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The Whole Biblical Narrative

A Holistic Reading

Jonathan Bryan

2011

This resource gives you a big-picture context for reading the Bible. It will show you the Bible's narrative, the story that begins in Genesis and ends in the last book, the Revelation.

Here's the short-short summary: God creates us in full communion with God. But we choose to alienate ourselves from God and from one another. Over and over we reject God. Nonetheless, God steadfastly invites us back into communion.

This gives us a holistic meaning: that the Bible is actually all about God's boundless yearning to have us back, regardless of our alienation. That's a meaning different from the one that fixates on sin, God's judgment, and our damnation.

It's a fascinating story, different from what you may have thought, thrilling in its profound simplicity, amazing in its ironies and paradoxes. Be prepared for some surprises and some remarkable insights.

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(which outlines the plot of the Bible)

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Contextual Contents

As you read a certain book, you can see where it fits into the whole biblical plot:

Books of the Bible . . .	Relevant chapters in this book . . .
Genesis	Creating Alienation God calls Abraham Bondage in Egypt
Exodus	Exodus from bondage God's covenant with Israel Israel's wilderness wanderings . . .
Leviticus . . . Numbers . . . Deuteronomy and the remainder of the Old Testament	Idolatry in Canaan Grace , love, and forgiveness
Matthew . . . Mark . . . Luke . . . John	Climax . . . Incarnation . . . Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection
Acts of the Apostles . . . Romans . . . and all the other epistles	The New Creation
The Revelation to John	And Finally, When? The Eschaton

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1 – Questions about the Whole Biblical Narrative

In the first forty years of my life I had a confused relationship with the Bible. I got Bible stories that left me with a vengeful old God and a limp-wristed Jesus. I listened to out-of-context passages in church, getting little meaning, no clarity. I had contempt for silly-comic televangelists who used the Bible as an irresponsible scattershotgun to pepper people with threats, condemnation, and guilt.

Then I read the whole book. I discovered that it has a start-to-finish narrative, a whole big story. And that the narrative conveys a coherent message: “We have messed up. God nonetheless stays with us.”

The “nonetheless” really grabbed me. As a middle-aged suburbanite husband, father, and community college English teacher, I had long learned that we get what we deserve and we pay for what we take. What’s this “You messed up. Nonetheless, God is staying with you”? It’s supposed to be, “You messed up. You’ll pay, now or later.”

Since then I have wrestled with the biblical “nonetheless” and its implications. To sort out my ideas, I self-published books called *Nonetheless, God Retrieves Us: What a Yellow Lab Taught Me about Retrieval Spirituality* (2006) and *Questings: A Parable* (2009) exploring the concept. I drafted this present book in 1995-1997 as the actual basis for those other two.

Now it’s finished, and you’re welcome to it. I hope you’ll get some strength, encouragement, and joy

from it. Especially the Nonetheless Concept, equally applicable in your theology and your personal relationships.

Thus this book provides the context – the whole biblical narrative – for discovering central meanings in the Bible.

What is a whole biblical narrative, anyway? As I said, I have noticed that the Bible has a coherent narrative arranged into a coherent plot – a beginning, a development, and an end. This plot, I saw, discloses coherent meanings. I refer to these as “holistic meanings” – what the Bible as a whole means.

And the Bible’s holistic meanings are . . . ? They tell us about (1) God’s character, policies, practices, intentions; (2) our relationship with God; (3) how to live well with our selves and with others; (4) the significance of things that happen; (5) where we came from, who we are, why we exist, what we can do about all this; and (6) all sorts of other insights.

These holistic meanings, I also realized, carry more weight than any selective meanings.

Which are . . . ? Suppose I want to know what the Bible tells us about a certain question, such as, “Is God wrathful?” I can select a bundle of passages – “proof texts” – that contain both “wrath” and “God.” From these, I can seem to prove that indeed the biblical God is wrathful. However, the Bible as a whole does not support that characterization. No, its holistic meaning demonstrates God’s steadfast grace and love, not wrath.

So, yes, selected biblical passages, when taken out of context, do indeed show God in wrathful moments. However, within the context of the whole Bible, this wrath is not congruent with the whole plot of the whole Bible, its holistic meanings. These larger meanings must take precedence over the lesser, the proof texts. The holistic trumps the local or topical or piecemeal or cherry pickings.

So proof texts are bad? No, they have preliminary value, but only when we rank them below the holistic biblical meanings. Certainly we use selective passages to discover what the Bible says about various matters. But to convert “the Bible says” to “the Bible means,” we read those passages within the context of the whole biblical narrative. Thus we derive responsible decisions about biblical congruence and coherence – and finally bottom-line meanings.

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What are your hopes for this book? The plot of the Bible as a whole moves and inspires me. It shows our relationship with God much better than proof texts can. So I want to (1) help readers recognize the Bible’s complete narrative; and thus (2) promote understanding of the meanings of the Bible as a whole; and thereby (3) contribute to a holistic biblical theology. Which just might (4) help reunify the sad cultural divisions that plague us – divisions stemming from misleading interpretations of the Bible. Which of course lead to questionable theology. (And silly-comic televangelists.)

What are you talking about? I’m talking about too many divisive cultural and policy disputes framed around selective meanings such as, “The Bible says [insert applicable proof texts here] and therefore it is wrong to [insert a cultural issue here].” Such selective meanings are then used to advance the speaker’s ideology.

By contrast, I hope to help people make the Bible their source of inclusive and unifying celebration, strength, and interdependent commitments. I want people to find in the Bible meanings in their lives, not a set of rules and legislation. So, to answer your question: To push back gently against some other forces that are dividing rather than unifying us.

“Says” versus “means”? My license plate says: NNTHLS. That could mean anything or nothing to you. To me it means: NONETHELESS. It’s my way of displaying my commitment to the Nonetheless

Concept.

It's also my way of demonstrating that what something says, like NNTHLS, may mean, in context, something quite different, like "nonetheless." What someone says may not be what someone means. What the Bible says literally may not be what the Bible means, literally. In someone else's context, NNTHLS may mean, Never Nibble The Hind Leg of a Snail. Who knows?

I use the phrase "the Bible *says*" quite often, reporting the literal sense of the text. Why is this important? Not because I take the Bible literally – I don't – but because I want to get an accurate picture of the actual, printed narrative as is, where is. In teaching English I learned that unless you find out exactly what a text says, literally, you have no chance of finding out what it means. So, only after we understand what the narrative says can we discover what it means, its truth.

I think the truth of the Bible lies not on its literal surface, but deep within its words, its characterizations, its stories, its contexts. As Jesus so well showed, the truth comes best through parables that use plot, characterization, and similitude to make their points.

I seek, then, to answer two questions: First, What does the biblical narrative actually say? Next, what does that narrative mean? What are the central meanings of the Bible as a whole? And I hazard this task even while recollecting the desperate theologian's trenchant remark, "The author of the Bible never really made its main points clear."

Any help with the meaning of meaning? For me, "meaning" answers the "so what" questions. "What's the significance of the passage, of the Bible?" "What impact does it have on me and mine?" "Who cares?" Answers to such questions are "meanings."

Here is a case where meanings in the Bible made a big difference in the lives of two people I cared about and who cared for each other: One said to the other, "You know what? You are not born again, and therefore you're going to hell, and therefore I cannot marry you because I can't stand knowing that I can never be with you in heaven." It seems that she had heard from her preacher that the Bible says clearly that only born-again Christians can go to heaven, the rest to hell.

My work with the Bible, as expressed in this and my other books, refutes that preacher's opinion as well as other similar opinions based on that one. When I study the Bible as a whole I find nothing whatever that would support (1) a dualism of "heaven" and "hell," (2) born-againism, (3) Christian exclusivism. Much to the contrary.

You think the Bible actually has authority in these matters? I do. I believe it has the authority to disclose the truth about God, purpose, reality, and us. And what is authority? It is whatever persuades me to believe what I believe, think what I think, feel what I feel, commit what I commit. The Bible has become for me a cardinal authority in these matters.

How? In wrestling with its quandaries, contradictions, and other obscurities. I have come to respect three attributes: First, how coherent it is, how well its internal logic works, how wise it is, deep down; and second, how venerable it is, how many people and how long it took to write it, how venerated it has been, how deeply embedded it has been for so long in our consciousness, our worship, our prayers. Something this persistent for this long for so many doesn't mean nothing. But mainly I have come to respect its profound message, the Nonetheless Concept and all it signifies about God and how we are with God in the Christ.

What's all this about how long, how venerated? It's quite a story. I have put the whole authorship question into Chapter 3, together with an historical context and an explanation of anthropomorphism (the Bible's habit of making God seem like a person). [Go to Chapter 3](#)

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How do you cite the biblical passages you quote? I cite the book, the chapter, and the inclusive verses, such as {Genesis 2.5, 8-9a}. In this citation, the comma separating the verse numbers means that I quoted verse 5, then left out verses 6 and 7, and included verse 8 but only the first half, “a,” of verse 9. A “b” would mean I quoted only the second half.

What translation? The New Revised Standard Version, a mainstream, scholarly translation. Its copyright rules allow 500 verses only. I have about 460.

The Bible is so long. Your biblical narrative is so short. How come? Well, one Sunday a preacher rose in the pulpit and said, “The Bible readings this morning offer so much, I hardly know where to begin.” The reprobate in a back pew called out, “As close to the end as possible, preacher, as close to the end as possible!” My thought exactly, so I have put the beginning of the Bible and the end of the Bible as close together as I can – I have removed everything not in the biblical narrative. And I have included only samples of the remainder. The result is that you won’t get tedious genealogies, lists of regulations, repetitive histories, or anything else irrelevant to the plot. You get only the narrative that begins in Genesis and ends in the last book, the Revelation.

This narrative yields composite biblical meanings, meanings that can give you a solid foundation for your personal convictions and spiritual practices.

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2 – The Narrative of the Bible in a Nutshell

The biblical narrative in five acts. In answering those preliminary questions, I said that we can read the Bible as an expression of meaning conveyed through the plot of its narrative. I see five acts in this plot: Equilibrium . . . Alienating conflict . . . Developing tension . . . Climax . . . Resolution. These are the five standard elements of any plot.

You get meaning from a plot by asking, “How does the ‘Resolution’ section resolve the ‘Alienating conflict’?” The answer could come out, “God damns the alienating sinners.” But it doesn’t – not even close. Much to the contrary. Read on to see the actual resolution, truly delightful and heart-warming.

Act One – Creation in equilibrium

The Bible says that in the beginning there is God, only God. Out of nothing God creates everything in **equilibrium**, with humans in peaceable communion with one another and with God (*shalom*).

Act Two – Alienating conflict

Humankind, created in God's image, enjoys this original, peaceable, God-centered equilibrium. However, having free will, they choose arrogant self-centeredness, alienating humankind from God and from one another. The plot now has a protagonist, God, and an antagonist, humankind's alienation. (Note: the antagonist is not humankind but humankind's alienating behavior.)

Act Three – Deepening relationship – and tension – between humans and God

In this long act, the narrative recounts humankind's chronic rebellion that intensifies the alienation – and shows God’s steadfast forbearance.

Highlights: God **calls** Abraham into communion. The Israelites suffer **bondage** in Egypt and cry out to God. God delivers them in the **Exodus**. At Sinai God makes an everlasting **covenant** with them. God then leads them through the **wilderness** to Canaan. There they indulge in persistent **idolatry**, worshiping the little fertility Baals.

Nonetheless, at every rebellious turn in this narrative God invites the Israelites to return to communion with God and with one another. And every time the Israelites arrogantly reject God, perpetuating their original alienation.

The tension between alienating behavior and God's forbearance provides the suspense in the plot and leads to the amazing climax.

Act Four – Climax: God's transforming grace-love

That brings us to the climax of this plot – the Christ event: the **incarnation**, the **crucifixion**, and the **resurrection**.

Jesus, **incarnate** God, grows up in Galilee, is baptized, calls disciples, teaches, and heals. Enacting the character of God, he corrects a great error: people had come to believe that God demands that people conform to unyielding legalisms, enforcing these with vindictive, punitive judgments. Jesus' policies and practices repudiate this false image. He shows, by contrast, that God offers steadfast **love**, **forgiveness**, and **grace**, inviting the outsider inside.

He goes to Jerusalem. His enemies connive to try him on trumped-up charges of blasphemy. They condemn him to death by **crucifixion**. He dies on a cross and is buried. He appears to his disciples in his **resurrection** body, a unique condition.

Act Five – A new creation

The disciples find their lives transformed in this experience. They go to work telling others about Jesus, his transforming presence in this **new creation**. The story transforms these others also. Finally, realizing their new status as **the body of Christ**, these Christians combine into house churches, rejoicing in their work. They realize that God is drawing the whole world into a fulfillment of *shalom* in the **Eschaton**, the last days.

A summary of this summary. God creates in peaceable communion. Humans, in persistent arrogance, alienate themselves from God and from one another. **Nonetheless**, God steadfastly invites them to return to full communion.

One holistic meaning to interpret from this. The Bible establishes God's gracious, steadfast love. The significance of this holistic meaning will become clear after we have gone through the whole narrative.

Off we go . . .

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3 – Historical Context, Authorship, and Anthropomorphism

Historical context – when did all this happen?

Scientists tell us that it has been about 13.7 billion years since the Big Bang (or, as I would say it, "since God began creating, using the Big Bang"); about 4.5 billion years since the formation of the earth; 100,000 to 200,000 years since the first evidence of homo sapiens.

Ethnic movements resembling what the Bible says about the Abrahamic migrations occur around 2000 years before Jesus; the Israelites' Egyptian bondage, exodus, covenant, and wilderness episodes could occur between 1500 and 1200 BC. From then on the Israelites occupy Canaan.

In the 1100s through 1000s BC the Israelites develop from twelve separate tribes into a unified

kingdom under Saul, David, and Solomon. Then, in a civil war in the mid-900s BC, they divide into two kingdoms – northern "Israel" and southern "Judah." In the 700s BC invading Assyrians conquer the northern kingdom, banishing many Israelites to foreign lands ("the Diaspora"). As the 500s BC begin, Babylonia conquers Judah, the southern kingdom, taking them into exile in Babylon. In the later 500s, they are restored to Jerusalem.

