

The Good Book

A Comedic Journey Through the Bible

By Jona Citrus Thyng and Patience

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Public reader edition • October 2026. An abridged, satirical retelling, not a Bible translation or a verse-by-verse guide. The journey follows the Protestant canon from Genesis to Revelation, combining and shortening many books. Lamentations, Joel, Obadiah, Nahum, and 2 Corinthians are not covered in this edition. Catholic and Orthodox additional books are outside its scope. Read alongside a complete Bible for the original passages and fuller context.

Preface & Official Disclaimer (Please Read This Before God Does)

Source note. Scripture passages marked WEB are quoted from the World English Bible, published by eBible.org. Ellipses indicate omitted words or verses. Other biblical dialogue and summaries belong to this comedic retelling and should be read as paraphrase, not as a new Bible translation. The World English Bible text is in the public domain; the author's original commentary is a separate creative work. Source: <https://ebible.org/engwebp/>.

What you are holding, or staring at on a screen while you should be sleeping, is not the Bible. Let me be clear about that right up front, because I have enough problems. The Bible is the Bible. It is ancient, complicated, contested, holy to a great many people, and approximately 783,137 words long depending on which translation you grabbed off the shelf. This is not that.

What this is, is one woman's attempt to sit down with the entire sweep of Scripture — from before time had a lunch break to the apocalypse, which at press time has not been rescheduled, though several denominations remain optimistic — and retell it in plain human language, the kind your uncle uses when he has had just enough sweet tea to get philosophical on the porch and just enough distance from Sunday morning to be honest about what he actually read.

The selected events herein are presented in roughly the order they appear in the Christian Protestant canon of sixty-six books, Old Testament and New. This is an abridged journey, with grouped summaries and omissions noted at the front of this edition. The theology is not mine to adjudicate. The arguments between scholars about authorship, dating, and interpretation have been ongoing for several millennia and show no signs of resolution, and I do not intend to wade into them with anything so fragile as a comedy document. What I will tell you is that I read the material. All of it. And my considered response, having done so, is: this is one of the strangest, most violent, most beautiful, most confusing, most human collections of writing ever assembled, and it deserved to be retold by someone who finds it both hilarious and genuinely moving, often at the same time.

No figures in this retelling are mocked for their humanity. God's management decisions are fair game. The situations people found themselves in are fair game. The gap between the instructions given and the behavior observed is extremely fair game. But the people — Noah, Ruth, Jeremiah, Mary, Paul, the disciple who kept falling asleep in the garden — these are human beings doing their bewildered best, and they deserve to be treated accordingly.

If you are looking for a devotional, this is not it. If you are looking for a theological treatise, this is emphatically not it. If you are looking for someone to explain why Ezekiel saw what he saw, I cannot help you; neither can most scholars, if they're being honest. What you will find here is a journey through the long, improbable, occasionally terrifying, genuinely magnificent story — told with the voice it always deserved: direct, affectionate, and fully aware of how wild the whole thing is.

Pour yourself something cold. Settle in. This is going to take a while. The source material took about a thousand years to write, and it shows.

— J.C.T., Jackson, MS, on a Wednesday evening in May, watching a thunderstorm come in from the west and thinking this seems appropriate

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PART ONE: THE OLD TESTAMENT

Thirty-nine books in the Protestant Old Testament. A story spanning generations. Approximately zero dull moments, if you are paying attention.

Genesis: In the Beginning, Nobody Had Any Idea What Was Happening

The Work Week (Chapters 1–2)

Before anything, there was nothing. This is the kind of sentence that sounds simple and becomes increasingly distressing the longer you sit with it, so let's move on. Out of the nothing, God began to work. The narrator does not know what God's credentials were, because there was nobody to issue them, but the output speaks for itself.

Day one: light. God said "let there be light," and there was light. God looked at the light. He called it good. He separated it from the darkness, named them Day and Night, and that was the evening and the morning of the first day. Now here is where a thoughtful reader pauses: there was light on day one, but the sun, moon, and stars did not show up until day four. Where was the light coming from? The text does not say. God did not elaborate on His sources. The narrator has decided this is either a deep theological point about the nature of divine light or an early indication that this project was being managed with a certain amount of creative flexibility. Both can be true simultaneously.

Day two: the firmament. God made an expanse in the middle of the waters and separated the waters above from the waters below. He called this expanse Heaven. This is the first infrastructure project in recorded history, and like most infrastructure projects, it was bold in concept and somewhat vague in its engineering documentation. Ancient cosmology imagined the sky as a solid dome holding back an upper ocean — a kind of celestial ceiling with windows that God could open when He wanted it to rain. This is a remarkable piece of architecture. Nobody has located the blueprints.

Day three: land and plants. God said let the water gather and let dry land appear, and it did. He called the dry land Earth and the gathered waters Seas. He looked. It was good. Then He put plants on the land — grass, herbs, fruit trees. Each producing after its own kind. The narrator notes again: plants on day three, sun on day four. These plants were photosynthesizing in the dark, or in whatever that first-day light was, which either indicates a miraculous botanical resilience or suggests the days may not be twenty-four-hour periods in the modern sense, a question that has generated approximately forty thousand books and more than a few family arguments at Thanksgiving. Moving on.

Day four: the sun, moon, and stars. Placed in the firmament to give light upon the earth, to govern the day and the night, to mark signs and seasons and days and years. God looked. It was good. The narrator imagines the plants, having survived without a confirmed star, exhaling visibly.

Day five: sea creatures and birds. Great sea monsters and every living thing that moves in the water, and every winged bird. God blessed them: be fruitful and multiply. God looked. It was good. The sea monsters are specifically mentioned. The narrator believes they deserve acknowledgment.

Day six: land animals and, last of all, humans. God said let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind — livestock, creeping things, wild animals. Then, and this is the sentence that changes everything: "Let's make man in our image, after our likeness." (Genesis 1:26, WEB) That plural is a conversation that has occupied theologians for two thousand years. God made the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living soul. This is either the most intimate creative act in the cosmos or, depending on your relationship with dirt, mildly insulting. The narrator prefers to see it as a compliment. You are made of the same stuff as the ground, yes, but God personally breathed into you. That is the detail that matters.

Day seven: God rested. He looked at everything He had made. He called it very good. He did not check His work again for several chapters, and when He did, things had already gotten complicated.

The Garden (Chapters 2–3)

God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and it was paradise by any reasonable measure. Four rivers, every tree that was good for food, gold and onyx and bdellium, which is a kind of resin that frankly nobody is sure about even now, and which suggests Eden had a materials culture that subsequent humans have struggled to reconstruct. Into this garden God placed the man He had formed from dust, to tend it and to keep it. There was only one rule: eat from any tree you like, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat from that one, you will die. This is the simplest lease agreement in human history, and it lasted about as long as most lease agreements do.

The man was alone, and God noticed that this was not good — the first time in the creation account that something is identified as not good, which tells you something about what God considered essential. God decided to make a helper suitable for him. He first paraded all the animals past Adam for naming, which Adam accomplished with what must have been either remarkable linguistic creativity or a lot of free time. None of them were a suitable partner. God then caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, took a rib from his side, closed up the flesh, and fashioned the rib into a woman. This is either the most romantic origin story ever told or the most alarming surgery ever performed without a consent form. Possibly both. God brought the woman to the man. The man's response was the first poem in human literature: "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh." (Genesis 2:23, WEB) He recognized her immediately.

The narrator finds this worth noting: the first human words recorded as poetry were said by a man looking at a woman, and he said she was part of him. You can do what you like with that.

They were both naked and were not ashamed. The narrator pauses here to note that this specific detail — the unashamed nakedness — is placed here deliberately. It will matter in about four verses.

Now the serpent. The text calls him more crafty than any beast of the field that God had made, which raises an immediate question about what "crafty" looks like in a snake before it has lost its legs, but the narrator will leave that alone. The serpent approached the woman and asked whether God had really said they should not eat from any tree of the garden. The woman explained the one rule. The serpent said: you won't die. God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. The woman looked at the tree. It was good for food. It was beautiful. It was desirable to make one wise. Her reasoning, the narrator observes, was not actually bad. She wanted knowledge. This is not a stupid ambition. She ate. She gave some to her husband, who was with her, which is a detail the text slips in quietly and which has been generating commentary ever since. He ate.

Their eyes were opened. They knew they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together and made coverings. This is the first recorded act of clothing design in history, produced under significant emotional stress, from materials that any tailor would describe as suboptimal. Then they heard the sound of God walking in the garden in the cool of the evening, and they hid among the trees.

God called: "Where are you?" The man said he was afraid, because he was naked. God said: who told you you were naked? Did you eat from the tree I told you not to? And then the blame chain begins, which is one of the most recognizably human sequences in the entire book. Adam says: the woman you gave me, she gave me the fruit and I ate. God turns to the woman. The woman says: the serpent deceived me and I ate. God turns to the serpent. The serpent has nothing to say, having apparently used up all of its words in the sales pitch. God curses it: on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. Whatever the serpent was before this moment — and the text does not specify, but "more crafty than any beast" implies something with some elevation — it is now a ground-level creature. The narrator notes that losing your legs as a divine punishment is a significant downgrade, and yet snakes have managed to remain deeply unsettling for the entirety of human history, which suggests they adapted.

God tells the woman that childbirth will be painful and that her relationship with her husband will be complicated. God tells the man that the ground is cursed for his sake, that he will labor and sweat for food until he returns to the dust from which he came. "For you are dust, and you shall return to dust." (Genesis 3:19, WEB) God then makes garments of skin for them — proper garments, an upgrade from the fig leaves, which suggests that even in the midst of expulsion, there was some care being taken — and drives them out of the garden, placing cherubim and a flaming sword at the entrance to guard the way to the tree of life. Paradise is closed. Humanity begins the long walk out, dressed in new clothes they didn't ask for, into a world that is now considerably harder than the one they were made for.

Cain and Abel (Chapter 4)

Adam and Eve had children, as directed. Cain came first, then Abel. Cain worked the soil; Abel tended the flocks. In time, both brothers brought offerings to God: Abel brought the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions; Cain brought an offering from the fruit of the ground. God looked on Abel's offering with favor. God did not look on Cain's with favor. The text does not fully explain why. Theologians have argued about it for millennia. The most common interpretation is that Abel brought his best, and the quality of the heart behind the offering matters. The narrator does not adjudicate this, but does note that the situation, whatever its cause, was not well received by Cain.

Cain's face fell. He was very angry. God came to him and said: why are you angry? If you do well, won't you be accepted? And if you don't, sin is crouching at the door, eager to have you; but you must rule over it. This is one of the earliest pieces of pastoral counseling in recorded history. Cain ignored it entirely. He said to his brother Abel: let us go out to the field. They went out to the field. Cain rose up against his brother and killed him. This is the first murder in the Bible. It was committed over a rejected barbecue offering. The narrator pauses to acknowledge that the distance between "my offering was not received as well as my brother's" and "therefore I will kill my brother" is a gap that should have been larger, and yet here we are, approximately three chapters into human history, and someone is already dead.

God said to Cain: where is Abel your brother? Cain said: I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper? This is the original non-answer to a direct question, delivered with a composure that, given the circumstances, is somewhat remarkable. Whether God genuinely didn't know or was giving Cain an opportunity to confess is a theological question the narrator declines to resolve, except to note that either option is interesting. God told Cain that Abel's blood was crying out from the ground, and that the ground was now cursed for Cain — it would no longer yield its strength for him. He would be a wanderer.

Cain said: this punishment is more than I can bear. Whoever finds me will kill me. And God said: not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer sevenfold vengeance. And God put a mark on Cain so that anyone who found him would not kill him. The narrator notes that this protection is remarkable: the first murderer in human history, given a mark of divine protection. The mercy is not what you expect. It never quite is, in this book.

And Cain went away and settled in the land of Nod, and he had a wife — which raises the question that has been raised in every confirmation class since the fourth century: where did she come from? The text does not explain. Adam and Eve had other children, presumably, including a son named Seth after Abel's death. But the logistics of early human population, the narrator acknowledges, are an area where the text expects you to extrapolate. We extrapolate and we move on.

Noah and the Flood (Chapters 6–9)

Time passed. Generations piled on generations. Humanity spread across the face of the earth and was, to put it in modern terms, having a very bad cultural moment. The text says the wickedness

of man was great in the earth and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. God was grieved that He had made man. He decided to uncreate most of what He had made and start again, which is the most dramatic rollback in the history of any project, divine or otherwise.

But there was one man who found favor with God: Noah. He was righteous, blameless in his generation. He walked with God. In a generation described as entirely given over to evil, this is an extraordinary thing to be said about a man, and God found it sufficient to change the entire plan. He came to Noah and told him the situation. The earth was filled with violence. God was going to destroy it all. But He was going to save Noah, his family, and two of every living creature, because the plan was not to end creation but to wash it and begin again. Noah was to build a boat. The specifications were precise: three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide, thirty cubits high, with a roof, a door in the side, and three decks. A cubit is roughly eighteen inches, which makes the ark approximately 450 feet long. Noah had to build this by hand. With his family. While his neighbors watched and formed opinions.

Noah did everything God commanded him. This statement, repeated twice, is one of the most significant details in the chapter, because doing everything God commanded in this case meant building an enormous boat on dry land without access to a Home Depot, loading it with two of every kind of animal plus seven pairs of every clean animal, plus food for all of them for an indefinite period, while the sky remained stubbornly clear. His neighbors were not wrong to think he'd lost his mind. His neighbors were simply operating on incomplete information.

Then the rain began. The fountains of the great deep burst forth. The windows of heaven opened. For forty days and forty nights the rain fell. The waters rose. The ark floated. Everything outside the ark that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. The waters covered the mountains to a depth of fifteen cubits. Everything. Gone. The narrator pauses here to acknowledge that this is a genuinely horrifying event, presented without sentiment in the text, and that glossing over it too quickly would be dishonest. The flood is terrible. The tradition has spent considerable effort trying to explain it, and the narrator declines to add to that effort except to note that the same God who destroyed everything also grieved making humanity, saved one family and two of every creature, and promised afterward never to do it again. The contradiction is not resolved. It sits there in the text, enormous and uncomfortable, the way the most important things usually do.

After one hundred and fifty days the waters receded. The ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. Noah opened the window of the ark and sent out a raven, which flew back and forth until the waters dried up. Then he sent a dove, which found no resting place and returned. He waited seven days and sent the dove again; this time it came back with a freshly plucked olive leaf in its beak. The narrator notes that this olive leaf, carried by this dove, is one of the most famous pieces of vegetation in Western civilization. He waited seven more days, sent the dove out, and it did not return. The earth was dry. God told Noah to come out.

Noah and his family came out of the ark. The animals came out. Noah built an altar and offered burnt offerings of every clean animal and every clean bird. God smelled the pleasing aroma and said in His heart: I will never again curse the ground because of man, even though every intention of the human heart is evil from youth. The narrator notes that this is an extraordinary

concession: God acknowledges the persistent nature of human failure and chooses to absorb it rather than act on it. God then set a rainbow in the clouds as the sign of the covenant. Every time it rained from now on, the rainbow would be there. The promise would be visible. The narrator thinks this is the most beautiful policy announcement ever made by anyone.

Noah's first act on dry land, once he'd rebuilt civilization from scratch, was to plant a vineyard. His second act was to drink its wine. His third act was to pass out naked in his tent. His son Ham went into the tent, saw his father's nakedness, and went out and told his brothers Shem and Japheth. Shem and Japheth picked up a garment, walked backward into the tent with it over their shoulders, and covered their father without looking at him. When Noah woke up and realized what had happened, he cursed Ham's son Canaan. The narrator notes that this is a strange response to a hangover — the cursing of a grandson for a son's behavior — and that Noah was probably working through a lot right now, having just survived the end of the world, and we might extend some charity in his direction even while acknowledging that Canaan got the short end of a very strange situation.

Tower of Babel (Chapter 11)

The whole earth had one language and one set of words. People settled in a plain in the land of Shinar and said to one another: let us build a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth. This is the first recorded example of civic boosterism, and it was ambitious.

God came down to see the city and the tower, which is an extraordinary detail: God had to come DOWN to see it. The tower, in other words, was not actually close to heaven. It was a tower. It was impressive for humans. But heaven was not in any danger of being stormed by masonry. Nevertheless, God saw what they were doing and said: look, they are one people with one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing they propose will be impossible for them. Let us go down and confuse their language so they may not understand one another's speech. And God scattered them over the face of all the earth. The city was called Babel, because there God confused the language of all the earth.

The narrator notes that this is technically the first zoning dispute in history, resolved by the most aggressive permitting authority ever to weigh in on a construction project. It is also the origin story of every misunderstanding that has ever happened between human beings. Every time someone says "that's not what I meant" or "I thought you said Tuesday" or "I have been speaking Portuguese this entire time and you did not notice," this is the root cause. The narrator finds this either comforting or devastating depending on the day.

Abraham: The Long Walk (Chapters 12–22)

From the scattered peoples of Babel, the narrative narrows its focus to one man: Abram, son of Terah, whose family came from Ur of the Chaldeans. He is seventy-five years old when he leaves Haran in response to God's call. God tells him to leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house and go to a land that God will show him. He does not tell him which land. He

says: go, and I will show you. To a man who is seventy-five years old and has presumably been settled for some time, this is a very significant ask. God sweetens it: 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. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. This is the covenant that the next nineteen books will be about. It starts with one old man being told to pack up and move, on faith, to an unspecified location, with a promise that stretches to the ends of the earth. Abram went. The narrator respects this without qualification.

Abram and his wife Sarai, who is also his half-sister — which the text mentions without apparent discomfort, and the narrator mentions without lingering — traveled to the land of Canaan. They had no children. The promise of a great nation was, therefore, contingent on something that had not yet happened. This is the central tension of the Abraham story: a man called to father a nation who has no children, who believes anyway, and who acts on that belief even when it looks, from a purely biological standpoint, increasingly unlikely.

In Egypt, Abram asked Sarai to tell Pharaoh she was his sister rather than his wife, so that Pharaoh would treat him well and not kill him to take her. This worked exactly as planned for Abram and rather less well for Sarai, who ended up in Pharaoh's household as a prospective addition to his collection. God sent plagues on Pharaoh's household because of Sarai, and Pharaoh eventually figured out what had happened, confronted Abram about it, and sent them both away. The narrator notes that this is a difficult passage, because Abram has here placed his wife in a dangerous situation to protect himself, and the text does not comment on whether this was admirable. The narrator also notes that this is not the last time this plan is used in the book. It happens twice more. The Bible is consistent, if nothing else.

Lot, Abram's nephew, had come along for the journey. He and Abram had accumulated so many flocks and herds that the land couldn't support them both together. Their herdsmen were quarreling. Abram suggested they separate: you pick a direction and I'll go the other way. Lot looked out and saw the Jordan Valley, well-watered everywhere like the garden of Eden. He picked that. He pitched his tent near Sodom. The narrator notes the geography of this decision and the word "near" and the name "Sodom" and allows you to draw your own conclusions, because the text is about to draw them for you.

God cut a formal covenant with Abram. Animals were halved and arranged. A deep sleep fell on Abram, and a dreadful darkness. God passed between the pieces as a smoking fire pot and flaming torch, making the covenant unilateral — it was on God, not on Abram, to hold it together. Abram was told his descendants would be enslaved in a foreign land for four hundred years before coming back to this land. The narrator notes that God delivered this information in what appears to be a normal tone of voice, and Abram accepted it with what appears to be normal faith, which tells you something about what passing through terror and coming out the other side can do to a person's threshold for alarming news.

Circumcision was introduced as the sign of the covenant at chapter seventeen. Abram became Abraham; Sarai became Sarah. The narrator acknowledges this section of the reading and moves forward with respect for those who found it difficult.

Sarai, still childless, gave her handmaid Hagar to Abram so that Abram could have a child through her. Hagar conceived immediately. She looked on Sarai with contempt. Sarai was unpleasant to Hagar. Hagar fled into the wilderness. An angel of the LORD found her at a spring of water in the desert and said: where have you come from and where are you going? She said she was fleeing. The angel told her to return and submit to Sarai, and promised her that her son would be a wild man, free, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he would dwell over against all his kinsmen. The son was named Ishmael. Hagar, in response to this encounter, gave God a name: El Roi, the God who sees. The narrator notes that Hagar is the only person in Genesis who names God, and that this happened in a desert, to a runaway servant woman, alone and afraid. The smallest people in the largest places.

Three mysterious visitors appeared at Abraham's tent in the heat of the day. Abraham ran to meet them, bowed, offered them water and food, and Sarah baked bread while Abraham prepared a calf. They ate. Then one of them — and here the text begins to use LORD interchangeably with the visitors, which is a theological statement in itself — said that Sarah would have a son by this time next year. Sarah was listening at the tent door. She laughed. She was ninety years old. Her husband was a hundred. This was not a realistic biological prospect by any normal calculation. The LORD said: why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for the LORD? Sarah said: I didn't laugh. He said: yes, you did. The narrator does not speculate on who had the better information here. Both points of view are understandable.

Then the visitors prepared to go down to Sodom, because its sin was very grievous. Abraham stood before the LORD and began one of the most remarkable negotiations in Scripture: what if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you destroy it for fifty? The LORD said he would not destroy it for fifty. What about forty-five? Fine. Forty? Sure. Thirty? Okay. Twenty? Yes. Ten? Yes. Abraham pushed the negotiation down to ten righteous people, and the LORD said he would not destroy it for ten. Abraham went home. The investigators went to Sodom. There were not ten righteous people in Sodom.

