Jewish conflict. Nowhere does the Bible say this. In fact, the opposite could be inferred: Sarah started the conflict.

### **Both Joseph and Hagar had difficulties with their female owners...difficulties caused by sex.**

Another similarity shared by Joseph and Hagar in Moses story is how slave owners, specifically female slave owners, treat the people they own. Joseph's body was young and healthy. So was Hagar's. These healthy virile bodies were noticed soon enough by their owners.

Joseph was owned by Potiphar who was the king's chamberlain. In many non-English translations, the word chamberlain is translated clearly as eunuch. The history books of arabic nations often mention who were eunuchs who married. If Potiphar was a eunuch, we can understand how his wife might develop a longing for Joseph's young vital body.

In somewhat the same way, Sarah saw Hagar's body as an object she could choose to use for her own ends. We might mention in passing that Abraham had earlier used Sarah's body for his own safety. Because he did not believe that pagans knew God or even understood spiritual issues, he assumed the worse of another culture and married off his wife to Pharaoh to save his skin. Moses does not state whether Sarah actually had sex with Pharaoh, nor does he show Sarah's attitude towards being forced into such a situation. But it does make one wonder if Sarah learned how to see Hagar as a sexual object by her experience with Abram's cruelty.

As the story records, Sarah could not conceive children. The thought occurred to her: why not use Hagar's body young and healthy as a surrogate? We don't know how old Hagar was. She must have been of child-bearing age. But what if she were younger? An older teenager, for instance.

Why is this question never explored? Even African-American pastors who understand the history of raping slave masters seem to preach as if it's all right for two slave owners to decide to perform a quickie marriage in order to force sex and childbirth on a slave.

Many will say that Abraham was perfectly within his rights to use Hagar's body as he wanted. After all, he had married her and raised her status. Why should we burden a person from Bible history with modern sensibilities? But that's not the point. I do not wish to burden Abraham's pre-modern soul, but since stories are ageless and preachers use these ageless stories to convey ageless truths, even those truths that are historically based, I wonder why the "use" of Hagar's body is never seen as a violation of her body by modern male teachers. When the sexual coupling between Hagar and Abraham is mentioned, the most we ever hear is "poor Abraham made a mistake." Why are we not also taught in church to ponder the heartache of the woman who had pregnancy forced upon her? Do we really think she was longing to be bedded by a wrinkled old man?

I think we do. This is why we have no patience with Hagar when she becomes pregnant. She did what most lower-status wives and concubines did when they became pregnant: she gloated. Dare I say it was only natural? But in church sermons we are often made to feel that Hagar was proud. Not just proud but "uppity." No one comes out and says this, but the implication is there. She was a lower-class woman who does not know her place and is speaking against God's anointed.

Hagar would soon learn that a mere slave should not engage in a battle of wills with a slave owner. Spite for spite, Hagar was in a bad position. In the middle of the desert, far from her culture and pregnant, she was as much a victim of her slave owners as Joseph was. Yet countless sermons exist about Joseph's victimization and few about Hagar's.

**Another similarity between Joseph and Hagar is that they got closer to God and learned obedience through suffering.**

Hagar and Joseph were not saints. They both some honor or promotion shown them which made them arrogant and encouraged them to think too highly of themselves. Thus, they both had to be taken down a peg. Joseph's dreams and embroidered long-sleeved coat turned him into a snitch who felt entitled to lord over his brothers. Hagar had her master's son, something that always created "attitude" in slave women. But their attitudes brought them trouble.

Joseph's bragging about his dreams brought him first to a pit and then to a prison. Hagar's pride sent her out into the desert. As I've stated, we don't know how Hagar ended up in her

enslaved state. She might have been born in slavery, a child of slaves. She might have been enslaved to pay a family debt. Or she might have sold into slavery as Joseph was. But both Joseph and Hagar had to submit to their enslavement until the time came for their freedom.

Placed in the king's prison for treason because Potiphar was a high official, Joseph had to learn that God was really in charge of his life. From the context of the story, we can assume that the only way out of this prison was by capital punishment, natural death, or a pardon from the king. He longed to be free.

Much is often said about Joseph's ability to endure. Much is made of his slavery and his long years spent "in submission to God's will" in the prison.

But Hagar's long years of servitude and return to "submit" to Sarah is often mentioned as if God were telling her her rightful place. Why do we think of Hagar's submission as going to her rightful place, but think of Joseph as someone fated to rise to power?

Here is another example of Moses' genius at storytelling, something that is often missed or not adequately examined. Moses makes the point of using the same phrase --"dealt harshly with"-- when he describes the treatment of the Israelites by the Egyptians and when he describes Sarah's treatment of Hagar. The obvious inference is that Sarah wasn't merely verbally abusive to Hagar but that she used the same methods of keeping her servant in line that the Egyptians used. Whether it was whippings, starvation or extra labor, Sarah caused emotional and possible physical harm to a pregnant woman slave. Why do we not examine this? An enslaved, pregnant, slave is at the mercy of a jealous class-conscious slave-owner, but we do not see this. She is told to return to her cruel slave-owner --all hopes of escape squashed by God Himself-- just as Joseph is in effect kept in prison because God (according to most preachers) had a different time planned for his freedom.

Joseph was given a promise and so was Hagar. Yet they learned how to keep their mouths shut. Imagine being told that your son will be great and yet being sent back to submit one's self to a woman who would not want to hear such a thing? Faced with such a wonderful vision of her son's future, Hagar did what Joseph should have done: she kept herself safe by keeping her mouth shut. One wonders what would have happened to her if she hadn't?

Much is said about Joseph's destiny and how God used him to save the Egyptians and his family, the embryonic Israel: "What was meant for evil God meant for good." Yet why don't we speak about Hagar's destiny? Hadn't God used her to care for Sarah in her pregnancy and the equally embryonic Isaac? Just as the future of Egypt and Israel depended on Joseph, so did the future of Isaac and Abraham's descendants depend on Hagar. One wonders what Sarah would have

done without her slave-girl to take care of her during her pregnancy, Isaac's birth and Isaac's infancy. Can anyone imagine an old woman racing after a toddler? As the only woman in a retinue of men, Hagar was needed to attend to the maternal and childcare needs of the slave-owner, Sarah. Sarah was old and had never had any children. Who would take care of her during her pregnancy? Who would clean up after her? Who would help her to deliver the baby? And after the child was born, who would have the energy to continuously play with it? Who would be healthy enough and strong enough to race after the child if needed? Certainly not an aged mother. But God trusted Hagar's spirit and integrity. Hagar would be there.

Again, why do we not speak more often of this? Have we forgotten how vindictive slaves can be? Bitter slaves have been known to kill their owner's children. Have we forgotten how noble and forgiving other slaves can be? Forgiving slaves have been known to preserve their evil owners during slave uprisings. Why is Joseph's patience and nobility spoken of so glowingly while Hagar's forbearance is taken for granted?

Again, it comes back to the fairy tale notion of the hidden prince. All well and good. But why isn't Hagar also a hidden princess? We know that both slaves longed for escape. But we identify more with Joseph's plight because we know "he is the lord's servant." We know that God had "an appointed time" in which he would free him. We speak often of Joseph's languishing in prison as God's will and say that if Joseph had been freed at the wrong time, Egypt would have suffered along with the rest of the region during the famine. Certainly, if he had been freed before Pharaoh received his dream, Joseph might have returned home to Israel and his brothers. All would have been lost.

So we understand that Joseph needed to save Egypt because Egypt would be the cradle from which the new-born nation of Israel would arise. But why don't we see destiny in Hagar's life also. Perhaps we see it but we do not want to discuss it. Both these slaves suffered in order to help their master's nation come to birth. Nations were blessed because of them. The correlation between this and African-American slavery is quite clear. The United States would not have grown to its greatness without the use of African slaves. So why do so many African-American ministers speak so derisively of Hagar?

Egypt needed to become a great nation because it was the cradle in which God wanted His people to be reared. Joseph's destiny was to help another nation, a nation that was prejudiced against his own. Hagar was also needed. Hagar would stay with these slaveholders for 13 more years.

**Both Joseph and Hagar were saved at last by divine intervention.**

Joseph was freed from prison and possible death by a combination which included his dream skills, providence and memory-jogging. Hagar was saved by an angel. Her work as caretaker of Baby Isaac was done and Abraham had cast her out into the desert at Sarah's request.

We often fail to see the heinousness behind this request. Surely, Sarah was aware that a child and mother alone in the middle of a desert may not live. Is it possible that Sarah's secret hope was that they would die? We tend to dismiss the cruelty of this event because God told Abraham to let Hagar go. We go so far as to assume that this was what God wanted. But should we assume this? When Abraham gives Hagar a few loaves and a bottle of water for her journey, we are taught that this is a sign of Abraham's faith in God's ability to provide for his cast-off second-status wife. But certainly, such a great chieftain as Abraham --a man with many herdsmen-- could've sent some of his men with Hagar a day's journey or two?