In the 500s BC through the 100s AD, Judaism and the Hebrew Bible develop. In the 100s AD Jesus lives and is crucified and resurrected. The Christian church and the New Testament develop.

That's the historical context for the biblical narrative.

Biblical authorship – how did the Bible get written?

Ancient Israelites were evidently natural theologians, wise people who contemplated great ultimate questions. When? Who can imagine when, in the mists of pre-history, thousands of years before Jesus, people first sat around the evening fire telling family stories, tribal stories, ethnic stories? Using those in their poetry, their singing, praying, and worshiping. Reciting family trees. Celebrating their legendary forebears. Recalling their chiefs and kings. Asking their deepest questions of deity, causality, origins, ethics, life's meaning, death and after-death, purpose, morals, prayer, governance.

Various answers emerged, interwoven, complex answers. And over time, generations, these amazing Israelite theologians worked the answers into precepts, legislation, prayers, hymns, poetry, chronicles, stories, genealogies, biographies, legends, myths. They edited these constantly, refining, combining, and shaping them.

Over many, many centuries these answers in their various forms became codified texts. And the people revered them, honored their deep significances, and used them for sacred purposes. I think that in these ways the people's reverence hallowed the texts. They became gradually no longer mere words but sacred words, sacred answers.

I further think that the spirit of God disclosed in the Bible caused this entire messy process.

Scholars have discerned that this all developed mainly through spoken words until the 500s BC; that afterwards the words were increasingly written down on scrolls; and that the collection of scrolls became gradually canonized in the years around the first Christian century.

"The New Testament" evolved in the same cumulative, developmental ways (in Greek) during Jesus' lifetime and seventy years or so afterward. Gradually, certain texts became canonized into the New Testament. In due course, Christians combined the two parts into the familiar Christian Bible. In very many translations.

And how did that messy process produce your tidy narrative plot? I don't know how. I do know it's there. I suppose that, somehow, God's creational power shaped the theological accumulations into a holistic context, an encompassing narrative, the larger story of the developing relationship between God and the Israelites and later the Christians. This narrative does give structure, and thus meaning, to the vast collection of theological answers in the various forms.

It is this structure and its meanings that I am writing this book to disclose.

Is the Bible historical? Yes and no. It's obviously written in an historical style, but it makes a special sort of history. I think that it is primarily theology, narrative theology. The narrative's plot carries the primary meanings of the Bible. Historicity has only utilitarian importance.

For the Israelites living before Jesus, this narrative theology becomes a spiritual constitution, a story upon which they base their bedrock convictions about how they are with God, and how God operates.

For Christians, the whole biblical narrative, including Jesus, offers an expanded spiritual constitution for bedrock convictions.

In either case, the narrative helps people interpret the past, to see in the narrative God's policies and the people's relationship with God.

Anthropomorphism – what is it? You will notice over and over that the Bible says that God did this and God did that, that God has certain emotional reactions, ones comparable to the reactions you and I might have. This personalization of God we call "anthropomorphism." It's a feature of biblical theology, a way that the ancients expressed their understanding of God.

It tends to lead, however, to thinking of God as not much different from ourselves, to shrinking our conception of God to our own size.

Personally, I resist that tendency. But if I am to be true to the principle of reporting just what the Bible says in order to discover what it means, I have to report the anthropomorphism as is, where is.

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4 – Creating in Peaceable Equilibrium

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about the origins . . . creation, creating?

A preliminary note. For each episode in the plot of the whole Bible I provide a number of passages that tell what the Bible *says* about that episode. And I explain those passages as we go along, a little commentary. (Even as I recollect someone's remark that "the Bible sheds a good deal of light on the commentaries.") Then, from time to time, I interpret the passages, drawing *meaning* from them. I convert what they *say* to what they *mean*. I relate them to their context in the plot. And so I oscillate from "*says*" to "*means*."

With that in mind, please enjoy my way of reading the Bible as a whole narrative, one complete story extending from Genesis to Revelation.

The narrative begins, in the Book of Genesis, with six significant concepts about the origin of everything:

(1) In the beginning (2) when (3) God (4) created (5) the heavens and the earth, (6) the earth was a formless void. {Genesis 1.1-2a}

This passage says that: (1) Our universe has a beginning. (2) The beginning is a point in time, "when." (3) Our universe has an originator, called "God." (4) God creates. (5) God created the heavens and the earth. (6) At that original time the earth had neither shape nor substance.

Says . . . means. That's what the passage says. Here's what I think it means.

(1) Says: "In the beginning" – Our universe does have a beginning.

Means: It's not circular. A beginning implies an end. It's going somewhere, a terminal point.

(2) Says: "when" – The beginning is a point in time, "when."

Means: If time begins, we can imagine "before time," a condition of "no-time." We have a term for this mind-twisting concept of timelessness: eternity. So this passage asserts the reality of both chronology (time) and non-chronology (eternity).

(3) Says: "God" – Our universe has an originator called "God."

Means: We could call the originator anything that denotes (a) “originability,” such as “First Cause,” and (b) reality outside of time, transcending time, in eternity. So I find “transcendence” a useful synonym for this attribute of God as originator. But note that I will show later how the Bible provides another attribute of God: immanence, God present and personal. So: God – simultaneously **transcendent** and **immanent**.

(4) Says: “created” – God created.

Means: Two ways to stress this phrase: (a) *God* created, meaning that only God – not something else – did the creating; and (b) God *created*. The verb “to create” means “to bring into existence out of nothing.” So, starting with nothing at all, God began bringing into existence, creating. Creating what? Everything. Taking this seriously, I say that – since only God can create (out of nothing) – we can only “make” (out of something). God creates, we make.

(5) Says: “The heavens and the earth” – The entire expanse of reality, from as far out there (the heavens) to as far in here (the earth) as reality extends.

Means: God creates everything. There is no reality that God does not create. If it is real, God creates it. But wait: does that mean that if I take planks and build a bench that actually God creates the bench? No. God creates the potential for a universe containing the potential for life and the potential for trees. We make planks from trees and benches from planks.

Hence the pious friend who visited his neighbor to admire the new lush garden. “Lo,” said the pious visitor, “look at God’s marvelous garden!” His skeptical friend replied, “Yes, you should have seen it when God was tending it without my work – a rocky hillside of wild vines and weeds.” God creates potential, we make whatever we make.

Thus the biblical narrative begins with this assertion: that **God creates every potential** for every reality: every potential entity, such as time, space, energy, matter . . . every potential law and principle, such as physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, evolutionary processes . . . every potential property, such as contingency, death, life . . . every potential abstraction, such as honesty, love, reason, treason, grief, revenge . . . every potential emotion, such as happiness, sadness, anger, compassion. We make what we make of these.

(6) Says: “The earth was a formless void” – At its moment of creation, the earth (“in here,” as opposed to “out there,” the heavens) had no form, no content.

Means: At the beginning the earth was formless void; now it has form and is certainly not void. This means that God created the earth full of potential – potential to take on form and fill the void with realities. This further implies that God creates in stages, through progressive evolution, from nothing to little to more to most to fulfilled. Further implied in this potentiality I see a companion property – contingency. Potential is truly potential only if it contains uncertainty, the possibility that it will not become realized. So – the Bible lets us know that God creates through potential and contingency. The end of this book will point out the vast significance of this observation.

To draw this together: The biblical narrative establishes that an originator, “before” time or any other reality exists, begins creating reality. Rephrasing: In eternity, a condition of no time, no space, no energy, no natural laws, no anything – that is, nothing, no-thing, no realities – transcendent God begins creating realities. Again: God transcendent creates realities *ex nihilo* – out of nothing. God creates realities through potential and contingency.

The first chapter of the Bible continues with a series of creations, beginning with light:

And darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. {Genesis 1.2b-3}

Notice that at first there was nothing, “darkness.” Then God creates something, “light.” This pattern recurs throughout the Bible: first nothing, then something. Over and over the Bible says that from nothingness God creates somethingness. I will point out instances of this idea and show why it is very important. God creates, creates out of nothing, nothing at all. *Ex nihilo*, from nothing. The concept of “God creates from nothing” forms a bedrock meaning of the Bible, appearing over and over throughout the narrative as a significant theme.

Please also file for later use the phrase “a *wind* from God swept over the face of the waters.” The word “wind” translates the Hebrew *ruach*. In other contexts *ruach* gets translated as “spirit” or “breath.” (Greek uses *pneuma* for the same purposes.) So keep this in mind as we weave together the biblical uses of *ruach/pneuma*, a very important concept.

I draw your attention also to the recurring phrase “God said.” By speaking words, God creates. When God says, “Let there be X,” X becomes real. Or, as the Bible phrases it, “And it (X) was so.”

Another recurring phrasing: “And God saw that it was good.” God is affirming the created realities: they are good, acceptable, complete.

For example, here we see (1) God creating-by-speaking the potential for the earth to produce living creatures and (2) the potential becoming real and (3) God declaring it good:

And (1) God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” (2) And it was so. . . . (3) And God saw that it was good. {Genesis 1.24, 25b}

The origin of humankind. Next we hear that God creates humankind, both male and female simultaneously:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. {Genesis 1. 26a, 27a}

To finish the first creation account, we hear God’s affirmation of the original creation:

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. {Genesis 1.31}

The second account of creation. That finishes the first account of creation. Now we get the second. It has a very different version of the origin of humankind: God creates man first, later woman:

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, . . . the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. {Genesis 2.4, 7}

As I said above, *ruach* means not only “wind” but “breath”: “God . . . breathed” and “the breath of life.” Later we’ll see *ruach* also means “spirit.” As the narrative develops, “wind,” “breath,” and “spirit” become central concepts, carrying vital meanings.

Next, God creates an original environment:

And the Lord God (1) planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he (2) put the man whom he had formed. And the Lord God (3) commanded the man, (4) “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but (5) of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for (6) in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” {Genesis 2.8, 16-17}

(1) The garden in Eden means an environment of harmonious equilibrium. (2) Humankind originally

lived in communion with God in this equable condition. (3) God established a relationship with humankind. (4) The relationship had three features; first, free will. (5) Second, restrictions, boundaries. (6) And third, consequences.

That is, our original environment had the features of *shalom* within the boundaries of moral law, the interaction of free will, boundaries, and consequences.

In the biblical narrative as a whole, this original environment of peaceable equilibrium stands as the benchmark condition, the perfect communion of humankind in relationship with God. All else is measured against this original condition. Hard to over-emphasize the significance of this original condition.

Now, recall that in the first account God creates man and woman simultaneously. But in the second account, the male is created first, the woman later:

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. {Genesis 2.18, 21-22}

The Bible goes on to say that this original man and woman live in guilt-free innocence, emotional health, and wholeness – *shalom*.

And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. {Genesis 2.25}

Here it is again, a portrait of humankind’s original innocence, like naked two-year-olds, connected with God in lovely communion.

Thoughts on Genesis so far. Literally so? You may wonder why I am relating this story as though I think it happened literally as written. Remember what I stipulated earlier – that a reader must get clarity about what a text says before deciding what it means. Genesis says that God created the universe progressively, as a week progresses from Sunday to Saturday. That’s what it says.

To ascertain what it means, I consider it in the context of scientific knowledge, and I can see that first, there was transcendent God, and nothing else. Then, out of nothing, transcendent God originated the Big Bang, the expansion from nothing of all the potentials needed to evolve a contingent, open universe. Some potentials actuate, some don’t. The potential for causation has, obviously, actuated and has in turn actuated the potentials needed to cause all the laws of nature – physical, conceptual, and moral. These are, in their turn, causing this universe where is, as is, in continuing, progressive creation. All of this has happened and is happening within the context of contingent potential that is strictly governed by causal laws.

I say again: the originator, God, created the laws of physics and chemistry through the Big Bang, which in turn potentiated the laws of biology that govern the evolution of life. Thus evolving humankind.

Why is this so important? The biblical accounts of creation are causing extraordinary public policy disputes.

Religious fundamentalists associated with the “intelligent design” movement are using these passages to argue that science does not explain how the universe got here; that the science of evolution does not explain how we got here; and that, therefore, public education should include biblical concepts to supplement or even replace scientific concepts.

Scientific fundamentalists associated with the “new atheism” are attacking religion, especially Bible-

based religion, as destructive.

I disagree with both types of fundamentalists. I respect the scientists' account of how an original expansion, the Big Bang, has led to the universe we now inhabit and the life we now have. And I respect the Bible's account – the whole biblical narrative – of why we are here, for what purpose. Science for “How did it happen?” Bible for “Why did it happen?” Therefore: far from contradicting each other, they complement each other, each discipline answering a different great question. See my books *Nonetheless* and *Questings* for further reasoning along these lines.

What does the Bible say so far? The biblical opening says (1) that in the beginning there was an originating, transcendent reality that it calls “God”; (2) that God creates; (3) that in the beginning there was “formless void,” nothing, no thing; (3) that from this no-thing God created things – everything we can perceive; (4) that God said that every thing was “good”; (5) that original humankind, represented as “Adam” and “Eve,” lived in “Eden,” which transliterates the Hebrew ‘*adan* – pleasure, delight; (6) and that they lived without shame.

And mean? These observations lead me to the following meanings:

(1) Since ultimate reality is transcendent God, and since God is creating our potentiated universe out of nothing, the nothings in our lives have potential to become something new and wonderful.

(2) God called the original actualities “Good” and “Eden” and “Not ashamed.” These attributes indicate that our original, established relationship with God has stability, security, tranquility, concord, harmony, balance, goodness, innocence. Whole, not fractured. Connected, not estranged. Mutual trust, not suspicion. Healthy, not ill. Fulfilled, not unfulfilled. All those attributes mean that we are originally created in God's peace, an unconflicted, peaceable communion with God. All is good in Eden.

The ancient Hebrew word for this cluster of original conditions, *shalom*, names our original condition. As the biblical narrative unfolds, we'll see that God yearns to restore original *shalom*.

But I need a more recognizable word associated with the analysis of plot – equilibrium. The biblical plot begins in equilibrium.

Two accounts of the beginning of creation. The **first** account, in Genesis 1, says that transcendent God, cosmic and “out there,” creates everything from nothing. In the **second** account, in Genesis 2, we visualize immanent God right on the earth, personified, making things from the earth. It portrays God in person, right here, present, immanent.