Two angels arrived at Sodom's gate in the evening. Lot was sitting there and offered them hospitality. They came to his house. Before they lay down, all the men of Sodom, young and old, surrounded the house and demanded that Lot send out the visitors so they could "know" them. This is the Bible's standard phrasing for something extremely specific, and the situation is exactly as bad as it sounds. Lot refused. In what is universally agreed to be one of the stranger moments in Genesis, he offered his daughters instead. The crowd pressed harder. The angels pulled Lot inside, struck the crowd with blindness, and told Lot to take his family and get out, because the city was about to be destroyed. Lot lingered — the text says he lingered, which is remarkable given the circumstances — and the angels took him by the hand and his wife and his daughters by the hand and brought them out of the city and told them to run and not look back. Lot's wife looked back. She became a pillar of salt. The narrator does not make a joke here. It is a brutal thing, whatever it means — a woman who could not leave her life without one last look, and was made into a monument by the looking. Some moments in this book are not for laughing at, and this is one of them.

Isaac was born to Sarah at ninety, to Abraham at one hundred. She laughed again when she held him. This is a different laugh from the one at the tent door. The narrator notes the difference without explaining it, because the difference explains itself.

The test of Abraham, chapter twenty-two, is the axis on which the entire Abraham story turns. God said to Abraham: take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will show you. Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, took two young men and Isaac, and went. On the third day he lifted up his eyes and saw the place from far off. He told the young men to stay with the donkey: "The boy and I will go over there. We will worship, and come back to you." (Genesis 22:5, WEB) This is either a lie — he did not know they would both return — or an act of faith so complete that it looked like a lie from the outside. The narrator inclines toward faith and moves on.

Isaac carried the wood. Abraham carried the fire and the knife. They walked together. Isaac said: Father, here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering? Abraham said: God will provide for himself the lamb, my son. They came to the place. Abraham built the altar, arranged the wood, bound Isaac, laid him on the altar. He stretched out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. The angel of the LORD called from heaven: Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me. Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. He took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son. He called the name of the place: The LORD will provide.

The narrator pauses on the ram. That ram had gotten up in the morning, found a thicket, and walked into it. It had no idea what morning had in store for it. It is the most relatable figure in the entire chapter, and possibly in the entirety of Genesis. It was in the right place at the right time through no merit of its own, and it was sufficient. The narrator finds this true and moving in ways that are difficult to articulate, and does not try.

Jacob and the Art of the Deal (Chapters 25–35)

Isaac married Rebekah, who was barren, and Isaac prayed, and she conceived twins. They struggled together inside her. She asked the LORD what was happening. He said: two nations are in your womb, and the older shall serve the younger. When the time came, the first twin came out red and hairy all over; they named him Esau. The second came out grabbing his brother's heel; they named him Jacob, which means "he grasps the heel," which is a polite way of saying "supplanter" or, more directly, "the one who trips you on his way past." This name is a personality preview. Jacob lives up to it several times before he's done.

Esau grew up to be an outdoorsman, a man of the field; Isaac loved him. Jacob grew up to be a quiet man, dwelling in tents; Rebekah loved him. One day Jacob was cooking stew when Esau came in from the field, famished. He said: give me some of that red stuff, I'm about to die. Jacob said: sell me your birthright first. The birthright was the inheritance right of the firstborn — a significant economic and spiritual position. Esau said: I'm literally starving to death right now,

what good is a birthright? He swore an oath and sold his birthright for bread and a bowl of lentil stew. The narrator calls this the original failure to read the terms and conditions. Esau ate and drank and got up and went his way. The text says he despised his birthright. The narrator says: he was hungry and he made a short-term decision, which is perhaps the most human thing in this chapter, and also the most expensive lunch in Genesis.

The second deal was more elaborate. Isaac was old and his eyes were dim. He called Esau and asked him to go out, hunt game, make him the kind of savory food he loved, and then Isaac would bless him before he died. Rebekah heard this. She went to Jacob and set in motion one of the most audacious pieces of domestic subterfuge in the Old Testament. She took Esau's best garments and dressed Jacob in them. She covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with the skins of goat kids. She gave Jacob savory food and bread. Jacob went in to his father.

Isaac was suspicious. The voice was Jacob's, but the hands were Esau's. He asked directly: are you really Esau? Jacob said yes. Isaac felt his hands again and said: the voice is Jacob's voice but the hands are Esau's hands. He blessed him. When Esau came home and they sorted out what had happened, his anger was considerable. He wept. He asked: is he not rightly named Jacob? He has supplanted me twice now. He took my birthright and now he's taken my blessing. He vowed to kill Jacob after their father's death. Jacob fled to Rebekah's brother Laban in Haran.

On the way, Jacob stopped for the night and took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head as a pillow. He dreamed of a ladder set up on the earth with its top reaching heaven, and angels of God were ascending and descending on it, and the LORD stood above it and spoke to him, renewing the covenant he had made with Abraham. Jacob woke up and said: surely the LORD is in this place and I did not know it. He was afraid. He said: this is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven. He took the stone he had slept on, set it up as a pillar, poured oil on it, and named the place Bethel, which means "house of God." The narrator notes that this is the first known use of a rock as simultaneously a pillow and a religious monument, and that Jacob achieved both functions without planning either.

Jacob arrived at a well in Haran. He met Rachel, Laban's daughter, who came to water the sheep. Jacob moved the stone from the well's mouth — a stone that normally required multiple shepherds — alone, as a demonstration of what might be described as romantic exertion. He kissed her. He wept aloud. He worked seven years for Laban to earn Rachel's hand, and the seven years seemed to him like a few days because of his love for her. This is one of the most beautiful sentences in Genesis and should be kept in mind for what follows.

What follows is this: on the wedding night, Laban took Leah, his older daughter, put a veil on her, and sent her to Jacob instead of Rachel. In the morning, Jacob discovered he had married the wrong sister. He went to Laban. Laban explained, with the calm of a man who had been planning this, that in their custom the older daughter must be given in marriage before the younger. He offered Rachel for another seven years of work. After completing Leah's wedding week, Jacob married Rachel and then worked another seven years for her. He worked fourteen years total for two sisters, which is the kind of delayed gratification that our modern attention span cannot properly process. He then spent the next several years outsmarting Laban in a livestock breeding arrangement that involves streaked rods and selective breeding techniques that the narrator

admits she does not fully understand even having read the passage three times, but which resulted in Jacob becoming extremely wealthy at Laban's expense. The scheme worked. The narrator respects the hustle.

Jacob packed up his wives, children, flocks, and servants and headed home. On the way, the night before he was to meet Esau, whom he expected to be furious and who was coming to meet him with four hundred men, Jacob sent everyone ahead across the Jabbok and was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket and put it out of joint. He said: let me go, for the day is breaking. Jacob said: I will not let you go unless you bless me. He asked Jacob's name. Then he said: your name shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed. And he blessed him there. Jacob named the place Peniel, saying: I have seen God face to face and yet my life has been delivered. He limped away as the sun rose over him.

The narrator calls this the most committed visa interview in recorded history. A man who came into the encounter called Jacob — the heel-grabber, the supplanter — left it with a new name, a permanent limp, and a blessing. The limp is important. He had to walk differently for the rest of his life, which is what genuine encounters tend to cost. And Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they both wept. After all of it. Against all odds, they wept and were reconciled.

Joseph and the Excellent, Terrible, No-Good Coat (Chapters 37–50)

Jacob had twelve sons, but one was his favorite: Joseph, born of his beloved Rachel, who had died giving birth to Benjamin. Jacob made Joseph a coat — the famous coat of many colors, or possibly a coat with long sleeves, depending on which translation you read, the details having been lost somewhat in the transmission — and his brothers saw that their father loved Joseph more than them and hated him for it. Then Joseph started reporting his dreams, in which sheaves of grain and the sun and moon and eleven stars all bowed down to him. He told these dreams to his brothers. He told them to his father. Even Jacob rebuked him for the star dream. His brothers hated him more. The narrator notes that Joseph, who was seventeen, had not yet developed what professionals call situational awareness.

The brothers were out with the flocks and Jacob sent Joseph to check on them. They saw him coming from far off and said to one another: here comes this dreamer. Let us kill him and throw him in a pit and say a wild animal devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams. Reuben, the oldest, suggested they just throw him in the pit without killing him, intending to come back and rescue him later. They agreed. They stripped Joseph of his coat and threw him in the pit. Then, and the narrator wants you to note this detail because it is in the text verbatim, they sat down to eat. A caravan of Ishmaelites appeared, heading to Egypt. Judah said: what do we gain by killing him? Let us sell him. They pulled Joseph out of the pit and sold him for twenty pieces of silver. He was taken to Egypt. Reuben came back to the pit, found it empty, and tore his garments. The brothers killed a goat, dipped the coat in its blood, and brought it to Jacob. Jacob recognized it. He said: a fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is torn to pieces.

Jacob tore his garments and mourned his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him. He refused to be comforted. He said he would go down to his son mourning to Sheol. Meanwhile, his son was in Egypt, being sold to a man named Potiphar.

In Potiphar's house, the LORD was with Joseph. He prospered. He rose to be the overseer of the entire household. Potiphar's wife noticed Joseph, who was handsome in form and appearance, and said: lie with me. Joseph declined, on the grounds that Potiphar had trusted him with everything in the house and that doing this would be a great wickedness and a sin against God. She asked day after day. He refused day after day. One day she grabbed his garment. He ran, leaving the garment in her hand. She called her household servants and said that this Hebrew man had come to lie with her and had left his garment when she cried out. She told the same story to Potiphar. Potiphar was furious. Joseph went to prison.

In prison, the LORD was still with Joseph. He rose to be trusted with all the prisoners. Two of Pharaoh's officers came in: the cupbearer and the baker, who had offended Pharaoh. They both had dreams in the same night and could not interpret them. Joseph said: interpretations belong to God; tell me your dreams. He interpreted them: the cupbearer would be restored to his position in three days; the baker would be hanged in three days. He asked the cupbearer to remember him to Pharaoh. Everything happened exactly as Joseph said. The cupbearer was restored. He forgot about Joseph for two years.

Two years later, Pharaoh had two dreams. Seven fat cows came up out of the Nile; seven thin cows ate them and were still thin. Seven healthy ears of grain grew on one stalk; seven thin ears ate them. Pharaoh's spirit was troubled. His magicians and wise men could not interpret the dreams. The cupbearer finally remembered Joseph. Joseph was brought from the prison, shaved, changed his clothes, and came before Pharaoh. He said: it is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer. He interpreted the dreams: seven years of great plenty throughout Egypt, followed by seven years of famine so severe the plenty would be forgotten. He recommended Pharaoh appoint a discerning and wise man to oversee the collection and storage of grain during the good years. Pharaoh looked at his officials and said: can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God? He turned to Joseph and gave him his signet ring, dressed him in fine linen, put a gold chain around his neck, had him ride in his second chariot, and made him ruler over all of Egypt. Joseph was thirty years old.

The seven good years came. Joseph stored grain. The famine came. All the lands were affected. Joseph opened the storehouses. His brothers came to Egypt to buy grain because the famine was severe in Canaan. They came before Joseph. They bowed down with their faces to the earth. He recognized them. They did not recognize him. This was the moment he had dreamed about at seventeen, standing in front of him, and they had no idea. The narrator pauses to appreciate the architecture of this: the dreamer, the pit, the coat in blood, the two years forgotten in prison, the dreams interpreted, the seven years managed, and now this. Joseph tested his brothers. He accused them of being spies. He held Simeon as a hostage and sent them back for Benjamin, their youngest brother. They said to each other — not knowing Joseph could understand them, as he had been speaking through an interpreter — that this was their punishment for what they had done to their brother, whose distress they had seen and had not listened to. Reuben said he had

told them not to do it. Joseph turned away from them and wept. He came back and spoke to them and bound Simeon before their eyes.

The brothers returned with Benjamin. Joseph hosted them at his house. He saw Benjamin and had to leave the room to weep. He returned. He seated them at the table in order of their birth, from the firstborn to the youngest, and they looked at one another in astonishment. He had a silver cup hidden in Benjamin's sack. When they set out for home, Joseph had them overtaken and accused Benjamin of stealing the cup. He said Benjamin would stay as his servant. Judah — the same Judah who had suggested selling Joseph in the first place — stepped forward and gave one of the great speeches of the book: he explained that their father had nearly died when he lost one son, that he could not survive losing Benjamin, that he had put himself up as guarantee for the boy, and he offered himself as a slave in Benjamin's place. Joseph could not control himself before all who stood by him. He sent everyone out. He wept, and Egypt heard it. He said: I am Joseph. Is my father still alive? His brothers could not answer him; they were dismayed at his presence. He said: come near to me. He said: I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. He said: God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here but God.

This is the longest con in Genesis, and at its conclusion, Joseph chose not to make it a con at all. He had every opportunity to let them starve or to reveal himself in a moment of retribution, and he chose revelation and reconciliation instead. He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. Jacob came down to Egypt with all his descendants — seventy people in all — and settled in the land of Goshen. Jacob saw Joseph and said: now let me die, since I have seen your face and know that you are still alive. Joseph wept.

Jacob lived seventeen more years in Egypt and died at one hundred and forty-seven. He blessed each of his sons before he died, in a scene of great ceremony and considerable poetry. Joseph buried his father in Canaan as Jacob had requested. His brothers, now afraid that Joseph might take his revenge, sent a message saying: your father commanded before he died that you should forgive us. Joseph wept when he heard this. He said to them: do not fear. Am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive. Do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones. He comforted them and spoke kindly to them. Joseph died at one hundred and ten years old. He was embalmed and put in a coffin in Egypt, having made his brothers swear that when God visited them and brought them out of the land, they would carry his bones with them. Genesis ends with a coffin in a foreign country and a promise not yet kept. The next book begins four hundred years later.

* * *

Exodus: The Great Escape (And the Part Nobody Talks About)

Moses (Chapters 1–4)

There arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph. Egypt, four hundred years on from Joseph's arrival, had done what comfortable nations tend to do when confronted with a growing minority population: it panicked. The Israelites had been fruitful and multiplied exceedingly, just as God had promised Abraham they would, and Pharaoh looked at them and saw a security threat. He made them slaves. He set taskmasters over them. They built treasure cities. The harder Pharaoh afflicted them, the more they multiplied and spread. He decreed that every Hebrew baby boy born was to be thrown into the Nile.

A Levite woman gave birth to a fine son and hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she put him in a basket made of papyrus, waterproofed it with tar and pitch, placed it among the reeds at the bank of the Nile, and had his sister stand at a distance to see what would happen. Pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe in the Nile. She found the basket among the reeds. She opened it. The baby was crying. She felt compassion for him and said: this is one of the Hebrews' children. The narrator notes that placing a child in the Nile in a sealed container technically fulfills the letter of Pharaoh's decree, if not its spirit, which makes this mother the first known practitioner of creative regulatory compliance. The sister appeared and offered to go find a Hebrew woman to nurse the child for Pharaoh's daughter. Pharaoh's daughter agreed. The sister went and brought the child's own mother. Pharaoh's daughter paid her to nurse her own son. When the child was older, he was brought to Pharaoh's daughter and she adopted him and named him Moses, meaning "drawn out," because she drew him out of the water. He grew up in the palace of the man who had ordered the death of all boys like him. The narrator finds the irony appropriate, cosmic, and completely intentional.

Moses grew up. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave and killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. The next day he saw two Hebrews fighting and tried to intervene; one of them said: who made you a prince and judge over us? Are you going to kill me like you killed the Egyptian? Pharaoh heard of it and wanted to kill Moses. Moses fled to Midian. He sat down by a well. He helped the daughters of a priest named Jethro drive off some shepherds who were hassling them and watered their flock. Jethro gave him his daughter Zipporah in marriage. Moses settled down, tended sheep, and spent what appears to have been a substantial portion of his life in a quiet that must have been very strange for a man raised in a palace. Then one day, near Horeb, he saw a bush burning that was not being consumed.

Moses said: I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burned. This is a reasonable response. A bush on fire that isn't burning up is the kind of phenomenon that justifies a detour. When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush. Moses said: here I am. God said: do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. He said: I am the God of your father, the God of

Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Moses hid his face; he was afraid to look at God.

God told Moses He had seen the affliction of His people in Egypt, had heard their cry, knew their sufferings, and was coming down to deliver them and bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey. He was sending Moses to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out. Moses offered five separate objections. Who am I to go to Pharaoh? God said: I will be with you. Who shall I say sent me? God said: I AM WHO I AM. Tell them I AM sent you. They won't believe me. God gave him signs: a staff that becomes a snake, a hand that becomes leprous and is healed. I'm not eloquent. God said: who made man's mouth? Go; I will be with your mouth. Please send someone else. God's anger burned against Moses. He said: Aaron your brother is coming to meet you; he can speak for you. But go. Moses went.

The Plagues (Chapters 7–12)

Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said: thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: let my people go. Pharaoh said: who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover I will not let Israel go. He increased the Israelites' workload that same day, ordering that they no longer be provided straw for making bricks but must gather it themselves while maintaining the same quota. The Israelites were furious with Moses. Moses went back to God, who assured him this was going according to plan.

Plague one: water to blood. Aaron stretched out his staff over the waters of Egypt. Every river, canal, pond, and pool of water turned to blood. The fish died. The Nile stank. The Egyptians dug around the Nile for drinking water. Pharaoh's magicians duplicated this feat with their secret arts, which raises the question of where they found unaffected water to turn into blood. Pharaoh's heart was hardened. He went into his house and did not take this to heart.

Plague two: frogs. Frogs came up out of the Nile and covered the land. They were in the houses and the bedrooms and the beds and the ovens and the kneading bowls. The magicians also produced frogs. Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said: entreat the LORD to take away the frogs, and I will let the people go. Moses said: when do you want them gone? Pharaoh said: tomorrow. Moses prayed. The frogs died. They were gathered in heaps, and the land stank. But when Pharaoh saw there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen.

Plague three: gnats. Plague four: flies, but only in Egyptian territory, not in Goshen where the Israelites lived, which the narrator notes is a significant escalation in the targeting. Plague five: livestock disease, only Egyptian livestock. Plague six: boils, on humans and animals throughout Egypt. The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils. Pharaoh's heart was hardened. Plague seven: hail, the worst in Egypt's history. Fire ran along the ground. Everything in the field was struck down. Plague eight: locusts, so thick they covered the face of the land so that it was dark, and they ate every plant that the hail had left. Plague nine: three days of darkness so thick the Egyptians could not see one another or rise from their place.

The narrator pauses here to address the theological complexity that the text itself raises: throughout these plagues, the text says repeatedly that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Not that

Pharaoh hardened his own heart, though that phrasing is also used — but that God hardened it. This has generated approximately one thousand years of debate about free will, divine sovereignty, and moral responsibility, and the narrator does not resolve it now except to note that whoever hardened whose heart, the result was nine increasingly devastating plagues and one more coming, and that at some level the question of agency is less interesting than the question of what it would take to let go, and what it cost everyone when the answer was "more than this."

Plague ten: the death of the firstborn. God instituted the Passover. Each Israelite household was to slaughter a lamb, put its blood on the doorposts and lintel of their house, eat the lamb roasted with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, dressed and ready to travel, in haste. When the destroyer passed through Egypt that night, he would see the blood and pass over. At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from Pharaoh's firstborn to the firstborn of the prisoner in the dungeon to the firstborn of all the livestock. There was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. Pharaoh rose in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians, and he called Moses and Aaron and said: get up. Get out from among my people. Go. Take your flocks and your herds. And bless me also. The Egyptians urged the people to leave in haste, saying: we shall all be dead. The Israelites left. Four hundred and thirty years after Jacob's family had come down into Egypt, the descendants of those seventy people — numbering in the hundreds of thousands, some estimates put it at two million with their livestock and flocks and the mixed multitude of others who came with them — walked out into the night, carrying their unleavened dough on their shoulders, and borrowed silver and gold from their Egyptian neighbors, who gave it freely.

The Sea (Chapters 13–14)

God led them by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night, so they could travel at all hours and always know which way to go. This is the most reliable GPS in the history of navigation, requiring no satellites, no signal, and no charging. Pharaoh changed his mind about letting them go. He took six hundred chosen chariots and the rest of his army and chased after them. The Israelites looked up and saw the Egyptians coming. They were terrified. They cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses: was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us here to die in the wilderness? This is not a generous moment for them, but it is an understandable one: the army is behind, the sea is in front, and the pillar of cloud, however majestic, has never actually stopped a chariot.

Moses said: do not be afraid. Stand firm. The LORD will fight for you, and you only have to be silent. The LORD told Moses to lift up his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea and divide it. Moses stretched out his hand. A strong east wind blew all night. The sea went back and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the water being a wall on their right hand and on their left. The Egyptians pursued them into the sea. God looked down in the pillar of fire and cloud and threw the Egyptian forces into confusion. He clogged their chariot wheels. They said: let us flee from before Israel, for the LORD fights for them against Egypt. God told Moses to stretch out his hand again. The waters returned. Not one of the Egyptians remained. Israel saw the great power the LORD used against Egypt, and the people

feared the LORD and believed in him and in Moses his servant. Miriam the prophetess, Moses' sister, took up a tambourine, and all the women followed her with tambourines and dancing, and she sang: sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. This is the first recorded worship service in the wilderness, and it lasted approximately as long as worship services tend to last before practical problems reassert themselves.