The wonderful storyteller Moses does something ingenious in this chapter. This is a chapter that still needs to be mined. Just after Hagar's near death from thirst is shown, he writes a scene in which Abraham gets into a conflict about a well. Hagar's emptiness is contrasted nicely with Abraham's fullness. Abraham has cast away his wife who is thirsting in the desert; at the same time he is arguing about a well. Yet, the story also speaks of a connection between Hagar and Abraham. In both stories, they give names to wells. Doesn't this imply something about Ishmael's destiny as children of Abraham?

**Both Joseph and Hagar slaves had come through the furnace as fine gold. Both Joseph and Hagar prospered in the house of their affliction. Both had spiritual insights.**

Joseph became governor of Egypt and became rich. Hagar's son Ishmael became the father of many nations. Both began as slaves but later prospered. Hagar's destiny was joined to Abraham's yet, Joseph's prosperity is praised and Hagar's blessing is continually spoken of as "Abraham's mistake." Joseph's phrase, "what you meant for evil, God meant for good," is heard everywhere. As well it should be. But when was the last time you heard any sermon on Hagar's insight? "You, God, see me."

What a wonderful insight this is! "From that day on, Hagar called the Creator, "'The God who sees me.'" The name she gives God is filled with pathos: *The God of all the universe knows my sorrows and is acquainted with my grief. God-who-sees-me* saw her as she submitted and returned

to her enslavement. Her revelation is the kind of deep Truth that is able to teach the small child and the wounded adult about God's love and care of His children. Yet this insight is never discussed as much as Joseph's is.

The Christian coldness and judgmental attitude towards Hagar showed up recently when I heard a minister speaking about Hagar's weeping in the desert. If you recall, Hagar was so convinced that her son would die, she turned her face from her son because she did not want to see him die. The minister's snide remark was: "What kind of woman would do something like this?"

A good question, but an inhumane one. That minister had never had a child die of starvation or thirst. Truly, he does not know what a mother would do in that position? But why does he say "What kind of a woman?" She has had more visions of God and angels than Sarah has. She has been a slave since her childhood, known nothing but the company of her mistress, been abused, cast-out, and extremely sensitive and now she has been thrown out into a world she has no control over. That's the kind of woman who would do "that kind of thing?"

The inability to see Hagar as a true child of God leads to sermons that come close to anti-Arabic (Both Arabs and Jews are anti-Semitic) This linking of the anti-Arabic sentiment with the Hagar story truly bothers me. Honest Bible study is required.

Traditionally, the freed Israelite slaves who first heard this story were former slaves freed from cruel slave-masters. We don't know how they reacted when Moses told them the story of Hagar and Sarah. Perhaps they identified with Sarah because she was the mother of the nation. Perhaps they identified with Hagar because they also knew slave-owners who had "dealt harshly" with them. Perhaps they were perplexed and unable to take side. After all, Hagar was Egyptian and a slave. And Sarah was an ancestor but a slave-owner. Did they walk over to Moses and say, "We don't know who to love in this story. We like and dislike both these women. Tell us who to like. We want to be sure we're on the right side." If they did, I hope Moses answered, "Man looks at the appearance and at cultural and genetic heritage but God looks on the heart. And only God alone can judge. Love both Hagar and Sarah."

## Zipporah

Exodus Chapters 2 and 4

**T**he Bible does not say much about Zipporah after Moses returned to Egypt. It later mentions his marriage to an Ethiopian woman. But the woman seems to have come from the same tribe as Zipporah, the tribe of Midian --Midianites, Sudanites and Ethiopians were often used interchangeably in the Bible-- and the Ethiopian woman might simply be Moses' way of describing the problem concerning Zipporah. The marriage to the Ethiopian woman is mentioned in Numbers chapter 12, quite a long time after Zipporah is first mentioned but the fact that the marriage is mentioned late doesn't mean much because the Bible writers often don't use the same kind of chronological storytelling that modern writers use. In fact, the Bible is famous for not giving important facts in the proper chronological order. The truth is that we do not know what happens to Zipporah.

But cruel sermons abound about Zipporah. Many Bible preachers say that she was a bad wife who treated Moses terribly. They use an incident about a circumcision as the starting point of their conjectures and story-spinning.

As shown in the chapter, the Hebrews had forgotten about the circumcision. They lived 400 years in the land of Egypt and forgot about the mark of their covenant with God. The Midianites, however, had not forgotten. Therefore when Moses was returning to Egypt to set God's people free, God came against him. Surprised and at a loss about the attack, Moses did not know what to do. As descendants of Abraham, they practiced the circumcision. All the children of Israel had forgotten about the circumcision, but Zipporah, a descendant of Midian, one of Abraham's other children, reminded him of this particular covenant of blood.

The circumcision was important. Zipporah immediately circumcised Moses and their sons and saved their lives. She then said the phrase which has made her so hated in Christian circles: "You are a bloody husband to me." She said this because of the circumcision. Christians take this very literally to mean that she was complaining about his bloody penis.

The major trouble is a misunderstanding of the King James Version. What does the phrase "a bloody husband to me" mean? Or rather, what does "A husband of blood to me" mean? And if one doesn't know the meaning, why jump to the conclusion that she is making a cruel sexual

comment? Many cultures understand the concept of “blood brothers.” And it is clear to anyone who reads a non-KJV version that Zipporah means that there is a covenant of blood now between her and her husband. But here assumptions are being made about the woman whose ancestors preserved the idea of circumcision. A woman whose father was a priest would understand the importance of circumcision.

## Delilah and Samson

Book of Judges, chapter 13

**T**he book of Judges is like a modern-day story collection. Its twenty-one chapters is like an anthology of stories written to challenge those readers who feel they know how to judge matters.

The stories usually revolve around a particular person, usually a judge or a priest. In the book of Judges, good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. Good people-- who should know better-- do bad things. And those we would naturally consider bad or inadequate in some ways do good things. In some ways, the book of Judges is one of three most unsettling books of the Bible (The other Books are Ecclesiastes and Job.) We leave the book feeling unsure about life and justice. What kind of world do we live in if one cannot use human measuring sticks to recognize good people? The book of Judges makes it quite clear that good genes, righteous intentions, a proper moral education, and belonging to the right clan don't mean much in a complicated world where human evil is present. In Judges, religion, social class, caste, genes or holiness do not make life happy or a person right. The writer of Judges tells us several times: "Each man did what seemed good in his heart." But this book about judges is often about challenging our judgment and judging the means by which we judge. As the book of Judges shows, justice, love and religion from an unredeemed heart can be just as bad as injustice.

The first stories begin at a time in Israel's early history when God ruled the nation through specially appointed men called "judges." At this time in Israel's history, the people have stopped wandering around in the desert and have now settled in the Land that God promised them. However, they have not totally conquered the land that was promised theirs and they are surrounded by other nations, most of whom are their enemies. Conflicts are everywhere, within and without. And many of these conflicts concern the lives of the judges. One of the most famous judge is Samson.

At first reading Samson could easily be seen as just another mythical strongman, someone like Hercules. Generally, physical strength is not a quality that Bible writers are interested in. Goodness and holiness, yes. Brute strength, no. Because of his strength, Samson is one of the more famous judges; every Bible reader has heard of him. People also like Samson for another reason. For better or worse, most people like a good love story.

Samson is both a lover and a fighter. And he is a good man, a man who loves jealously,

hates passionately and who –when overwhelmed by his murderous anger– has the strength to cause real damage.

The writer of Judges tells us that Samson was born when his parents were old. Like many of the great men in the Bible, his birth was foretold. This is fascinating, if nothing else. No angel foretold Moses' birth, for instance, and Moses was to be the deliverer of his people. Samson delivered the Israelites and his deliverance wasn't permanent, yet before he was born, an angel of the Lord appeared to his parents and told her that her son would free the Israelites from the Philistines.

We don't know why God chose this particular couple. But, after reading the first five books of the Bible, we can easily guess: God tends to choose people who can never boast of anything. Abraham and Isaac had children only after they realized they could not. Jacob is named "Israel" (Prince) only after he loses a fight with an angel and admits that his name (Jacob) means "Cheater." So with Manoah's family, we see that God's blessings come because He wills it not because any particular person wills it, deserves it, or has the genes for it.

Nine months later, the prophesied baby arrives and is named Samson, "Little Sunshine." As Samson grows up, it soon becomes apparent to his parents that Little Sunshine has an anger management problem. Even worse, like Moses before him, Samson seems to have been created by God to fall in love with women who are not of his own people. I say "created by God" because the writer of Judges tells his reader that "this thing" was from the Lord.

This is a hard saying to say the least. We can understand God creating John the Baptist to be a recluse but who ever heard of God creating someone with a passion for women of other races? While growing up, it is possible that Samson –being the child of Manoah's old age– was spoiled and always got what he wanted. Perhaps this is why he has such a bad temper. But the combination of Samson's fiery temper, his love for certain kind of women is somehow from the Lord. These traits will be used by God to defeat the long-standing oppression caused by the Philistines.