These two portraits of the creator God are a prominent theme of the Bible. They show up as one of the great paradoxes of biblical theology – God simultaneously **transcendent** and **immanent**, both cosmic (out there) and immanent (right here).

However . . . read on for the next step in the biblical plot, when it all gets terrible.

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5 – Alienation

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about alienation (called Sin)?

Adam and Eve live in communion with God in the equilibrium of Eden. A lovely picture. Which turns ugly:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He [the serpent] said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” {Genesis 3.1-5}

This temptation is so attractive that humankind succumbs, thus taking the first step of alienating conflict:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. {Genesis 3.6}

The disobedience causes an alienating condition: guilt, anxiety.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. {Genesis 3.7}

And they take another alienating step. By hiding, they rupture their communion with God with rebellion, arrogance, estrangement.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. {Genesis 3.8}

And this leads to further alienating behavior: deceit, blaming, refusal to accept responsibility, buck-passing, and loss of trust.

But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” [The Lord God] sent [humankind] forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. {Genesis 3.9-13, 23}

(Reminds me of a gag: Friend: “What, you bought another new suit?” “Yes, Satan made me do it.” “Why didn’t you just say, ‘Get thee behind me, Satan?’” “I did. He just said, ‘It looks good from back here too.’”)

Meanings: language and connotations. Two clusters of words have emerged so far:

(1) I have used “equilibrium” (*shalom*, created order, wholeness) to name the initial conditions of the universe. And I have chosen “communion” to signify the special relationship between humankind and God, the original perfect condition, the lost condition, the condition of harmony that God yearns to regain.

(2) According to customary interpretations, the Adam-and-Eve story explains the origin of Sin, “the Fall.” It provides the basis for “original sin.” This rupture of original communion separated people (1) from God, (2) from God’s Edenic peace and equilibrium, and (3) from one another. The result: humankind’s wrongness and brokenness, rupture of relationship, and therefore chasmic estrangement, dis-harmony, and dis-communion in our relationship with God.

The words “sin,” “sinful,” “sinning,” “original sin,” “the fall,” and the like have accumulated many unhelpful trivializations. They now confuse more than clarify. So I prefer a different word to collect all

those meanings: “alienation.” For me, it names what “sin” is supposed to name. “Alienation” captures the condition without losing the meaning of the story.

In short, the biblical plot is all about Equilibrium/communion-versus-Alienation.

Preview. Now, what would I expect God to do about humankind’s outrageous rebellion, this deliberate fracture of communion, this rupture of Godly equilibrium? React with anger and disgust? Abandon them? Yes, I would. However, according to how the biblical plot actually develops, retribution is evidently not God’s policy. Although God does expel humankind from Eden, God also stays faithful to them. Regardless of their affront, God does not break communion, tit for tat. This reversal of our expectation surprises us and complicates the narrative, raising our suspense. What else will amazing God do? Enter Abraham.

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6 – God Calls Abraham

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about commissioning us?

So the biblical plot brings us now to Abram (later renamed Abraham), a successful head-of-tribe in what is now Iraq. God calls him into a covenant: Abraham is to leave his comforts and follow God. In return, God will make him the progenitor of a great nation in a new land. The Bible gives us two accounts, in Genesis 12 and in Genesis 17.

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. {Genesis 12.1-2, 4a}

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. {Genesis 17.1-4}

What? After all that rejection, rebellion, and misbehavior – chronic alienation – God would offer humankind (represented by Abraham) a fresh start in covenanted communion? I would not do that. I would want all sorts of safeguards against further alienation. But God shows unmerited, unwarranted trust in Abraham. And Abraham, on his part, rises to that level:

Abram went, as the Lord had told him. {Genesis 17.4a}

Abraham’s unquestioning compliance appears throughout the biblical plot as the prototype of faithful response to God’s call. The Bible says that he uproots his entire tribe and heads out in God’s footsteps, destination unknown, migrating southward into Canaan. He and Sarah have Isaac, who has Jacob, who has sons who in time form the twelve tribes of Israel. They produce, as God promised, many descendants:

Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob’s firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. The sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s maid: Dan and Naphtali. The sons of Zilpah, Leah’s maid: Gad and Asher. {Genesis 35.22b-26}

And, as the Bible says that God promised, the Israelites did occupy the area known variously as the Promised Land, Canaan, Palestine, the Holy Land, Zion, Israel. And those twelve sons established the twelve tribes of Israel (the model of which shows up later in Jesus’ twelve disciples).

Meanings. This episode initiates a recurrent trend: God calls to commitment – regardless of the worthiness of the people called. God evidently yearns to re-establish communion with humankind and calls people to communion.

This policy of grace appears over and over again in the next episodes.

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7 – Bondage in Egypt

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about being enslaved, trapped, not-free?

This is a good place to restate my understanding that the Bible recounts not video-quality history but does provide the Israelites a spiritual constitution. Bondage and deliverance are central tenets.

I report to you that the Bible says that Abraham’s tribes migrate into Canaan, what we now call Israel; that they suffer severe famine; that they leave Canaan and migrate to Egypt, where, over the next centuries, they become prosperous; and that a new pharaoh enslaves them. That’s what it says. What does it mean?

Now, back to the narrative. The Bible reports on how Israel gets along at first in Egypt:

But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. {Exodus 1.7}

Then a new pharaoh enslaves them in wretched bondage. This experience relates to Israel in later instances of bondage, of persecution and restricted freedom.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land. Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. {Exodus 1.8-14}

And the people of Israel cry out to God for relief. As people always do from their foxholes.

We cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors. {Deuteronomy 26.6}

God hears the supplications of enslaved Israel and appears to Moses. As Israel believed God always does.

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. {Exodus 3.1-6}

(Much later in the narrative, mysterious flame will signify God’s presence in the Pentecost event.)

God promises to deliver the Israelites from bondage. This assurance comforts Israel.

Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” {Exodus 3.7-8}

Two observations: First, God has compassion and empathy, a personal concern for Israel in bondage. Second, God moves, proactively, to rescue Israel.

And so God commissions Moses to be the agent of deliverance. Which assigns Moses status as a near-messiah.

“So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” {Exodus 3.10}

Moses attempts to disqualify himself, but God reassures Moses: I will be with you, a constant presence. (Remember this much later when Jesus says it, in Matthew 28.2.)

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.” {Exodus 3.11-12}

Moses asks God to know the name of the authority he has when he tells the Israelites that they must abandon their homes and follow him to who knows where.

But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” {Exodus 3.13-14}

The cryptic answer, “I am who I am” translates four Hebrew consonants: Y-H-W-H, which some translators render as Yahweh and others render as the LORD, in caps. In this little book, I use “the Lord.”

When reading this phrase, try saying, “I **am**,” which asserts God’s reality. Then say, “**I am**,” which asserts that God, no other, has ultimate reality. I prefer this latter reading.

God adds two strong incentives: (1) deliverance from “the misery of Egypt” and (2) a new home “flowing with milk and honey.”

Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. I declare that (1) I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, (2) a land flowing with milk and honey.’ {Exodus 3.15-17}

That does it for Moses. He carries out his commission and is ready to launch the Exodus.

Meanings in the Call and Bondage passages. God approaches the people, communicates with them, responds to their needs. God remains present with them, always inviting and re-inviting them to communion. God seems to yearn to close the gap of separation, to overcome the alienation that estranges them. As though humankind has leapt from the bridge, God’s bungee cord stretches almost to the rocks before retracting us back toward God. But not all the way. Later.

8 – Exodus from Bondage

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about deliverance from bondage?

The Israelites' spiritual constitution continues with the central tenet: God delivers from bondage. Thus:

After Pharaoh has suffered all the plagues he can stand, the time comes for the enslaved Israelites to break loose and make their hasty flight, their exodus.

The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. A mixed crowd also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds. They baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt; it was not leavened, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves. {Exodus 12.37-39}

Moses leads them to the Red Sea and safely through its waters.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. {Exodus 14.21-22}

(I recall a cartoon showing the child Moses facing his bathtub full of water, his arms upraised, the water parting, and the caption, "Young Moses in training.")

God's deliverance, as promised, impresses the Israelites.

But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. {Exodus 14.29-31}

Meanings. The Bible says that God remained faithful to the Israelites and to the covenant with Abraham; and that God did deliver them from their misery. Now, what does that mean? It means (1) that God has shown by direct action that the Israelites are a treasured possession, worth delivering; (2) that God will be faithful to promises made (in this case, to Abraham); (3) that God exhibits these attributes despite the Israelites' long history of alienating behavior.

These meanings become imprinted on their spiritual memories and recorded in their scripture. Throughout the Bible they call the Exodus the great defining act of God, their faithful deliverer. For example:

The Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders. {Deuteronomy 26.7-8}

In the bondage and exodus narratives, we see Israel's conviction that God creates new realities out of deathly realities. The whole biblical narrative will develop this theme right to the end.

The biblical plot, then, has so far shown us dramatic yet counter-intuitive happenings. The suspense rises: What will happen to these newly freed Israelites? How will they respond to their new relationship with this perplexing, faithful God?

9 – God’s Covenant with Israel

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about mutual agreements with God?

The Bible says that the Israelites migrated from the Red Sea crossing into the Sinai Peninsula, settling at the foot of Mt. Sinai (also called Horeb).

[The Israelites] entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. {Exodus 19.2b}

Then comes God’s announcement of a covenant with the people of Israel. This next passage is known as the “eagles wings” covenant, beautiful and stirring. Expressing a concept for a new relationship that would create the nation of Israel, it uses only generalized language, with no specifics: I, God, have brought you close to me. Stay close to me and be “my treasured possession, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.” {Exodus 19.3-6}

A digression to note a significant biblical motif. Israel descended from bondage, a severe negative, into a lethal environment (the waters of the Red Sea) but emerged into a life-giving environment (a covenant relationship with God at Sinai). This death-to-life motif is replicated in Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection – as well as in Christian baptism.

Back to the narrative. Moses presents God’s conceptual version of the covenant to the people; they agree to comply with it.

So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. The people all answered as one: “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.” Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.” {Exodus 19.7-9}

The specifics of God’s covenant relationship with Israel. The covenant-making narrative has begun with the generalities of the “eagles’ wings” covenant. Next come the more specific, yet still only ten, imperatives, known as the “Ten Commandments.” Very specific regulations will follow, building a conglomeration known as “the Law.”

This first commandment certifies that Israel recognizes one God and only one God, denying the contemporary polytheism and affirming monotheism.

Then God spoke all these words: [One] I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. {Exodus 20.1}

The second commandment specifically prohibits idolatry, the worship of any divinity other than God. Religion in the Middle East had always had numerous little gods, especially Baals. God prohibits any worship of these godlets.

[Two] You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow

down to them or worship them {Exodus 20.2}

Commandments numbers three and four give religious rules.

[Three] You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. [Four] Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work . . . For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. {Exodus 20.7-8b}

Numbers five through ten provide ethical rules to promote a stable culture.

[Five] Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. [Six] You shall not murder. [Seven] You shall not commit adultery. [Eight] You shall not steal. [Nine] You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. [Ten] You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. {Exodus 20.12-17} (A second version of these appears in Deuteronomy 5.6–21, with insignificant variations.)

(Another cartoon shows a guilty-looking Israelite in the back of the crowd saying to his friend, “I certainly hope these are not retroactive.”)

Now, soon after hearing these ten simple obligations of fidelity to God – who had just delivered them from bondage – the people of Israel begin to chafe and murmur and disobey. They demand their more familiar, more utilitarian, and less demanding gods:

The people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us.” {Exodus 32.1b}

Aaron agrees and arranges a ceremony of idol-worship; the idolatrous Israelites lie, saying that the godlets had delivered them from bondage.

He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” {Exodus 32.4}

Upon discovering this shameless idolatry, God instructs Moses to go down the mountain to the people. He castigates them for their faithlessness.

The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” {Exodus 32.7-8}

As we move along, we’ll see very many similar episodes of Israel’s lapsing into idolatry. Idolatry becomes, in fact, a central theme, a severe problem. We shall see how God responds to these pervasive cases of perfidy. Be prepared for surprise and paradox.

The narrative shows us now that the basic, general “eagles wings” covenant has expanded into the ten imperatives and is further expanding into many regulations to insure that Israel will become a humane, just, and ethical society. For example:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will

surely heed their cry. You shall not revile God, or curse a leader of your people. You shall not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. {Exodus 22.21-23, 28-29a}

Here is another theme, this one stating God's cardinal attributes. It emerges here and repeats quite often:

The Lord passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” {Exodus 34.6-7}

This passage shows the biblical conviction that God's character has an absolute core: “abounding in steadfast love.” God practices a paradoxical dialectic: “forgiving iniquity” and simultaneously “by no means clearing the guilty.” These features of God's complex character show up over and over in the whole biblical narrative.

And then we hear how Israel is supposed to respond to God's steadfast love:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. {Deuteronomy 6.4-5} You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord {Leviticus 19.18}

Love God. Love yourself. Love your neighbor. Much later we'll hear Jesus restate this for his disciples:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” {Luke 10.27}; see also Matthew 22.37-39 and Mark 12.30-31)

The covenant mission. The covenant so far defines God's relationship with the Israelites. But it has another function also: it defines Israel's mission; God commissions Israel to a certain duty. Listen:

[God said,] I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. {Isaiah 42.6b-7}

Or, to paraphrase, God commissions Israel to enlighten other nations with the light of God, to open their eyes to God, to bring others out of bondage. To be, in short, “a light to the nations.” On what authority? On the authority of the status God has given Israel:

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. {Deuteronomy 6.6}

Meanings. The covenant at Sinai means that God in turn creates a new relationship with the people of Israel. And that God promises boundless and gracious love for Israel, holding Israel as a treasured possession. And that God has high expectations that Israel would maintain absolute fidelity to God and ethical conduct and justice toward one another.

The Bible makes this quite clear, that God expects Israel (1) to be holy as God is holy, and (2) to shine forth God's light to other nations. This becomes Israel's covenanted mission.

These further mean that the character of Israel has become formalized, the expectations have become heightened, the consequences for breaches have become more severe. Israel has grown up. God and

Israel have become, you might say, married.

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10 – Israel’s Wilderness Wanderings

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about those 40 years?