The Wilderness Complaints (Chapters 15–18)

Three days into the wilderness of Shur and the people found no water. They found water at Marah, but it was bitter. They grumbled against Moses: what shall we drink? Moses cried to the LORD, who showed him a log to throw into the water. He threw it in. The water became sweet. One month later, the whole congregation grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness of Sin. They said: would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. God heard. He said: I will rain bread from heaven for you. Each morning there was a fine, flake-like thing on the ground, white, tasting like wafers made with honey. The people said to one another: what is it? Moses said: it is the bread the LORD has given you to eat. They called it manna. The supply was consistent, reliable, and inexhaustible: it appeared every morning except the Sabbath, for which a double portion appeared on the sixth day. The people complained about it within approximately eleven minutes of receiving it.

They also received quail in the evening, great flocks of them, and the people gathered them. This too was complained about, at a later juncture, when they said they were tired of manna. The narrator notes that complaining about free bread and free quail is a very human thing to do, and that this fact does not make it less infuriating to read about.

They camped at Rephidim. No water again. The people quarreled with Moses so vigorously that Moses said to God: what shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me. God told him to go to a rock at Horeb, strike it with the staff, and water would come out. Moses did this before the elders of Israel. Water came out of the rock. He named the place Massah and Meribah, meaning testing and quarreling, because the people had quarreled and tested the LORD by saying: is the LORD among us or not? The narrator notes this question and lets it sit, because it is the question under every complaint in every wilderness, and the answer — consistently demonstrated by manna and quail and water from rocks and a pillar of fire — was yes, and the people kept asking it anyway, which is the most human thing in the book of Exodus.

Sinai (Chapters 19–40)

Three months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped before the mountain. God called Moses up the mountain and told him to consecrate the people: wash their garments, abstain from certain things, be ready for the third day. On the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast so that all the people in the camp trembled. Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln. The whole

mountain trembled greatly. The trumpet blast grew louder and louder. Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. God came down to the top of the mountain and called Moses to come up, which he did. The narrator has never read a more impressive stage direction than that sequence, and notes that it makes most contemporary light shows look modest.

The Ten Commandments were given: no other gods before God; no idols; do not take the LORD's name in vain; keep the Sabbath; honor your parents; do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; do not covet. Ten commandments. The narrator notes that the first four are about the relationship between people and God, and the last six are about the relationship between people and each other, and that the ratio is interesting, and that the last time she checked, most of the world's problems still trace to violations of the last six.

Moses was then on the mountain for forty days receiving the full specification of the law and the tabernacle. The people, apparently incapable of waiting forty days, went to Aaron and said: make us gods, for we do not know what has become of Moses. Aaron collected their gold earrings, melted them down, and fashioned a golden calf. The people said: these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. They had been free for three months and were already making a replacement deity out of jewelry. The narrator notes that this is alarming, but also that Aaron is the one who melted the jewelry, and that when Moses asked him later what happened, Aaron said: "I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf." (Exodus 32:24, WEB) This is the least convincing explanation for a physical object in recorded history. The calf did not come out of the fire on its own. Aaron made the calf. But he did not say this.

God told Moses what was happening on the mountain. He said: your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. He was furious. He proposed destroying them all and making a great nation from Moses. Moses talked Him out of it — one of the most significant acts of intercession in the Old Testament — reminding God of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The LORD relented from the disaster he had spoken of. Moses went down the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hands. He heard the sound of the people singing. He saw the calf and the dancing. He threw the tablets and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf, burned it, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it. The narrator calls this one of the more creative punishments in the Bible and notes that it was also, presumably, extremely unpleasant.

Moses went back up the mountain. New tablets were made. The covenant was renewed. The tabernacle was built to God's precise specifications: one hundred cubits long by fifty cubits wide and five cubits high for the court, with specific curtains and pillars; the tabernacle itself with its boards and bases and bars and coverings; the ark of the covenant in acacia wood overlaid with gold; the mercy seat with two golden cherubim on top; the table for the bread of the Presence; the golden lampstand with its seven lamps; the altar of incense; the altar of burnt offering; the laver of bronze; the court of the tabernacle. Specific fabrics: fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet yarns. Specific metals: gold, silver, and bronze, each in its appointed place. The ephod for the high priest with its shoulder pieces and the breastpiece with its twelve stones, one for each tribe of Israel. The narrator notes that God is an extraordinarily detail-oriented client and that Bezalel and Oholiab, the craftsmen assigned to build this, must have been under

considerable pressure. When it was finished, the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter. The work was complete, and it was extraordinary, and God moved in.

* * *

Leviticus: The Employee Handbook

There are people who will tell you that Leviticus is where Bible-reading plans go to die, usually somewhere around the third chapter, when the regulations for the peace offering start getting very specific about the fat around the kidneys. The narrator acknowledges this. The narrator is going to make the case that Leviticus is, in its own way, remarkable, once you understand what it is: it is the complete operating manual for a society that has never been a society before, given to two million people who had been slaves for four hundred years and who had no institutions of their own beyond the memory of their ancestors and the covenant those ancestors had made with a God who was now living in a tent in their camp.

The sacrificial system occupies the first seven chapters. Burnt offerings: the whole animal burned, nothing kept, total consecration. Grain offerings: flour and oil and frankincense, a portion burned, the rest for the priests. Peace offerings: shared between God and the worshiper, the fat burned, the meat eaten in community. Sin offerings: for unintentional sins, covering the gap between who you are and who you were supposed to be. Guilt offerings: for specific violations, with a restitution component. Each category has specific procedures for specific situations — what a priest brings versus what a common person brings, what the animal is, where it's slaughtered, what happens to the blood. The detail is not arbitrary. Every element of the system communicates something: the fat belongs to God, the blood belongs to God, life belongs to God, and the approach to God requires that something be given in order for the relationship to be maintained. You may have your theological views about all of this. The narrator's view is that any system of worship that requires participants to think carefully about every step they take before approaching something holy is, at minimum, taking holiness seriously.

The dietary laws occupy chapters eleven and following: clean and unclean animals. Land animals must have split hooves and chew the cud; the camel chews the cud but doesn't split the hoof (unclean), the pig splits the hoof but doesn't chew the cud (unclean), cattle are fine. Water creatures must have fins and scales; shellfish, therefore, are off the menu. A comprehensive list of birds, insects, and other creatures follows, with most birds of prey declared unclean. The laws are comprehensive, specific, and the subject of considerable modern interpretation. The narrator reads them and thinks: this is a community defining its distinctiveness by what it eats, which is one of the most persistent ways human communities have ever drawn their boundaries. You are what you eat; what you will not eat tells your neighbors who you are.

Chapters thirteen and fourteen cover skin diseases at considerable length, followed by mold in houses and regulations about bodily discharges. The narrator notes that all of these are grouped under the concept of cleanness and uncleanness, which is in Leviticus a ritual and communal category more than a hygienic one, though hygiene may not be entirely absent from the picture. Chapter sixteen brings the Day of Atonement: the high priest enters the Most Holy Place once a year with the blood of a bull and a goat, making atonement for himself and the whole community. One goat is sacrificed; one goat — the scapegoat — has the sins of the people symbolically laid on it and is sent out into the wilderness. The weight of everything, carried

away on an animal, into the desert. There is a gravity to this ritual that even a secular reader can feel.

The Holiness Code of chapters seventeen through twenty-six includes sexual ethics laws in chapter eighteen and opens up into something larger: in paraphrase, God's own holiness is to shape the people's conduct. They must refuse hatred and revenge, care for neighbors as they care for themselves, and reserve part of each harvest for people in poverty and foreigners. They must not cheat others or exploit someone's deafness or blindness. Elders deserve respect. Resident foreigners are to receive the same welcome and care as native-born people, with Israel's own experience in Egypt serving as the reminder (Leviticus 19:2, 9–18, 32–34). The narrator notes that Leviticus, the book most famous for its regulations about fat around the kidneys, also contains some of the most expansive ethical commands in the Old Testament. It is a document that covers both the arrangement of the altar and the treatment of the immigrant, and treats both as serious business. "This book exists," the narrator says, "because God understood that if you leave two million people alone in a desert with no instructions, the results will be creative and terrible." The narrator stands by this.

* * *

Numbers: Forty Years of Being Lost With Documentation

The book of Numbers begins with a census, which tells you what kind of book you're in for. At Sinai, God instructed Moses and Aaron to register Israel's men by family and clan, counting those aged twenty or older who were fit for military service (paraphrase of Numbers 1:1–3). The results of this census occupy several chapters. The narrator presents a representative sample and moves on: 46,500 from Reuben, 59,300 from Simeon, 45,650 from Gad, and so forth, for a total of 603,550 fighting men, not counting the Levites, who are set apart for the tabernacle. The tribes are organized around the tabernacle in a specific arrangement. The Levites are assigned specific responsibilities. Everything is documented. Numbers is the book where you realize that the wilderness was not the chaos it might appear to be from the outside; it was an organized society on the move, with regulations and assignments and census data and complaints filed in triplicate.

The narrator skips several chapters of census material and priestly regulations and picks back up at the spies, because that is where the book changes.

God told Moses to send twelve men, one from each tribe, to scout the land of Canaan. They went. They were gone forty days. They came back with a cluster of grapes so large it took two men to carry it on a pole, and with pomegranates and figs. Their report praised the land's abundance and offered the fruit as evidence. However. And here is where the vote splits. The scouts also described formidable inhabitants, enormous walled towns, and the descendants of Anak. Amalekites occupied the south; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites lived in the hills; Canaanites occupied the coast and the Jordan corridor. Caleb urged an immediate advance, confident that they could take the land. Joshua would join him in opposing the majority. The other scouts insisted that the inhabitants were too powerful and described themselves as insects beside giants (paraphrase of Numbers 13:27–33; 14:6–9).

The people wept. They cried all night. In paraphrase, they accused God of leading them toward slaughter and leaving their families at the mercy of enemies. They proposed replacing their leader and returning to Egypt. Caleb and Joshua ripped their clothes in distress and pleaded with them to trust God: the country was excellent, and with God's favor they could enter it. They urged the people to abandon rebellion and fear. The crowd answered with threats of stoning (Numbers 14:3–10).

God appeared. He spoke to Moses: how long will this people despise me? How long will they refuse to trust me, after all the signs I have performed among them? He again proposed destroying them and making a great nation from Moses. Moses again talked him out of it — the intercession more developed this time, Moses appealing to God's reputation among the nations, to the character God had revealed to him on the mountain. God relented. But the consequence was this: none of the men of this census, twenty years and older, would see the promised land. For forty years — one year for each day the spies scouted — they would wander in the wilderness. Their children would be the ones to enter. Caleb and Joshua, the two who gave a faithful report, would survive to see it. The ten who gave the bad report died of a plague

immediately. The narrator notes that this is the most expensive case of collective anxiety in recorded history: the entire original generation lost the promised land because they believed the majority report.

Numbers chapter twenty-two introduces Balaam and his donkey, which is the most surreal episode in a book that already contains a lot of competition. Balak, king of Moab, was terrified of Israel. He sent messengers to Balaam, a prophet of some renown, asking him to come and curse Israel. God told Balaam not to go. Balak sent more impressive messengers with a better offer. God told Balaam to go, but only to speak what God told him. Balaam saddled his donkey and went.

An armed angel blocked Balaam's route, but the donkey saw danger that Balaam could not. Her first escape took them into a field; Balaam beat her back toward the road. When the angel next appeared between vineyard walls, she squeezed aside and trapped Balaam's foot against the stone. Another beating. At a third, tighter passage there was nowhere to squeeze through, so she sank to the ground. Balaam hit her with his staff. God then enabled the animal to speak, and she demanded an explanation for the three beatings (paraphrase of Numbers 22:22–28). The narrator pauses here. The donkey is talking. Balaam's donkey is talking, and Balaam's response is to argue back. In paraphrase, Balaam accused her of humiliating him and said he would kill her if he had a sword. She reminded him of their long history together: had she ever behaved this way before? He admitted she had not. God finally allowed Balaam to see the angel, and Balaam dropped to the ground in submission. The angel challenged his treatment of the donkey: her evasive movements had saved his life, because the angel would otherwise have killed Balaam and spared her (Numbers 22:29–33). The narrator notes that this is the Bible's most underrated episode and possibly its most surreal, and that it contains a donkey who makes a better argument than the man riding her, a man who argues with an animal without apparently registering that the animal is speaking, and an angel who has been blocking a road with a sword while remaining invisible. The episode is extraordinary, and then it ends, and the story of Balaam's attempts to curse Israel and inability to say anything but blessings proceeds, and the narrator strongly recommends reading chapters twenty-two through twenty-four in full because they are genuinely funny in addition to being theologically significant.

Korah, a Levite, along with Dathan, Abiram, and two hundred fifty leaders of the congregation, challenged Moses and Aaron's leadership. They said: you have gone too far. The whole congregation is holy. Why do you exalt yourselves? Moses fell on his face. He arranged for a public resolution. The next morning, Korah and his allies assembled before the tabernacle with their censers. The ground under them split open. It swallowed them and their households and all their goods. They went down alive into the pit. Fire came out from the LORD and consumed the two hundred fifty men offering the incense. The narrator moves on, noting only that the adjudication process in Numbers is considerably more direct than anything available in modern dispute resolution.

The Death of Moses' Chance (Chapter 20)

There was no water again. The congregation assembled against Moses and Aaron. Moses and Aaron withdrew to the meeting tent and bowed to the ground. God instructed them to take the staff and gather the people, then address the rock so that it would provide water. Moses took the staff and assembled the crowd, but rebuked them as rebels and asked whether he and Aaron must produce water from the rock. He hit it twice. Enough water poured out for the people and their animals. God then told the two leaders that their failure to trust him and demonstrate his holiness before Israel meant they would not lead the people into the promised land (paraphrase of Numbers 20:6–12). He was told to speak to the rock. He struck it. He said "shall we bring water," implying it was his doing. The waters came, but the credit was not properly assigned. The narrator notes that this is a painful moment: a man who has been faithful for forty years, who talked God out of destroying his people twice, who survived forty years of complaints about water and bread and quail and Egypt, who carried this entire situation on his back — denied entrance to the promised land for one act of impatience at a rock. The narrator does not say this is unfair. She says it is devastating, and that there is a difference.

* * *

Deuteronomy: Moses Gives the Longest Farewell in History

The word Deuteronomy means "second law," which is an accurate description of a book that is, essentially, Moses standing before the assembled people of Israel on the plains of Moab, with the promised land visible in the distance, and going through everything that has happened and everything that is supposed to happen next, in considerable detail, for thirty-four chapters. He is one hundred and twenty years old. His eyes have not dimmed and his vigor has not gone. He has one more thing to say, and he intends to say all of it.

He reviews the wilderness journey: the spies, the complaining, the water and bread and quail, the laws given at Sinai, the rebellion at Peor. He reviews the laws themselves: the Ten Commandments repeated, the Shema of chapter six ("Hear, Israel: The LORD is our God. The LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6:4–5, WEB)), the dietary laws, the festivals, the regulations for kings (there will be kings; they should not multiply horses or wives or gold; they should copy the law and read it all the days of their lives — a prescription that most subsequent kings failed significantly), the laws about prophets and witnesses and cities of refuge and warfare and property. He reviews the blessings that will come from obedience and the curses that will come from disobedience. The curses, in chapters twenty-seven and twenty-eight, are vivid and extensive. The narrator reads them and notes that whoever wrote them was not working from ignorance about what can go wrong when a society falls apart.

Then the covenant is renewed before the assembled congregation. Moses writes the law and gives it to the priests. He writes a song — the Song of Moses in chapter thirty-two, which is magnificent poetry — and teaches it to the people as a witness against them when they forget. He blesses the tribes, one by one, as Jacob did, with poetry specific to each. Moses then climbed Nebo to the summit of Pisgah opposite Jericho. God gave him a view of the country: Gilead and Dan, Naphtali, Ephraim and Manasseh, Judah toward the Mediterranean, the southern region, and the Jordan plain reaching to Zoar. This was the country promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God explained; Moses could look across it but would not enter. Moses died in Moab as God had said. The account describes his burial in a valley opposite Beth-peor and says the grave's location remained unknown. He was 120, still clear-sighted and physically vigorous. The book closes by remembering his unparalleled prophetic relationship with God (paraphrase of Deuteronomy 34:1–7, 10–12).

The narrator does not add anything here. The ending can carry its own weight.

* * *

Joshua: Real Estate, Acquired Aggressively

With Moses dead, God commissioned Joshua, Moses' assistant and the son of Nun, to lead Israel across the Jordan into its promised home. The charge repeatedly called for courage and assured Joshua that God would accompany him wherever the task took him (paraphrase of Joshua 1:1–9). The narrator notes that God told Joshua to be strong and courageous three times in the first nine verses of chapter one, which is either remarkable encouragement or a strong indication of how intimidating the job was. Joshua was replacing Moses. The Canaanites had fortified cities and experienced armies. The LORD was with him, and God apparently felt it was worth mentioning this multiple times in the opening paragraphs.

Joshua sent two spies to Jericho. They went into the house of a woman named Rahab, who was a prostitute. The king of Jericho was told about them. He sent to Rahab asking her to produce the men. She had already hidden them on her roof under stalks of flax. She told the king's messengers the men had left at dark before the city gate closed and that if they hurried they might catch them. She went up to the men on the roof and said: I know the LORD has given you this land. The terror of you has fallen on us. We have heard how the LORD dried up the Red Sea, what you did to the two kings of the Amorites. Our hearts melted. There was no spirit left in anyone because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. She asked for a sworn oath that she and her family would be saved. They swore it. She let them down by a cord through the window. They told her to tie a scarlet cord in the window, gather her family inside, and keep quiet. She tied the cord. The narrator notes that Rahab is the most strategically sophisticated person in Jericho, and that the red cord she hung from her window is one of those details that resonates across the entire trajectory of the book, though the narrator will not press that point too hard in a document of this length.

When the ark-bearing priests entered the Jordan, its incoming water piled up far upstream and the riverbed became passable. They remained in the channel while the whole people crossed. Representatives of the twelve tribes carried stones from that spot to Gilgal. These would give future children a reason to ask about the crossing—and their parents a way to explain how God had opened a path through the river (paraphrase of Joshua 3:14–17; 4:1–7, 19–24).

Jericho was shut up tight. No one went out and no one came in. God told Joshua the strategy: march around the city once a day for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day march around the city seven times, the priests blowing the trumpets. When they make a long blast, all the people shall shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall down flat. No siege weapons. No battering rams. No catapults. March. Blow trumpets. Shout. This is the battle plan. Joshua carried it out with perfect discipline. The people of Israel marched in silence for six days. On the seventh day they rose at dawn and marched around the city seven times. At the seventh circuit, the priests blew the trumpets, Joshua said shout, the people shouted, and the walls fell down flat. Every man charged straight in. The city was taken. Rahab and her household were brought out and spared. She lived in Israel from that day on.

The conquest of Canaan was not all Jericho. The battle of Ai was lost first because one man, Achan of the tribe of Judah, had taken some of the devoted things from Jericho — a beautiful cloak from Shinar, two hundred shekels of silver, a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels — and hidden them in the ground inside his tent. The narrator notes that burying contraband under the floor of the tent you are sleeping in is not a sophisticated concealment strategy and raises questions about Achan's long-term planning. Achan confessed, the stolen goods were produced, Achan and his family and his possessions were taken to the Valley of Achor and stoned. Ai was then taken successfully. The conquest proceeded: a long campaign of establishing Israel in the land assigned to each tribe, with victories and some losses, with the occasional diplomatic exception for groups clever enough to negotiate treaties before the army arrived (the Gibeonites disguised themselves as travelers from a far country and secured a treaty before Joshua realized they were neighbors — the narrator notes that this is the most effective costume in Joshua and possibly in the whole of the historical books).

Joshua divided the land among the twelve tribes according to the lot before the LORD. Cities of refuge were established: anyone who killed someone accidentally could flee there and be safe from the blood avenger until the matter was adjudicated. The Levites received forty-eight cities distributed among all the tribes, since they had no tribal territory of their own. Joshua gave a long farewell address, similar to Moses', urging the people to be careful to love the LORD their God and to hold fast to him. Then Joshua the son of Nun died at one hundred and ten years old. They buried him in the hill country of Ephraim. And the narrator notes that the phrase "they knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel" appears one verse after Joshua's death as the beginning of the next book, which tells you everything about what is coming.

* * *

Judges: The Screen Door That Never Closed Properly

After Joshua's generation died, there arose another generation who did not know the LORD or the work he had done for Israel. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals. The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them, and he sold them into the hands of their surrounding enemies, and they were in terrible distress. Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of their plunderers. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers. And so it went. The pattern in Judges is precise: Israel sins, Israel suffers, Israel cries out, God sends a deliverer, the deliverer dies, Israel sins again. The narrator compares this to a screen door that has never quite closed properly. Every time it swings shut you think maybe this time it'll latch, and it never quite does.

Deborah

Deborah, a prophetess, judged Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment. She sent for Barak the son of Abinoam and told him: the LORD commands you, go, gather your men at Mount Tabor. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you with his chariots and troops, and I will give him into your hand. Barak said: if you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go. She said: I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. The battle was won. Sisera fled on foot.

Sisera sought refuge with Jael, whose husband Heber belonged to a household on peaceful terms with Jabin. She welcomed him into her tent, reassured him, and put a covering over him. When he requested water, she served milk instead. He asked her to watch the entrance and deny that anyone was hiding there. Exhaustion overtook him. While he slept, Jael approached quietly with a hammer and tent peg and drove the peg through his temple into the earth, killing him. When Barak arrived in pursuit, she led him inside to see Sisera's body (paraphrase of Judges 4:17–22). The narrator has decided that Jael is one of the most terrifying people in the entire Bible, and she means this as the highest possible compliment. She saw a situation, assessed it, and acted with a precision and a calm that the ancient world reserved for its most serious practitioners of anything. The song of Deborah and Barak in chapter five calls her "most blessed among women." The narrator agrees.