Just as Esther's extreme submissiveness was created for her time, so Samson's stubborn anger was created for such a time as this. Samson's anger boils over at every slight, especially if that slight was personal. But nowhere does the writer of Judges hint that this anger is wrong. Rather, Samson's anger, petulance and jealousy is seen as serving God's higher purpose. Philistines fall dead to his left and to his right at the smallest slight and all we can see is that God was pleased to use Samson's insecurity to destroy Israel's enemies. The question is: Did God – who knew what furnace in which to burn clay– choose those emotional and family traits to create a being like

Samson? But Samson pretty much succeeds and is blameless before God and powerful against man. He has one major flaw however: he turns to putty when he encounters a woman's pleading tears and this will be his downfall with Delilah when those tears nag him into telling her his Achilles heel.

Delilah is a Bible personality who is often scape-goated by religious teachers. If asked to describe Delilah, most Christians will say she was a prostitute and she was a betrayer.

But Delilah was not a prostitute. A Bible verse describing Samson's visit to a harlot occurs just before the verse in which Delilah makes her entrance. The mistake is made because the verses that describe the woman are placed in such close proximity to the ones which introduce Delilah.

We don't know what Delilah was or did. She may have been a farmer's daughter. She may have been a shop-keeper. She may have been Philistine, she may have not been. She may have been rich, she may have been poor. What we know is that she was not a harlot and that her problem started when she had a romance with the wrong man. Her romance brought her to the attention of the Philistine powers that be and –perhaps her life was being threatened-- she betrayed her lover for silver.

As you read the story, you will see that because of his love for the wrong woman, Samson ended up losing his eyes and strength, being mocked and humiliated by his enemies, and ultimately losing his life. She begged and nagged and wept and cajoled and at last managed to squeeze the truth of Samson's strength out of him. He told her his secret, she shaved his hair, the Philistines were victorious over him for a while, but at last in his death he triumphed over his enemies, destroying them with his death. Depending on our background, Delilah is either a victim of a male-dominated culture, a Mata Hari-like spy working for the wrong side, or an evil temptress-harlot-castrator-foreign woman who destroys good men who have the bad luck to fall in love with her. Unlike many of the women discussed in this book, Delilah is not a saint. But she is not nearly as bad as we would like to believe. The important phrase is: "like to believe." We are always lacking in compassion for her.

Like Jesus, Samson was created to be sacrificed. But whereas God used Jesus' love and meekness, God created Samson with a jealous, murderous temper. Like Jesus, Samson destroyed the spiritual enemies of God and man. Unlike Jesus, Samson's enemies were mere human beings. And unlike Jesus, the zeal Samson had for God and against God's enemies overwhelmed him. Like Moses, Samson is a murderer whom God uses to help His people.

Delilah, from what we can tell, is a country girl caught up in the middle of a war. She

seemed to have had some good points. The Philistines told her to trick Samson and ask him where his strength lay; but, she didn't trick him. She didn't pull any subterfuges or do any sneaking around; she came straight out and ask him. There's a frankness and directness about that. Like Adam, Delilah is used by her man's enemy to destroy him. If Delilah was a Philistine, then like Jael a Hebrew, she uses hospitality and feminine wiles to destroy the enemy of her people. If she is Hebrew, then like Judas, she betrayed a savior for mere mammon. If she is a Philistine, then like Esther, she is called upon to save her people. She doesn't violate the laws of hospitality to the extent that Jael does. But unlike Ruth, she does not turn her back against her people.

Although Delilah is the only one of Samson's loves who is given a name, the writer of Judges does not tell us whether she was Philistine or not. If she was Philistine, her greatest fault, therefore, is that she didn't know when to stop being patriotic. If she was an Israelite, then Samson was wounded in the house of his friend and she becomes a symbol for Judas and all future betrayers of Christ.

But if we reduce her to a mere prostitute, we are reducing a complicated story and losing the questions the book of Judges ask us.

## **Saul**

I Samuel 8- II Samuel 1

**T**he story of Israel's conversion from a growing nation of judges to a true kingdom is told in the books of Samuel. It is told from the viewpoint of a spiritual man watching the mayhem around him. The book's writer depicts a nation that is consumed with a vision to be "like the nations" around them. Although they are aware of God, God's laws, and their unique place as a divinely-blessed people above all the nations they had given him.

This once-nomadic people had now become a nation. Yet, in comparing themselves with the other nations, they are like Esau, despising their birthright and rejecting the holy and divine for an earthly human substitute. They did not want God to be their king, nor would their bodies be his temple; a human king in an earthly palace was what was needed. The prophet Samuel gave them a brief warning about the troubles that occurred in kingdoms – greed, hierarchy, contumely, etc. He did not mention the assassinations, murders, alliances and conspiracies that one often finds in the average history book, but the books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles would soon show them that. They lusted after a king, just as their ancestors had lusted after meat in the wilderness. A king was

what they wanted, a king they would have.

Into this complex situation came Saul, a good man who had other matters on his mind. Although God did not want his chosen people to be like other nations, He decided to give them the king their hearts craved. No longer would He appoint judges to lead the people. The nation of Israel would no longer be ashamed because they had no king. Now Saul would be their king.

As far as we know, Saul had no desire to become king. Even after Samuel anointed him, he balked. But he had a good heart, and most importantly, he was impressive. And, as is shown throughout the Bible, the tendency to be impressed by external appearances is ingrained in the carnal human mind.

God's kingdom cannot be judged by human eyes, heart or mind. Nevertheless, the pride of life in man's kingdom shows up over and over in the Bible. God's kingdom often appears like a mustard seed – small, petty, powerless and worthless to the non-spiritual person. The Prophet Isaiah wrote about the Suffering Servant of God, the coming Messiah, who had nothing in Him that would impress the people. Isaiah went so far as to say that the Messiah would be despised and rejected. In the Psalms, David prophesied that the stone which the builders rejected would become the head cornerstone. In the New Testament, in a showdown between two potential deliverers, the people chose Jesus Barrabas, a political savior rather than Jesus of Nazareth, a spiritual deliverer. And Jesus himself warned that in the last days, Israel will make the major spiritual mistake of choosing and accepting as savior someone who is “good in their eyes.” Therefore this motif of appearances runs all through Scripture. The opposite is also true; what impresses God rarely impresses the world. And if the world is impressed, it is impressed for the wrong reasons.

God chose Saul as king because Saul was the sort of man who could impress a nation so caught up in comparing themselves to others. Saul is the very perfect specimen of a man who would be king, a king to idolize. He stands taller and more handsome than everyone else. He seems “good in their eyes.” In short, Saul falls straight into the motif of men who are impressive great-looking false hopes. Saul is a man after the people's heart.

The trouble, however, is that Saul is too much like the people he will serve. His heart understands their desires and needs only too well. Always judging matters from the world's perspectives, Saul always does what “seems” good to him and to his subjects. He understands what it means to be worshiped and soon becomes caught up in his role as the idolized king.

There is no doubt that Saul fails miserably. He is brought into a situation by God and Samuel where the hearts of the people are already prone to worship him. Saul is shy, retiring and

insecure when he is “called” to this position. But it is the rare person who would not fail under such a burden. In his letter to Timothy, (1 Timothy, 3:6, 5:22) Paul warns his young mentor about the dangers of accepting untried young men into certain positions in the church. Saul is an example of a worse-case scenario. His insecure soul drinks in the people’s praise. So much so that all his actions seem to be dictated by his need to impress them. If this were modern times, one might say that Saul took democratic polls on his popularity and became a victim of those polls. But the democratic voice of the people could also enslave a leader. After a while Saul began to anticipate what the people wanted. Did they want him to perform religious rituals? Would their love for him wane if he had fewer victories than David? The mental burden was too much for him. He became mentally imbalanced and even sought out spiritualists and mediums.

It could be argued that God chose Saul and should have known that Saul was simply not the man for the job. Didn’t he know that by appointing Saul as king he was setting certain events in motion that would destroy Saul’s very soul? But that argument goes to the core of our notions of free will, God’s omniscience and the free will of man

## Solomon, Sex and Truth

1 Kings, Book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon

**T**he Song of Solomon is a book that is rarely studied in its entirety. We know it is a loosely-strung collection of love songs. Bible scholars often say that the book is about the love of God and Israel, Jesus and the church, a marriage couple, and all of the above. The Song of Songs had its hey day in those medieval times when such writers as Bernard of Clairvaux examined the notion of God as lover, spouse and husband. They often found profound spiritual applications but, being celibate nuns and monks, they steered clear from the glories and joy of earthly sexual relations. The uncomfortable truth is that Solomon's many descriptions of sexuality and the human body will keep the book out of the reach of many a pious hand. Its link to Solomon—who had problems restraining his own libido-- also taints it: who wants to read a book by a lascivious many-wived king who lost his relationship with God because he couldn't control his lusts?