To review the plot so far – God creates everything out of nothing, all good. Including humankind, in peaceable communion with God. Humankind chooses to alienate that perfect communion. Through Abraham, God nonetheless calls his people back into communion. The people of Abraham, the Israelites, suffer bondage in Egypt. God delivers them in the great Exodus. And makes a covenant with them at Sinai.

Now we watch them wander in the wilderness toward the land God promised Abraham’s descendants, Canaan. The biblical accounts tell us that these nomads journeyed forty years before entering the fruitful area known as Canaan, Palestine, etc. Here is how the Bible describes these times.

They complain about the food.

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” {Exodus 16.2-3}

So God provides manna for them.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. {Exodus 16.4}

They complain about the water.

The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” {Exodus 17.2-4}

So God provides water for them.

The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” {Exodus 17.5-6}

They refine their covenant law to maintain civil order in an uncivil people and to insure ethical and moral rectitude. The result: a harsh code of punitive law consistent with others in the harsh culture of the times. But although harsh, in many cases it actually modulates prevailing practices of unrestrained vengeance. Thus it is called the *lex talionis*, the law of measured and proportional retaliation. For example, a person whose tooth an opponent had broken in a fight could – in revenge – break only one tooth, not a mouthful.

Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death. Anyone who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, life for life. Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered.

One who kills an animal shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death. You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the Lord your God. {Leviticus 24.17-22}

The people become dissatisfied with their blessings; they feel entitled to yet more. They snivel and whine constantly. Moses becomes exasperated with both God's expectations of him and his people's acting like spoiled children.

So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once – if I have found favor in your sight – and do not let me see my misery." {Numbers 11.11-15}

Moses leads the Israelites to Mount Nebo, just east of the Jordan River, near the Dead Sea, where they can see Canaan and send forth scouts to find out about living conditions there.

At the end of forty days [the scouts] returned from spying out the land. And they told [Moses], "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. {Numbers 13.26-27}

Moses explains to the Israelites that in the wilderness God has tested their commitment to the covenant.

This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. {Deuteronomy 8.1-2}

He reminds them that God has faithfully provided for their needs, like food and water.

He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. {Deuteronomy 8.3-4}

And that God has given them hardships not to punish them but to harden their resolve and fidelity.

Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. {Deuteronomy 8.5-6}

Moses exhorts them to be grateful that God has been faithful to the covenant by giving them Canaan, a prosperous land.

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you. {Deuteronomy 8.7-10}

And Moses exhorts the people to fidelity to God alone.

Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. {Deuteronomy 8.11}

He reminds them that they must think that any prosperity comes not from their own merit, but from God's bounty.

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. {Deuteronomy 8.12-16}

Moses warns Israel not to swerve from true monotheistic worship lest they suffer the terrible consequences of idolatry.

If you do forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the Lord is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God. {Deuteronomy 8.19}

The exhortations to ethical faithfulness point out that God, in love for Israel, has charged them to be steadfastly faithful to God.

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. {Deuteronomy 10.12-15}

And so God has honored the covenant with Abraham. The epic journey of Abraham's descendants is summarized in a passage from Deuteronomy now known as "the little credo." Why? Because it states their conviction that God's actions have certified God's love and care for Israel:

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. {Deuteronomy 26.5b-9}

Meanings. The wilderness episode signifies that Israel must have a long-term commitment, in fidelity, to the Covenant; that only over time can Israel develop spiritual maturity.

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11 – Idolatry in Canaan

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about worshiping other-than-God?

So, as we follow the developing biblical plot, we see that God has delivered the Israelites from bondage, covenanted with them, led them through the wilderness, and given them residence in Canaan. Time for faithful gratitude, yes? No. The alienation gets worse.

Some background. You recall that God's covenant included three major features: (1) God's fidelity to Israel and Israel's fidelity to God; (2) the people's ethical rectitude and the nation's public justice; and (3) Israel's mission, to be a light to the other nations, to shed God's light on others.

When the Israelites settled in Canaan, according to the biblical narrative, fidelity became the first casualty. The Canaanites worshiped an array of idols representing little gods. These godlets were thought to provide fertility and other wants and needs. They had utilitarian attributes: when you wanted a certain outcome you worshiped the godlet in charge of that outcome. The term Baal covers many of these convenient deities.

God, by contrast, expected exclusive fidelity, service to others, ethical behavior, selflessness, and the like. Challenging.

In the accounts of the Israelites' occupation of Canaan, the biblical narrative says that the local gods, especially the Baals, tempt them away from worshiping God and God alone as the covenant requires.

So, even though God has been faithful to the covenant, Israel is not equally faithful to God. The idolatry becomes rampant. Early on, Joshua, Moses' successor, had this to say to Israel:

[You entered] a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant. Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. {Joshua 24.13-15}

But his challenge had little effect:

Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and worshiped the Baals; and they abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord, and worshiped Baal and the Astartes. {Judges 2.11-13}

Thus they fail to be God's light to lighten the nations.

The biblical narrative says that during these centuries both northern and southern kingdoms have their separate line of kings. Some kings lead the people to faithful worship of God and some encourage idolatry, Baalism.

Here is a typical account of idolatrous kings in the northern kingdom, Israel, condemned for doing "what was evil in the sight of the Lord" – worshiping the little godlets, the Baals.

Ahaziah son of Ahab began to reign over Israel in Samaria in the seventeenth year of King Jehoshaphat of Judah; he reigned two years over Israel. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of his father and mother, and in the way of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin. He served Baal and worshiped him; he provoked the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger, just as his father [Solomon] had done. {1 Kings 22.51-53}

By contrast, here is a typical passage about a faithful king:

Jehoiada [a high priest in Jerusalem] made a covenant between the Lord and the king and people, that they should be the Lord's people; also between the king and the people. Then all the people of the land went to the house of Baal, and tore it down; his altars and his images they broke in pieces, and they killed Mattan, the priest of Baal, before the altars. The priest posted guards over the house of the Lord. {2 Kings 11.17-18}

But the reforms never stay reformed, in either the northern or the southern kingdom. Here is one of the worst of the worst – King Manasseh of Judah, who worships the worst of the Baals, Molech. Molech demanded that firstborn sons “pass through fire,” which of course burned them to death.

He [King Manasseh of Jerusalem, king of Judah] built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, “In Jerusalem I will put my name.” He built altars for all the host of heaven [the polytheistic deities of Baalism] in the two courts of the house of the Lord [the Temple]. He made his son pass through fire; he practiced soothsaying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. The carved image of Asherah [a Baalist deity] that he had made he set in the house of which the Lord said to David and to his son Solomon, “In this house [the Temple], and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever. {2 Kings 21.4-7}

When Manasseh builds altars to the Baals, sacrifices his son in the fire, and erects a carved image of Asherah, he desecrates the Temple and all that it signifies about Israel's sacred mission to be God's own people.

Idolatry includes not only overt worship of Baals but also failure to live up to God's insistence that the people of God ensure social justice. Many prophets rail against this infidelity to the covenant. In this typical passage, the prophet Amos expresses indignation that the people lack compassion and allow chronic social injustice. Amos notes bitterly that, for example, merchants wait impatiently for religious observances to end so that they can return to dishonest profit-taking.

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” {Amos 8.4-6}

Meanings in the narrative of idolatry. These examples show that the narrative emphasizes, through massive repetition of instances, that the Israelites in Canaan commit chronic acts of infidelity to their covenant with God, worshipping the Baals rather than God.

In the plot structure, this means that the conflict between God and the Israelites' arrogance has risen to a crisis: no further stress in the system is possible; a climax must take the tension one way or the other. Dramatic suspense in this crisis has risen as far as it will rise. Stand by for a countervailing tension.

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12 – Grace, Love, and Forgiveness

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about unmerited forgiveness?

The plot so far. Creational *shalom* leads to alienational conflict leads (nonetheless) to God's call to Abraham leads to bondage, to exodus, to covenant, to wilderness, to idolatry. God the protagonist confronts the alienating arrogance of God's beloved people. This tension becomes severe. The people's alienating behavior rises to an intense stress on the relationship, a crisis.

The narrative contains a dramatic expression of this tension: the prophet Hosea, in order to allegorize the tension, marries a prostitute. Why? To signify that although God has “married” Israel, Israel has

gone whoring after Baal. In this way Hosea dramatizes the theological abstraction of Israel's infidelity to the covenant. The question hangs over the narrative: What will God do about this infidelity?

Well, I know what I would do. I would reflect briefly on the persistent arrogance of my people, their rebelliousness, their ingratitude, their chasing after other sources of benefits, their gross exploitation of my patience – in short, their infidelity. And I would conclude that they are a lost cause, unworthy of further investment of love. That's what I would do.

That is not, however, what the plot of the Bible says God actually did. I was stunned when I first realized what the Bible says God actually did. I had grown up with the popular notion that the "Old Testament God" is bloodthirsty and vengeful, harsh and judgmental, etc. Many "Bible stories" had encouraged that notion. But I discovered that the biblical plot does not support that characterization. Much to the contrary.

We have seen instead that God has consistently called the people back to communion, has delivered them, has made a covenant of mutual trust and respect, has stayed present with them through many trials.

God has had ample justifications over the centuries for abandoning them. But God has not abandoned them. We have seen that the biblical God expresses steadfast love for the people of God over and over and over. That's the headline story here. Despite all the alienation, God persists in calling them back.

In the plot so far, God has been saying, "I created you, dear people, but you have rejected me and my gifts. Nonetheless, I still love you and want you close to me."

In the Hebrew language of the Bible this nonetheless-attribute of God is called *hesed*. It translates into steadfast love, unconditional love, faithful love. I use simply "grace-love." God has a policy of grace-love, a program of grace-love, a practice of grace-love. God, in short, as we have seen, is grace-love.

So the biblical narrative shows God's reliable grace-love.

Where are we now? We come now to the 700s and 600s BC. God's people have been settled in Canaan (Palestine) for some centuries, alternately faithful and unfaithful. The great prophets are pointing out that the people's infidelity to God is causing political and moral rot. They are warning Israel and Judah of impending doom if they continue their infidelity.

But here is the paradox. They are assuring the people that they will suffer from their infidelity. And concurrently they are assuring them that God nonetheless will continue to love them steadfastly. They express this dynamic in anthropomorphic language:

[God said to Israel,] "do not go after other gods to serve and worship them, and do not provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm." {Jeremiah 25.6}

Jeremiah then describes the angry, punitive consequences that God threatens:

Yet you did not listen to me, says the Lord, and so you have provoked me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm. Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, even for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace. {Jeremiah 25.7-9}

Well-documented history tells us that indeed King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon did descend upon Israel in the early 500s BC and exile the elite Israelites to Babylon. Jeremiah got it right.

A challenging issue in biblical interpretation. But what about attributing these angry reactions and retributive policies to a personal, human-sized deity? What about saying that God manipulated foreign affairs to cause Israel's downfall on account of Israel's religious infidelity?

As a young man, before I thought through the larger context of this biblical account, I deplored the Bible's seeming characterization of a god who had severe emotional limitations. "Disobey me, will you? I'll getcha!" This became a yet greater problem when I realized that my own parents and my other adult friends – my teachers, my fellow Marine officers, my NCOs, my colleagues – these mature, honorable people did not behave like this. I began to think that the Bible presents a juvenile deity with stunted judgment, a petty tyrant. This distorted view (together with some other grievances) discredited the entire Bible in my own juvenile, uneducated mind.

I have come a long way from that opinion.

First. I have come to respect natural physical and moral laws, causality – those built-in dynamics of cause and effect that always and everywhere operate reliably and consistently, without exception. Climbing a ladder that I had set on a slippery surface caused a fall that permanently injured my shoulder. From that pain I learned (again) that defying the reliable laws governing slippery surfaces and gravity leads to destructive consequences. I watched helplessly as two married people disrespected each other for years, eventually causing their marriage to dissolve. I keep learning that defying the reliable laws of human relations leads to destructive consequences.

Second. I figured out that God did not cause either of these destructive consequences. But the reliable laws (of physics and human relations, respectively) did certainly cause these destructive consequences.

Third. I figured out that God caused (created) the reliable physical and moral laws in the first place. And they always work reliably.

Fourth. I figured out that the Israelites had been violating certain moral laws of fidelity and social justice for centuries, and that these violations had caused spiritual weakness that caused national vulnerability that Assyria and Babylon exploited. So did God cause the downfall of the Israelites? Yes, but indirectly, through the reliable, predictable interaction of their self-destructive behavior and their enemies' aggressive behavior.

Fifth. I have come to terms with the vexing biblical habit of anthropomorphism, of reducing God to human size. It's just the way the biblical writers did it before we developed ways to express causality in the language of natural and moral law.

Sixth. Therefore, I "interpret" this passage like this: "God has created dynamics that will operate reliably to cause internal rot that will result in the collapse of these people's nation (**"will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace"**) {**Jeremiah 25.9**}. This interpretation recognizes God as the original but not the immediate cause of destruction.

Now, back to where I started this digression into biblical causality: I was saying that the prophets "are assuring the people that they will suffer from their infidelity. And concurrently . . . that God nonetheless will continue to love them steadfastly."

"God nonetheless will continue to love them steadfastly." This phrase captures the essence of what I have to say in this book. The Israelites will suffer greatly, yes, but God will not abandon them. The biblical passages that come next illustrate where I got this idea.

A new creation. Turns out that God's manner of "loving steadfastly" involves newness – a new covenant, a new relationship, a new creation. Newly imprinted on the human heart, not cold stone. Realized within the psyche, not enforced from without. A startling set of images, these are.

To illustrate this new covenant, I have chosen passages (in chronological order) from four prophets, Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, who foreshadow God's act of consummate grace. We shall see in the next chapter what that surprising act will be.

Hosea – First, from the 700s, Hosea reviews God's steadfast love for his people despite their persistent worship of the Baals.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim [the Israelites] to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. {Hosea 11.1-4a}

God promises a new covenant of security and peace.

I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. {Hosea 2.18}

And God concludes with imagery of love as faithful as marital love.

And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love [*hesed*], and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord. {Hosea 2.19-20}

Jeremiah. Second, from the late 600s to early 500s BC, here is Jeremiah, delivering God's promise of a new covenant:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. {Jeremiah 31.31}

This new covenant improves on the one made at Sinai, which the Israelites persistently broke:

It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. {Jeremiah 31.31-33a}

It will be written not on stone tablets, rigid and legalistic, but on the human heart.