Gideon

The Midianites were oppressing Israel so severely that the Israelites had taken to living in caves and dens and strongholds in the mountains. When they came out and planted crops, Midian invaded and destroyed everything. Israel cried out. The angel of the LORD came and sat under a terebinth tree at Ophrah while Gideon the son of Joash was beating out wheat in a winepress to hide it from the Midianites. The angel said to him: the LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor. Gideon said: please, sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us?

Where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted? The LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian. The LORD turned to him and said: go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you? Gideon said: please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house. The LORD said: but I will be with you.

The narrator notes that calling Gideon a mighty man of valor while he was hiding in a winepress threshing grain is either sarcasm or encouragement, and has decided it is encouragement of the most generous kind: seeing in someone not what they are but what they are going to be, and calling them that name first. Gideon asked for a sign. God gave it. Gideon asked for another sign. God gave it again. God then told Gideon his army was too large. Gideon's army of 32,000 was whittled down first by sending home anyone who was afraid: 22,000 men left. The remaining 10,000 were brought to the water. God said to watch how they drank. Everyone who knelt to drink was sent home. Everyone who lapped water from their hands like a dog was kept. Three hundred men lapped. God said: with the three hundred men who lapped I will save you and give Midian into your hand. Three hundred men, selected by their drinking technique, sent to rout an army described as thick as locusts, with camels as numberless as the sand. Each man got a trumpet and a clay jar with a torch inside it. They surrounded the camp at night. On Gideon's signal, they broke the jars, held the torches, blew the trumpets, and shouted: a sword for the LORD and for Gideon! The Midianite camp went into complete panic. They turned their swords on one another. They fled. Israel won. The narrator calls this history's most unorthodox military campaign and the only one in recorded history decided primarily by drinking technique and pottery.

Samson

Samson was born under a Nazirite vow: no wine, no razor to his head, no contact with dead things, consecrated to God from birth. He is the Herculean figure of Judges, the one with the most extraordinary gifts and the most spectacular mismanagement of them. He was drawn to Philistine women from the start, which was either a character flaw or, depending on how you read the narrator's comment that "this was from the LORD," a deliberately placed vulnerability used to create occasions for conflict with the Philistines. The narrator is not going to decide which. She is going to tell you what happened.

Samson wanted to marry a Philistine woman. On the way to her, a young lion came roaring toward him and he tore it apart with his bare hands as one tears a young goat, having nothing in his hand. He told no one about it. On the way to the wedding, he turned aside to look at the carcass of the lion. In it was a swarm of bees and honey. He scooped out the honey and ate it. He had touched a dead thing. This was Nazirite violation number one, and he was not counting.

At the wedding feast, he proposed a riddle to thirty Philistine companions: "Out of the eater came out food. Out of the strong came out sweetness." (Judges 14:14, WEB) If they solved it, he would give them thirty linen garments; if not, they owed him thirty. They couldn't solve it. On the seventh day they went to Samson's wife and said: entice your husband to tell us the riddle, or we will burn you and your father's house with fire. Did you invite us here to impoverish us? She

wept before Samson for the seven days of the feast and on the seventh day he told her, and she told them. They came to Samson before sunset of the seventh day with the answer: what is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion? He said: if you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle. He went down to Ashkelon, killed thirty men of the city, took their garments, gave them to the men who had solved the riddle, and went home to his father's house in a rage. His wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man.

Samson came back later with a goat as a gift for his wife. Her father said: I really thought you hated her, so I gave her to your companion. Her younger sister is more attractive; take her instead. Samson said: this time I will be innocent of the Philistines when I do them harm. He caught three hundred foxes, took torches, turned them tail to tail, put a torch between each pair of tails, set the torches on fire, and let the foxes loose into the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and the standing grain and the olive orchards. The Philistines asked who had done it. They were told Samson, because his wife had been given to his companion. They burned the woman and her father's house with fire. Samson said to them: if this is what you do, I swear I will be avenged on you, and only then I will stop. He struck them hip and thigh with a great blow. Then he went and stayed in the cleft of the rock of Etam. The narrator notes that Samson's entire career was, at its structural core, an escalating series of personal grudges with catastrophic damage radii, and that this is a very human thing to say about a man with the strength of a small army.

He killed a thousand Philistines with the fresh jawbone of a donkey. He carried the gate of Gaza off on his shoulders to the top of a hill. He fell in love with a woman named Delilah, in the Valley of Sorek. The lords of the Philistines came to her and said: find out where his great strength comes from and how we might overpower him. We will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver. Delilah asked Samson where his strength came from. He gave her a false answer. She tested it. He escaped. She asked again. False answer. Tested. Escaped. She asked a third time. False answer. Tested. Escaped. Then she said: how can you say you love me when your heart is not with me? You've mocked me three times now. She pressed him daily and urged him until his soul was vexed to death. He told her the truth: if his head were shaved his strength would leave him. She sent for the Philistine lords with the money. While he slept, a man shaved his head. His strength left him. She said: the Philistines are upon you. He awoke expecting to escape as before, and did not know that the LORD had left him. He was captured, his eyes gouged out, and he was set to grinding grain in the prison in Gaza. The narrator notes that Delilah is often cast as simply a villain in this story and that the text is more interested in Samson's inability to learn from the first three times than in condemning her, but that either reading captures something true about what it costs to keep telling someone what they want to hear when what they want is the thing that will destroy you.

His hair began to grow back. The Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon and to celebrate Samson's capture. About three thousand men and women were on the roof watching as they called Samson out to perform for them. Samson asked the boy leading him to let him feel the pillars the house rested on, so he could lean against them. He said: O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes. He grasped the two middle pillars on which the

house rested. He said: let me die with the Philistines. He pushed with all his strength. The house fell upon the lords and upon all the people in it. The dead he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life. He had judged Israel twenty years.

* * *

Ruth: A Very Short Book About Very Large Love

The book of Ruth is four chapters long and contains more genuine human warmth per square inch than almost any other book in the Old Testament. It is set in the days of the judges — that same grim era of cycles and failure described above — and it opens not in the promised land but in Moab, which tells you immediately that the story is going to operate by different rules.

A man from Bethlehem named Elimelech took his wife Naomi and their two sons to Moab because of a famine in Judah. Elimelech died. The sons married Moabite women: Orpah and Ruth. Then both sons died. Naomi was left, in a foreign country, with two daughters-in-law and no male relatives to provide for any of them. She heard that the LORD had visited his people in Judah and given them food. She set out to return. On the road she turned to her daughters-in-law and said: go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. She kissed them. They wept. They said: no, we will return with you to your people. She said: go back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? I have no more sons. I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, would you wait for that? Go back, for I am too bitter for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone out against me. They wept again. Orpah kissed Naomi and went back to her people. But Ruth clung to her.

Naomi urged Ruth to follow Orpah home to her own people and their worship. Ruth refused. Her pledge, in paraphrase, was to share Naomi's journey, home, community, and faith; she intended to remain with her for life and be buried where Naomi was buried. She invoked God as witness to a commitment that death alone should end (Ruth 1:15–17). The narrator sits with this speech for a moment. Ruth is choosing an uncertain future in a foreign land, with a woman who has just told her that her own life is bitter and that God has gone against her, out of nothing but loyalty and love. This is not a rational choice in the economic sense. It is the kind of choice that makes the whole human project look promising.

They went back to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Ruth went to glean in the fields behind the reapers, taking the grain that the harvesters left behind, which was the provision the law of Moses made for the poor and the stranger. She happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, a relative of Elimelech's. Boaz noticed her. He asked his servant: whose young woman is this? The servant told him her story. Boaz went to Ruth and said: do not go to glean in another field. Stay close to my young women. I have charged the young men not to touch you. When you are thirsty, drink from the water they have drawn. She bowed and said: why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner? He said: all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. She ate with him at mealtime. He passed parched grain to her and she ate until she was satisfied and had some left over. He told his young men to leave her some extra grain deliberately.

Naomi told Ruth that Boaz was a close relative, a redeemer. She instructed Ruth in a ritual that is either a very clear marriage proposal or an extraordinarily bold move, depending on how you read the ancient custom: wash, put on your best garments, go to the threshing floor, wait until

Boaz has finished eating and drinking, and when he lies down, uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do. Ruth did this. At midnight, Boaz woke up, and a woman was lying at his feet. He said: who are you? She said: I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer. He said: may you be blessed by the LORD. You have made this last kindness greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. He called her a woman of valor. He handled the kinsman-redeemer business at the city gate the next morning — there was a closer relative who had first right of refusal, and when he understood that redeeming the land included marrying Ruth, he declined — and he married Ruth. Ruth conceived and bore a son. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name: they called him Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse; Jesse was the father of David.

The narrator notes that one of the most significant bloodlines in the canon of Scripture runs through a Moabite woman who wouldn't leave her mother-in-law, who gleaned behind reapers in a foreign field, who lay at a man's feet on a threshing floor as a marriage proposal, and who said "where you go I will go" with no guarantee of what was coming. The most important decisions in this story were not made in palaces. They were made on a road in Moab, at midnight on a threshing floor, and at a city gate in the morning. Small places, enormous consequences. This is how the book of Ruth works, and why it is, in the narrator's opinion, the finest four-chapter piece of writing in the Old Testament.

* * *

1 & 2 Samuel: The King Years, Volume One

Hannah and Samuel

There was a man from the hill country of Ephraim named Elkanah who had two wives: Peninnah, who had children, and Hannah, who had none. Hannah was loved by her husband but provoked by Peninnah year after year about her childlessness, because Peninnah had figured out the exact pressure point and was not above using it. One year at Shiloh, where the tabernacle was, Hannah was weeping and not eating, and she went to the door of the tabernacle and prayed, weeping bitterly, making a vow that if God gave her a son she would give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor would touch his head. She was praying silently, her lips moving but her voice not heard, and Eli the priest saw her and thought she was drunk. He said: how long will you go on being drunk? Put away your wine. She said: no, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Count not your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation. He said: go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him. She went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad. The LORD remembered her. She conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel, for she said: I have asked for him from the LORD.

When the child was weaned, she brought him to Shiloh. She brought him to Eli and said: I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD. She left Samuel with Eli. Then she prayed a prayer of such power and beauty — a song, really, about God lifting the poor from the dust and the hungry from the ash heap, about the mighty being brought low and the lowly exalted — that it echoes a thousand years later in Mary's Magnificat, and the narrator notes that these two women, separated by a millennium and connected by a prayer, are among the most important voices in the biblical tradition, and were both responding to a child.

Samuel grew. Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were corrupt priests who took the best of the sacrificial meat by force and slept with women who served at the tabernacle entrance. Eli rebuked them mildly. God was displeased by both the sons' behavior and the mildness of the rebuke. Samuel heard the voice of God at night, three times thinking it was Eli calling him, and Eli finally realized what was happening and told Samuel: if he calls you again, say "speak, LORD, for your servant hears." Samuel did this. God told him that Eli's family would be judged for the iniquity of his sons. Samuel was afraid to tell Eli in the morning. Eli pressed him. Samuel told him everything. Eli said: it is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him. Samuel grew. All Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the LORD.

The Ark and the Philistines

The Philistines fought Israel and captured the Ark of the Covenant. This turned out to be a significantly worse acquisition than the Philistines had anticipated. They put the Ark in the temple of their god Dagon in Ashdod. The next morning Dagon had fallen on his face before the Ark. They set him back up. The morning after that, Dagon was on his face again, and this time his head and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Additionally, the people of Ashdod were afflicted with tumors. They sent the Ark to Gath. The people of Gath were afflicted with tumors. They sent it to Ekron. The people of Ekron cried out that they were being killed. After seven months, the Philistine priests recommended sending the Ark back to Israel with a guilt offering: five golden tumors and five golden mice, one for each of the five Philistine lords. This is one of the more unusual peace offerings in ancient history. The Philistines put the Ark on a cart with two cows, pointed it toward Israel, and let it go. The cows went straight to Beth-shemesh without turning, lowing as they went. Israel looked up and rejoiced to see the Ark. The narrator calls this the worst acquisition in Philistine history and one of the most decisive object lessons in all of Scripture about what happens when holy things are treated as trophies.

The First King

Samuel judged Israel all his days, but when he was old his sons were corrupt judges who took bribes, and the people came to Samuel and said: give us a king to judge us like all the other nations. Samuel was displeased. He went to the LORD, who said: they have not rejected you; they have rejected me. Nevertheless, warn them solemnly and show them the ways of the king who will reign over them. Samuel warned them: the king will take your sons for his army, your daughters for his courts, the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards, a tenth of your grain and wine, your male and female servants, the best of your young men and your donkeys, a tenth of your flocks. You will be his servants. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves. The people refused to listen. They said: no, we want a king over us, that we may also be like all the nations. God said to Samuel: obey their voice and make them a king. Samuel told the people: go to your cities. This is not the last time in history that a people were warned exactly what they were signing up for and chose it anyway. It will not be the first time the warning proves accurate.

There was a Benjaminite named Kish who had a son named Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people. He was going to find his father's lost donkeys when he ended up in Samuel's vicinity, and Samuel had been told by God the day before that the man who was to be king was coming. Samuel anointed him with oil and kissed him and said: has not the LORD anointed you to be prince over his people Israel? And when the day came to present Saul to all Israel, they sought him and he could not be found, and they inquired of the LORD, and the LORD said: behold, he has hidden himself among the baggage. They ran and took him from there. When he stood among the people, he was head and shoulders taller than any of them. Samuel said: do you see him whom the LORD has chosen? There is none like him among all the

people. The people shouted: long live the king. The narrator notes that beginning a kingship by hiding in the luggage is an unusual choice that the subsequent reign did not entirely overcome.

Saul and David

Saul began well. He saved the people of Jabesh-gilead from the Ammonite threat and proved himself in battle. But then the structural flaws began to show. At Gilgal, waiting for Samuel before battle, he grew impatient when Samuel was late and offered the burnt offering himself, which he was not authorized to do. Samuel arrived, rebuked him, and said: your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart. Then on the campaign against the Amalekites, God told Saul to destroy everything — every man, woman, child, and animal. Saul destroyed most of it but kept King Agag alive and kept the best of the livestock. He told himself it was to sacrifice to the LORD. Samuel arrived and Saul said cheerfully: I have performed the commandment of the LORD. Samuel said: what then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear? Saul explained that the people had kept the best animals to sacrifice. Samuel said: to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king. Saul's problem was not cruelty; it was a preference for partial obedience and good explanations. This particular combination has undone more people than outright rebellion, because it is harder to identify and much easier to justify.

God sent Samuel to Bethlehem to a man named Jesse, who had eight sons. Samuel looked at Eliab, the firstborn, who was tall and impressive, and thought: surely the LORD's anointed is before him. The LORD said: do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart. Seven sons passed before Samuel. None of them. Samuel asked Jesse: are all your sons here? Jesse said: there remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep. Send and get him, Samuel said. David came in, ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. The LORD said: arise, anoint him, for this is he. Samuel anointed him in the midst of his brothers. The Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward.

The Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit tormented him. His servants recommended finding someone who could play the lyre when the spirit came upon him. Someone mentioned Jesse's son David, who was skilled in playing. Saul sent for him. David came and played. The spirit would leave Saul whenever David played. Saul loved him greatly and made him his armor-bearer.

The Philistines and Israel were at a standoff. Each morning and evening for forty days, a Philistine named Goliath came out and said: I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man, that we may fight together. He was six cubits and a span tall, wearing armor that weighed five thousand shekels of bronze, with a bronze helmet and greaves and javelin and spear. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam and its iron head weighed six hundred shekels. A shield-bearer walked before him. All of Israel were dismayed and greatly afraid. David came to the camp to bring food to his brothers. He heard Goliath. He asked: who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God? He said he would fight him. Saul

said: you are just a youth. The Philistine has been a man of war from his youth. David said: your servant has struck down lions and bears to protect his father's sheep, and this Philistine shall be like one of them. Saul said: go, and the LORD be with you. He tried to put his own armor on David, but David said he hadn't tested it. He took it off. He took his staff, chose five smooth stones from the brook, put them in his shepherd's pouch, and went to meet the Philistine with his sling in his hand.

Goliath looked at David and disdained him: am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks? He cursed David by his gods. He said: come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the field. David said: you come to me with a sword and spear and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts. The LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's. He ran toward Goliath, put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it. It struck the Philistine on his forehead. He fell on his face to the ground. David ran and stood over him and cut off his head with Goliath's own sword, since David had no sword. When the Philistines saw their champion was dead, they fled. The narrator notes that every underdog story ever told is trying, to some degree, to recreate this moment: the youth with one stone, against the armored giant, and the giant losing. The reason it keeps being retold is that it keeps being true. The battle is the LORD's. The stone is enough.

Jonathan, Saul's son, loved David as his own soul from that moment. He made a covenant with David and gave him his own robe and armor and sword and bow and belt. But Saul grew jealous when the women sang: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." (1 Samuel 18:7, WEB) From that day on Saul eyed David with suspicion. He threw a spear at him while he played the lyre. David evaded him. This happened twice. Saul was afraid of David because the LORD was with David and had departed from Saul. He gave David his daughter Michal in marriage (she loved him, too, which made Saul's plan to use her as a trap somewhat self-defeating), but also sent him on dangerous military missions hoping he would be killed. David succeeded at all of them. Saul's daughter loved him; his son loved him; his armies loved him; his enemies feared him. Saul had everything and was undone by what he didn't have, which is the defining grief of the Saul story and one of the most recognizable human tragedies in the text.

David spent years as a fugitive in the wilderness and in Philistine territory. Twice he had the opportunity to kill Saul and chose not to. Once he cut off the corner of Saul's robe while Saul was using a cave as a latrine. Once he crept into Saul's sleeping camp at night and took his spear and water jug. Both times he said: I will not put out my hand against the LORD's anointed. This restraint cost him years of running. The narrator notes this and does not moralize further, except to say that the willingness to let justice wait rather than take it into your own hands is one of the rarest qualities in this book, and David had it, whatever else he did or didn't have.

Saul, near the end, went to the witch of Endor and asked her to bring up Samuel's ghost. She did. Samuel, irritated to be disturbed, appeared and said: why have you disturbed me by bringing me up? Saul explained the Philistines were fighting him and God had departed from him. Samuel said: why do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done to you as he spoke by me. Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me. The LORD will give the army of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines. Saul fell immediately full

length on the ground, filled with fear. The battle went as promised. Jonathan was killed. Saul's other sons were killed. Saul was badly wounded by the archers. He asked his armor-bearer to run him through. The armor-bearer was afraid and would not. Saul took his own sword and fell on it. When the armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword. So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day.

David's Reign

David became king of Judah at thirty, then king over all Israel. He captured Jerusalem. He brought the Ark to Jerusalem, dancing before it with all his might, wearing a linen ephod, leaping and dancing before the LORD. His wife Michal, daughter of Saul, saw him through the window and despised him in her heart. She said: how the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' female servants, as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovers himself! David said: it was before the LORD, who chose me above your father. I will celebrate before the LORD. I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in your eyes. The narrator likes this scene enormously. The greatest king in Israel's history, dancing past dignity in the street, not caring who sees. There is something both very human and very right about this.

Then Bathsheba. David was walking on his roof in the evening and saw a woman bathing. She was very beautiful. He sent and inquired about her: she was Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. He sent messengers and took her. She came to him, and he lay with her. She conceived and sent word: I am pregnant. David recalled Uriah from the front, hoping he would go home to his wife and the pregnancy could be attributed to him. Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the king's servants and did not go down to his house. David asked why. Uriah said: the Ark and Israel and Judah dwell in tents, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing. David plied him with food and drink, but even drunk Uriah slept with the servants and did not go home. So David wrote a letter to Joab: set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down and die. He sent the letter by Uriah's own hand.

Uriah died in battle as arranged. David married Bathsheba. The thing he had done displeased the LORD. God sent the prophet Nathan to David with a story: there were two men, one rich with many flocks and one poor with one little ewe lamb he had raised as a pet, which ate from his own food and drank from his cup and lay in his arms. A traveler came to the rich man, who did not take from his own flock but took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for his guest. David was furious at the story and said: the man who did this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold. Nathan said: you are the man. There followed a catalogue of what God had done for David and what David had done in return. David said: I have sinned against the LORD. Nathan said: the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless the child will die. The child was sick for seven days and died. David rose from the ground, washed and anointed himself, went to the house of the LORD and worshiped, then ate. His servants were baffled: you fasted and wept for the child while he was alive, but now the child is dead, you rise and eat? He

said: while the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said: who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me. Solomon was born next. The LORD loved him.

Absalom, David's son, was the most handsome man in Israel, from head to toe without blemish. He killed his brother Amnon for what Amnon had done to their sister Tamar, fled into exile, and was eventually brought back. Then he began a slow, organized political campaign to undermine his father: standing at the city gate, meeting people with grievances, saying "Behold, your matters are good and right; but there is no man deputed by the king to hear you. ... Oh that I were made judge in the land, that every man who has any suit or cause might come to me, and I would do him justice!" (2 Samuel 15:3–4, excerpt, WEB) He stole the hearts of the men of Israel. He declared himself king in Hebron. A messenger came to David: the hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom. David left Jerusalem immediately, barefoot, weeping, his head covered. Everyone with him wept as they went. He was gone. His son had taken his city. This is the low point of David's reign, and it is devastating not because David is without fault in it — he is not, and the narrator does not pretend otherwise — but because the grief is real. He loved Absalom. He loved him even as Absalom drove him out. He said to his commanders when they went to fight: deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.