Yet, even those who have not read this little poetry-play know some of its verses. For instance, most Christians have heard that “Love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave,” an “Many waters cannot quench love.” Yet few Bible readers can really tell what the actual story is about.

Most Bible readers know that love and religion often together in the Bible stories. The Bible abounds with love stories, friendship stories and lust stories. The Bible is rich with kisses. There are religious kisses, romantic kisses, traitorous kisses, familial kisses, holy kisses and friendly kisses. So we aren't particularly bothered by a book which begins with this invitation: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. For thy love is better than wine.”(KJV)

The problem is Solomon. We don't quite trust him. We don't want to say it too loudly but we don't know how wise Solomon was when he wrote it. Traditionally, three books have been attributed to him: Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, The Song of Songs. And three more—seemingly-- unlike books one would never hope to find. And yet they after we move past the first impression we see that they are inextricably linked.

The writers of Bible tells us that Solomon gathered together a collection of proverbial sayings in addition to writing many. (1 Kings 4:32, Proverbs 1:1; 10:1; 25:1) Although Solomon added his own observations of life, most of these proverbs are inherited from a culture—or a mother and father-- who instilled in him the importance of wisdom. The book of Proverbs is hopeful, full of

insights about the cause and effect of certain behavior. The book affirms life's meaningfulness and shows that in many ways the events that occur in a person's life stem not only from God but from deeds done and words said. A great bishop in the Philippines once said, "Fools learn by experience. Wise men learn by authority." Or as my Jamaican mother says, "If you don't hear you'll feel."

The book of Proverbs strives to keep the reader away from foolishness. Yet its collective wisdom declares that doing the right thing doesn't come naturally. The average "son" or "prince" must be taught to go against his natural emotions, whether these natural impulses are connected with anger, the need for revenge and justice, despair, the desire to have a good life, and more importantly the natural sexual desires.

In the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of Proverbs, we are given the description of the woman far above rubies. It's a woman's description of a perfect daughter-in-law. Most men-- past, present or to come-- would be uncomfortable with such a free and powerful women. Many would not "naturally" lust for a woman like this. But this is the woman Lemuel's mother (and Solomon, the Proverb-collector) tells Lemuel to yearn for. The woman described in this chapter is no mere tool of her husband. He has such trust in her that she has power to buy land without his permission and she has her very own business. When she walks through the streets, she is respected as a powerful and savvy merchant. The man with such a wife would have had to turn away from some of the easier women who crossed his path. And I mean "easy" in any way you wish to take it. The reader leaves the book of Proverbs knowing that immediate gratification of one's natural desires often bodes ill because "The full soul loathes a honeycomb, but to the hungry soul, every bitter thing is sweet." (Proverbs: 27:7.) And if nothing else, the reader of proverbs remembers that the book is replete with maternal warnings against bad women. One cannot help imagining the formerly adulterous Bathsheba warning her son Solomon against the evil woman who takes a lover while her "husband is away on business."

But then, the Bible reader comes upon Ecclesiastes, a different book altogether. In this book, we see the Preacher/King's own opinions of life under the sun. Not the collected hearsay but his own painful nihilistic conclusion that "Life under the sun is empty wind and utterly meaningless." It's a strange pessimistic bookend to Proverbs which sees God everywhere and which assures its reader that God is in charge and will give meaning to even the grossest injustice. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, tells his readers that life is unsearchable and that troubles often come to good people. Ecclesiastes is bitter and existentialist. The proverb collection records the Jewish spirituality with which Solomon was raised. The other, the king's personal memoir, is the

king's honest portrayal of what he has seen in his somewhat wasted life.

We could try to get around the confusions found in the book of Ecclesiastes by saying that these collected memoir/observances of a preacher/king are the memoirs of someone other than Solomon. But from all internal evidence, the writer can be no other than Solomon. Who else could say with such boldness that he had never met one good woman in a thousand if he had not had one thousand concubines and wives? Other correlation between Ecclesiastes and the Solomon can be found. (1 King 23; 1 Kings 11; 1 Ch 29:19. Eccles 2) The Solomon of the book of Kings and the book of Proverbs may have found life under the sun meaningless but those books did not record his grief but they hinted at the grief and estrangement he felt from the God of his fathers.

But how did Solomon come to this strange pass? Well, we all know how. The Bible tells us: through his love of the wrong women. (1 Kings 11: 3-8)

The book of Ecclesiastes doesn't tell us how Solomon lost his joy in life or how he came to such an existentialist pass but it does record the thoughts of a religious man whose intellect is challenged by the injustice and seeming unfairness in the world. The Preacher/philosopher/king doesn't have the same easy faith of his ancestor David. He understands that his father –and his father's culture-- trusted a Supreme Being. Yet he himself doesn't relate well to this supreme being. In Ecclesiastes, he speaks of God but he never really prays to Him. The son of great king David, the one who tells us in the Song of Solomon, that Love is strong as death, doesn't tell us that love is so strong it can pull people away from God Himself. Love is powerful indeed! Lovers attempt to understand and please the beloved. In pleasing the beloved, a lover can lose his bearings.

We are told in the historical books of Kings and Chronicles that Solomon indeed lost his bearings, going so far as to build temples for his wives' gods. Solomon was so influenced by his wives' religions, he lost his. One can imagine Solomon – for love's sake– leaning onto his own well-known wisdom and trying to incorporate the wisdom and spirituality of his wives' cultures into his own spiritual heritage. To his dismay the wives' religions differ so much from his father's he must either choose to leave certain aspects of his religion behind or try to create a syncretist buffet-style religion that seems democratic, just, and acceptable to the wives and the world they represent. But there is nothing in the false religions of the foreign wives that can compare with the Law, the traditions, or the Rituals which Yahweh has given His people. Certainly, the idea that the Israelites are God's Holy and Special people will have to be the first to go. The trouble with developing a unity-within-diversity democratic spirituality is that the specifics which make a religion unique often get in the way. They have to be pared away. Once this is done, the democratic believer or

syncretist finds himself with the questions that are the common denominators of all religions and philosophies: is there justice in the world and how do we make life meaningful in the face of death?

And this is what happens with Solomon. Solomon rids himself of inherited cultural baggage, throws aside the ancient rituals and teachings of his father's religion and is now left with justice alone to give life and death meaning. This is no longer religion because religion deals with the supernatural, the revealed, and the unknown. Solomon has now entered the realm of philosophy where man leans to his own understanding. While David, the shepherd-king who slew lions and giants, knew God as The Great Shepherd and could calmly say, "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever," Solomon, raised in a king's palace without trials is uncertain if God is the caring Shepherd and Father. To him, everything is a matter of choice and timing, bad and good luck. He acknowledges that God exists and is to be feared. But this God is not a caring father but an inscrutable being who hides himself. Unlike his father, David, the Preacher does not write intimate love songs to Yahweh, but Ecclesiastes – a book which traces his search for meaning. (For an interesting contrast, read the Book of Ecclesiastes then read Psalm 49.)

And what does this book show? Only that work, wisdom, art, pleasure, morality and good works don't give life meaning. Nothing works. He does not go so far as to say life is a joke but his earthly wisdom has shown him that the world is not fair. "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor wishes to men of understanding. But time and chance happens to all men." The beautiful and good and wise are not treated any better than the ugly, the evil and the stupid. Everything is a matter of luck and timing. This seems unfortunate to him. The rest of us (the ugly, the stupid, the poor) might be glad that the world is not fair. But not someone wise and rich like Solomon.

Solomon then hits upon Love. This is where modern confused humanity also finds the meaning of life. (How many characters on television-- usually it's a terminally ill character-- have shouted out to God, "All I want is to be truly loved by a good person before I die?" Something like that. Sex and love –Eros-- give meaning to the lives of modern folks. After all, what is there to live for?) Solomon is an intellectual, a researcher and tireless experimenter. He has explored the arts, architecture, public works, politics, pleasure, and wisdom and found them all meaningless. The only thing left to truly worship and to truly live for is love. For lovers, love has drama, affirmation. In love, one encounters societal taboos and discovers one's ability to give and to receive pain. This is where the Song of Solomon comes in. And into this poem/play, Solomon weaves his Solomon's

history, heritage, philosophy, and emotional biography:

*Consider the cast of characters:*

1. a Shunammite kept under strict guard by her brothers -- stranger in the community. She is a Shunammite. The town of Shunem was in the northern kingdom, a little north of Samaria and its people were a mixed population. This Shunammite might have been of tainted ancestry.
2. her lover whom she is trying to reach. The Beloved is better than all other men, an apple tree among trees in the forest. And the only good decent man in the only story. He may or may not be in her "class." The Beloved is distant in so many ways. He is far away in his garden feeding his flocks. But even if he were present, he cannot meet her in public without people gossiping.
3. the keepers of the city who --like her brothers-- are angry with her because of her love for her Beloved. They violate the Shunammite by removing her veil and mocking her love.
4. and the chorus of Jerusalem women whose help she enlists. She is not "one of them." She is dark and aware that they are staring at her dark skin. And she is aware that her reputation needs to be good in their eyes. But she has no worry here. The women have heard about her love for her beloved. This earns her their respect.
5. The shepherds. They don't show up in the story. But they will think badly of her and think she shamelessly follows after young men (1:7)
6. The Shunammite's brothers. They are worried for her virginity. How moral is their sister? How will her behavior affect their family honor? They are unsure if their sister is a "door" (loose) or a "wall" (chaste). (8:8,9) Her sexuality is something that they alone can handle. In their eyes, a woman cannot be trusted with her own virginity.
7. The villains are the keepers of the law, moral people like the Shunammite's brothers who don't trust women's sexuality, men so obsessed with a solitary beautiful --foreign-- woman?. (People who take their books of Proverbs seriously, one might think.) Her beloved --her bridegroom and protector is away on a journey. (Her inner spirit communes with him at night. But what use is that to her in the light of day when there are so many enemies about?) It's a love match too. Not an arranged marriage. Love is wild and free and dangerous. The young shepherds don't know how to appreciate beauty so they lust at it. The keepers of the city --men who are supposed to be taking care of women-- abusing their power and violating her by removing her veil. Few understand love, especially the moralistic and the judgmental. These are the adversaries of love.

Solomon worships love. For him, Love –true or otherwise– has many adversaries: human adversaries, the little foxes, such as jealousy, Distance, judgmentalism, Societal and cultural expectations and Death. And Solomon is right: Love is a to be protected. The tender grapes should be protected. Vineyards -- symbol of the human soul and of human dreams-- need to be tended, protected from wild animals or else the tender grapes are crushed. In the Song of Solomon, love is bolstered, controlled, attacked and restrained by society. But love and sexual healing win out in the end. A woman’s beauty and self-esteem suffers at the hand of men --her brothers and the “keepers of the city.” But friendship with other women help her to overcome the rigid men who interfere with her life. It’s interesting that Solomon wrote this song before modern psychologists even envisioned the concept of sexual healing or the notion of wounded femininity. But is there a place for Proverbs to fit in? Can morality, love and the beauties of the beloved’s body ever mesh? Can the good young man find sexual joy and yet not have love lead him down the wrong path?

Yes, because for all the passion, and the misunderstandings, the Shunammite stands pure. She disobeys society and she longs for her beloved’s body. But she can proudly proclaim that she is not a door, but a wall. Her virginity is intact. And so society remains on her side.

But whether or not the Song of Solomon is about the wounded soul’s journey towards God (the Shunammite representing the human soul advancing against religious rules, the keepers of the city being those elements-- religious, emotional, and cultural-- that try to separate the soul from God.) The book is full of religious customs and authorities getting in the way of relationship that is pure and sexual. The heritage and moral order is maintained (Proverbs.) And Solomon tells life as he sees it and his integrity is maintained (Ecclesiastes)

God made sex and sex is beautiful. But the definition of sexuality has dwindled into something that means seductive, unclothed, and easy. The Shunammite’s sexuality was one of faithfulness, intelligence, kindness, and devotion. And readers are warned to avoid being like like the young shepherds or like the Shunamite’s brothers. Perhaps the Song of Solomon *is* the greatest song after all.

## Vashti

The Book of Esther

**W**ho knows but that you have entered into the kingdom for such a time as this?  
That could as easily be said about Vashti as about Esther?

When you read the Torah, the five books of Moses, you learned about many of the God-instituted holidays, feast and fast days such as Yom Kippur. But Judaism also has feast days that were not instituted by God. The feasts of Purim and Chanukah are some of these. Both these holidays were instituted to memorialize the triumphs of the Jews over genocidal enemies.

Many people believe that before Christianity, Israel lived happily and peacefully unoppressed. They often say that Christianity is responsible for oppressing Jews. But from its beginning, Israel has had to struggle against genocidal enemies. And many countries have this history of being oppressed. The Poles, for instance, have a long history of being conquered and reconquered. Having survived the genocidal intentions of the Egyptian slave-masters and other cultures, the Israelites are now oppressed by the Assyrian.

The story of Purim, a festival that celebrates the survival of the Jews against its enemies, is the story of Esther. The story begins with a king who is proud of his power and his property.

Towards the end of the feasting, Xerxes' heart was merry. And why shouldn't it be? He had shown his power, magnificence and his wealth. He had shown great managerial skills. Imagine carrying off such a party! The management of food, sleeping arrangement, male and female singers!. To say the least, the partying was successful. The visiting potentates would return home with great tales of his munificence. Imagine a party in which every guest had his own uniquely engraved golden cup! Since the kingdom of heaven is like a party, one can readily see how godlike Xerxes must appeared. And yet, although the emperor had godlike power over all resources, arts, peoples, he bowed himself to one thing: the written law of the Medes and the Persians. As the writer of the book of Esther adds in a curious comment: "the drinking was according to the law" and no one did compel anyone to drink. An interesting phrase when one realizes what is to come. Legality and compelling are evident in this story of a party with an air of equality, fraternity, and legality.

Xerxes reigned over a large territory, spanning from India to Ethiopia. He had princes and minor territorial kings under him. Power and property indeed! Delighted in himself and determined

to celebrate his greatness, the emperor thought it would be a good idea to have a feast in honor of himself in the third year of his reign. The party would take place at his royal palace in Shushan. The feast lasted six months and was comprised of three different feasts. The largest one was for dignitaries from across Xerxes' vast empire. This lasted six months. Another lesser feast began in the sixth month and was a private affair for the palace household, all who worked, lived and served in the palace. And then there was the feast that his queen, Vashti, the foremost of all the royal ladies, held for the women of the palace.

On the seventh day of this party, the king was slightly tipsy. Not too much to fall all over himself or to fall asleep, but enough to ask for something that would not be done otherwise. He asked the eunuchs to bring the Queen before his guests so his drunken guests could gaze at her. Considering that at the time only eunuchs could see the women in the royal palace. Or be used as messengers to king's concubines, one can imagine the impropriety of the request.

Vashti, like any good middle eastern woman of high morals and social standing, refused to come. Like any angry wife, she told him he should come to her! But she was the king's arm candy. She was the greatest possession of a king who was fascinated by his possessions. And in a surprising move of integrity, stupidity and self-assertion disobeyed her husband. Certain kinds of husbands should not be disobeyed; especially in full view of their friends. The king was angry and embarrassed. He called a meeting before his boy's club and the advice they gave him was simple: all the women in the provinces would know Vashti's actions and these women would have an excuse to stop obeying their husbands. In short male pride demanded that Vashti be demoted. No longer would she be queen, but she would become just another concubine. In this way, all women would listen to their husbands. This was made part of the written law of the Persians and Medes. And once the law was set down, the king—powerful as he was—could not change it. The king was angry enough to agree to this.

But later, he realized that he had cut off his nose—so to speak—to spite his face. His anger was appeased. He thought longingly on his wife but there was no way he could subvert the law. In addition, the other concubines women in his royal household were not acceptable either. His servants and ministers decided to have a new start. They recommended that the king search the kingdom for virgins who would replace Vashti. Remember Solomon and his princesses and thousand concubines? Powerful men are not inclined to bond with the many women they have sexual intercourse with. This is where the story of Esther begins and where Vashti's story ends. No longer do we hear of the woman who revolted against being a powerful man's show-piece. But her

integrity in refusing --or her stupidity in believing that she was loved and therefore her husband to forgive her – was used by God providentially to save His people.

What does Vashti's story say to us today? It tells us new things and old things. It tells us for instance what we already know: love and power are always at odds. It tells us that those with integrity often will lose power and status. Vashti saved her soul but lost the whole world. But it also makes us question the judgement we use against others. Many Bible readers assume Vashti was a bad person. They speak of her arrogance and pride. In order to appreciate Esther, they feel that they should find fault in Vashti's behavior. It is a common human fault which enters Bible studies. People divide Bible characters into good guys and bad guys because their minds can't seem to hold on to two different thoughts. How, they say, can they be happy for Esther if they like Vashti? Perhaps the first thing they should remember is that life does not have easy answers.

But what about Esther? Let's face it: we are a romantic people. Television and the media have affected the way even Biblical Christians think. And so when we read this story of heaven, we will – if we aren't careful—start turning this story into a great love story.

Esther is not a love story, rather it's the story of a living sacrifice. Like Jephthah's daughter, she has to lay her life down. Her rise to the status of queen and her protection of her people is nicely symbolic of the triumph of God's people over death, and her ability to change the unchangeable law of the Medes and Persians is wonderfully symbolic of the triumph of grace over law, but --fairy-tale ending aside— the actual life of a real queen consort is not a good one.