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. {Jeremiah 31.33b}

It promises ultimate communion in which all will know God personally, wholeheartedly, inwardly, intimately. Remember the lovely condition in Eden, when God could expect to meet Adam and Eve in the Edenic garden to stroll together in the cool of the day. God yearns for a return to that full communion with humankind. God promises that it will happen one day, this original relationship of *shalom*, wholeness, reconciliation.

How will it happen? How will they all "know me"? Through forgiveness:

They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more {Jeremiah 31.34b}

For good reason is this passage respected as prime evidence of God's intent to fulfill creation in the

end of time.

Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel gives a particularly striking instance, likening the failed people of God in the 600s BC to a valley of dry, dead bones. He uses the recurring image of *ruach*, the wind or breath or spirit of God that brings new life into the spiritually dead:

Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” . . . Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” I [Ezekiel] prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. . . . [God said,] I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. {Ezekiel 37.5-6, 9-10, 26-27}

Isaiah. From the 500s, Isaiah, like Hosea and Jeremiah, reports God’s specific intent to do a new creation with the beloved Israelites.

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. {Isaiah 43.18-19a}

Isaiah goes yet further in God’s scope of the new creation: “new heavens and a new earth” with a clean slate: God will remember nothing from the former times. All will be joyously new.

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. {Isaiah 65.17-19}

You may recall that I said in the first pages how important is the assertion, “God creates.” Well, God has indeed created (1) a new people in Abraham’s descendants, (2) a new relationship in the Sinai covenant, and (3) a new nation in Canaan/Palestine.

Now comes God’s promise of a new creation altogether. How, we may wonder, would God accomplish such a new creation? Isaiah offers the vision of a branch sprouting from the family tree, the same family as produced the prototypical king of Israel, David (the son of Jesse):

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. {Isaiah 11.1}

Remember that in the beginning God’s means of creating was through the *ruach* of God, the “wind,” of God, embodying the spirit of God into the creation? Now God promises that the spirit, the *ruach*, will begin a new creation in the branch of David:

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. {Isaiah 11.2}

In the new age that these four prophets envision, the whole world will be in God’s peace, *shalom*, the Peaceable Kingdom:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall

play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. {Isaiah 11.6-9}

(Woody Allen it was, I think, who mused that the leopard may lie down with the calf, but the calf won't get much sleep.)

Meanings. The narrative that expresses this great narrative theology evidences God's heart-held policy: God continues, episode by episode, to create new relationships with the Israelites. Over and over and over and over, we have seen God yearning for the people of God, never failing to be present and to care and to grieve every defeat. Israel's story of entering Canaan, of building and dividing their kingdom, their dispersion, their exile, their restoration, their rebuilding – all these tell of Israel's infidelity and God's fidelity – nonetheless. "Nonetheless" is defining God's character and policy. Wrong-doing and faithless you may be, God says. Nonetheless, I love you.

A biblical passage that summarizes the narrative of the Israelites. Here's the story. In the 500s BC the Israelites suffer exile from their homeland. Two generations live as captives in Babylon, then they are sent home to Jerusalem. They rebuild the Temple and restructure their religious life. A priest named Ezra, in a mass meeting of the Israelites, offers a lengthy prayer, recorded in the Book of Nehemiah. He summarizes the story of their ancestors' relationship with God. Here it is:

Creation – And Ezra said: "You are the Lord, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven worships you." {Nehemiah 9.6}

Alienation – (Ezra says nothing of the Adam and Eve story. However, he does weave the theme of alienation into everything else.)

Call – You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham; and you found his heart faithful before you, and made with him a covenant to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Gergashite; and you have fulfilled your promise, for you are righteous. {Nehemiah 9.7-8}

Bondage – And you saw the distress of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea. {Nehemiah 9.9}

Exodus – You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted insolently against our ancestors. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. And you divided the sea before them, so that they passed through the sea on dry land, but you threw their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. Moreover, you led them by day with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the way in which they should go. {Nehemiah 9.10-12}

Covenant – You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known your holy Sabbath to them and gave them commandments and statutes and a law through your servant Moses. {Nehemiah 9.13-14}

Wilderness – For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them. {Nehemiah 9.15}

Idolatry – But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments; they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that

you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt. {Nehemiah 9.16-17a}

Grace – But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them. {Nehemiah 9.17b}

Idolatry – Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your ordinances, by the observance of which a person shall live. They turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. {Nehemiah 9.29b}

Grace – Many years you were patient with them, and warned them by your spirit through your prophets; yet they would not listen. Therefore you handed them over to the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. {Nehemiah 9.30-31}

Nevertheless – Note how often Ezra asserts the unexpected, paradoxical grace of God’s response. God stays with the Israelites and does not forsake them although they so plainly deserved punishment for their persistent and faithless idolatry. Indeed, he uses the explicit “nevertheless” to highlight God’s reversal of expectation, what I’m calling the nonetheless response.

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13 – Climax

The question here: How do the tensions in the biblical plot come to a narrative climax?

From “Old Testament” to “New Testament.” In the biblical plot that we are following, the Old Testament has run its course. It has told the beautiful story of how God’s boundless grace-love creates the people of Israel. Now the plot enters the New Testament. (Personally, I prefer to ignore the editorial distinctions between these two testaments and concentrate upon the unity of the biblical narrative – the Bible taken whole, one love letter.)

Well, anyhow, here we are at the end of the “Old Testament” in a universal tension: God’s irresistible grace-love against humankind’s immovable alienation. In dramatic terms, we have reached a point of climax. Something has to give, and it won’t be God. But how to move the immovable? Go in person. Have a word with them.

The Christ event. And that’s what God does in the Christ event. Say again? Christ event? Yes. In the biblical narrative we now meet a new figure, Jesus of Nazareth. And we watch three Jesus episodes – his **incarnation**, his **crucifixion**, and his **resurrection**. Taken together, these three climax the biblical plot, showing how this conflict plays out.

In the Christ event, God says, in effect, “You people have alienated yourselves from me and from one another. I despise what you have done and not done. Nonetheless, I love you and I want you back in full communion with me. Nonetheless.”

Here’s the thumbnail on the Christ event: God becomes **incarnate** in Jesus of Nazareth, who lives, teaches, and heals among the people. However, consistent with previous infidelities, the authorities ignore the teachings and **crucify** the teacher. Nonetheless (again), God’s love prevails, making a new creation through the singular **resurrection** of the Christ.

The four gospels – This part of the Bible starts with four “gospels” that appear to be biographies of Jesus. I prefer to read them as biographical theology. You can see my reasoning in my book, *Nonetheless, God Retrieves Us*, 2006. A briefer version appears in conversational form in *Questings: A Parable*, 2009.

Briefly: after the resurrection, many communities are becoming followers of the Christ – Christians. Each community, then as now, is dealing with its own local issues such as persecution, discord over religious doctrine, and human suffering. And so each community develops a distinctive theology, a gospel, addressing its own particular theological concerns. Eventually four of these become our four gospels.

Each gospel uses Jesus' biographical data to interpret what the Christ event means to that community. Each answers the question, "What is the theological significance of the Christ event for this community?" It isn't trying to provide historical biography, but applicable theology.

Of course, the four gospels do have considerable commonalities. For purposes of tracking the biblical narrative, here's a summary:

Incarnation – All four gospels say that Jesus accumulates disciples, and that he teaches and dramatizes God's policies, practices, and program. These include (1) anticipation of a new time when all will gladly center their lives on God (the so-called "kingdom of God"); (2) the power to heal broken bodies and relationships; (3) the merits of a life of self-giving and God-centeredness; and (4) Jesus' willingness to draw in "bad" people whom the "good" people shun. This attribute of radical inclusiveness, called commensality, embodies God's policy of refusing no one, inviting everyone, no matter what – nonetheless.

Crucifixion – All four tell how religious authorities collude with Roman authorities to condemn and crucify Jesus. The four narratives of the crucifixion recount, with variations, (1) Jesus's last supper with his disciples, (2) his prayer with them in Gethsemane, (3) Judas' betrayal, (4) Jesus's trial by Pilate, (5) his flogging, crucifixion, death on the cross, and burial in a tomb on a certain Friday.

Resurrection – All four attest that, on the following Sunday, disciples discover that the tomb is empty. All (except Mark) record that Jesus' disciples experience personal contacts with a bodily presence resembling Jesus. Mystified, they conclude that God has created a new order of reality, new life, resurrection life, whatever that is.

To summarize: the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection episodes (comprising the "Christ event") show how the conflict between the biblical protagonist and the biblical antagonist is resolving. God is prevailing over human alienation. It remains now to discover exactly how God will resolve the ancient conflict.

Let's move through these three episodes in the Christ event.

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14 – Incarnation

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about God fully human and fully divine?

Tradition has long said that God became present with humankind in Jesus of Nazareth. The name for this presence is "**incarnation.**" What's that? Incarnation requires two features: (1) Jesus must be immanent: fully human, a flesh-and-blood mortal, with every attribute of a person; (2) Jesus must be fully God, transcendent deity. Not some of each, or alternating one then the other, or any other diminishment of this ultimate paradox: Jesus is fully human and concurrently fully God. Immanent and transcendent.

The origins of Jesus' incarnation – Each gospel has a different account of how Jesus' incarnation originates. I'll give a brief sample from each:

Matthew's account of Jesus' origins – Matthew's gospel says that an angel tells Joseph that God's spirit (Greek: *pneuma* – comparable to the Hebrew *ruach*) will cause Mary to birth Jesus.

Now the birth of Jesus (1) the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was (2) found to be with child from the Holy Spirit [*pneuma*]. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for (3) the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and (4) you are to name him Jesus [in Hebrew, *yeshua*]. {Matthew 1.18-21a}

(1) The messiah (in Hebrew: *mashiah*, meaning “anointed one”) is a person whom God has anointed to serve as a national deliverer or savior. King David was the prototype. Calling Jesus “the messiah” signifies the Matthean community’s conviction (a) that God had promised them a messiah and (b) that Jesus is that messiah.

(2), (3) In both sentences, Matthew states that God’s spirit has engendered Mary’s pregnancy. The term “Holy Spirit” (*pneuma*) restates the concept in Genesis 1, the “spirit of God.” There the language was Hebrew, and the word was *ruach*, meaning the breath or wind or spirit of God instrumental in the origins story. And it connects with Mark’s and Luke’s explanation (below) that the spirit of God engendered Jesus’ birth. As I’ve said before, we’ll see how this repetitive motif of “creating spirit” will yield yet more meaning as the biblical narrative unfolds.

(4) The Hebrew *yeshua* is transliterated as “Jesus.” It means “God is deliverance, rescuer,” thus connecting with the Israelites’ conviction that God delivered them, in the great Exodus, from bondage in Egypt. So of course Jesus must have a name consistent with his function – deliverer from all sorts of bondages.

Evidently Matthew considers that (1) Mary, (2) the spirit of God, and (3) Jesus’ name are the important features, for Jesus’ birthing itself gets only passing notice – in only a subordinate clause!:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem. {Matthew 2.1}

Meanings – The spirit of God creates, in the context of Mary and Joseph’s marriage, a messiah, God incarnate, named “God-is-deliverance.” This name, *yeshua*, identifies the messiah’s mission: to deliver people from bondage to illness, brokenness, interpersonal conflict, oppression, and the like.

Mark’s account of Jesus’ origin. Mark’s gospel does not even mention Jesus’ birth. Instead, it starts when Jesus is baptized as an adult. Jesus’ incarnation becomes evident at this moment.

In those days (1) Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was (2) baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the (3) Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are (4) my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” {Mark 1.9-11}

(1) Mark locates Jesus’ origin in a particular town in a particular region, Nazareth in Galilee. This particularity lets the reader visualize Jesus as a real flesh-and-blood person, not a mere concept. Please file this fact to use in interpreting Mark’s account of Jesus’ resurrection.

(2) “Baptized” (Greek: *baptizmo*) means “dipped” or “dunked” in water. The image brings to mind the Exodus, when the Israelites went down into and up out of the Red Sea waters. The Exodus, remember, signifies God’s power to deliver from bondage (as in *yeshua*, the deliverer).

(3) Again, the word “spirit” connotes God’s creating power, in this instance a new order of existence: incarnation leading to an altogether new creation. On “spirit,” see the notes in Matthew, above, #s 2 and 3. The dove image suggests peace and equilibrium, the Edenic condition of human existence before all the alienation began.

(4) “My Son, the Beloved” tells us that Jesus is as closely identified with God as a son is with a father. When linked with evidence (above) that Jesus is fully human, this affirmation that Jesus is also fully God establishes that Jesus is the incarnation of God.

And by the way, the other gospels have virtually identical accounts of Jesus’ baptism, showing that all four communities placed high value on the theology of baptism – Jesus’ and their own. My book *Nonetheless* explains the importance of a theology of baptism.

Meanings – Mark’s gospel introduces Jesus not at his birth but at his baptism. This emphasizes Jesus’ adult works of calling, teaching, and healing in the context of baptism, new life in intimate communion with God.

Luke’s account of Jesus’ origins. First, we hear the familiar story of God’s messenger telling Mary the plan for incarnation: God’s spirit will engender full Godness in a mortal child. This combination will yield an incarnate being: Jesus of Nazareth.

The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and (1) you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be (2) called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him (3) the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, (4) “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; (5) he will be called Son of God. {Luke 1.30-35}

(1) See Matthew’s note #4 on Jesus’ name. (2) See Mark’s note #4 on “Son of God.” (3) See Matthew’s note #1 on “*mashiah*,” the messiah. (4) See Matthew’s notes (2) and (3) on “spirit.” More repetition of this powerful concept.

Luke has the familiar Christmas story of the roomless inn, the manger, Jesus’ birth, the shepherds, and the angels.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and (1) wrapped him in bands of cloth, and (2) laid him in a manger, because (3) there was no place for them in the inn. {Luke 2.7}

(1) It was customary to wrap a newborn in bands of cloth. Remember this when we get to the account of burying Jesus’ corpse.

(2) Around Bethlehem are natural limestone caves that locals use to shelter and feed animals. Inside they carve into the rock face a trough, called a “manger.” Animals feed from this manger. Here one served as newborn Jesus’ cradle.