Absalom's head got caught in the branches of a great oak as he rode under it and he was left hanging between heaven and earth while his mule went on. Joab drove three spears through his heart. David was told. The king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. As he went, he said: O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son! The narrator does not try to be funny here. This is the grief that runs under everything in 2 Samuel, under all the victories and the psalms and the dancing and the sins. O Absalom, my son, my son. It is the grief of a father for a son he could not reach, and it is one of the truest things in any book.

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1 & 2 Kings: The King Years, Volume Two (Mostly Downhill)

Solomon

David's last command to his son Solomon was essentially: be strong, be a man of God, keep the laws of Moses, and also deal wisely with certain people who have wronged me and settle those accounts. Then David slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of David. Solomon sat on the throne of David his father, and his kingdom was firmly established. God appeared to him in a dream and said: ask what I shall give you. Solomon said: give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil. God was pleased that he hadn't asked for riches or long life or the death of his enemies. He gave him wisdom beyond any before him or after him, and also the riches and honor he hadn't asked for. The two women who came to him both claiming to be the mother of the same living infant — and Solomon's solution of proposing to cut the child in two, so that the real mother would reveal herself by her willingness to give up the child to the other woman rather than see it killed — this became the defining anecdote of his wisdom. All Israel heard of the judgment and stood in awe of the king, for they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice.

Solomon built the Temple. Seven years it took. Cedar from Lebanon, stone quarried and dressed before it came to the site so that no hammer or axe was heard at the Temple during construction. The dimensions were specified and substantial. The inner sanctuary, the Most Holy Place, was overlaid with pure gold. The gold was everywhere. The two great cherubim in the inner sanctuary were fifteen feet tall, their wings spanning the whole width of the room. The Temple was magnificent by any measure, and when it was finished Solomon assembled all Israel and the elders and the chiefs and brought the Ark of the Covenant up to the Temple. The priests carried the Ark into the inner sanctuary. When the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD. Solomon turned and blessed all the assembly of Israel. He prayed over the Temple for a very long time — chapter eight is the prayer, and it is worth reading — asking that when the people sinned and suffered and cried out toward this place, God would hear from heaven and forgive and act. He asked for strangers, for enemies who would come back penitent, for those in drought and famine. The prayer presupposes failure. It plans for it. It asks that the divine ear remain open even when the people have done exactly what they were warned not to do. This is the wisest prayer in the book of Kings.

God appeared to Solomon again and said the Temple was consecrated. If Solomon walked in integrity as his father David walked, his throne would be established forever. But if Solomon or his sons turned aside and went after other gods, then Israel would be cut off from the land, and the Temple would become a heap of ruins, and everyone who passed by would hiss and say: why has the LORD done this to this land and to this Temple? They will say: because they abandoned the LORD their God who brought their fathers out of Egypt, and laid hold on other gods and worshiped them and served them. Therefore the LORD has brought all this disaster on them.

This is the most clearly stated conditional in the book of Kings, and it is followed, almost immediately, by Solomon beginning to do the thing he was warned not to do.

Solomon had seven hundred wives of royal descent and three hundred concubines. His wives were from the nations God had specifically warned Israel about. When Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart after other gods. He went after Ashtoreth and Milcom and Chemosh and Molech. He built high places for them. The narrator notes that managing one thousand relationships is, first of all, a logistical challenge that most people would find consuming, and that adding theological complications to it at that scale was always going to end badly. God was angry with Solomon. He said: since you have done this and have not kept my covenant and my statutes, I will tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant. Not in your days, but in your son's days. For David your father's sake, I will leave him one tribe.

The Division and the Parade of Kings

After Solomon died, his son Rehoboam came to the throne. The people came to him and said: your father made our yoke heavy; lighten it, and we will serve you. Rehoboam consulted the old men who had served Solomon: they recommended lightening the load. He consulted the young men who had grown up with him: they recommended saying "my little finger is thicker than my father's waist." He chose the young men's counsel. The people of Israel said: what portion do we have in David? Everyone to your tents, O Israel! Ten northern tribes broke away under Jeroboam and became the northern kingdom of Israel. Two tribes — Judah and Benjamin — remained with Rehoboam in the south as the kingdom of Judah. The narrator notes that this is what happens when a new leader's first public action is a demonstration of contemptuous arrogance, and that it is perhaps the least surprising political outcome in the Old Testament.

From here, 1 and 2 Kings trace two royal lines simultaneously: north and south, Israel and Judah. The narrator rates them for you. The northern kingdom of Israel had nineteen kings across approximately two hundred years and not one of them received an unqualified "did right in the eyes of the LORD." Not one. The southern kingdom of Judah did somewhat better: of its twenty kings, eight are rated positively, though even the good ones usually left the high places standing. The two kingdoms went to war with each other. They made alliances with surrounding nations. They failed to maintain those alliances. They worshiped Baal. They stopped worshipping Baal. They worshiped Baal again. Prophets came and warned them and were ignored or killed. The narrator presents this parade of kings with a weariness that she feels is appropriate to the material.

Elijah

Elijah the Tishbite came to King Ahab of Israel — who had done more to provoke the LORD, the text says, than all the kings of Israel before him, which is saying something — and told him there would be no rain or dew except by Elijah's word. Then God told Elijah to go hide by the brook Cherith. Ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. When the brook dried up, God sent him to the house of a widow in Zarephath. She had a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. She was gathering

sticks to prepare her last meal for herself and her son before they starved. Elijah asked her to make him a small cake first, then feed herself and her son, and promised the jar of flour would not go empty and the jug of oil would not run out until the rains came. She did as Elijah said. The jar of flour did not go empty and the jug of oil did not run out. Her son died. Elijah stretched himself out on the child three times, crying out to God, and the child's life came back into him. The widow said: now I know you are a man of God.

Three years into the drought, Elijah went back to Ahab. He proposed a contest on Mount Carmel: 450 prophets of Baal versus Elijah, one bull each, no fire lit by human hands, and the God who answers with fire is God. The people agreed. The prophets of Baal called on their god from morning until noon. Elijah mocked them at noon: "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is deep in thought, or he has gone somewhere, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he sleeps and must be awakened." (1 Kings 18:27, WEB) They cried louder and cut themselves until the blood gushed out, as was their custom. There was no voice, no answer, no one who paid attention.

Elijah repaired the altar of the LORD that had been torn down. He took twelve stones, built the altar, dug a trench around it, arranged the wood and the bull. He then poured four large jars of water over the offering three times, soaking it thoroughly, filling the trench. He prayed once: O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God. Fire fell from the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said: the LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God. Elijah said: seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape. They were seized. Elijah killed them all. Then it rained.

Elijah went to Ahab and told him to go eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain. He himself went up to the top of Carmel, bowed himself down on the earth, put his face between his knees, and told his servant to go look toward the sea. The servant reported nothing. Again. And again, seven times. On the seventh: a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea. That was enough. Elijah said: go tell Ahab: prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you. The sky grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain.

Ahab told Jezebel what Elijah had done. Jezebel sent Elijah a message: so may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow. He was afraid. He rose and ran for his life, into the wilderness of Beersheba, and went a day's journey further into the wilderness and sat down under a broom tree. He asked that he might die. He said: it is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers. He lay down and slept under the broom tree.

The narrator stops here for a moment. This is the greatest prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel, the man who just called down fire from heaven before a crowd, who killed 450 prophets of Baal, sitting alone under a broom tree asking God to let him die because one queen sent him a threatening message. This is not a small thing and should not be treated as one. Elijah was exhausted. He had done something enormous, it had made no ultimate difference — Ahab and Jezebel still ruled, nothing had changed, the victory had not held — and he was done. There is a

particular kind of despair that comes not from failure but from spectacular success that changes nothing, and the narrator recognizes it, and so does God.

An angel touched Elijah and said: arise and eat. He looked, and there beside his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. The angel came a second time and touched him and said: arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you. He arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God. God's first response to the exhausted prophet under the broom tree was not a sermon, not a rebuke, not a lesson in trust. It was a snack. And the narrator says: there is more theology in that angel and that cake than in most systematic treatises, and it is this: that sometimes what the faithful need is not encouragement but food, and that God knows the difference.

At Horeb, God told Elijah to stand on the mountain. A great wind came and tore the mountain apart, but the LORD was not in the wind. An earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. Fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire: a still small voice. Elijah heard it. God asked: what are you doing here, Elijah? And they talked. The narrator gives this moment its own paragraph and does not add to it, because there is nothing to add.

Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, preceded by a chariot of fire and horses of fire that separated him from his protégé Elisha. Elisha saw it and cried: my father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen! He took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. He picked up the cloak of Elijah that had fallen. He went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He struck the water with the cloak and said: where is the LORD, the God of Elijah? The water parted and he went over. The prophets at Jericho who were watching said: the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha. And they came to meet him and bowed before him to the ground.

Elisha and the Minor Miracles

Elisha performed a remarkable variety of miracles in his career: he purified the spring at Jericho by throwing salt into it; he multiplied a widow's oil so she could pay her debts; he raised the Shunammite woman's son; he purified a pot of poisoned stew by throwing flour into it; he fed a hundred men with twenty small loaves of bread with some left over. But the narrator chooses to linger on Naaman, because Naaman's story is one of the most recognizable human stories in all of the historical books.

Naaman was the commander of the army of the king of Aram, a great man in his master's sight and in high favor. He was also a leper. A young Israelite girl who served Naaman's wife said: would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy. Naaman went with silver and gold and festal garments and a letter to the king of Israel. The king was distressed: am I God, to kill and make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Elisha heard, and said: let him come now to me, that he may know there is a prophet in Israel. Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha did not come out. He sent a messenger who said: go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.

Naaman was furious. He said: behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the LORD his God and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean? He turned and went away in a rage. His servants came near and said to him: my father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you: wash and be clean? He went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. Naaman's servants are the real heroes of this episode. They are the ones who said: you came all this way, the prophet said wash in the river, the river is right there, why are you walking away? Sometimes the voice of wisdom is a servant who points out that you are making things harder than they need to be. Naaman went back to Elisha and stood before him and said: behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel. He came expecting a dramatic ceremony and received seven baths in a modest river. It was enough.

The Fall of the Kingdoms

The northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BCE after a three-year siege of Samaria. The population was carried off into exile. The southern kingdom of Judah continued, with good kings occasionally breaking the pattern of decline: Hezekiah, who prayed when the Assyrians surrounded Jerusalem and received a remarkable deliverance; Josiah, who found the book of the Law during Temple repairs, read it, tore his clothes, and instituted the most significant religious reform in Judah's history. But Josiah was killed at Megiddo, and his sons reverted to the old ways, and the Babylonians came. Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem. He carried the Temple treasury to Babylon. He carried the people of Jerusalem to Babylon. The Temple was burned. The walls of Jerusalem were broken down. Judah went into exile. The books of Kings end in a strange, small note of hope: Jehoiachin, the exiled king of Judah, was released from prison by the king of Babylon and given a seat at the king's table and an allowance for the rest of his days. Not restoration. Not return. Just a man eating at a table, alive, in exile, a remnant of a promise not yet fulfilled. The narrator finds this ending appropriate. The hope is small and real, which is the best kind.

* * *

1 & 2 Chronicles; Ezra & Nehemiah: The Director's Cut and the Reconstruction

Chronicles covers roughly the same history as Samuel and Kings but from a different angle, with a particular focus on the Temple and its worship, on David and Solomon as ideal figures, and on the priestly lineage of Judah. It begins with nine chapters of genealogy that trace from Adam all the way through the post-exilic period. The narrator acknowledges these nine chapters, pays her respects, and moves on. Chronicles adds details about the Temple preparations and David's religious organization that Kings doesn't include, and it tends to omit the more compromising episodes from David's career — notably the Bathsheba story gets no space here. This is not dishonesty but emphasis: Chronicles is making a particular theological argument about the Temple and its importance, and the narrative serves that argument. The narrator is not here to dispute the argument; she is here to note that both pictures — the full, complicated David of Samuel and the idealized David of Chronicles — exist in the same book and that the honest reader has to hold both.

Ezra and Nehemiah, originally one book, cover the return from Babylonian exile under the decree of Cyrus the Great of Persia, who allowed the exiles to go back and rebuild the Temple. This is, from a historical standpoint, remarkable: a Persian emperor funding the reconstruction of a Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Zerubbabel led the first group back and laid the foundation of the Temple. When the foundation was laid, the old men who had seen the first Temple wept aloud, and many others shouted for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the weeping, and the sound was heard from far away. The narrator finds this scene one of the most moving in all of the historical books: a sound that is both mourning and celebration, indistinguishable from a distance, which is a very accurate description of certain kinds of hope.

Ezra the scribe came later with another group and found that the returned community had been intermarrying with the surrounding peoples. He was devastated. He tore his garments and his cloak and pulled hair from his head and beard and sat appalled. A great assembly gathered, weeping. This is one of the more striking communal repentance scenes in the text. Nehemiah came later still, as a royal cupbearer to the Persian king, to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He arrived at night and rode around the ruins of the walls in secret before presenting his plan. He organized the rebuild so that each family was responsible for the section of wall nearest their own house. He rebuilt the walls in fifty-two days, despite organized opposition from Sanballat and Tobiah, despite threats, despite psychological warfare. When it was done, Sanballat and Tobiah were astonished, and realized that this work had been accomplished with the help of God. Then Ezra brought the book of the Law and read it to the assembled people from early morning until midday, and all the people wept when they heard the words of the Law. Nehemiah said: this day is holy; do not mourn or weep. The joy of the LORD is your strength. Go, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. The people went their way to eat and to drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. The narrator finds

this the most appropriate ending for a reconstruction narrative: people who understand what they have been given, who weep at it, and who are then sent to celebrate and share.

* * *

Esther: The Queen Who Did Not Flinch

The book of Esther is set in the Persian court of Ahasuerus, whom most historians identify as Xerxes I. The king throws a banquet that lasts six months, followed by another banquet of seven days. At the second banquet, he commands his queen, Vashti, to come display her beauty before the assembled company. She refuses. The king's advisors panic: if the queen gets away with refusing the king, all women throughout the empire will start refusing their husbands. The king deposes Vashti and sets about finding a new queen by gathering all the beautiful young virgins of the empire and bringing them to the palace for a year of beauty preparations before presenting them to the king. This is, the narrator notes without lingering, a profoundly disturbing process presented with perfect bureaucratic calm by the text.

Among those gathered was a young Jewish woman named Esther, whose Hebrew name was Hadassah, raised by her older cousin Mordecai after the death of her parents. Esther was beautiful. She won the favor of everyone who saw her. She won the favor of Hegai, the keeper of the women. She won the favor of the king more than all the other women. He loved her more than all the other virgins. He made her queen. She had not told anyone she was Jewish, as Mordecai had instructed her. Meanwhile, Mordecai sat every day at the king's gate. The king's chief minister, Haman the Agagite, passed through the gate, and all the other servants bowed before him, for the king had so commanded. But Mordecai did not bow. He had decided, for reasons the text does not fully explain, that he would not bow to Haman. When Haman saw this, he was furious. He disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone; instead, he sought to destroy all the Jews throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus. He cast lots to determine the best day for this massacre — the lots are called purim — and the lot fell to the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. He presented his plan to the king. The king agreed. A decree went out to all the provinces to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, and to plunder their goods.

Mordecai put on sackcloth and went to the king's gate. He sent a message to Esther explaining what had happened and asking her to go to the king and beg for mercy for her people. Esther sent back a message: everyone in the palace knows that if any man or woman goes to the king in the inner court without being called, they are put to death, unless the king holds out his golden scepter. And I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days. Mordecai sent back: do not think that you in the king's palace will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Esther said: gather all the Jews and fast for me three days. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.

The narrator reads this sentence and pauses. "If I perish, I perish." This is not bravado. This is the sound of someone who has thought through the situation and decided that certain things matter more than safety. Esther goes in. The king holds out the golden scepter. She is received. She invites the king and Haman to a banquet. At the banquet she invites them to another banquet. At the second banquet, the king asks what she wants, up to half his kingdom. She tells him. She

names Haman. Haman is hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai, a seventy-five-foot structure visible from a considerable distance, which the narrator notes is an elaborately ironic conclusion.

The narrator notes that the book of Esther does not mention God once. Not once, in ten chapters. God's name does not appear. Prayer is not explicitly mentioned. This appears intentional. Sometimes — and this seems to be the theological point — the divine works through a Jewish woman who is both courageous and politically sophisticated, through timing and boldness and the strategic withholding of information and the perfectly placed invitation to a second banquet, and you can do the math yourself. The courage was Esther's. The timing was God's. The text does not feel the need to say so explicitly, because the reader can see it.

* * *

Job: The Longest Argument With Heaven Ever Recorded

There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. He was blameless and upright; he feared God and turned away from evil. He had seven sons and three daughters and vast wealth and was the greatest man in the east. In the heavenly court, the sons of God presented themselves before the LORD, and among them came the Adversary. The word in Hebrew is the satan, the accuser, the one who functions as something like a divine prosecutor. God pointed to Job: have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, blameless and upright, who fears God and turns away from evil. The Adversary said: does Job fear God for nothing? You've put a hedge around him, around his household, around everything he has. You've blessed the work of his hands. But stretch out your hand and touch all he has, and he will curse you to your face. God said: all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.

In one day, Job lost everything. The Sabeans took his oxen and donkeys and killed the servants with them. Fire fell from heaven and burned his sheep and the servants. The Chaldeans took his camels and killed those servants. Then a great wind struck the house where Job's sons and daughters were feasting and the house fell on them, and they were all dead. Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, fell on the ground, and worshiped. He said: naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD. In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong. The Adversary came back and said: let me touch his body. God agreed, with limits. Job was struck with terrible sores from head to foot. He sat in the ashes scraping himself with a potsherd. His wife said to him: do you still hold your integrity? Curse God and die. He said: you speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Three friends — Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite — came to comfort him. When they saw him from a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept and tore their robes and threw dust on their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word, for they saw that his suffering was very great. The narrator considers this their finest moment, and is sorry they did not stay in it longer.

After seven days Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. He said: let the day perish on which I was born. Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not come out from the womb and breathe my last? Then his friends began to speak, and the speeches go on for thirty chapters. Eliphaz is relatively gentle but insists that Job must have sinned; the innocent do not suffer like this. Bildad is less gentle: your children sinned against God and were punished accordingly. Zophar is the bluntest: know that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves. Job responds to each of them: I have not sinned; I am not guilty; I maintain my integrity. He says to God: let me speak, and you answer me, or let me speak, and you reply. I would know the words he would answer me and understand what he would say. I would speak without fear. I am not so in myself.

He demands an audience with God directly, which his friends consider outrageous. He doesn't care. He wants to put his case. He believes he is right. He says so. A fourth young man named Elihu shows up in chapter thirty-two, furious at Job for his self-justification and furious at the friends for not answering Job adequately, and he gives four chapters of speech that is considerably more sophisticated than the others' but still misses the point in a slightly more articulate way.

Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the whirlwind. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if you have understanding. Who determined its measures, if you know? Or who stretched the line on it? What were its foundations fastened on? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4–7, WEB) The questions come for two chapters: the gates of death, the breadth of the earth, the storehouses of snow and hail, the Pleiades, the Orion, the chambers of the south, the ordinances of heaven, the clouds and the lightning, the lions and the ravens, the wild donkey and the wild ox, the ostrich, the horse, the hawk, the eagle. God is not answering Job's question about why he suffered. God is asking Job: were you there? Can you do this? Do you comprehend the size and complexity of what you are in the middle of? The answer to each question is no. Job says: I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.

God turned to the three friends and said: you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. This is the theological surprise of the book: Job, who argued and complained and demanded and accused, spoke what was right. His friends, who defended God with polished arguments and assured theodicy, did not. The difference is honesty. Job said what was true about his experience. His friends said what was comfortable and systematically defensible. God preferred the honesty. Job was restored, doubly: fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, a thousand female donkeys, seven sons and three daughters. His daughters, the text notes with unusual specificity, were the most beautiful in all the land, and he gave them an inheritance among their brothers. Job lived one hundred and forty years after this and saw four generations of his descendants. Then Job died, an old man, and full of days.

The narrator notes that Job is the only person in this book who argues with God directly, refuses to be comforted by easy explanations, demands an answer, receives a response that is not an answer in any conventional sense but is something larger than an answer — a vision of the scope of things, the storehouses of snow, the morning stars singing — and that somehow this is enough. It is enough because Job was not actually looking for a philosophical explanation. He was looking for God. And God came. In a whirlwind, with questions he could not answer, but God came. And somehow, that is the answer.

* * *

Psalms: 150 Songs, Every Human Emotion, No Editing

The Psalms are a collection of one hundred and fifty poems and songs, composed over several centuries and edited into five books within the larger book, covering everything from desperate grief to ecstatic celebration to calm trust to burning anger to the pleasure of walking in integrity to the grief of exile. The narrator does not attempt to cover all one hundred and fifty. She presents a tour.

Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, and from the words of my groaning?" (Psalm 22:1, WEB) This is one of the most honest sentences in Scripture, and the narrator notes that it begins in abandonment and ends in praise, and that the journey between those two points is not resolution or explanation but endurance and the eventual, shaky, real return of trust. This is what most of the lament psalms do: they do not resolve the problem. They walk through it.

Psalm 23: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing." (Psalm 23:1, WEB) Six verses. Probably the most memorized piece of Hebrew poetry in human history. The narrator reads it and notes that even people who have never been near a sheep and have no relationship with the religion in which it originates find it calming, which suggests it is touching something true about what it feels like to be cared for by something larger than yourself. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." (Psalm 23:4, excerpt, WEB) The narrator finds this sufficiently said.

Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we won't be afraid, though the earth changes, though the mountains are shaken into the heart of the seas;" (Psalm 46:1–2, WEB) And then, later: "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted on the earth." (Psalm 46:10, WEB) The narrator reads this and takes a breath. Then she moves on.

Psalm 51: David, after Nathan, after Bathsheba, after all of it. "Have mercy on me, God, according to your loving kindness. According to the multitude of your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin." (Psalm 51:1–2, WEB) And then: "Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me. Don't throw me from your presence, and don't take your Holy Spirit from me." (Psalm 51:10–11, WEB) The narrator notes that this is the prayer of a man who has done something genuinely terrible and knows it and is not making excuses. He is asking for something he cannot earn or negotiate. He is asking for a new heart. This is the most honest thing in the Psalms, and the most difficult to pray, because it requires admitting that what you have is not enough.

Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yes, we wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows in that land, we hung up our harps. For there, those who led us captive asked us for songs. Those who tormented us demanded songs of joy: 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1–4, WEB) This is one of the most beautiful and most brutal poems ever written. It ends with a verse about dashing Babylonian infants against rocks that has disturbed readers ever since, and which the narrator presents without trying to soften it, because it is the sound of profound grief expressing itself in

the idiom of its time, and because the Psalms contain human emotions including several the songwriter was probably embarrassed about later, and that is exactly what makes them work. They are honest. All the way down to the embarrassing parts.

The narrator says: the Psalms are the soundtrack of the biblical story. They are what it sounds like to be a human being trying to hold the experience of being a human being while also believing in something vast and holy and sometimes inexplicably distant. They are the document most quoted in the New Testament. They are the hymnal and the therapy session and the war cry and the love letter all in one book, and the narrator commends them without reservation to anyone who has ever had an emotion they didn't know what to do with, which is everyone.

* * *

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon: Wisdom in Three Registers

Proverbs: Things Wise People Said So You Wouldn't Have To Learn Them the Hard Way

The book of Proverbs is the Bible's collection of wisdom literature in the most accessible mode: short, memorable, practical observations about how the world works when you pay attention to it. Many are attributed to Solomon; some come from Agur and King Lemuel; the compilation almost certainly reflects multiple centuries of collected insight. The narrator presents highlights without claiming comprehensiveness.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and don't lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." (Proverbs 3:5–6, WEB) This is the central posture of the whole book: wisdom is not self-generated. It comes from taking seriously the structure of the universe as created by something beyond you. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." This one has been tested empirically by every generation and confirmed every time. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Also empirically confirmed, though frequently ignored. "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps." This is not fatalism; it is the observation that there is a gap between our plans and outcomes that we do not control, and that this gap is not always a misfortune.

The book ends with a portrait of the wife of noble character, which is Hebrew poetry for a woman who is, by any measure, running several things simultaneously: she assesses a field and buys it, plants a vineyard, makes garments for trade, manages her household, gives to the poor, and is respected at the city gates where her husband is known. Her children rise and call her blessed. Her husband praises her. The narrator endorses this portrait and notes that it has, historically, been significantly under-cited in conversations about what the Bible says about women.

Ecclesiastes: Everything Is Vapor, Including This Sentence

Ecclesiastes is possibly the most modern-feeling book in the entire Bible. The Teacher, who identifies himself as the son of David, king in Jerusalem — almost certainly a Solomon persona if not Solomon himself — has tried everything: wisdom, folly, great works, pleasure, wealth, achievement. His verdict: vanity of vanities. The Hebrew word is *hebel*, meaning breath, vapor, mist. It describes what exists for a moment and then is gone. Everything under the sun is *hebel*. Wisdom is *hebel*, because the wise man dies just like the fool. Labor is *hebel*, because you leave everything to someone who did not work for it. Pleasure is *hebel*. Youth is *hebel*. Fame is *hebel*.

"All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again." (Ecclesiastes 1:7, WEB) "There is nothing new under the sun." "I have seen all

the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a chasing after wind." (Ecclesiastes 1:14, WEB) "That which is crooked can't be made straight; and that which is lacking can't be counted." (Ecclesiastes 1:15, WEB) The Teacher applies himself to everything and finds it wanting. He is the smartest person in the room, and he has read enough to be very tired, and the tiredness is honest. This is not nihilism; the book ends by pointing toward God and the keeping of commandments. But it is a prolonged, unflinching look at the way that human striving slides through our fingers even when it goes well, and the beauty is in the honesty of the tiredness. "Vanity of vanities," says the Teacher. "All is vanity." The narrator reads this and says: there is something true here that most books are too polite to say. This one says it and then says it again, and then asks you: knowing this, what will you do with the day you have?

Song of Solomon: The Chapter Sunday School Skipped

The Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs, is eight chapters of frankly erotic love poetry between two lovers whose exact identities and relationship to Solomon are debated. The narrator presents this book with the straightforwardness it deserves and declines to extensively allegorize it, though the allegorical tradition is venerable and she respects it. Two people are in love. They address each other with elaborate compliments structured as extended metaphors. "Your eyes are like doves behind your veil. Your hair is as a flock of goats, that descend from Mount Gilead." (Song of Solomon 4:1, excerpt, WEB) "Behold, he comes, leaping on the mountains, skipping on the hills. My beloved is like a roe or a young deer." (Song of Solomon 2:8–9, excerpt, WEB) "My beloved is mine, and I am his. He browses among the lilies." (Song of Solomon 2:16, WEB) There is longing and reunion and separation and joy and the physical celebration of the beloved in terms that are unmistakable. The narrator notes only that if this is allegory about God and Israel, it is allegory of extraordinary commitment and specificity, and that whether allegory or not, its presence in the canon says something true: that the love between persons is not trivial, that the body is not shameful, and that the intensity of desire for the beloved is not opposed to holiness but is, in some sense, a reflection of the shape of all longing.

* * *

The Prophets: Isaiah Through Malachi, Each One Progressively More Exhausted

Isaiah

Isaiah's call came in the year that King Uzziah died: he saw the LORD seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above the throne stood seraphim, each with six wings, calling to each other: "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of Armies! The whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isaiah 6:3, WEB) The doorposts of the Temple shook at their voices. The house was filled with smoke. Isaiah said: woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty. One of the seraphim flew to him with a live coal taken from the altar and touched his mouth with it and said: see, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for. Then the LORD said: whom shall I send? And who will go for us? And Isaiah said: here am I. Send me. The narrator notes that the coal was applied to his mouth, which is the specific instrument he felt disqualified him, and then immediately afterward he was asked to speak and immediately agreed. The pattern of healing followed by commission is characteristic of every calling in this book.

Isaiah's sixty-six chapters span the reigns of multiple Judean kings and cover everything from immediate political situations to visions of cosmic scope. He is the most quoted prophet in the New Testament. His servant songs — "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering and acquainted with disease. He was despised as one from whom men hide their face; and we didn't respect him." (Isaiah 53:3, WEB) — have been read as describing Messiah by Christians and as describing Israel by Jews, and both readings have argued from the same text for two thousand years. The peaceable kingdom of chapter eleven: "The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, the calf, the young lion, and the fattened calf together; and a little child will lead them." (Isaiah 11:6, WEB) Chapter forty: "He gives power to the weak. He increases the strength of him who has no might. Even the youths faint and get weary, and the young men utterly fall; but those who wait for the LORD will renew their strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles. They will run, and not be weary. They will walk, and not faint." (Isaiah 40:29–31, WEB) The narrator reads Isaiah and says: this is a man who saw both the wreckage of everything and the far end of it where things come right, and who reported both with equal clarity, and who is worth reading slowly.

Jeremiah

If Isaiah is the prophet of grand vision, Jeremiah is the prophet of relentless proximity. He was called before he was born, which he was informed of early in his career and which he found more alarming than encouraging. He is called the weeping prophet, and he earns it. He prophesied the fall of Jerusalem for decades, was put in stocks, lowered into a cistern and left to sink in the mud, had his scroll burned by King Jehoiakim who cut off sections with a penknife as

they were read aloud and threw each piece into the fire with complete composure. Jeremiah had the scroll rewritten with additions. He complained constantly. He asked God: you deceived me, and I was deceived. I have become a laughingstock all day long. He wished he had never been born. He said: cursed is the day I was born. Let the day be not blessed when my mother bore me. He kept going anyway, which is the thing about Jeremiah that the narrator most respects: he never stopped, never got comfortable with the task, never found it anything other than painful, and never quit.

In the middle of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, with the city being starved into submission, God told Jeremiah to buy a field at Anathoth. He bought it: he weighed out the silver, signed the deed, sealed it, had it witnessed, put it in an earthenware jar to last a long time. He then said to God, essentially: you told me to buy this field, I bought this field, and the Chaldeans are right outside the city wall. God said: yes, and I will bring back the exiles, and houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land. The purchase was an act of prophetic hope in the middle of a military disaster. The deed in the jar says: this is not the end. The narrator calls Jeremiah the most emotionally honest person in the Old Testament and the most comprehensively inconvenienced by his own faithfulness, and says that these two things are probably related.

Ezekiel

Ezekiel saw things. This is the primary fact about Ezekiel, and it distinguishes him immediately from every other prophet in the canon. His first chapter is a vision of wheels within wheels, each wheel full of eyes all around, four living creatures with four faces each, the gleam of beryl, the color of amber, fire and brightness and lightning and a vast expanse of crystal and above it a sapphire throne and upon the throne a likeness with the appearance of a man, and the whole thing moving as the spirit directed it. The narrator reads this and says: I believe Ezekiel saw something. I cannot tell you what it was. I believe he reported it as accurately as the Hebrew language allowed. I believe the Hebrew language was working at capacity.

The valley of dry bones in chapter thirty-seven, in paraphrase: God brings Ezekiel into a valley littered with dried-out human remains and asks whether life could return to them. Ezekiel leaves the answer to God. At God's command, he addresses the bones. They rattle, join, and acquire tendons, flesh, and skin, but the bodies are still lifeless. God then tells him to summon breath from every direction. When he does, the bodies rise: an enormous living host. God explains the image. Israel feels as hopeless as those bones, but God promises to bring the people out of their graves, restore them to their land, and give them life through his Spirit (Ezekiel 37:1–14). The narrator reads this chapter and says: there is no better image of hope than watching scattered, disconnected things find each other and stand up. Bone to its bone. The whole mechanism reassembling not by human effort but by prophetic word and divine breath. This is what Ezekiel was for.

Daniel

Daniel and his three friends — Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego — were among the Judeans taken to Babylon. They distinguished themselves in the court by refusing to eat the king's food, living on vegetables and water, and coming out healthier than everyone else, which is the most underperforming dietary miracle in terms of how often it is cited. Then there were the great crises. Nebuchadnezzar built a golden statue ninety feet high and required everyone to bow and worship it when they heard the music. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused.

Nebuchadnezzar had the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and threw them in. The men who threw them in died from the heat of the fire. The king looked and saw four men walking around in the fire, unbound, unharmed, and the fourth had the appearance of a son of the gods. They came out of the fire, and the narrator notes with particular appreciation the detail that follows: not a hair of their heads was singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and they did not smell of fire. The narrator is deeply impressed by the smell. The absence of smoke is the detail that makes the miracle undeniable even to the most skeptical Babylonian official in the room.

Daniel was thrown into a den of lions by Darius the Mede, because his enemies had arranged for a law forbidding prayer to anyone but Darius, and Daniel prayed anyway, three times a day, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, which is the most defiant act of devotion in the book. He survived the lions' den. The men who had accused him were thrown in and were killed by the lions before they reached the bottom. Darius issued a decree that in every dominion of his kingdom people must tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God.

Daniel also interpreted dreams and received visions of his own, concerning four kingdoms and the Ancient of Days and a figure like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven, and the details have generated enough prophetic interpretation to fill several theological libraries. The narrator presents them and steps back, noting only that Daniel's visions look forward across enormous stretches of time to something beyond any particular empire, and that standing inside history trying to look forward in this way requires either extraordinary faith or extraordinary vision, and Daniel appears to have had both.

The Minor Prophets

Hosea was told to marry a woman who would be unfaithful to him, as a living enactment of Israel's faithlessness to God. He did. His marriage became his message. His message became his grief. His grief became one of the most sustained and aching portraits of divine love in the Old Testament: in paraphrase, God cannot simply abandon Ephraim and Israel. Compassion overcomes the impulse to destroy them. The Holy One among them is God rather than a human being, and will not let anger have the final word (Hosea 11:8–9).

Amos was a shepherd and a fig-tree dresser from Tekoa who walked into Bethel during a prosperous time in the northern kingdom and started preaching. His indictment, in paraphrase: people were traded for money or even the price of sandals; the poor were crushed, and the vulnerable could not obtain justice. Religious celebrations could not compensate for that. God rejected worship detached from justice and demanded that just conduct become as abundant and

continuous as a flowing river (Amos 2:6–7; 5:11–12, 21–24). He was told to go home by the priest at Bethel. He said he was no professional prophet, just a shepherd; the LORD told him to go, so he went.

Micah, from Moresheth, summed up the entirety of the prophetic tradition in one sentence that the narrator considers the most compressed theological summary in the Old Testament: "What does the LORD require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8, excerpt, WEB) The narrator notes that the rest of the prophetic literature — indeed, much of the Old Testament — is variations on the problem of people failing to do these three things, and that this sentence has the additional quality of being impossible to misunderstand. You may object to it. You may find it difficult. But you cannot claim you didn't know what it meant.

Habakkuk complained to God that violence and wickedness surrounded him and God was doing nothing. God said He was raising up the Babylonians to deal with it. Habakkuk said: but the Babylonians are worse than we are; how can you use them? God gave an answer that Habakkuk had to wait for and write down. It included the line that Paul would later develop into a theological category: "the righteous shall live by his faith." Habakkuk ended with one of the most counterintuitive statements of trust in the prophetic corpus: in paraphrase, even if the figs and grapes fail, the olive harvest disappears, the fields produce nothing, and every sheep pen and cattle stall stands empty, Habakkuk will still find joy in the God who saves him (Habakkuk 3:17–18). This is faith that has given up its grip on outcomes. The narrator finds this remarkable.

Zephaniah and Haggai and Zechariah cover the period around the exile and the return, calling the people back to the Temple and to fidelity, offering visions of restoration. Malachi, the last of the minor prophets and the last book of the Old Testament in the Protestant canon, warns about corrupt priests and unpaid tithes and divorce, and closes with a promise: in paraphrase, Elijah will arrive before God's great day of judgment. He will reconcile parents and children, so that the land need not fall under a curse (Malachi 4:5–6). And then the Old Testament ends. And there is approximately four hundred years of silence before the next thing happens.

Jonah: The Only Successful Prophet Who Was Angry About It

The narrator has saved Jonah for last among the prophets not because of its chronological position but because it is the most complete short story in the prophetic canon and possibly in the entire Old Testament, and it deserves to be presented as one.

God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, the great Assyrian city, and call out against it because its wickedness had come up before God. Jonah went to Joppa and boarded a ship going to Tarshish, which is in the opposite direction from Nineveh, as far as the ships of the time went in that direction, which was as far as Jonah could arrange. God hurled a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest. The sailors were terrified and each cried out to his own god and threw the cargo overboard. Jonah was in the inner part of the ship, fast asleep. The captain found him and said: what do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! They cast lots to find whose fault the storm was. The lot fell on Jonah. They asked him everything: who are you, where are you

from, what have you done? He said: I am a Hebrew and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. They were exceedingly afraid and said: what is this you have done? He said: pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you. The men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land. They could not. They threw Jonah into the sea. The sea ceased from its raging. The men feared the LORD exceedingly and offered a sacrifice.

The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. He prayed from inside the fish — a remarkable prayer of thanks, given the circumstances, for what he describes as deliverance from the depths, which is technically accurate if spatially confusing. The LORD spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah went.

Nineveh's response, in paraphrase: the enormous city took three days to cross. Jonah made a day's progress into it, warning that its overthrow was forty days away. People of every rank took the warning seriously, fasting and wearing sackcloth. The king exchanged his royal clothing for sackcloth and sat in ashes. His decree extended the fast even to livestock. Everyone was to appeal to God and abandon wrongdoing and violence, in the hope that judgment might be averted. God saw their changed behavior and spared the city the announced disaster (Jonah 3:3–10).

Jonah's reaction, in paraphrase: he was furious. He told God that this was exactly what he had feared back home. He had fled because he knew God was compassionate, patient, and willing to spare people. Now he would rather die than watch Nineveh escape judgment (Jonah 4:1–3). The narrator pauses here to note: Jonah had already identified, precisely and correctly, what God was going to do. He had refused to go to Nineveh because he knew it would work. He did not want Nineveh saved. He was a prophet who preached successfully to an entire city and was furious about the results.

The final scene, in paraphrase: Jonah waited in a shelter east of Nineveh to see what would happen. God supplied a plant whose shade delighted him, then sent a worm that destroyed it the next morning. With a hot wind and the sun beating down, Jonah became faint and again wished for death. God asked whether losing the plant justified his fury. Jonah insisted that it did. God pointed out that Jonah grieved for a plant he had neither cultivated nor created, one that had appeared and vanished almost overnight. Why, then, should God not care for Nineveh, with more than 120,000 people unable to distinguish right from left, and its many animals (Jonah 4:5–11)? The book ends there. God's question hangs in the air, unanswered by Jonah, presumably answered by the reader. Should I not pity Nineveh? The narrator notes that Jonah is the only prophet in the Bible whose mission succeeded completely and who remained furious about it, and that this tells you something true about the difference between being right about God and being glad about what God does.

* * *

PART TWO: THE NEW TESTAMENT

27 books. One life. An argument that has been going on ever since.

Prologue: Four Hundred Years of History in Two Paragraphs

Between Malachi and Matthew, approximately four hundred years pass during which the Old Testament does not update its feed. In that time: the Persians, who allowed the exiles to return to Judea under Cyrus, ruled until Alexander the Great swept through and conquered most of the known world between 334 and 323 BCE, dying at thirty-two in Babylon with no clear heir and everything he built promptly fracturing. His empire divided among his generals. Judea ended up under the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who decided that Hellenism should be mandatory, desecrated the Temple by erecting a statue of Zeus in it and sacrificing a pig on the altar, and thereby made a serious tactical error. The Maccabees — specifically Judas Maccabeus and his brothers — led a revolt that drove the Seleucids out and re-consecrated the Temple. The holiday of Hanukkah celebrates this. The Maccabean dynasty eventually declined through internal conflict, invited the Romans in to help settle a succession dispute, and thereby discovered the classic geopolitical miscalculation of asking for Roman help. The Romans stayed. By the time of Jesus' birth, Judea was a Roman province under Herod the Great, who was an effective administrator, a paranoid ruler, and a man who had murdered members of his own family to secure his throne, which tells you most of what you need to know about the political atmosphere into which the next story begins.

Into all of this, in a stable in Bethlehem, during a census ordered by Augustus Caesar that required everyone to go to their ancestral hometown, while Quirinius was governor of Syria, a child was born. He was laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn. This is where Part Two begins.

* * *

The Gospels: Four Accounts of One Life

Matthew: The Gospel for People Who Read Footnotes

Matthew's gospel begins with a genealogy: seventeen verses tracking the lineage from Abraham to Jesus through forty-two generations, organized in three sets of fourteen. The list includes, among the mostly male names, five women: Tamar, who posed as a prostitute to secure her rights from her father-in-law Judah; Rahab, who hid the spies and tied a scarlet cord in her window; Ruth, the Moabite who refused to leave her mother-in-law; Bathsheba, identified here only as "the wife of Uriah," which is an editorial comment of extraordinary precision; and Mary. The narrator notes that Matthew begins his careful account of the promised Messiah by advertising, in verse three, that the bloodline is more interesting than most people have been told, and has run through women with complicated stories from nearly the beginning. This is not an accident. Matthew is establishing something.

Joseph, pledged to Mary, found that she was pregnant before they had come together. He was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, so he decided to divorce her quietly. An angel appeared to him in a dream: Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. Joseph woke up and did what the angel commanded. He took Mary home as his wife. He did not consummate the marriage until after she gave birth. The narrator notes that Joseph does not get nearly enough credit in this story. He received strange news in a dream, believed it, acted on it, and never asked for acknowledgment of any of it. He is perhaps the most quietly faithful figure in the New Testament.

Magi from the east came to Jerusalem asking: where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. They stopped in Jerusalem first, which was an extraordinary lack of political situational awareness, and told Herod the Great about the child they were looking for. Herod called his chief priests and scribes together, found out the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, and sent the Magi there, asking them to report back with the child's location so he could "worship him also." This was not his intention. The Magi found the child, presented gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and went home by another route. Herod, furious at being outsmarted, had all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and under killed. Joseph had already been warned in a dream and had taken Mary and the child to Egypt. They stayed there until Herod died, then returned to settle in Nazareth in Galilee. The narrator notes the echo: this is the second time in Scripture that a Hebrew child has been born under a royal order killing infant boys and survived by some combination of warning and divine arrangement. Moses was the first. The callback is not accidental.

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, preaching: repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He was clothed in camel's hair with a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey, which is a costume and a diet that communicates very clearly that this person is not

running for any office that requires public approval ratings. Pharisees and Sadducees came out to be baptized. He called them a brood of vipers and asked who warned them to flee the coming wrath. He said he was baptizing with water, but one was coming after him whose sandals he was not worthy to carry, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John. John protested: I need to be baptized by you. Jesus said: let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness. John baptized him. As Jesus came up from the water, the heavens opened, the Spirit of God descended like a dove and came to rest on him, and a voice from heaven said: this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Then, immediately, the Spirit drove him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for forty days and forty nights.