Esther was the right person in the right place because she was submissive. Here is another case where God uses someone's personal history to create a place for them. Just as God used Samson's probable spoiled childhood to destroy the Philistines, and Moses life as the adopted son of an Egyptian and the husband of an Ethiopian to show God's grace and love, so He used Esther's sad beginnings to prepare her for her future.

When we meet Esther she is the ward of her uncle Mordecai. We don't know when her parents died, but anyone who has been raised by a loving relative after the death of her parents is not only grateful, but such gratefulness will often lead psychologically to a desire to please the substitute parental figure. In addition to having a desire to please, Esther is also very beautiful. In the story of Samson we saw how brute strength was used by God. In the story of Esther, we see that physical beauty can also be used by God. God knew that after the king received the tongue-lashing from Vashti, his bruised pride would only be salved by a beautiful woman who was submissive and who didn't ask too many questions or challenge his male pride.

Esther would probably have been better off with a regular guy for a husband. Weeks would go by without her having seen her husband. Yes, Esther had been placed there by God. She had wealth and some power. But we must remember that like Jephthah's daughter, she was a living sacrifice. She was no longer free to breathe the air and walk joyously and freely among her people. She was a rich man's wife, locked up in a royal harem. Unlike other great royal love stories, the only monument to Esther is in the heart of her people. The king saved her but one sincerely doubts if such a shallow lover of beauty could love any woman deeply. This is no "happily ever after story." Nowhere are we told that Esther loved Xerxes. Strange, isn't it?

Let me repeat: the story of Esther is not a great love story. It is the story of a shallow king who liked beautiful women and the praise of men and how God used this man's failings, a bit of drunken impropriety, one woman's physical beauty and another woman's integrity to save His people.

The Book of Esther tells the story of a beautiful female deliverer named Esther (Hadassah) who was chosen by the Babylonian king, Xerxes, but it is really a story about someone whose life became a living sacrifice. It is one of the few stories where deliverance from the enemy is won by female beauty and charm...and by much prayer. It is also, like the story of Ruth, a story about providence because while it never explicitly shows God working behind the scenes, we all know that God is behind all the small and large aspects of the story.

But what about Vashti's place in history? Ironically, the integrity that caused Vashti to disobey her husband's attempts to treat her as a trophy wife, has made her an object of scorn in evangelical circles where she is often perceived as a haughty snob who would not do what her man wanted. In sermon after sermon, she has been scapegoated. Why?

Many Bible readers assume Vashti was a bad person. They speak of her arrogance and pride. In order to appreciate Esther, they feel that they should find fault in Vashti's behavior. It is a common human fault which enters Bible studies. People divide Bible characters into good guys and bad guys because their minds can't seem to hold on to two different thoughts. How, they say, can they be happy for Esther if they like Vashti?

On the purely cultural level, some people find it hard to understand that this woman lived in a culture that prized modesty in women and she was being asked to show off her beauty in front of a bunch of drunken men. What woman from this culture would want to be a victim of such leers and lusting....especially at her husband's request?

There is another reason why people have a problem with Vashti. They reason that she must

have done something bad because God wouldn't destroy one woman's life simply to bless another woman. This is a kind of reasoning that is not Biblical. Considering the fact that Bible saints always suffer, especially when they keep their integrity (as in the case of Job) or refuse to descend from the cross there is no spiritual or theological cause to Vashti into an arrogant queen. In the Bible, bad things happen to good people all the time. It's almost a given. This leads Bible readers to praise Esther and we often feel that to praise Esther we must rebuke Vashti. To do differently would mean questioning God about his treatment of good people. In order to feel peaceful, we therefore try to make Vashti "evil" or "unfortunate." We assume she must have done wrong to be demoted by her husband, the king. And kings are often seen as authority figures blameless before God and romantic figures, the man of our dreams. To us, what has befallen Vashti seems terrible but let us consider the following.

Although Vashti was probably deeply hurt when her husband demoted her. Divorced or merely demoted in status, Vashti would have had to swallow her pride and become a mere nobody. If she continued in the king's harem, she would have to see Esther from time to time in the women's quarters. Tough indeed. Yet, we should not be spiteful and believe that she got what she deserved, lost the prince because she could not hold her man. God was still with her. Nor should we assume that Vashti disappeared from the king's life completely. She was removed from being Queen but no one knows what happened to her. He might have kept her in his harem. He might have given her to a lesser official as a cast-off as some ancient cultures did. He might have put her in seclusion forever and he might have had her killed.

Life does not have easy answers. The story of Esther is not a great love story. It tells how God used this man's failings, a bit of drunken impropriety, one woman's physical beauty and another woman's integrity to save His people. It is the story of a shallow king who liked beautiful women and boasting about what he had; the king is not a great prize. Even if he were not as shallow and vain and boastful as he apparently was, he is a king who does not see his wife often. As occurs now in large houses in certain parts of Africa and the middle east, when a woman wants to see her husband, she has to send word to ask permission. How much more difficult for a king with a harem!

The book of Esther is about providence and working around the laws. The book of Esther the workings of GRACE and the LAW. Like God, the king is bound by his own laws towards his subjects. How he gets around it is a foreshadowing of how God gets around the law in the case of pardoning sinners yet at the same time making them his perfected children. There is also signs God's providence and guidance and even a lesson on discretion. (Esther is one of the few Bible

characters who hide their religion for a good cause. For more on the Israelites exile in Babylon, read the books of Esther, Nehemiah, Ezra and Daniel

Most women are pretty. And some women are especially beautiful. In the story of Esther, we see beauty being used as a commodity by a powerful man. Vashti and Esther were both married to a man who loved his wives' bodies and faces more than he loved their spirits. In a culture, where little girls are taught that a powerful rich man is a "good catch," it's good to be reminded by the Esther story that the Princess Di's and Hillary Clinton's of the world sometimes suffer in spite of all the wealth and power they seem to wield. In the end of the story – as we know it– the king ends up with a woman who satisfies his lust for female beauty. In addition, he had the perfect wife to fit his ego: a submissive young girl who had been raised by her uncle and who wanted to please him. This is not the kind of wife to help the king grow out of his more egotistical traits but it is the kind of wife who can save her people.

A word needs to be said about the "end" of the story. We do not know what happens to Vashti or Esther in the end. We do not know Vashti's future, or if she was still a favorite of his although no longer his queen. Nor is there any extra-Biblical account in history about Esther. History records Xerxes' wife as Amestris, a name which would be hard to connect to Esther because Amestris' reputation is so horrendous and it is hard to imagine Esther becoming as cruel as the histories paint Amestris. To know who Amestris is to decide whether her reputation has been sullied by historians. If a christian's research points to Amestris' cruelty, then everyone assumes that Amestris must be Vashti. Conversely, should a Christian think of Amestris as a good queen whose reputation was unduly sullied by her enemies, then he is likely to assume that Amestris is Esther. It is hard to think of Vashti as Amestris because history tells us that Amestris survived her husband and remained queen.

But there is the matter of Xerxes's harem. He had no problem with demoting and promoting wives. One can only wait for more archeological discoveries to show the extent of Esther's influence.

As it is, however, at this point in archeological research history, no one is sure of the length of Esther's reign as queen. Just as we don't know what happened to Vashti. We do know that one woman's integrity and strength was used by God in that it led to her demotion so that Esther could become queen. Esther's submissiveness helped to save her people and helped to show other women in Xerxes' vast kingdom that they should not talk back to their husbands. A queen is mentioned in the book of Nehemiah but Nehemiah does not mention the queen's name. For more on the Israelites exile in Babylon, read the books of Esther, Nehemiah, Ezra and Daniel.

## Jonah

**J**onah is the favorite prophet of many people. As the writer of the story tells us, one day Jonah got an unwelcomed call from God. God wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh and warn the people to change from their wicked ways. Or the Ninevites would be destroyed.

Jonah disliked his mission. Of course this is fairly normal. Several of God's prophets weren't too keen on being appointed to some spiritual task by the Lord. Ezekiel, for instance, sat in his house in anger for a good week (Ezekiel 2:15-21) and God had to tell him that if he didn't give the message, he'd suffer for it anyway.

In Jonah's case, as in Ezekiel's, God could have chosen another more willing Israelite prophet. He might also have raised up a prophet from among the Ninevites. But He didn't. He chose Jonah. Jonah was not happy about saving the lives of the enemies of his people. He knew that the Ninevites might repent of their sins. He also knew God was forgiving. That was the worst thing that could happen as far as Jonah was concerned. Nineveh had a cruel history. They had raided many nations, including Jonah's homeland of Israel. And here was God giving them a chance to be saved. Jonah ran away from God on a foreign ship bound for Spain. Then a dangerous storm arose. The sailors realized the storm was not normal. While Jonah was napping peacefully during the storm, they threw lots to see who was responsible for the storm. This action doesn't condone fortunetelling, by the way. People were always throwing lots in Biblical times. But it does show us that God can sometimes use the traditions, cultures and beliefs of other ethnic groups to lead people to a particular truth. The lot fell on Jonah.