Meanings – Luke’s accounts of Jesus’ origin reinforce Matthew’s and Mark’s. And Luke has added two vital images: the bands of cloth and the manger cut from rock. Keep that in mind when we hear that Jesus’s shroud-wrapped corpse was laid into a cave-tomb in a rock and resurrected from that tomb.

John’s account of Jesus’ origins. Hang on for a wild ride. Remember where the Bible opens, in Genesis, “In the beginning”?

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. {Genesis 1.1}

Well, that’s where the Gospel of John opens also, “In the beginning”:

In the beginning was (1) the Word, and (2) the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (3)

He was in the beginning with God. (4) All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. {John 1.1-3}

That's what it says. What does it mean?

(1) The word "Word" translates the Greek word *logos*. The Greeks used *logos* to identify the transcendent order, natural law, structure, rationality, causation, and potentiality in the universe. John borrows the Greek concept of *logos* to explain the relationships among God, Spirit, Jesus, and the origins of the universe.

(2) John connects God to the *logos*: "with God" and "was God."

(3) The *logos* (the agent of creation, the prime mover of God) does all the creating. Thus the *logos* is the equivalent of the wind [*ruach*, also "spirit" and "breath"] from God in Genesis 1.2b. So the mind-bending image emerges: transcendent God has a *logos*, a sort of creative attribute, that creates all the potential structure of the universe. And Jesus (fully God) is that *logos*. My books *Nonetheless* and *Questings* have fuller explanations.

No angels. No Joseph. No Mary. No birthing. Just beginning. All the way back to (in my opinion) the Big Bang. In theological language. That's John. To me, this means that John sees Jesus as the originator not only of the original creation but also of a new creation of a new order of reality. Please file that thought for use when we've seen the resurrection passages.

He goes on to say that the *logos* originates both life and light, light that overcomes darkness. That's also what Genesis 1.3-4 says about God's creating light out of original darkness. Notice how John parallels Genesis:

Original – And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. {Genesis 1.3-4}

New – What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. {John 1.4-5}

John explains that God incarnate comes to inhabit the world, which rejects the incarnation – recollecting the first humans who rejected God in Eden:

The true light [the *logos*, i.e. Jesus], which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world [incarnate]. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him [the *logos* was the agent, the means of creation]; yet the world did not know him. He came [became incarnate among us] to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him [rejected Jesus, finally crucified him]. {John 1.9-11}

Then the explicit statement of incarnation:

And the Word (1) became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of (2) a father's only son, full of grace and truth. {John 1.14}

(1) This restates that Jesus is God incarnate. (2) Stating that God is Jesus' father states that Jesus is fully God.

Summary of Jesus' origins in the four gospels. So, here's a view of the four. **Mark:** Jesus, incarnate God, is "born" at his adult baptism. **Matthew and Luke:** Mary births the incarnate God as a human child infused with the Spirit of God. **John:** The *logos*, God's creative power, incarnates Jesus of Nazareth, fully human, fully God. To summarize: Jesus is both fully God, and fully mortal human being. Theologically speaking, Jesus incarnates God.

How Jesus lives his incarnate life. All four gospels say that soon after his baptism Jesus begins to call disciples, to teach, and to heal. Here are some examples of how the Bible says Jesus spends his time.

He calls and deploys disciples (assistants, followers):

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. {Matthew 10.1}

He teaches them an uncomplicated, unimpeded single-mindedness:

You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. {Matthew 10.8}

Echoing God's covenant at Sinai, Jesus teaches also a deep faithfulness to God and God alone no matter what:

Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." {Luke 9.23}

He teaches deep love for people, love that reflects God's own deep love for people:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. {Matthew 9.36}

And he teaches a peaceable attitude toward living: his "yoke" and "burden" bring serenity, not guilt:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." {Matthew 11.28-30}

His teaching draws on the authority of the Bible's established teachings. In his sermon on the mount he teaches his new covenant in terms deliberately reminiscent of Moses at Mt. Sinai. But rather than the burdens of Mosaic law, he teaches God-centered grace. Rather than "thou shalt not," he phrases his covenant as "Blessed are they who":

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. {Matthew 5.1-12}

Jesus teaches that any distractions from ministry and mission (such as preoccupation with wealth and possessions) impede one's spiritual development, one's journey Godward toward living a God-centered life (another way of phrasing "the kingdom of God"):

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel

to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”
{Mark 10.23-25}

Jesus teaches a life of reciprocity, mutuality, collaboration, and interdependence; a life compassionate, considerate, ethical, and other-referenced:

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” {Matthew 7.12}

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. {Matthew 5.44-45, King James Version}

(Which brings to mind, “The rain it raineth everywhere, /Upon the just and unjust fella, /But mainly on the just, because /The unjust hath the just’s umbrella” – Charles Synge Christopher Bowen.)

In this next passage, a lawyer (one saturated in the legalisms of Judaism) asks Jesus a question that reveals the lawyer’s preoccupation with “personal salvation.” Jesus elicits from him acknowledgment that the Jewish law calls for love of neighbor. Sensing that the lawyer thinks “neighbor” means only nice people who are legally pure (like the lawyer himself, he would claim). Jesus tells him a parable that makes him admit that his “neighbor” could be a person utterly obnoxious to Judaism: a Samaritan.

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” {Luke 10.25-37}

In this parable, Jesus establishes the inclusiveness in God’s character and policy. Which might adopt the motto, If you draw a circle to fence me out, I draw a circle of love to draw you in. And so Jesus both incarnates and teaches the true character of God’s love, forgiveness, and grace. In this way Jesus gently corrects the religious authorities’ mistaken belief in a vindictive, judgmental, punitive God of unyielding legalism.

(In reflecting on the lawyer’s sanctimonious presumption that he was superior to any Samaritan, I recollect the one-line review of a one-man comedy show: “The cast was too large.”)

The parable of the prodigal son. This short story has three characters with figurative significance: The younger son, who represents all of us who make a hash of life; the father who welcomes us home from our prodigalities; and the elder son who resents the father’s grace. I am placing the first part of the parable (the departure and return of the younger son) at the end of this book (in the Epilogue), for it serves as a thumbnail summary of the entire Bible.

In part two of the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus illustrates that not all people are delighted with this picture of a forgiving and reconciling God. Some actually wish for punitive legalism – to be applied to other, not-so-legal people. Jesus points out that God has, paradoxically and graciously, equal patience with people holding this transactional world view, but urges them to adopt a more joyous attitude toward those who do receive God’s forgiving compassion:

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he [the elder son] became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’” {Luke 15.25-32}

In this oblique way, Jesus holds up the religious authorities and points out that God loves them equally, has patience with their puritanical and exclusivist attitudes, but does urge them to a higher charity.

Jesus minces no words, withholds no appropriate emotion, pulls no punches. He has a forthright, candid, self-differentiated style, fully mature. For example, to one ill for 38 years, he inquires whether or not the man actually wants to be made well.

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” At once the man was made well. {John 5.5-9}

To the legalists, he points out God’s joy when the illegal repent. This is another example of how Jesus incarnates God’s policy of Commensality.

And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” . . . [Jesus told them,] “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” {Luke 15.2,7}

Against the grossly exploitative, he takes direct remedial action.

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. {John 2.15}

To those who prefer to wait passively for God to serve them, he suggests assertive personal initiative.

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? . . . How much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! {Matthew 7.7-9,11}

To the sanctimonious, he urges common sense and compassion.

When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax

collectors and sinners?” But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” {Matthew 9.11-13}

Jesus dramatizes the infinite power of God to heal – that is, to teach the good news of God-centeredness that makes broken humankind whole and cures (heals) diseases of heart and body:

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. {Matthew 9.35}

In making people whole, Jesus enacts his role as the incarnate *logos* of God, the original agent of creation. As the creation was originally whole, so does Jesus restore broken, ill, and alienated people to their original wholeness, *shalom*.

Choice, free will. Jesus highlights God’s original gift to humankind of choice and free will. In the next two passages, we see Jesus calling people to choose to overcome their own anxiety, fear, and reduced reliance upon God – to decide to strive for a higher condition of wholeness, strength, and courage:

There was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. {Matthew 8.2-3}

[Jesus] said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. {Matthew 14.29}

Jesus has a disciplined but simple prayer life, retreating into the quiet places to draw near to God, to be in close communion with God.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. {Mark 1.35} He withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. {Matthew 14.13}

In this way he enacts the ultimate communion with God to which he is leading others.

Meanings. In the narrative from the alienating episode in Eden, through Abraham, Egypt, Sinai, wilderness, and Canaan, we have seen God steadfastly manifesting grace-love. In Hosea, Jeremiah, and Isaiah we have seen God promising to continue that grace-love in a new covenant in a new creation.

Now, in the climax of this plot, we are seeing Jesus – the incarnation of God’s grace-love – calling, teaching, and healing. That is, demonstrating the potential attributes of the new covenant in the new creation, attributes such as . . .

- . . . wellness and wholeness among the sick, the halt, the blind, the marginalized, to replace illness, brokenness, and alienation.
- . . . relationships of healing reconciliation, to replace alienation and destructive anger.
- . . . communities of love and grace, to replace self-centered individualism.
- . . . utter dependance upon God, to replace reliance upon religiosity.
- . . . serenity and security, to replace anxiety and distrust.
- . . . kindness, empathy, and compassion, to replace indifference to human needs and self-serving acquisitiveness.
- . . . commensality – a commitment to include the excluded, to replace the high-handed sanctimony of those holier than thou, superior.
- . . . God-centered *shalom*, to replace disequilibrium and disharmony.

Not that the gospels show us any of that actually happening. Jesus is creating potential, not actuality. The four gospels show the failure of Jesus' program over and over. The disciples never quite caught on and ended up faithless under fire. During Jesus's life no one else actually adopted this style and stayed with it. But not to worry. It only gets worse.

Transition into calamity, the prelude to new creation. Here's how the biblical narrative cascades into terminal devastation – then astounding reversal: (1) Certain religious authorities with all their authority of religious entrenchment, collude with the Roman authorities to contrive his crucifixion; (2) Jesus had a last supper with his disciples; (3) he prayed with them in the garden of Gethsemane; (4) Judas betrayed him; (5) Pilate tried him, and the religious authorities insisted that the Romans crucify him; (6) the soldiers flogged him and made him carry his cross to Golgotha; (7) they crucified him there; (8) he died on the cross; (9) his friends buried his corpse in a tomb; (10) on the following Sunday, disciples discovered that the tomb was empty; (11) disciples experienced personal contact with a being resembling Jesus but utterly transformed.

We'll work our way through this narrative with some preliminaries about Jesus' approach toward death and then we'll deal with the crucifixion and resurrection as an undivided unit.

Approaching death. All four gospels tell of a last supper, when Jesus, knowing that the authorities would soon act against him, gathers his disciples to commission them to carry on after his death. Jesus uses the pattern of the traditional Jewish table prayers, but amends them to identify himself with the bread and wine – as we do in the Eucharist.

Matthew, for example, says that . . .

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. {Matthew 26.26-27}

John reports that Jesus commissions his disciples to steadfast love for one another.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. {John 15.9-13}

All four gospels tell how Jesus and the disciples go to a garden (Gethsemane) to pray. Mark, Matthew, and Luke tell of Jesus' intense agony of commitment.

He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." {Matthew 26.37-38}

At this point we must linger long enough to draw out the significant meanings from the next passage:

And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." {Matthew 26.39}

Jesus, in that grief and agitation, comes to his crossroads moment. Consider the situation. He knows that the authorities are plotting to arrest him and crucify him the next day. But right now he has his liberty, he is a free man. He faces his choice: he can slip away in the darkness and disappear into the countryside; or he can stay in this garden and await excruciating death.

So what does he do? He prays: **“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.”** I want, he says, not to do this thing. I want to save myself.

He continues: **“Yet not what I want but what you want.”** More than wanting to save myself, I know that I am here to show forth God’s absolute grace-love, to show that despite this ultimate alienation, cold-blooded murder, grace-love always seeks reconciliation, always makes things new. Only through my death, he says, can God bring to reality the new creation, the promised new covenant, the reality of grace-love.

He chooses. He decides for grace-love. He chooses self-sacrifice. He stays in the garden, circling humankind back around to that original garden called Eden, that place of perfect communion with God, walking there in the cool of the day. He does not hide.

A little digression. Some people have told me that, since Jesus was fully God, he could tolerate the short-term pain of crucifixion on Friday because he knew that he would be resurrected on Easter morning – so it wouldn’t be all that bad. I reply: Jesus was fully human and fully God. As fully human, he knew exactly what we know of pain and post-mortal conditions, no more, no less. Thus he suffered exactly as much as we would. And he knew exactly as little as we know about post-mortal conditions. To minimize that suffering in any degree depreciates his sacrificial offering, the totality of his love for us.

The pace of narrative picks up. Soldiers. Judas the betrayer. Peter the denier. Caiaphus the accuser. Pilate the judge.

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, ‘Which of the two do you want me to release for you?’ And they said, ‘Barabbas.’ Pilate said to them, ‘Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ All of them said, ‘Let him be crucified!’ Then he asked, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Let him be crucified!’ {Matthew 27.20-23}

Soldiers flogged him up a hill outside of town and nailed him to a cross . . .

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15 – Jesus’ Crucifixion and Resurrection

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about death of the old, life of the new?

. . . and nailed him to a cross, where . . .

Before continuing this frightful account of human sacrifice and suffering, we must deal with some textual issues.

In telling the crucifixion-resurrection story, each gospel has distinctive differences, each expressing a slightly different theology.

The crucifixion-resurrection in Matthew’s gospel. Matthew’s community of new Christians included Jews who had converted from Judaism but were still living among unconverted Jews. Thus they needed to hear how Jesus had actually fulfilled the Hebrew scriptures. Matthew’s gospel shows Jesus continuing Jewish tradition from a new angle, incarnate God. As such, Jesus represents the new Moses fulfilling the Jewish law by interpreting Jesus’ life death, and crucifixion as God’s new covenant. Jesus dies, crucified, as a confident, sacrificial servant. The resurrection of the Christ inaugurates the new Israel.

The crucifixion-resurrection in Mark’s gospel. For Mark’s community facing lethal persecution, the Gospel of Mark shows how Jesus faced lethal persecution. Jesus demonstrates a courageous death of

loving solidarity with all who suffer. He died forsaken, the suffering and sacrificial servant close to all for whom life is a veil of tears. Mark's resurrection narratives require only eight verses that give an account of the empty tomb but no appearances of the Christ. (A "Longer Ending of Mark" contains much more, but lacks authenticity.)