The three temptations: turn these stones into bread — Jesus declined, quoting Deuteronomy: man does not live by bread alone. Throw yourself down from the Temple, for the angels will catch you — Jesus declined: do not put the LORD your God to the test. All the kingdoms of the world for one bow of worship — Jesus declined: worship the LORD your God and serve him only. The devil left him. Angels came and ministered to him. He returned to Galilee and began his ministry. The narrator notes that every temptation was, at its core, an invitation to achieve the right thing by the wrong method, or to demonstrate power for its own sake, or to acquire legitimate authority through illegitimate worship. He refused all three. This is the texture of the rest of the ministry: consistently, Jesus refuses to be the kind of Messiah that would have been easier to follow.

The Sermon on the Mount occupies chapters five through seven and is the longest uninterrupted teaching of Jesus in Matthew's gospel. The Beatitudes open it (Matthew 5:3–10, WEB): "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. Blessed are those who have been persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." The narrator reads this list and notes: every category of person blessed here is either in a difficult situation, practicing a posture that costs something, or both. Not one of them describes a position of obvious worldly advantage. "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:5, WEB) is either the most counterintuitive economic promise ever made or a prediction with very delayed fulfillment, and the narrator cannot say with confidence which, but notes that two thousand years of people finding it true in unexpected ways is a kind of evidence.

The sermon continues: you are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. Do not think I came to abolish the Law; I came to fulfill it. You have heard it said, do not murder; I say do not be angry with your brother. You have heard it said, do not commit adultery; I say do not look with lust. You have heard it said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy; I say love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing when you give. Do not pray in public performances; go into your room and shut the door. Pray like this: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our debts as we

forgive our debtors, lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil. Do not lay up treasures on earth. The eye is the lamp of the body. You cannot serve God and money. Do not be anxious about your life. Consider the lilies of the field: Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Do not judge, or you will be judged. Do not give dogs what is holy. Ask and it will be given; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened. Do to others what you would have them do to you. Enter by the narrow gate. Build on the rock, not the sand.

The narrator reads the Sermon on the Mount and says: this is the most radical speech ever given. Every sentence is a reversal of the conventional accounting of what matters and what works. When he finished, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught as one who had authority and not as the scribes. That is the response. Not "we understand now" — astonishment. Two thousand years later, the sermon still produces astonishment in careful readers, and also the persistent, humbling sense that it describes a way of life that we are still, collectively, trying to figure out how to want.

A brief tour of miracles across the Gospels: water to wine at the wedding in Cana, when his mother told him they had run out of wine and he said "woman, what does this have to do with me?" and then fixed it anyway, because she told the servants to do whatever he said and apparently the maternal expectation was sufficient to move things forward. The narrator calls this the most relatable family interaction in the New Testament. Healing of lepers, healing of the centurion's servant (from a distance, because the centurion had said: I am not worthy for you to come under my roof; just say the word), the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, the stilling of the storm, the Gerasene demoniac and the pigs that ran into the sea, the paralyzed man lowered through the roof by his four determined friends whose faith Jesus commended even more than the man himself, the daughter of Jairus and the woman who touched the hem of his garment. The feeding of five thousand: five loaves and two fish, twelve baskets left over. Walking on water. The narrator notes that the miracle stories in Matthew tend to move quickly and without commentary; the emphasis is on the reality of the event and its effect, not on the narrator's astonishment at it.

The parables: The sower and the soils. The wheat and the weeds. The mustard seed. The pearl of great price. The talents: one man received five talents, invested them and made five more; one received two and made two more; one received one and buried it in the ground for safekeeping and was rebuked not for losing it but for not even trying. The ten virgins, half of whom ran out of oil for their lamps while waiting. The great banquet. The sheep and the goats, separated by whether they had fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and imprisoned: "Most certainly I tell you, because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40, excerpt, WEB)

The prodigal son appears in Luke but the narrator will say here what she wants to say about it: the elder brother is the character most Sunday school treatments underplay. He has done everything right. He stayed home. He worked. He did not waste his portion. He is watching his brother come home to a party he doesn't feel he has ever had, and he is furious, and he refuses to go in, and the father goes out to him too. The father says: son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours

was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. The parable ends there, with the father still outside talking to the elder brother. The prodigal is inside. The father is outside. You are left with the question of whether the elder brother went in, and what he decided about his own story, and whether the definition of home he had been using was large enough. The narrator thinks this is the question the parable most wants to ask.

Another parable from Luke, the good Samaritan: a man beaten and left on the road. A priest and a Levite both pass on the other side. A Samaritan — a member of a group the Jewish audience would have considered alien and theologically deficient — stopped, bandaged his wounds, carried him to an inn, paid for his stay, and promised to cover whatever more it cost. Jesus asked: which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The expert in the law who had asked the original question about who qualified as a neighbor said: the one who had mercy on him. Jesus said: go and do likewise. The narrator notes that the parable refuses to debate the intellectual question about who qualifies for compassion and replaces it with a practical question about who is acting compassionately. The rhetorical move is elegant and complete.

Jesus cleansed the Temple, overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of those selling doves, driving them out, saying: my house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers. This is an unusually forceful public action in the Gospel accounts. The narrator notes that he did not do it quietly. The narrator also notes that this event, in Matthew, occurs at the beginning of the final week in Jerusalem, and that it contributed to the urgency with which the chief priests and scribes began looking for a way to arrest him.

Mark: The Gospel for People Who Don't Read Footnotes

Mark's gospel is the shortest, the most urgent, and almost certainly the earliest written. There is no birth narrative. No genealogy in chapter one. No Sermon on the Mount in its Matthean form. Mark begins immediately: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." John baptizes. Jesus is baptized. "And immediately"— this phrase appears forty-one times in Mark — the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. He came to Galilee, calling his disciples. He taught in the synagogue with authority. Immediately a man with an unclean spirit was there. Immediately they left the synagogue and went to Simon's house. Simon's mother-in-law was sick. Immediately Jesus healed her. That evening, the whole city gathered. He healed many. In the morning, long before dawn, he rose and went to a deserted place to pray. When they found him, they told him everyone was looking for him. He said: let us go on to the next towns. They went throughout all Galilee.

The narrator reads Mark like a journalist who is out of breath, filing copy from a scene that keeps moving faster than her pencil. Everything happens immediately. The miracles are compressed. The teaching is brief. The healing is constant. The disciples are persistently confused. The narrator notes that Mark's Jesus is a man of action, always moving, always commanding, and that the disciples in Mark come across as more bewildered than in the other gospels, which the narrator finds more realistic than alarming. Mark ends, in the oldest manuscripts, at chapter sixteen verse eight: the women at the empty tomb were told he has risen, go tell the disciples,

and they fled, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. The narrator finds this ending honest and appropriately incomplete, like the dawn that has arrived but hasn't fully broken.

Luke: The Most Beautiful Account

Luke is a physician, a companion of Paul, a careful and elegant writer, and his gospel is addressed to someone named Theophilus — meaning "lover of God" — to whom he promises an orderly account based on eyewitness testimony. He delivers: Luke's gospel is the most literary of the four, with the most beautiful birth narrative, the most complete version of the infancy stories, the most socially conscious of the gospels, and the most attention paid to women, the poor, and the socially marginal.

The annunciation: the angel Gabriel came to Mary in Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to Joseph. He said: greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you. She was greatly troubled and wondered what sort of greeting this might be. He said: do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and of his kingdom there will be no end. She said: how will this be, since I am a virgin? He explained. She said: behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word. This is one of the most consequential sentences spoken by any person in the New Testament. She did not know what she was agreeing to. She agreed anyway.

She visited her relative Elizabeth, who was also miraculously pregnant with John the Baptist, and when Mary greeted her, the baby leapt in Elizabeth's womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Mary responded with the Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior, for he has looked at the humble state of his servant. ... He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down princes from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things. He has sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:46–48, 51–53, excerpt, WEB) The narrator calls this the most politically loaded lullaby ever sung. A young woman from a backwater town in Galilee, pregnant under complicated circumstances, singing a revolutionary vision of divine justice. She is the first theologian of the Incarnation.

The birth: Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census. Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem. There was no room in the inn. She wrapped the baby in cloths and placed him in a manger. In the fields nearby, shepherds were watching their flocks. An angel appeared. The glory of the Lord shone around them. They were terrified. The angel said: do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. A great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying: glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests. The shepherds went to Bethlehem, found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger, and spread the word concerning what had been told them. Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. This is the most important sentence in the birth

narrative: Mary treasured all these things and pondered them. The first response to the Incarnation was not proclamation but pondering. The narrator thinks this is instructive.

Simeon was in the Temple when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus there. He had been told by the Holy Spirit he would not die before seeing the Lord's Messiah. He took the child in his arms and praised God: Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation. He had waited his whole life for this. He held the baby. He was ready to die. The narrator finds this scene genuinely moving: an old man holding an infant, both of them at the threshold of something enormous, one of them arriving and one of them departing, and both of them at peace with it.

When Jesus was twelve, the family went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. On the return, after a day's journey, they discovered Jesus was not with the group. They went back and searched for three days. They found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions, and everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. His mother said: son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you. He said: why were you searching for me? Did you not know I had to be in my Father's house? They did not understand what he was saying. He went back with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. The narrator says: and there it is, at twelve. Not a dramatic declaration. A question, asked gently, of parents who had spent three days in terror. Did you not know? And then he went home with them and was obedient, and grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. The narrator finds the obedience after the declaration as interesting as the declaration itself.

Luke's unique material includes: the parable of the rich fool who builds larger barns the night before he dies; the woman who searches for one lost coin and sweeps the whole house; the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the Temple, whose prayers the narrator will summarize precisely: the Pharisee said, essentially, thank you that I am not like other people; I fast, I tithe, I do everything right. The tax collector stood far off, would not even look up, and beat his breast and said: God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Jesus said: the second prayer is the one that goes up. Not because achievement is bad, but because the Pharisee's prayer was a list of his own accomplishments aimed at an audience of one, and the tax collector knew who he was and needed help and said so without decoration. The narrator has known both kinds of prayer and has learned, slowly, which one actually connects.

John: The Most Theological Account, Also the Most Unusual

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him. Without him, nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness hasn't overcome it." (John 1:1–5, WEB) The narrator reads this opening and notes that whoever wrote it understood that the way you begin a document is itself a statement of everything. John does not start with a genealogy or an angel or a stable. He starts before the beginning, at the point where being is being, and traces the Word — the logos, the organizing principle, the divine intelligence — all the way down into flesh, into a particular

body, in a particular place, in a particular moment. "The Word became flesh and lived among us. We saw his glory, such glory as of the only born Son of the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14, WEB) The narrator considers this the most compressed theological statement in the New Testament and possibly in any literature.

John's gospel has no straightforward birth narrative. It has instead this cosmic prologue. Then John the Baptist ("I am not the Messiah"), then the call of the disciples, then immediately the wedding at Cana. Mary told Jesus they had run out of wine. He said: what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come. She told the servants: do whatever he tells you. He told them to fill six stone water jars, the kind used for ritual washing, holding twenty to thirty gallons each. Fill them to the brim. They did. Draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet. He tasted it. He didn't know where it came from. He called the bridegroom and said: everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much; but you have saved the best till now. This was the first of his signs. His disciples believed in him. The narrator notes that the miracle turned concern about an embarrassing social situation at a wedding into the context for the first revelation of his glory, which seems very deliberate, and that the best wine appearing last rather than first is a detail that John intends you to carry through the rest of the gospel.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He said: no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him. Jesus said: unless someone is born again, they cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said: how can someone be born when they are old? Jesus said: what is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of Spirit is spirit. This is the conversation that contains the most quoted verse in the New Testament: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16, WEB) Nicodemus went home that night not understanding. He reappeared later in the gospel, raising a procedural objection when the Pharisees wanted to condemn Jesus without a hearing, and one more time after the crucifixion, carrying burial spices. He traveled far from that first conversation in the dark, eventually arriving with spices for a burial.

The woman at the well: Jesus was passing through Samaria, which most Jews avoided on principle. He sat by a well at noon, tired from the journey. A Samaritan woman came to draw water. He asked her for a drink. She was astonished: how can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink? He said: if you knew the gift of God and who it is who says to you "give me a drink," you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. They talked about the water, about worship in Jerusalem versus worship in Samaria, and then Jesus said: go call your husband. She said she had no husband. He said: you have had five husbands, and the man you have now is not your husband. She said: sir, I perceive you are a prophet. She was not ashamed. She was curious. She ran back to town and said: come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah? The whole town came out and came to him. Many Samaritans believed because of her testimony. The narrator notes that the first evangelist in the Gospel of John is a woman with five husbands who went to the well at noon — probably to avoid the other women who came in the morning — and who ran back to town and told everyone without waiting to be credentialed. The narrator finds this appropriate.

The raising of Lazarus: Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, was ill. They sent word to Jesus. Jesus waited two days before going to Judea. By the time he arrived, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. Martha met him on the road: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Mary came and fell at his feet: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. The same words. He asked where they had laid him. They showed him. "Jesus wept." This is the shortest verse in the Bible in many translations and it says everything: the man who was about to raise the dead was genuinely grieved by death. The grief was not performed. The power and the grief coexisted. He had the ability to fix it and he wept anyway, because what was lost was really lost, and death is real, and his friends' tears were real, and none of that was less true for what was about to happen. He came to the tomb and told them to take away the stone. Martha said: Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days. He said: did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God? They took away the stone. He looked up and prayed. Then he called in a loud voice: Lazarus, come out! The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped in strips of linen and a cloth around his face. Jesus said: take off the grave clothes and let him go. The narrator reads this scene and says: the specificity of it — the four days, the warning about the smell, the grave clothes still on, the instruction to unwrap him — is the detail of an eyewitness or someone who heard from one. It is not abstracted. It is present and physical. It happened.

The I AM statements of John: I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Each statement is a claim about the deepest structure of reality, made in the first person, by a man standing in a specific place at a specific time. The narrator presents them without theological commentary and notes that they are either the most extraordinary series of true statements ever made or the most extraordinary series of false ones, and that the gospel does not offer a third option.

The Last Supper in John: Jesus washed his disciples' feet. When he came to Simon Peter, the questions began. Peter said: Lord, are you going to wash my feet? Jesus said: you do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand. Peter said: no, you shall never wash my feet. Jesus said: unless I wash you, you have no part with me. Peter said: Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well! Peter is, as always, the person in the room who goes from refusal to enthusiastic overcorrection with no middle ground. After he washed their feet, Jesus said: do you understand what I have done for you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. A new command I give you: love one another as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. John's account also records Judas leaving into the night.

* * *

The Passion: The Part Everything Was Building To

They went out to the Mount of Olives, to a garden called Gethsemane. Jesus said to his disciples: sit here while I go over there and pray. He took Peter, James, and John with him and began to be sorrowful and troubled. He said: my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me. He went a little further, fell with his face to the ground, and prayed: my Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will. He came back. They were sleeping. He said to Peter: could you men not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. He went away a second time and prayed the same thing. He came back. They were sleeping again. He went away a third time. He prayed the same prayer a third time. Then he came back to the disciples and said: are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come. Get up, let us go. Here comes my betrayer. The narrator does not belabor the disciples' sleeping. The narrator does not belabor the prayer, which asked for another way and received "the hour has come." The narrator lets the distance between those two things stand on its own.

Judas arrived with soldiers and officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees, carrying torches and weapons. He had arranged a signal: the one I kiss is the man. He went directly to Jesus and said: Rabbi! and kissed him. They seized Jesus. Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, whose name was Malchus. Jesus touched the man's ear and healed it, even in this moment, even now. He said to Peter: put your sword away. Then he said to the crowd: every day I was with you in the Temple courts and you did not arrest me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness. They took him. All the disciples deserted him and fled. A young man following was seized; he left his linen cloth and fled naked, which is one of those strange, specific details that appear in Mark and have the quality of embarrassed autobiographical confession.

The trials: the Sanhedrin, seeking testimony against him, found many false witnesses who contradicted each other. The high priest asked him directly: are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One? Jesus said: I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven. The high priest tore his clothes. They condemned him. Peter, in the courtyard, was asked three times if he was one of Jesus' disciples. Three times he denied it. The third time, a rooster crowed. Peter went out and wept bitterly.

Pilate, the Roman governor, found no basis for a charge against Jesus. He tried to release him: at Passover he had the custom of releasing one prisoner. He asked the crowd: do you want me to release the king of the Jews? The crowd had been stirred up by the chief priests. They said: no, not him; give us Barabbas. Barabbas was a man who had been imprisoned for insurrection and murder. Pilate asked: what shall I do then with the one you call the king of the Jews? They said: crucify him. Pilate asked: why? What crime has he committed? They shouted louder: crucify him! Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas and had Jesus flogged. He washed his hands publicly and said: I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility. The narrator notes that this is the most famous attempt by a public official to avoid responsibility for an action he is actively performing, by the man who is performing it, while performing it. The

washing of hands was understood by everyone present as a legal and symbolic gesture. It did not work. The record still carries his name.

The soldiers put a crown of thorns on his head and a purple robe on him. They called out: Hail, king of the Jews! They struck him again and again. They led him out to crucify him. They were on the way to the place called Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. They offered him wine mixed with gall to drink; he tasted it and refused. They crucified him. Above his head they put the written charge: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Two criminals were crucified with him, one on each side. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads. The chief priests and teachers of the law mocked him: he saved others but he can't save himself. Even the criminals who were crucified with him heaped insults on him, though Luke notes that one of them rebuked the other and asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom, and was told: today you will be with me in paradise.

At noon, darkness fell over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three, Jesus cried out in a loud voice: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is the opening line of Psalm 22, and every person in earshot who knew the Scripture would have known which psalm it was, and would have known that psalm ended in praise and deliverance. This is not, or not only, a cry of abandonment. It is also a man quoting the beginning of a psalm of lament that contains within it the seeds of hope. Jesus cried out again in a loud voice and gave up his spirit. The curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook. Rocks split. The centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus were terrified and exclaimed: surely he was the Son of God. Among the women watching from a distance were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons. The narrator notes the women, who did not flee.

Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man who had himself become a disciple, went to Pilate and asked for the body. He wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and placed it in his own new tomb, which he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary sat there opposite the tomb.

Early on the first day of the week, before dawn, the women came to the tomb. The stone had been rolled away. The tomb was empty. In John's account, Mary Magdalene came alone, in the dark, found the stone rolled away, and ran to tell Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved. They ran. The other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over, looked at the strips of linen lying there, but did not go in. Simon Peter arrived and went in and saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head, folded, lying separately. The other disciple went in, saw, and believed. They went back home. Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. She bent over to look and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and one at the foot. They asked why she was crying. She turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize it was Jesus. He asked: woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for? Thinking he was the gardener, she said: sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you put him and I will get him. He said: Mary. She turned toward him and cried out: Rabboni! which means Teacher. The narrator stops here. He said her name, and she knew him. Some moments in this book do not need elaboration or

comedy or any layer of distance at all, and this is one of them. He said her name. She turned. That is everything.

The appearances after the resurrection: two disciples walking to Emmaus were joined by a stranger who walked with them, explained the Scriptures to them, and accepted their invitation to stay for the evening meal. At the table, he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened and they recognized him. He disappeared. They said to each other: were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road? They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. Through locked doors in the upper room he came and stood among them. He showed them his hands and side. He said: as the Father has sent me, I am sending you. Thomas was not there. He said he would not believe unless he put his finger where the nails had been and put his hand in his side. A week later, Jesus appeared again with Thomas there. He said: put your finger here; reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe. Thomas said: my Lord and my God. Jesus said: because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. The narrator respects Thomas's demand for evidence and notes that Jesus did not refuse it. He provided it. The faith that followed was real, and it was based on evidence that Thomas found sufficient. The narrator considers this the most encouraging miracle story in John for a certain kind of reader, and does not apologize for saying so.

The beach breakfast: Jesus appeared to some disciples by the Sea of Galilee. They had been fishing all night and caught nothing. He called from the shore: throw your net on the right side of the boat. They did. The catch was so large they couldn't haul it in. John said to Peter: it is the Lord. Peter, who was fishing without his outer garment, put it on and jumped into the water. He waded ashore. Jesus had a fire going with fish on it, and some bread. He said: come and have breakfast. After breakfast he asked Simon Peter three times: do you love me? Three times Peter said yes. Three times Jesus said: feed my sheep. The narrator notes that these three questions — one for each denial in the courtyard with its charcoal fire, and now a charcoal fire again on a beach at dawn — are the most compassionate accounting in the New Testament. Three denials, three questions, three commissions. Not punishment. Restoration. The math is exact. The mercy is complete.

The Ascension: Jesus led his disciples out to the vicinity of Bethany and was taken up before their eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky. Two men dressed in white said to them: men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. They went back to Jerusalem to wait, in a room upstairs, with the women and with the family of Jesus and his brothers, praying together. The narrator notes that the question — why do you stand there looking at the sky? — is the most practical possible follow-up to the Ascension, and that the appropriate response to being left a commission is not to stand there staring upward but to go and do it. They went. They waited. Ten days later, everything changed.

* * *

Acts: The Early Church, Functioning and Otherwise

The day of Pentecost arrived. The disciples were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound came from heaven like a rushing mighty wind, filling the whole house. Tongues of fire appeared and came to rest on each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Jews who had come to Jerusalem from every nation under heaven heard the sound. Each one heard them speaking in his own language. They were bewildered. They asked: are not all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Some sneered: they have had too much wine. Peter stood up and addressed the crowd. He was not, the narrator notes, the same Peter who had denied knowing Jesus three times around a charcoal fire seven weeks earlier. He spoke for the rest of chapter two. About three thousand people were baptized that day. The narrator notes that this is the biggest single altar call in recorded history and that it was preached by a man who had been hiding a month before.