Jonah told the sailors that he was running away from the God who made heaven and earth. This made the seamen afraid. In those days, gods had territories. But, even in religions where many gods are worshiped, people often believed in one chief god who was greater than all the other gods combined. The sailors were afraid when Jonah told them he was running away from this God of Gods. Jonah told them to throw him overboard if they wanted to stop the storm. They did not want to throw him into the sea. When the foreign sailors threw Jonah into the sea, the storm stopped immediately and the sailors worshiped Jonah's God.

God prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. There in the middle of the sea, the fish's stomach is the safest place for Jonah to be. After three days in the fish's stomach, Jonah was vomited out on dry land. But Jonah still had to preach to the Ninevites and Jonah was stuck. Jonah preached to the people, and as far as Jonah was concerned, the worst thing happened: the people in

the city felt the need to ask God for forgiveness. Jonah is the only prophet who didn't want his hearers to listen to him. He did not want God to give these people a second chance.

Jonah wanted revenge. He went to the top of the hill and built himself a booth to shade himself from the sun while he sat watching the city. He was hoping all their prayers would fail and God would destroy the city. He wanted rivers of blood to flow as payback for the blood that had flowed through his country.

Nineveh is in a hot country and the place where Jonah sat –on top of a hill– was unshaded from the sun. Not only was Jonah seething and hot inside, he was seething outside too. Jonah built a make-shift shelter to keep the sun off his body. But it wasn't adequate. The heat still attacked his body.

So God made a gourd plant which sprang up in a day to shade and cover Jonah. God did a lot of creating for Jonah's sake. First he created that great fish to swallow Jonah. Then he created that magnificent vine plant with large leaves that grew up in a day ---- right where Jonah happened to be sitting. Then he made the cutworm that destroyed the plant.

Jonah knew God had made the gourd. (He was too mad with God to thank Him for making the thing but he appreciated it.) The great fish had popped up out of the blue at the most convenient moment to engulf, protect, and entomb him. Jonah loved the vine plant too. The vines wide beautiful leaves and tendrils wound around Jonah's make-shift littler shelter and protected Jonah from the sun.

The vine delighted Jonah. He watched it grow over him with its shining transcendent shimmering leaves, gazed at its wonderful design and color as it covered him tenderly. And then Jonah saw this wonderful creation that had so protected him wilt, weaken and die from the hidden cutworm inside it. Then, to make matters worse, God sent a hot wind that beat down on Jonah's back. This was the most crushing blow for Jonah at this time in his life.

Jonah became very angry. Then God asked Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the gourd?" Jonah answered, "Yes, I have every right to be angry!" God then replied, "You are angry about the death of this plant that came up in a day and died in a day? A plant you had nothing to do with creating? But you want me to destroy this country, with young people who don't know the difference between their left hand and their right, and also a lot of livestock?"

"And also much cattle?"

Why did God say that? It always seemed to me that Jonah didn't much like people in general. Or maybe he liked people but he loved animals. So much of the story is God creating one creature or

another. Perhaps despite Jonah's hatred for people, his love for God's created things made him worry about the plants and the wounded animals.

In the beginning Jonah would rather have died than forgive his enemies. Often, the trouble with anger and revenge is that they take over every nook and cranny of a person's heart. God—who understands human hearts more than we can ever say—taught Jonah's heart to love again and then he enlarged Jonah's ability to understand human pain by showing him the plant's pain.

I have no doubt that when God later did destroy Nineveh, in God's time after the Ninevites returned to their old ways, Jonah grieved for his enemies. The God of love and power who is everywhere is a destroyer as well as a creator. He is everywhere and he loves the creatures he has made. He also wants his people to love all his creatures.

## Job's wife

**T**he story of Job is the oldest book in the Bible. Now what is the story about? If you say that it is a story about a good man who suffers when Satan chooses him as a spiritual target, then you are only partially right. Yes, Job did suffer, but others suffered as well. His wife, in particular, suffers greatly. But her story is not told. Or perhaps, it's told only obliquely...one sees her trials only at the corner of one's eye. The trouble, unfortunately, is that all humans judge by appearances and if a person's suffering is unseen – especially if that person is a woman or a minority– that person will probably be ignored or even worse judged. The art of storytelling demands that we have a main character. But what are we to do with peripheral characters who are unseen and mostly unknown? Not judge them surely.

In the Book of Job, we are told that Job –probably an Edomite descended from Abraham through Esau– is a good man. He is not only good, but he is perfect. He fears God, going so far as to frequently sacrifice for them in case they have sinned against God in their hearts.

God has also blessed Job. He is respected among his friends, enemies, strangers, and citizens of the land. He has healthy children, much property and land. But all this changes quite suddenly in a single day.

Quite unexpectedly, out of the blue, with no warning or apparent cause, Job's children are killed. He loses his property, and becomes deathly ill. The only mercy given him, it would appear, is that his wife has not been taken from him and his friends have come to comfort him.

As we read Job's story, we see how stunned his friends are about the sudden destruction that has come upon Job. This is not a normal tragedy. He has not lost a son by tragedy or by murder. Trouble hasn't come to Job the way it usually comes to normal people: one sorrow following another in the normal course of life. No, although Job never felt smugly secure in his spirituality or safe from God's wrath, devastation has come to his door. There is something so clearly purposeful about this outpouring of destruction on Job's life that his friends cannot speak for seven days. I'm not sure if this was partly a matter of Middle Eastern etiquette or if they were simply speechless. Probably a combination of both. But when they finally open their mouths, the reader of Job's story can only wish they had kept their mouths shut.

We should not be too hard on Job's friends. The art of comforting is a difficult one and

many Christians today don't even wait seven days before they start advising a sufferer about her life. But as often happens when a sufferer opens his heart to his close friends, when Job begins to complain about life he unfortunately opens a door for his friends to advise and preach at him.

We do not know what Job and his friends knew about Satan. If they are aware of a malevolent being who causes humans trouble, they never mention him. They do seem to think that God both punishes the good and protects them from evil. Job is a good man as are his friends. It is possible that if the situation had been reversed and one of these friends had been the object of this sudden cumulative tragedy, Job might have been one of the know-it-all comforters.

Comforting is a difficult skill, something not to be indulged in unless one has specifically been told to do so. Most people have existential questions when suffering enters their life. They wonder why suffering has come to them, they wonder if God is good or if He even is comprehensible. They wonder about God. Wondering about God is an honest course. But trouble often follows if one makes one's questions known to the wrong person – to people who are sure of themselves and have all the answers about God. These, unfortunately, are the exact kind of people Job has around him.

These friends must defend God to the best of their knowledge of Him. They honor His name and His integrity. They do not believe that a good God would let horrors so supernaturally cruel and well-choreographed devastate Job unless Job had done something to deserve them. After all, God is not evil.

Perhaps they have a point. But it never occurs to them is that it is precisely Job's goodness that has made him "deserve" these tragedies. It has been said that God egged Satan on to destroy Job and that the book of Job is about God's playing around with Job's life. That's a nice theory to fool around with in a college Bible class but it isn't entirely clear that God was the one who instigated Job's sorrows. Many theological troubles and philosophies occur with English-speaking Christians that never occur with Christians of other languages, or in the Hebrew language. In the KJV, Job 1:8 begins, "Hast thou considered my servant Job..." The English interpretation implies that God is inviting Satan to test Job. But the intention of the Hebrew is more telling. In English, the passage should probably read something like, "So, I see you have been considering my servant Job." But theological questions aside, the fact remains that Job maintains his integrity. He neither blames himself or God. He is dumb-founded. He wonders about God's behavior and seeming inscrutability but he never quite sins by actually calling God evil. The more his friends defend God by blaming Job, the more Job is tempted to sin by cursing God but he resists the urge to curse God.

His friends seek to justify God at the cost of human compassion. But they are also terribly uncomfortable. How could they not be dismayed? This is the holiest person they know. If God can do evil to His creatures – even the good ones– then the world is an unsafe place with an untrustworthy God who was either demanding, petulant or unjust.

If Job's friends had been Jeremiah, Samson or Elisha, they would have commiserated with him. Many of the very very good people in the Bible suffer terribly. The King James Version shows Jesus himself crying out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But those were holy men who understood what a troubled overwhelming life can be. They understood what it felt like to feel as if their God has forsaken them. But Job's friends are not like the Jeremiah of Lamentations or the blinded Samson; they do not understand suicidal grief. In fact, they make matters worse. Job and his wife do not hear comforting reminiscences about their lost children or commiserations about Job's bad health. They don't seem to get financial help in their sudden poverty. What their religious friends subject them to are innuendos, judgments and insults. Job's grief is no longer about his tragedy but about accusing theological arguments. The more his friends speak, the more suicidal, lost, and misunderstood Job becomes. He regrets having shared his soul with these rigid religious non-compassionate friends. And now to make matters worse, his wife has given up all hope.