The crucifixion-resurrection in Luke's gospel. Luke's community had gentiles who lived amidst much illness, brokenness, and marginalization. So their gospel emphasized a compassionate Jesus, representing God's healing, inclusion, and unifying power. Thus Jesus offers hope for all the broken, downtrodden, and marginalized worldwide. Even during Jesus' agony in crucifixion he shows concern for others around him, bringing assurance that God heals and unifies through loving sacrifice. The resurrected Christ greets his disciples in loving gatherings.

The crucifixion-resurrection in John's gospel. This community has former Jews who struggle to decide whether Jesus was (1) entirely human, (2) entirely divine, (3) partly human and partly divine, or (4) fully human and fully divine. In their account of the crucifixion, a strong, regal Jesus strides toward death, in charge of his destiny, representing indomitable God. And the Christ strides into the gatherings of his disciples to confront them with the paradox of God incarnate, God crucified, God resurrected.

Jesus' moment of death. As to Jesus' last mortal moments, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are quite similar. Here is what Luke says:

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. {Luke 23.44-46}

And, quite different, John's gospel says:

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished [*tetelestai*], he said (in order to fulfill [*teleiothe*] the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished" [*tetelestai*]. Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. {John 19.28-30}

Meanings. Two interesting phrasings in these accounts:

(1) Matthew, Mark, and Luke all say that "he breathed his last." In Greek, "breathed" is *enephusen*, literally "exhaled." This tells us that Jesus breathes out one last time and dies. That's the plain meaning of the sentence. However, I think that more than the end of pulmonary function is going on here.

Remember that Genesis reports that God begins creating with *ruach*, meaning wind, breath, and the creating spirit of God? And remember the breath that God breathed into Adam to create original human life? Remember in Ezekiel when God breathed life into the dry bones?

Well, I think that when Jesus breathes his last, exhales his last breath of life, we are seeing the end of the original creation. Because remember "the Word became flesh" in John 1? This "Word" that is the *logos* of God that Jesus incarnated? The *logos* that causes the original creation described in Genesis? These are all linked. That will become more evident after we examine John's account.

(2) In John, when Jesus says "It is finished," we have a literal translation of the Greek *tetelestai*, a word rich enough to tell us that Jesus is declaring not only that his mortal life is ending but also that his work is complete, accomplished, fulfilled. *Tetelestai* and *teleiothe* connote both of these.

And so, when we coalesce these two preliminary meanings, we get a deeper level of meaning: When

Jesus dies, his breath stops, his incarnate spirit of creating stops – because his purpose is fulfilled, his purpose to create not only the entire universe from the beginning but also the potential for a new creation.

This complex meaning becomes the bedrock upon which the next episode stands – the resurrection. Before visiting that, however, a few more notes on the crucifixion.

Jesus' burial. After Jesus dies, his friends wrap his body in cloth and bury it in a rock cave.

Then [Joseph of Arimathea] took [Jesus' body] down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. {Luke 23.53, very similar to Matthew 27.9, Mark 15.46, and John 19.40}

This imagery brings to mind Luke's account of Jesus' birth:

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger. {Luke 2.7a}

Interesting, isn't it, that at both birth and death Jesus is wrapped in cloth and laid in a rock. So Jesus' "rock-hewn tomb" (Luke 23.53) becomes visually similar to his manger birthplace (Luke 2.7a). Encouraging us to take Jesus' death as a new birth. More later.

A brief review. We have traced God's encounter with humankind from that original Edenic communion through the first blatant alienation, estranging ourselves from God and one another. Nonetheless, God invites Abraham into a covenant relationship. This alienation-to-nonetheless becomes the prototype for a recurring cycle over the centuries. Finally, in a grand climax, God incarnate goes face-to-face with humankind. Jesus lives among us, immanent God, to show us first hand the policies, character, and program of God. That's love.

Now this. The sanctimonious bigots, zealots for the extremes of the Law while indifferent to human suffering, conspire with political power to murder Jesus. And Jesus dies, dead. He begins to decompose.

On to the resurrection. Jesus' corpse went into the tomb on Friday evening. On Sunday, at first light, women discovered not only that the tomb was empty but that a figure resembling Jesus was greeting them. As the days went on, he appeared to various people. The Bible says that he was clothed, not enshrouded, that his wounds were visible and touchable, and that disciples recognized him as he walked, talked, and ate with them.

What's this? As you can understand, this apparent "coming back to life" caused confusion, dispute, joy, astonishment.

The four resurrection accounts. The resurrection accounts in the four gospels are not so similar to one another as the crucifixion accounts are. So my choices of representative passages to trace the biblical plot do neglect some good details. I place the selected passages in chronological order to keep the narrative flowing.

(An editorial note: I shift now from referring to "Jesus," the name of God incarnate, a man from Galilee, to "the Christ," God's resurrected new creation.)

Mark's resurrection appearances. Mark, like the other three, says that on Sunday at dawn women went to the tomb to complete the unfinished burial rituals

When the Sabbath [Saturday] was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of

the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. {Mark 16.1-8}

Meanings in Mark. First, Mark establishes the basic data of the first-day (Sunday) episode: the women’s ministrations; their concern that the rock would be sealing the tomb; their discovery that the tomb is empty; their encounter with a young man, or angel or something; his assurance that Jesus is resurrected; his instruction to meet the Christ in Galilee; and their reaction in fright and disbelief. But Mark reports no actual appearances of the Christ. Instead, Mark emphasizes a full narrative circle: it begins with Jesus’ baptism in Galilee, which affirmed his status as God’s incarnation; it traces Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, through the crucifixion and resurrection; and it ends where it began, in Galilee. This circular narrative shows the disciples seeing him (1) initiating a new creation and (2) fulfilling the new creation in the reality of resurrection life.

Luke’s resurrection appearances. Luke has Sunday morning stories similar to the stories in the other gospels. But he also tells of two disciples walking that afternoon toward Emmaus: they encounter a stranger and invite him to share a meal with them. He accepts:

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. {Luke 24.28-29}

The Christ is able to handle bread. When he prays before the meal, the disciples realize that the stranger is the Christ. And then he vanishes:

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. {Luke 24.30-31}

They reflect on this amazing experience:

They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” {Luke 24.32-33}

Then they return to Jerusalem to announce their discovery to the other disciples:

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. {Luke 24.34-35}

Meanings in Luke. Luke’s account develops these ideas:

(1) Disciples see the Christ’s resurrection body as simultaneously tangible and intangible, both appearing and disappearing, yet able to walk and eat..

(2) In the Christ’s presence, the disciples experience communion with God.

(3) The Christ inspires them to reverse their journey out of Jerusalem, the sacred but dangerous city,

and to return to communion with the other disciples. That is, the Christ encourages unity, discourages disunity.

(4) The Christ inspires courageous upgrades in spiritual commitment.

(5) Disciples proclaim the good news of the Christ.

John's resurrection appearances. John tells of similar events on Sunday morning. And, (1) like Luke, he tells of the Christ's visit to the disciples on that Sunday evening. (2) Even though the doors were locked, his intangible body comes through the closed doors anyhow. (3) He bestows upon his friends God's peace (remember: the original *shalom*: the communion of God-Adam-Eve-Eden in equilibrium, wholeness, mutuality, interdependence). And (4) he shows them his tangible wounds.

When it was (1) evening on that day, the first day of the week, and (2) the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and (3) said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he (4) showed them his hands and his side. {John 20.19-20a}

Why does John's account place this event on "the first day of the week," Sunday? Because this Sunday event connects with God's original "Sunday," the first day in the Genesis creation myth. John is showing us the beginning of a new creation process. (Just as telling us that Jesus died on Friday connects his death with the last day of the original creation myth. And thereby signifies that Jesus' death terminates the original creation, opening the way for a new creation.)

John further certifies that the Christ's resurrection body is both intangible and tangible. This paradox signifies God's new reality, a new creation in which the material and the transcendent merge. Very mysterious. Very new. Unique.

As the disciples experience the Christ's presence, they become joyful, hopeful, inspired. They begin to realize that they are participating in this new creation, this conjoining of God and humankind in a fresh new day.

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. {John 20.20b}

They now have yet more significant experiences: (1) The Christ commissions them as apostles (Greek: *apostoloi*, people commissioned to go forth as representatives of authority: ambassadors). (2) The Christ breathes the spirit of God (*ruach/pneuma*) upon them, just as God originally breathed the spirit of life into clay to create humankind. (3) Thomas insists on seeing the Christ in a tangible resurrection body:

Jesus said to them again, (1) "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, (2) he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But (3) Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." {John 20.21-25}

On the following Sunday the Christ appears again through the shut doors in intangible form. This time he tells Thomas to touch his tangible resurrection body and thus prove to himself that the Christ is present with them:

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.

Do not doubt but believe.” {John 20.26-27}

For Thomas, this experience of the Christ as a living body, simultaneously both tangible and intangible, evokes (1) his declaration of allegiance to the Christ as Lord and God; and (2) the Christ’s commendation of all who have never touched the Christ and nonetheless make their own commitment to Christ as Lord and God:

Thomas answered him, (1) “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? (2) Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” {John 20.28-29}

Meanings in John’s accounts.

(1) That’s two different realities, one an intangible body able to pass through locked doors and the other a tangible body that Thomas could touch. The fact that the Christ’s resurrection body enters through closed doors means that it transcends molecular barriers. And simultaneously it exhibits tangible flesh and blood. Taken together, these observations seem to cancel each other out. But suppose they do not cancel each other out. Suppose they signify that God has done an utterly new thing: has created a new order of reality – both transcendent and immanent (the two paradoxical attributes of God that we saw in the two accounts of creation in Genesis). Never before, never since. A new, unique creation. The Christ.

(2) When the Christ bestows peace (in Greek, *eirene*, in Hebrew, *shalom*) upon the disciples, he relocates them into the condition of the Genesis origins: God’s peace, an Edenic equilibrium, harmony, and perfect communion with God. Not that they travel back in time, but that they participate in that perfect condition in the Christ’s new creation. And not that they live that way. Like all humankind, frail in discipline, they come short of their potential. The Christ endows them with potential, the potential to be in full communion with God. They – and we – now can choose *shalom/eirene*, choose the Edenic new creation to replace our post-Edenic estranged, alienated condition.

(3) The first person to declare allegiance to the Christ as Lord and God turns out to be the most initially resistant: Thomas. The Christ commends this allegiance, setting the standard for faithful disciples to journey from skepticism to conviction to fidelity.

(4) When the Christ commissions them as apostles and breathes the spirit of God upon them, the Body of Christ takes life and receives identity and mission.

Matthew’s resurrection appearances. Matthew recounts a later gathering in Galilee. He tells how (1) they worship the Christ; but (2) some disciples doubt the reality of the Christ:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. {Matthew 28.16-17}

The Christ (1) commissions them to “make disciples of all nations”; and (2) promises the perpetual presence of God among them:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and (1) make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, (2) I am with you always, to the end of the age.” {Matthew 28.18-20}

As God assured Moses, “I will be with you (Exodus 3.11), so God in Christ assures his apostles, “I will be with you,” adding “always, to the end of the age.”

Meanings in Matthew’s gospel. Like Mark, Matthew sets the resurrection appearances in Galilee, but

for a different purpose: to establish that Jerusalem is no longer the spiritual center. Rather, the work of making disciples will occur in the wider world signified by Galilee, fifty miles distant from Jerusalem and outside the spiritual orbit of the Jerusalem authorities. And whereas the religious tradition to date has centered the presence of God exclusively in the Jerusalem Temple, now the presence is wherever the disciples might be, starting from Galilee.

Meanings of the gospels' crucifixion-resurrection narratives. These data from each gospel coalesce into certain insights about the crucifixion-resurrection as a unit.

God becomes incarnate in Jesus, suffers self-sacrificial crucifixion on a Friday (the traditional sixth day of creation, the completion-day), says from the cross, *tetelestai* ("it is completed"), breathes his last, dies, and is enshrouded and entombed. On Sunday, the first day of the new week (the first day of the new creation), his friends encounter an unprecedented reality: a bodily presence recognizably Jesus but utterly different. The gospels do not use the word resurrection, but they do describe unprecedented appearances.

In the resurrection, God simply does what God has been doing all along – creating. It's all about creating: creating a new category of reality unlike any reality before. The stories of the Christ in contact with his friends after his crucifixion are dramatic instances of a new, never-before-experienced reality. It's the Christ's resurrection body which real people really experience at that time in that place.

Another way of saying this: God resurrects Jesus' corpse into a transformed reality, a new order of life, a new creation unlike anything ever before or since.

A significance of these meanings – This crucifixion-resurrection inaugurates the new creation. Just as God created all out of nothing originally, using the Big Bang, so out of this nothingness (the annihilation – *nihilo* – of Jesus' absolute mortal death) God set forth a new Big Bang in that tomb of death/nothing. A Big Bang that originated a new creation. Yes.

Now, here's another way of looking at all this: In the crucifixion-resurrection the Bible may be telling us: You and I now live in a new potential, a potential for living in *shalom*, comparable to the original Eden. The crucifixion-resurrection may have created (1) us anew as ministers being the presence of the Christ in the world; with (2) a human mission to proclaim the Christ event in word and deed; and (3) a new standard for living: in fidelity to God in Christ.

Seems like a far cry from Easter bunnies and bonnets. But it does bring to mind the children gathered at the chancel during the Easter Sunday children's sermon: "Now children, what hops and has a pink nose and long ears?" No answers. Question again, with more clues. No answer, but a little fellow is heard to whisper to his chum, "Whenever they get us up here and ask questions, the answers are always supposed to be Jesus, but that sure sounds like the Easter bunny to me."

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16 – The New Creation

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about post-Easter living?

The biblical plot has progressed through its climax, which I called the Christ event. It consists of Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

The plot goes now to its resolution. Here we discover what God is doing after the resurrection – continuing to create, to create all anew, to bring into being a new creation. But how? What? Why? When?

By way of preview, four short answers: (1) Creating how? By means of the spirit of God, generally called the Holy Spirit. (2) Creating what? The Body of Christ. (3) Creating why? In order to fulfill the

New Creation. (4) Creating when? From the day of Jesus' resurrection until the last day of time. Let's take these enigmas one at a time . . .