The early community: they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the Temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. The narrator says: this lasted about as long as you'd expect, which is not a cynical statement but a realistic one. Acts five introduces a couple who sold some property and secretly kept part of the price while claiming to have given it all, and they both died on the spot, which is a pointed warning about the difference between community and performance of community. By chapter six there were already complaints that some widows were being overlooked in the food distribution. Administration problems arrived before the persecution did. The church was human from the start, which is either its problem or its point, and possibly both.

Stephen, one of seven men chosen to handle the distribution of food, was also a man full of grace and power, doing signs and wonders among the people. He was seized on false charges and brought before the Sanhedrin. He gave a speech recapping the entire history of Israel from Abraham to Solomon, landing on the conclusion that the listeners had always resisted the Holy Spirit, just as their ancestors had, and that they had betrayed and murdered the Righteous One. They were furious. They gnashed their teeth at him. He looked up and said: I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. They dragged him out of the city and stoned him. He said: Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. He fell on his knees and said: Lord, do not hold this sin against them. Then he died. A young man named Saul stood nearby, watching the coats of those throwing stones, approving of what was happening. The narrator marks this detail, because Saul is about to become the most important figure in the second half of Acts.

Philip the evangelist was told by an angel to go south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. He went. He found an Ethiopian court official, a eunuch of great authority under Queen Candace, who was in charge of all the treasury, returning from Jerusalem in his chariot, reading aloud from Isaiah. The Spirit told Philip to stay near the chariot. Philip ran up and asked: do you understand

what you're reading? The man said: how can I, unless someone explains it to me? He invited Philip to sit with him. The passage was Isaiah 53, the suffering servant passage. The man asked: who is the prophet talking about? Philip opened his mouth and beginning with that passage told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled, they came to some water. The man said: look, here is water. What prevents me from being baptized? Philip said: nothing, if you believe with all your heart. He said: I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. They stopped the chariot. They went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch went on his way rejoicing and saw him no more. Philip appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns. The narrator calls this the most efficient conversion in the book of Acts: no committee, no confirmation class, one chariot, one passage of Isaiah, one question, one answer, one stretch of water. Done.

Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest and asked for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, authorizing him to arrest any followers of the Way and bring them back to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? He said: who are you, Lord? The voice said: I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do. The men traveling with him stood speechless: they heard the sound but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. They led him into Damascus. He was blind for three days and did not eat or drink anything.

A disciple named Ananias was told in a vision to go find Saul of Tarsus at a house on Straight Street and restore his sight. Ananias said: Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. God said: go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. Ananias went. He placed his hands on Saul and said: Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. He ate something and his strength returned. He spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. And then, immediately, he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished: isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? The narrator notes that Saul became Paul and became the most prolific church-planter and letter-writer in the New Testament in a transition that lasted approximately three days and required only blindness, fasting, and one man willing to put his hands on a persecutor and call him brother. The economy of the conversion is extraordinary.

Paul's missionary journeys covered Asia Minor, Greece, and Macedonia over approximately fifteen years, establishing communities in Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus, among others. In Philippi he and Silas were beaten and thrown in prison. At midnight they were praying and singing hymns to God. An earthquake shook the prison foundations. All the doors flew open. Everyone's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, saw the doors open, drew his sword to kill himself. Paul shouted: don't harm yourself! We are all here! The jailer called for

lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He asked: what must I do to be saved? They said: believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household. He took them home, washed their wounds, fed them, and was baptized that night, he and his whole household. He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God.

In Ephesus, Paul preached so effectively that the silversmiths who made shrines to the goddess Artemis began to lose business. Demetrius, the silversmith, gathered his colleagues and made a speech: our trade is in danger of being discredited. The whole city fell into confusion. For two hours the crowd chanted: Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! The town clerk eventually quieted them down and reminded them that there were proper legal channels for these complaints. The narrative moves on. The narrator notes that the silversmith's concern was economic, his appeal was religious, and the result was a two-hour crowd chant in a theater, which is a structure that has appeared in public life repeatedly since. Nothing new under the sun.

Paul was eventually arrested in Jerusalem, tried before Felix and Festus and King Agrippa, and shipped to Rome under guard. On the voyage, a storm came. The sailors wanted to abandon ship. An angel told Paul they would all survive. They struck a sandbar and the ship ran aground. All 276 on board made it to shore safely on the island of Malta. Paul gathered brushwood for a fire. A viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. The Maltese people said to each other: this man must be a murderer; though he escaped the sea, divine justice has not allowed him to live. Paul shook the snake into the fire and suffered no ill effect. They waited for him to swell up or suddenly fall dead. When he did not, they said he was a god. The narrator notes that the Maltese moved Paul from murderer to divine in the span of about half an hour based purely on his relationship with a snake, which is a remarkably fast theological revision. Paul arrived eventually in Rome and spent two years there under house arrest, welcoming all who came to him and preaching about the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. Acts ends there, with Paul talking, the gospel still moving, the story still open. The narrator considers this the correct ending: not a conclusion, but a continuation.

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The Epistles: Paul's Letters, Which He Wrote While Under Arrest and While Not Under Arrest, Both Productively

More New Testament books are attributed to Paul than to anyone else: thirteen letters attributed to him, written to churches and individuals across the Roman world, addressing specific situations, theological questions, and pastoral crises, often in chains or under some form of official supervision, which did not appear to slow him down. The narrator tours the major themes.

Romans is the most systematic of Paul's letters: a comprehensive argument that all people — Jews and Gentiles — stand under condemnation, and all people are offered righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ, not through law observance. Chapter one through three: all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Chapter four: Abraham was justified by faith before circumcision, making him the father of all who believe. Chapter five: since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God. Chapter eight, the great chapter of assurance: in paraphrase, those united with Jesus are freed from condemnation. Paul is certain that no condition of life or death, no spiritual power, no event now or still to come, and nothing anywhere in creation can tear believers away from the love God gives through Jesus Christ (Romans 8:1, 38–39). The narrator reads this chapter slowly and does not add anything to it.

First Corinthians addresses a church that was dividing over leaders, tolerating serious immorality, suing each other in public courts, arguing about food sacrificed to idols, conducting worship in disorder, and disputing about the resurrection. Paul addresses all of it, but the narrator pauses longest at chapter twelve and thirteen. Chapter twelve: the church is one body with many parts, and the eye cannot say to the hand "I have no need of you," and the parts that seem weaker are indispensable. Chapter thirteen (1 Corinthians 13:1–2,4–8,12–13, WEB, excerpt): "If I speak with the languages of men and of angels, but don't have love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but don't have love, I am nothing. ... Love is patient and is kind. Love doesn't envy. Love doesn't brag, is not proud, doesn't behave itself inappropriately, doesn't seek its own way, is not provoked, takes no account of evil; doesn't rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will be done away with. Where there are various languages, they will cease. Where there is knowledge, it will be done away with. ... For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, even as I was also fully known. But now faith, hope, and love remain—these three. The greatest of these is love." The narrator presents this passage without commentary, because some things do not need it.

Galatians is Paul's most urgent letter, written to churches that were being told they must observe Jewish law in addition to faith in Christ. Paul is furious: I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel. He does

not greet them warmly before delivering this opinion, which tells you the temperature of the letter. The central argument: Abraham was justified by faith, not by law, and those who are of faith are the children of Abraham. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. The fruit of the Spirit, which Paul contrasts with the works of the flesh: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Philippians was written from prison, probably Rome, and is one of the warmest and most joyful of Paul's letters despite its circumstances: in paraphrase, Paul repeatedly urges joy in the Lord. He invites his readers to bring their fears and needs to God with gratitude, trusting a peace beyond explanation to protect their inner lives. Their attention should rest on truth, integrity, justice, goodness, beauty, and whatever deserves admiration. He has learned contentment in abundance and in deprivation alike, drawing his endurance from Christ (Philippians 4:4–13). The narrator reads this and notes that Paul wrote "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" in a prison cell, which is where the sentence was calibrated, and that the context matters when you apply it.

Colossians, Ephesians, the letters to Timothy and Titus, Philemon, and Thessalonians cover the ordering of church life, instructions for specific situations, warnings against false teaching, encouragement to perseverance, and the profound theological passage of Colossians chapter one in which Christ is described as the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, through whom and for whom all things were created, who holds all things together. He is before all things. In him all things hold together. The narrator reads this and considers it an extraordinary claim made with extraordinary calm.

Hebrews is written to Jewish Christians who are tempted to return to Judaism under persecution. Its argument is thoroughgoing: Jesus is the final word after prophets; he is greater than angels, greater than Moses, greater than the Levitical priesthood, offering a better covenant on better promises through his own blood in the ultimate heavenly sanctuary rather than the earthly copy. Chapter eleven, the great roll call of faith: in paraphrase, faith means trusting what God has promised even before it can be seen. Abel's offering, Enoch's escape from death, and Noah's preparations for the flood illustrate that trust. Abraham left familiar ground without knowing his destination. Sarah trusted the promise of a child despite her age. Moses chose solidarity with God's people over his royal status. The fall of Jericho and Rahab's survival also belong to this history of trust (Hebrews 11:1–31). The narrator notes that the Hall of Faith includes two women by name, one of whom bore a child in old age and one of whom was a prostitute, and that this is consistent with the Bible's general pattern of including people whose stories are more complicated than their citations suggest. The next chapter draws the practical lesson, in paraphrase: with these witnesses around us, we should discard the burdens and sins that obstruct us, persist in the course before us, and keep our attention on Jesus, who brings faith from its beginning to its fulfillment (Hebrews 12:1–2).

James is the most practically demanding letter in the New Testament. Faith without works is dead. If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them: go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body,

what good is that? Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. The narrator finds James bracing in the way that a cold shower is bracing: not pleasant precisely, but clarifying. It does not allow you to hold belief as a purely internal matter. It insists that belief has consequences, visible ones, in the direction of the hungry and the poorly clothed.

The letters of Peter encourage communities experiencing persecution to consider suffering as participation in something larger, to maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, to honor the emperor without worshipping him, to love the brotherhood. First Peter chapter five: in paraphrase, remain alert and self-controlled. The devil is pictured as a predator hunting for prey; steadfast trust is how believers resist him. After their suffering, the gracious God who has called them into Christ's lasting glory will restore their strength and give them firm footing (1 Peter 5:8–10). The letters of John circle around the great summary: in paraphrase, love expresses who God is, and a life rooted in love is a life shared with God, who remains present in the person living it (1 John 4:16). The narrator says: this is either the simplest theological statement ever made or the one that takes the longest to fully understand, and almost certainly both. The letter of Jude is a short, fierce warning about false teachers who have crept in, whose judgment was pronounced long ago. The narrator presents it respectfully and moves to the last book.

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Revelation: The End, or Possibly the Beginning, Depending on Your Read

John's opening vision, in paraphrase: on Patmos because of his witness to Jesus, he is caught up in the Spirit on the Lord's day. A voice as commanding as a trumpet comes from behind him. Turning, he sees seven golden lampstands surrounding a humanlike figure in a long robe with a gold band across his chest. White hair, blazing eyes, furnace-bright metal feet, and a voice like immense waters make the figure overwhelming. Seven stars rest in his right hand; a double-edged sword projects from his mouth; his face shines with the sun's intensity. John collapses. The figure touches him and reassures him: the one who died now lives without end and holds authority over death and Hades. John must record these visions for seven churches (Revelation 1:9–19).

The seven churches of Asia Minor received letters — Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea — each with specific commendations and specific rebukes, specific to their situations. Ephesus had sound doctrine but had lost its first love. Smyrna was poor but rich. Pergamum tolerated false teaching. Thyatira allowed a self-proclaimed prophetess to lead people astray. Sardis had a reputation for being alive but was dead. Philadelphia had kept the word with little strength. Laodicea was neither hot nor cold but lukewarm, and the letter to Laodicea contains one of the most famous sentences of the seven: behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. The narrator notes that the letters to the seven churches read like letters to seven churches that exist in every century, including this one, and that finding your church in the list is an exercise left to the reader.

The heavenly throne room, in paraphrase: an open doorway reveals a throne whose occupant shines with the colors of jasper and carnelian, encircled by emerald-like radiance. Twenty-four elders occupy surrounding thrones, wearing white and gold crowns. A crystal-like expanse lies before them. Four creatures, resembling a lion, a calf, a human, and an eagle, have six wings apiece and eyes everywhere. They praise God's holiness and enduring sovereignty without rest. The elders respond by bowing, laying down their crowns, and honoring the Creator whose will gives all things existence (Revelation 4:1–11). The narrator sits with this for a moment. Whatever else Revelation is or is not, it begins with a room in which everything that exists is oriented toward one center, in worship, without ceasing. The image is not primarily about terror. It is about orientation. Everything facing the same direction. The narrator finds this clarifying in a way that is difficult to articulate.

The scroll and the Lamb, in paraphrase: God holds a scroll secured by seven seals, and no one anywhere is found able to open it. John weeps. An elder announces that Judah's Lion, the Root of David, has prevailed and can break the seals. Yet when John looks, the victorious figure is a standing Lamb bearing the marks of slaughter. The Lamb receives the scroll from God. The four creatures and twenty-four elders bow and sing that the Lamb's sacrificial death has won people for God from every human community, making him worthy to open the scroll (Revelation 5:1–9). The narrator notes that the Conqueror is announced as a Lion and appears as a slaughtered

Lamb. This is the central reversal of Revelation, and it is the central reversal of the entire New Testament: the power that opens history is not military conquest but sacrificial love. The Lamb who was slain is found worthy. This is the thesis of the whole book, stated in the fifth chapter, before most of the alarming imagery begins.

The seals are opened: the first four release the famous four horsemen on their various colored horses, bringing conquest, war, famine, and death across a quarter of the earth. The fifth seal reveals the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God, crying out: how long? They are given white robes and told to wait a little longer. The sixth seal brings a great earthquake, the sun turning black, the moon turning blood red, the stars falling like figs shaken from a fig tree, the sky rolling up like a scroll. The narrator notes that the imagery of Revelation draws heavily from the Old Testament prophets — Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah — and that readers who come to it cold, without that context, often find it chaotic in ways that careful contextual readers do not. The book is not random. It is dense with allusion. Understanding it requires reading what it was reading.

A hundred and forty-four thousand were sealed from the twelve tribes of Israel. Then, in paraphrase, John sees a crowd beyond counting drawn from the world's many peoples and languages. Wearing white and carrying palms, they celebrate God and the Lamb as the source of their deliverance. An elder identifies them as survivors of terrible suffering, their clothing made clean through the Lamb's blood. They worship continually in God's presence and receive his shelter. Hunger, thirst, and punishing heat no longer threaten them. The Lamb tends them as a shepherd, brings them to life-giving springs, and God ends their weeping (Revelation 7:9–17). The narrator notes that even in the middle of apocalyptic catastrophe, in chapter seven, before the worst of it has arrived, there is this: a vast, uncountable, multiethnic crowd safe before the throne, with every tear wiped away. The comfort arrives before the end. This is also characteristic of the book.

Trumpets and bowls follow, escalating in severity: hail and fire, a great mountain burning thrown into the sea, a great star burning like a torch falling on the rivers, the sun struck for a third of the day. Creatures from the bottomless pit. The great river Euphrates dried up. The narrator moves through these with appropriate speed and notes only that Revelation's series of sevens — seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls — have a liturgical, almost musical structure, with repeated cycles of judgment and interlude that are better experienced than analyzed. The number six hundred and sixty-six, the number of the beast, has generated approximately one million identifications of historical villains and public figures across two thousand years, with no shortage of confident disagreement, which the narrator considers a reason to be cautious when evaluating new proposals.

Babylon the Great falls. She is described as the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth, dressed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. First-century readers understood immediately: this is Rome. The merchants of the earth who grew rich from her will weep when she falls, standing far off, saying: alas, alas, O great city, you were clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! For in a single

hour all this wealth has been laid waste. Heaven is called to rejoice over her fall. Then the announcement: the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready.

The rider on a white horse comes out of heaven, called Faithful and True, judging in righteousness, with many crowns on his head and a name written that no one knows but himself, and his robe dipped in blood, and his name is called the Word of God. The armies of heaven follow him. The beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gather to make war against him. The beast is captured. The false prophet is captured. They are thrown into the lake of fire. The devil is bound for a thousand years and thrown into a bottomless pit. The saints who had been beheaded for their testimony of Jesus came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. This is the millennium, and the narrator notes that the question of what exactly this millennium means — whether it is a literal future reign, a present spiritual reality, or a symbolic representation of the church age — has occupied Christian theologians since roughly the second century and has produced more than a dozen distinct positions and several denominations, and the narrator declines to adjudicate, not from cowardice but from genuine respect for the complexity of the question.

After the thousand years, the devil is released, deceives the nations one more time, is thrown into the lake of fire. Then the great white throne judgment: the dead, great and small, stand before the throne. The books are opened. Another book is opened, the book of life. The dead are judged by what is written in the books, according to what they had done. Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. This is the last judgment, presented in eight verses, with a weight that no elaboration improves.

Then. The renewed creation, in paraphrase: the old sky and earth disappear, along with the sea. Jerusalem descends from God, radiant with the readiness of a bride. A mighty announcement declares that God will now make his home among his people. The old order of bereavement, anguish, tears, and death is over. From the throne comes a promise that everything is being renewed, and an instruction to record it as dependable truth. God identifies himself as Alpha and Omega, the beginning and completion of all things, and offers life-giving water freely to the thirsty (Revelation 21:1–6). The narrator does not add commentary here. The promise speaks for itself.

The city itself, in paraphrase: twelve pearl gates, twelve jeweled foundations, jasper walls, and gold with the clarity of glass. Its three dimensions match, forming a vast cube. God and the Lamb take the place of a separate sanctuary, and their radiance makes sunlight and moonlight unnecessary. The nations live by that light, and earthly rulers bring their splendor into a city whose gates remain open. Night never falls. A clear river carrying life runs from the divine throne along the city's central street. Beside it grows the tree of life, with a harvest each month and leaves that heal the nations. The curse has ended. God's servants worship in his presence, see him face to face, and bear his name. With God providing all their light, their reign has no end (Revelation 21:16–26; 22:1–5).

The narrator ends here and does not try to be funny. Some things are bigger than the joke, and this is one of them. The book that began with a garden — one river, two people, every tree good for food, and the tree of life in the middle — ends with a city whose river flows from the throne of God, whose tree of life bears fruit every month, whose leaves heal every nation, and into which the kings of the earth bring their glory and the gates never close. The garden was good. The city is redeemed. And the river runs through both. The narrator pauses on this sentence longer than any other in the book, because it is the one she came here to say.

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A Closing Note from the Narrator

Well. Here we are.

You have now, in some compressed and comedically inflected form, traversed selected stories and themes from the Protestant Bible, generations of remembered history, two testaments, one covenant that turned into another covenant, several hundred miracles, one enormous flood, two sets of stone tablets (the first set broken, the second set kept), the long stretch between Abraham and the cross, a great fish that functioned as public transportation, a donkey that was more sensible than its rider, a jawbone that served as a military weapon, a tent peg that served as a final argument, a coat of many colors that started an epic, a scarlet cord that saved a household, a reed basket that changed history, five smooth stones of which only one was needed, and one very significant piece of bread broken at a table in an upper room in Jerusalem approximately two thousand years ago.

The narrator does not know what you believe. She does not know if you came to this document as a skeptic looking for confirmation, a believer looking for a good laugh, a curious person with a Wednesday evening to fill, or someone who just wanted to see how long a thing like this could actually run. All of these are legitimate reasons to arrive here, and the narrator welcomes all of them.

What the narrator does know, having spent considerable time in the source material, is this: the Bible is stranger, funnier, darker, more honest, more beautiful, and more resistant to being summarized than almost any other book in the world, which is part of why people keep trying to summarize it and keep failing to do it justice. This document has also failed to do it justice. It has done its best. Its best is an imperfect, affectionate, irreverent, and genuinely moved attempt to tell a very long story about what it looks like when the divine and the human try to find each other across the centuries, and keep almost missing, and keep trying anyway.

The people in this book were not saints by temperament. They were farmers and shepherds and kings and fishermen and tax collectors and prostitutes and prophets and reluctant prophets and extremely reluctant prophets and one man who did not want to be a prophet at all and ended up in a fish as a direct consequence. They were scared and faithful and faithful and scared, sometimes simultaneously. They made extraordinary mistakes and were given extraordinary grace. They argued with God, and occasionally God argued back, and on one occasion the argument went all night and ended with a limp and a new name, and the narrator considers this one of the most honest descriptions of how the most important conversations end: changed, limping slightly, and going forward anyway.

That river, in the narrator's considered opinion, is still running. From the garden to the city and out through both banks, into the lives of people who are still trying to figure out what the leaves are for and whether they can get some.

Thank you for making it this far. You didn't have to. The narrator is grateful that you did. Go drink something cold, sit on the porch if you have one, and watch the evening come in. The light will be worth looking at, same as it was on day one, whatever that was coming from.

— J.C.T.

Jackson, MS

Still Wednesday. The storm came through. Everything smells like rain.

The Good Book: A Comedic Journey Through the Bible is an original creative work of parody and literary satire in the tradition of public-domain comic retellings. It is not a translation of, substitute for, or theological commentary on the Bible. The comic commentary and narrative framing are the author's creative retelling of biblical material. Biblical figures are treated with affection, humanity, and the kind of respect that comes from actually having read their stories.