Ah yes, Job's wife. Have we forgotten her? Job's wife has her own theological question and her own interesting reaction to the family tragedy.

By the time Job's friends have finished with him, Job is questioning God. But what is Job's wife, also a grieving parent, doing in the middle of all this? It's not mentioned if her female friends have come by to comfort her. Would their husbands even let them out of the house to do such a thing? If Job is sick and silent in his room, who is overseeing the burial of the dead children and servants? Who is feeding Job or his friends?

The book of Job prompts many questions. Many of these questions are asked by characters in the story. Satan asks, "Does Job serve God for no reason? Destroy his life, his family and his happiness and he will curse you to your face." Ah, that is the question indeed.

Job's wife echoes Satan's sentiment when she frankly tells her husband, "Are you still retaining your integrity? Curse God and die."

Many preachers judge her for this. She has become a dependable scapegoat in Bible studies and to attempt to defend her is to battle on several levels at once.

The first is a result of the storytelling technique. Clearly, Christians don't know anything about

Job's wife. She is a character seen at the edges of a scene and as such she is ignored. It bothers me and terrifies me to see so many Christians who simply don't want to identify with her. Some even belittle her suffering. They say "yes, we understand that she suffered, but look, she's upsetting Job! She is being used by Satan to tempt a good man." Let's examine this idea of woman as "tempter."

Firstly: Why not examine the temptations Job's wife is facing. Doesn't the temptations of a grieving mother matter?

Secondly: If a woman is grieving and angry, should she keep her grief to herself for fear she might "tempt" her equally bereaved husband?

Thirdly: Does her suffering simply not matter at all?

The typical Bible study answer to all these questions is yes. Countless preachers known for their sensitivity to women will regularly toss off an insult about Job's wife, some going so far as to say that God gave Job a different wife at the end of the story. The Bible doesn't say this but people will read between the lines and the need to get rid of Job's wife because she did not "support her man" is so strong these preachers see God getting rid of a grieving man's wife as a blessing.

Mrs Job's comment is an important one: Is the devastated believer to continue living a noble life, continue praying for her enemies, abstaining from sin, and praising a God who has seemingly forsaken her by allowing so many trials all at once?

The answer is simple. Yes. A Christian should retain her integrity. The person who casually scapegoats Job's wife knows that a Christian should always retain her integrity. Because the answer is so simple, a Bible Class will immediately assume that they should automatically dislike Job's wife. But is that the right thing to do? If we don't examine the circumstances of the story, we will give permission to people to clamp down on uncomfortable questions. Not only that, but we are almost inviting the Bible student to dislike a grieving wife simply because the woman didn't put aside her own grief to support her man.

The usual response at this point is for someone in the Bible study to say, "I hear what you're saying, but she told Job to die. Job said her breath offended him. She wasn't a good woman."

Let us remember that we are talking about a married couple dealing with grief. The question of Job's foul breath is neither here nor there. He is sick and perhaps his wife still has the stench of death in her nostrils after burying her children. Job's wife is burned out. She is giving Job the advice she has probably been giving herself.

This large-scale destruction has not only affected Job. Job's wife too has lost her children. Job acknowledges her pain when he responds: "Shall we take good from God and not take evil?" Unlike

many Christians, Job does not behave as if the pain is his and his alone. In addition, his additional response to his wife comes off like a backhanded compliment. He tells her she is acting like a stupid woman. This is Job's soul mate. He has not picked a woman like Rachel who hasn't got a spiritual bone in her body. He seems to be saying that she really should know better.

As I wrote earlier, I recently heard a TV preacher say, "God gave Job a better wife who gave him children." Again, nowhere in the Bible does it say this. True, the Bible says Job had more children. But why couldn't these new children be a blessing for Job as well as his wife? Doesn't God want to heal the heart of Job's wife also? Or does God only care about male pain? God did not simply yank Job's wife out of the land of the living and give Job a new wife. That's a very patriarchal view of God that leads to scapegoating grieving women. I cannot imagine Yahweh doing this.

We Christians often justify judging Job's wife by saying, "If I were in her position, I would have supported Job." Aside from the fact that we are assuming the weaker vessel must "support" the stronger one, there is the very plain fact that none of us have ever been in Job's wife's position. There are Christians who have had lost family and property in one day but did any also endure fire blasts from heaven at the same time?

St Paul has stated that we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. He also states that we should esteem others higher than ourselves. And yet, we often respond to the story of Job by identifying with Job who was successfully tried, and not with his wife who faltered. We are very wrong to say, "if I were in so-and-so's position." Our challenge as Christians is to learn how to work with the perplexity of the wounded, those people who walking among us like Job's wife. We are to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and learn to live compassionately without assuming that if we were walked in someone else's shoe, we would walk better, lighter, and on a straighter path. But Christ asks us to understand the pain of our brothers, not to judge them.

I've never lost any children. But if my sons all died in a single day, disaster struck from all sides, and there was ample evidence that something supernatural was behind it all, Would I seriously wonder why God had allowed such devastation to afflict me? No doubt. Under the weight of such spiritual and emotional stress, one becomes quite cynical about serving God, even if one believes in Satan and Evil. The death of children often brings pain between spouses and between people and God. Allowing ourselves to judge Job's wife, we give ourselves permission to give an easy answer to judge people who are angry with God. In doing so, do we not become know-it-alls like Job's comforters?

Countless books exist in which theologians have discussed Job and the nature of suffering, but regular church-goers such as myself are never given insight into how to answer the angry sufferer. Rather as this chapter shows, we are encouraged to judge a woman who is in emotional shock and grief.

She does tell Job to curse God but the implication is that she's saying that she's given up on God and Job might as well do it too. IF you really really really feel the need to add Job's wife to the article, I guess you can but it didn't seem really necessary to slip in a judgmental comment about someone whose pain we don't really understand. Of course everyone in the English speaking world agrees that Job's wife is bitter. But most theologians will not say she is spiteful. And most psychologists will wonder why Christians insist on judging a sufferer. And I've noticed that. People actually "insist" on their right to pick on Mrs Job. Remember also that Job also wanted to die and her God has failed her. As far as she knows God has done horrible things to her husband who has been a good man. As for cursing God, she already knows that worshiping God doesn't imply safety, does she really believe that Job's cursing God will make Job die? She takes the attitude that Job should divorce God as she has. This is normal. Why blame a woman for acting normally under such trying circumstances? Why look at the life of a married couple grieving over dead children and only care about the man's sorrows?

I had a friend who essentially divorced God. I am sure there are many other people who have. In my friend's case, her first child died because of an illness. Her second died after spending eighteen months in the hospital due to a medical mistake. My friend had been a good Catholic. I don't know what she meant by this. Perhaps she had read the Bible, perhaps not. Perhaps she understood the nature of God's word and the malevolence of the devil. Perhaps she didn't. Perhaps she knew how to pray effectively.. Perhaps she did not. Perhaps those interceding for her – clergy, laity, and family– knew about the many obstacles to effective prayer. Perhaps they did not. The child died. My friend asked Jesus, her parish priest, and the people in her Catholic church for answers. She did not pick up a Bible. Nor did she read any Christian books about suffering. She said Christianity did not answer her questions about why suffering came to good people. Whether she was good or not is a minor question because God shows kindness to the evil and the good. However she delved into alternative religions and eventually became a Hindu because she felt that it gave her a reason why her children both died: they and she had done evil in a past life.

This was the case of a Christian woman who lives in a world where the Bible exists. We understand her need and feel surprised and perhaps at a loss that she did not find an answer within

the Christian tradition. How then can we judge Job's wife, a woman who was not of the Hebrew people, a woman who lived before any of the Biblical books were written?

Let us judge even those who are tempted to divorce God with compassion. But even better: let us study to know how to answer them.

**W**ell, fellow Bible reader,

We've come to the end of this book. These are my opinions and ramblings. It's here to help you understand the pitfalls you can fall into if as you read your Bible. Part of it is written as a defense against those who misuse or insult the Bible – either because of their own agendas, or because their own holy books attack the Bible.

Now begin to read and write about the real book that matters: The Bible. Understand it and study it and feel free to disagree with me and with all Bible books you read. But do so with God's strength and inspiration, and with knowledge. Study to show yourself approved.

God bless you.

Carole McDonnell.

Carole McDonnell's works appear in various anthologies including "So Long Been Dreaming: Post-colonialism in science fiction," edited by Nalo Hopkinson and published by Arsenal Pulp Press; "Fantastic Visions III," published by Fantastist Enterprises; W.W. Norton's "LIFENOTES: Personal Writings By Contemporary Black Women," and "Then an angel came along," edited by Julie Bonn Heath and published by WinePress Publishing, "Jigsaw Nation" published by Spyre Publishing and "Seasoned Sistahs: writings by mature women of color." She is the author of a speculative fiction novel based on the Bible called "Windfollower." The Book is available in bookstores and online.

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