Creating how? By the spirit of God. We get two vivid cases of creating by God's spirit: the Pentecost, and Paul's conversion.

Pentecost. Remember John's vivid picture of Jesus breathing the spirit of God upon the disciples? Well, in the long book called the Acts of the Apostles, we get another powerful image of the spirit "breathing" again – on a large gathering of those who had seen or heard about the resurrection. Notice several significant features:

(1) It happens on Pentecost, an observance of the covenant at Sinai, when God established a new relationship with the people delivered from bondage, making them God's people of Israel.

(2) Just as the wind-breath-*logos* of God originally creates the universe, so here wind (i.e., spirit, God's creating spirit, *ruach/pneuma*) blows through the gathering.

(3) Those gathered see personalized fire, an old symbol of the presence of God (the burning bush, the pillar of fire by night) and sacrifice (the altar fires for burnt offerings).

And (4) they all experienced spiritual transformation: being en-spirited, inspired.

When the (1) day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. (2) And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. (3) Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. (4) All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. {Acts 2.1-4}

Meanings – Several significances emerge:

(1) The disciples have this Wind-Flame-Voices experience just days after seeing, hearing, and touching a semblance of Jesus, the resurrected Christ – and while celebrating Pentecost, the original covenant with God. They may surmise that God is creating a new covenant, new realities, a new identity. But what identity? What are the terms of this new covenant? What is now real?

(2) In the whole biblical narrative, we have seen repeated references to the spirit of God – the Word that spoke reality into being, the breath that initiated all creating in Genesis, Jesus' last breath exhaled to end his life (the old life of the old creation), the Christ's new breath of resurrected life breathed onto the disciples.

(3) The narrative keeps bringing up this spirit, breath, wind, constantly creating. The Pentecost event now introduces us formally to the biblical concept of "the Holy Spirit." Luke places great emphasis upon this concept, which has been lurking in the narrative from the beginning.

(A note in passing: in John's gospel, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "**The wind [*pneuma*, spirit] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit**" {John 3.8}. Interesting, isn't it, how this parallels Luke's account of the Pentecost experience.)

(Another note: the flame appearing in the Pentecost events evokes memories of the flame of Moses' burning bush, signifying God's immediate presence.)

Saul/Paul's conversion. Another "pentecost experience" occurs later in the narrative. A pharisee named Saul, considering the disciples blasphemous apostates from Judaism, persecutes them relentlessly. While traveling to Damascus, he has his own private pentecost, afterward becoming

known as Paul, the greatest of the Christian missionaries and apologists . . .

Now as he [Saul] was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” . . . Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. . . . So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized. {Acts 9.3-6, 10, 17-18}

We have seen the spirit of God creating the Christ and creating transformed gatherings and individuals, creating, in short, new out of old. We turn now to the next question: In the biblical narrative, what is this new creation?

What does the Spirit create? A new creation, the Body of Christ. The what? Listen to Paul’s reasoning. The Spirit of God, he says, creates a new relationship between God and ordinary people – a parental relationship, comparable to God’s relationship with the Christ:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ {Romans 8.14-17}

The Spirit not only creates the resurrected life of the Christ, but also a resurrectional life for those who watch all this happening. These disciples realize, first, the presence of the Christ. Then they realize that the Christ no longer remains present with them, has ascended. Then they realize that they themselves have become the only remaining presence of the Christ’s resurrection body in the world. They have a new identity – the Body of Christ. This striking image emerges in Paul’s metaphor: the Christ is like a person’s head and the people are like a person’s body:

He [the Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible All things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. {Colossians 1.15-19}

Paul fills out this image by comparing the different parts of the human body to the different sorts and capabilities of people who follow the Christ, the Body of Christ:

For just as the [human] body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the [human] body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. {1 Corinthians 12.12-18}

This image affirms the diversity of the Body of Christ, and then goes on to assert that God intends the Body to remain unified (but not uniform) and mutually interdependent and mutually responsible:

As it is, there are many members, yet one body. . . . God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. {1 Corinthians 12.20a, 24b-26}

Why? Because God's grace-love will not be thwarted. The plot of the biblical narrative has demonstrated that God's grace-love will prevail. Not by coercion, by threat, by punitive consequences, but by the invitation to join in the grace-love project.

Humankind continues to have liberty to reject grace-love, but humankind also now has a new choice: to participate in a new identity – **the Body of Christ**. The Body has a mission – to be the presence of Christ, the presence of incarnate grace-love in the world, drawing others into this embrace. To fulfill the ministry that Jesus instituted. To demonstrate, as Jesus did, incarnate grace-love, sacrificial grace-love, resurrectional grace-love.

Now, consider. In the original creation, a problem arose when God bestowed upon newly created humans the liberty of choice. They chose rebellion and arrogance, becoming alienated people. Despite God's steadfast grace-love, they persisted in rejecting communion with God. So God creates the Christ event and brings into being this new creation called the Body of Christ. Behold the affirmations:

In general . . .

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! {2 Corinthians 5.17}

Specifically . . .

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. {Romans 12.4-5}

With generous, life-giving results – reconciliation, potential for lives in service to others (ministry), and potential for life-purpose as ambassadors of love-grace . . .

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. {2 Corinthians 5.18-20}

And with a vision of life growing into the Christ . . .

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. {Ephesians 4.11-16}

And finally the original gift restored: peace, wholeness, *shalom*, *eirene* . . .

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of

Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. {Ephesians 2.13-17}

Creating when? From the Sunday of the Resurrection till the day of the Eschaton. The Bible tells a truly comprehensive story. Starts “before” the Big Bang (in transcendence: eternity and infinity. Extends through all of cosmic history. Projects its narrative out beyond our time (*chronos*) . . . to the “last day,” which we call by its Greek term: *eschatos*, the ultimate terminal point of everything.

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17 – And Finally, When? The Eschaton

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean about the end-time?

When? The “end-time,” when God’s creating comes to fulfillment.

This mystical concept strains the imagination. Those who consider what the Bible means struggle with it, especially its presentation in the Book of the Revelation to John, which expresses a vision of the end of time, the final point in the existence of the universe.

Thoughts on this matter are “eschatology,” from the Greek for “last, farthest,” *eschatos*. Thus we call that final condition “the Eschaton.”

Just as the Bible presents a view of God’s origination of the universe, its genesis, so it presents this view of God’s termination of the universe, its Eschaton, its fulfillment.

Fulfill what? Fulfill God’s yearning to restore Eden – the original condition of perfect communion between humans and God. The Bible tells us that in the end-time, all who accept God’s ultimate invitation to communion will gather close to God in a new condition of equilibrium, of peace, of *shalom* – fulfilled. *Tetelestai*.

(Important note: I just used a phrase, “all who accept God’s ultimate invitation to communion” I have a strong conviction about that. It speaks to the vexing question about what happens to us when we die. You know all the images of heaven and hell and so forth rattling around in popular culture. I take a different view which I have derived from this study of the Bible. If you’d like to see what I think, check out *Nonetheless* and *Questings*.)

What are we to make of this? Well, to review this trip through the biblical plot: we have watched God’s steadfast love for humankind persisting through our worst rejections; we have seen that love incarnated, crucified, and resurrected; we have seen resurrectional people band together to continue that love as the Body of Christ. Now we contemplate what this next passage might mean:

By his great mercy [God] has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. {1 Peter 1.3}

To rearrange this sentence into the chronological order of its phrases: (1) God has exercised great mercy . . . (2) Jesus, dead, became the resurrected Christ . . . (3) this has given us a new birth . . . (4) which gives us a living hope.

To bring out the meanings in that statement: (1) God’s “great mercy,” meaning steadfast grace-love, has (2) converted Jesus’ annihilation into resurrection, a new creation called the Christ, God among us. (3) His followers experienced this presence of the Christ among them. They realized that God was

creating a new reality – the continuation of the Christ in the world, the Body of Christ. That is, (4) they were participating in the Christ’s resurrectional condition. That gave them hope.

“Hope” is a theological term for a conviction that God continues to invite us Godward after our mortal death. It lacks the usual connotation of “perhaps,” or “with good luck,” or “maybe.” It expresses confidence based on powerful evidence. So the term “hope” in this passage says that “we,” the Body of Christ, will continue in the presence of God in Christ after death.

What is the powerful evidence leading to this conviction? The biblical plot has shown that God has persisted in inviting even the most rebellious, arrogant apostates (that’s us) back into communion with God. Or, to use comparable language, God has brought new life out of death. Or, God has reconciled the original alienation. Or, reconnected with those estranged.

Here is another passage with that import:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. {1 Corinthians 15.20-22}

Rearranging into chronological order: death came through a human being, . . . all die in Adam . . . Christ has been raised from the dead . . . the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being [Jesus] . . . so all will be made alive in Christ.

To paraphrase: The Adam-and-Eve rebellion signifies our chronic alienation from God, a deathly estrangement. But Jesus’ resurrection into the Christ has bequeathed humankind (“all”) new life.

Meaning that the Christ has (1) reconciled humankind’s alienation from God and (2) continued God’s steadfast invitation to new life (to full communion with God) even after our mortal death.

Paul continues in this vein, venturing images of our continuation.

For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” {1 Corinthians 15.53-55}

We now have two images: (1) we all participate in the resurrection of the Christ; and (2) as the Christ lives beyond mortality, so are we invited to continue in resurrected communion with God.

(What might that mean? “Continue in resurrected communion?” Paul is addressing the great question of what happens to us after we die. As I said earlier, my thoughts on the question appear in my other two books.)

Keeping these images in mind, we look to John, the author of the Book of the Revelation, for how the images might play out. Here is his vision of the Eschaton, the final condition. Note the (1) repetitive newness; the (2) imagery of first and last; the (3) death of death; the (4) communion of God and humankind.

I saw a (1) new heaven and a (1) new earth; for (2) the first heaven and (2) the first earth had passed away, . . . And I saw the holy city, the (1) new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, . . . And I heard a loud voice . . . saying, “See, the (4) home of God is among mortals. (4) He will dwell with them as their God; (4) they will be his peoples, and (4) God himself will be with them; (4) he will wipe every tear from their eyes. (3) Death will be no more; (3) mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for (2) the first things (3) have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making (1) all things new. . . . Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true. . . . It is done! I am (2) the Alpha and the Omega, (2) the beginning and the end. (4) To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life” {Rev 21.1a, 2a, 3-6}

That’s a strong concentration of imagery which, taken together, points to God’s intent to gather all humankind into a final communion.

It is done! But here’s the most interesting place in this passage – “It is done!” At the end of time God says, in effect, I began creating before time and space, etc.; I extended steadfast love straight through to this point, after time and space; and now I say, “It is done!”

Well, what is “it” that is done? The word “it” means the whole creating project, from beginning to end, alpha to omega, *in toto* – holistically. Nothing left out. All creation is included. All is done.

And what does “done” mean? It translates a Greek word, *gegonan*, which will not translate into a single equivalent English word. We must settle for a bundle of connotations. First, *gegonan* is related to the Greek *genea*, birth, and lies behind our English verb “to generate.” So we start with that central meaning: to generate, to cause to be, to happen, to become, to come into being, to become reality.

So when John says that God says, “It is done,” I hear “the original creating and all the creating (birthing, bringing into being, becoming real) since then, has now happened (is now fulfilled, completed).

I also hear a strong echo of Jesus’ words from the cross, “It is finished, *tetelestai*,” the new creation is created, completed, fulfilled. And why not . . . same voice, different context.

We’ve gone now from Alpha to Omega, start to finish. The great biblical narrative has narrated all. *Tetelestai*. “It is finished.”

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18 – Epilogue

The question here: What does the Bible say and mean, anyhow?

In the parable of the prodigal son at Luke 15.11-32, Jesus illustrates the character of God who yearns for our return, welcomes us in deep grace, and rejoices when we reconnect.

I think that when you read this parable, you are reading the whole biblical narrative in a nutshell: God creates (the son and the home). Humankind alienates (the son rejects the close communion with his father). Nonetheless, God always invites humankind to return to communion (despite the pain of rejection and rebellion, the father welcomes the son home).

As a fit conclusion to this little book about the whole biblical narrative, I offer this parable, divided into the classic five-act plot structure.

I invite you to contemplate the meaning of this parable, to reflect on how it sums up the biblical narrative and how it communicates to us God’s boundless love-grace. Taking that to heart strengthens and encourages me. I hope it does something like that for you.

Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son

Act One: Equilibrium. The father has created a stable household condition – just as God created a universe in equilibrium (every action with its compensating reaction).

There was a man who had two sons.

Act Two: Alienation. The son squanders the inheritance – just as humankind squandered original Edenic communion with God.

The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

Act Three: Suspense. How far will this son’s arrogance go? How far will God’s grace-love tolerate the Israelites’ alienating behavior? Ours?

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” So he set off and went to his father.

Act Four: Climax. Despite the son’s self-serving departure, the father responds with gracious love, *hesed, agape*. Just as, nonetheless, God incarnate gives all in self-sacrificial love for humankind, reuniting, in the resurrection, God and humankind. And for us, individually, no matter what.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Act Five: Resolution. Both father and son have fitting responses to the climax. Just as God creates new life in the Body of Christ. And in us.

Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

As Jesus said on the cross, *tetelestai* (John 19.30).

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19 – About the author of this resource

I have been a Marine officer, community college professor of English, and rector of an Episcopal parish (Holy Cross, Dunn Loring, Virginia, 1983-1999). Since retiring in 1999, I have self-published four other books:

A Life of Love, a Love of Life: Recollections of Our Family (2002), a tribute to my parents.*

CrossRoads: Musings on a Father-Son Pilgrimage (co-authored with Alex Bryan, 2003), alternating essays about our trip to Ireland to contemplate Celticism.*

Nonetheless, God Retrieves Us: What a Yellow Lab Taught Me about Retrieval Spirituality (2006), my ideas about the intersection of science and Christian theology and biblical theology.

Questings: A Parable (2009), a sort of novel seeing what would happen if the ideas in *Nonetheless* were worked out in the life of a fictional character and his friends.

Judy, my beloved wife of fifty years, and I enjoy good conversations with our three children, three grandchildren, and friends.

– The Reverend Jonathan Bryan, M.A., Ph.D.

*Out of print. Contact me for copies.

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