

Bible Jam – Class 5; Fall/Winter Semester
October 12, 2021

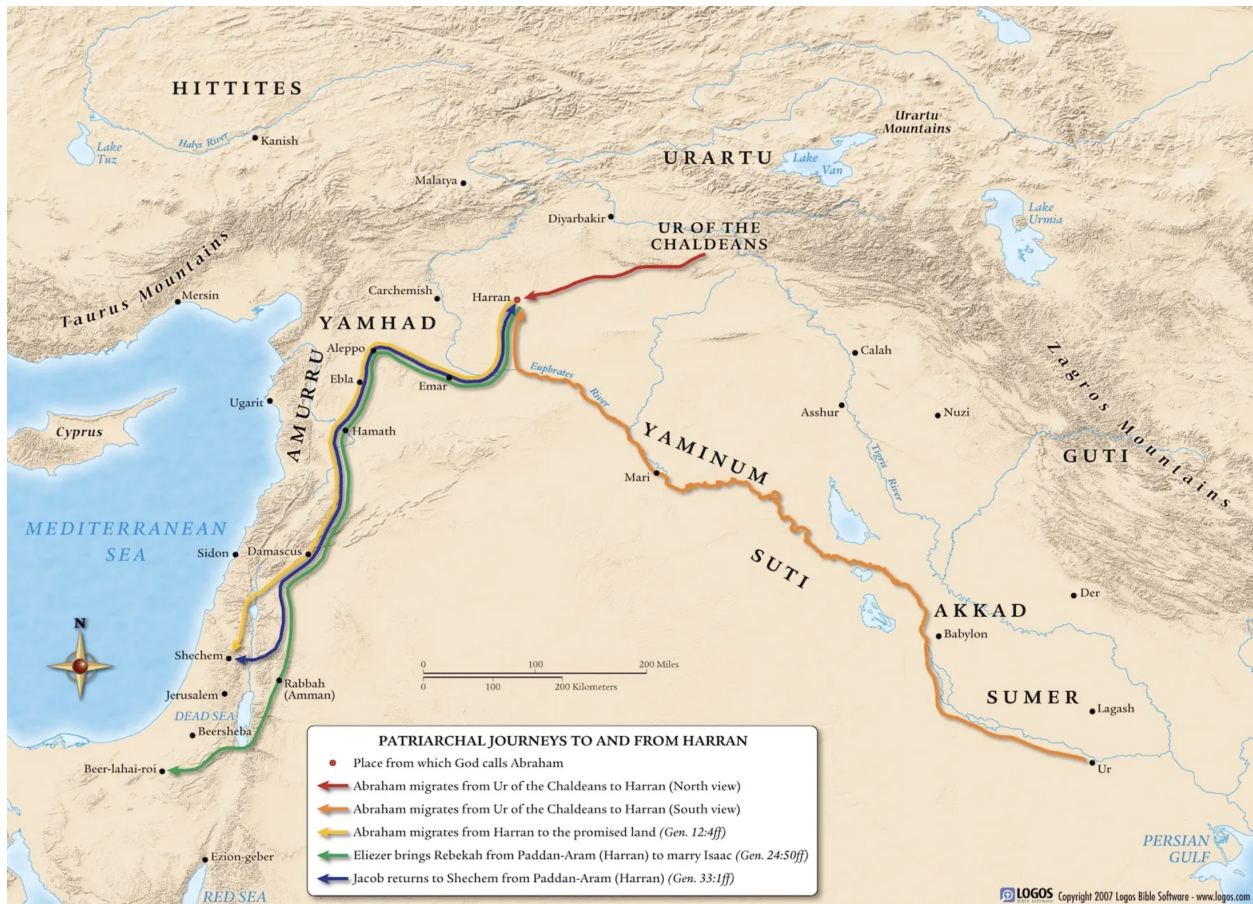
Tickets, please....
But first.... ["Come with me..."](#)

Ages in the Ancient Near East – The Levantine Period

Stone Age: 2,000,000 – 3300 BCE

Bronze Age: 3300 – 2300 BCE

Iron Age: 550 BCE – 700 CE



Promised Land Redux

The narrative in the Book of Genesis revolves around the themes of posterity and land. Abraham (2150 BCE – 1975 BCE) is called by God to leave the house of his father Terah and settle in the land originally given to Canaan but which God now promises to Abraham and his progeny.

Abraham was born Abram, son of Terah, at the beginning of the second millennium BC in Ur, the capital of Mesopotamia at the height of its splendor as a highly developed ancient world. According to Jewish tradition, he was the son of an idol maker and smashed all of his father's idols—except one—in a story that foreshadows his devotion to one God. The Koran tells of a time when Abram confronts his father about his idol worship and is condemned to burn in a furnace by King Nimrod of Babylon, but God protected him. His family left Ur—in modern day Iraq—to travel northwest along the trade route and the Euphrates River to the city of Haran. Abram settled down in Haran—in modern day Israel—with his family. He married Sarai and entered into a lifelong partnership with her. At the time, Haran—as well as all the neighboring cities and countries—was a land devoted to polytheism.

Abram was in Haran at age 75 when he got the call from God to leave his home and family behind and follow God into a strange land that He would give him. *Time* quoted Thomas Cahill, author of *The Gifts of the Jews*, calling the move "a complete departure from everything that has gone before in the evolution of culture and sensibility." Abram took his wife, his nephew, Lot, and his possessions and departed. Abram moved south into the land of Canaan, a land inhabited by a warrior people called the Canaanites. He settled temporarily in Shechem and Beth-el. God told Abraham his descendants would inherit the Canaanite land.

Joshua 23 (Around 1200 BCE) ~ Author? Samuel?

¹When Joshua was very old, a long time after God gave the Children of Israel security from all their enemies surrounding them, ²Joshua summoned all of Israel—the elders, leaders, judges, and officers—and said, “I am old and advanced in years. ³You have seen everything that YHWH your God did for you against these nations. It was YHWH your God alone who fought for you. ⁴Remember that I allotted to you as an inheritance, tribe by tribe, the land of all the nations I conquered and of the nations I destroyed, from the Jordan and the Great Sea. YHWH your God alone drove them out as you advanced. It was YHWH who dispossessed them to make room for you, and you took the land, that YHWH your God promised you.

⁶“So be strong! Be courageous! Put into full practice all that is written in the book of the Law of Moses. Be careful not to deviate from it—neither to the left nor to the right. ⁷Do not mingle with the nations that still live among you. Never invoke their gods, swear by them, serve them, or worship them. ⁸You must cling to YHWH your God, as you have done up to this day.

⁹“God drove out great and powerful nations before you. And to this day, not one of them poses a serious threat. ¹⁰Each one of you tramples over an entire village battalion, for YHWH your God is the one who fights for you, as God promised you.

¹¹“For your own sake, therefore, take great care to love YHWH your God. ¹²For if you ever abandon God and attach yourselves to the remnants of the nations that still live among you—if you intermarry with them and have relations with them, and they with you— ¹³then you can be sure that YHWH your God will no longer drive out these peoples on your behalf. Rather, they will become snares and traps for you. They will be whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until the day you perish from this good land that YHWH your God entrusted to you.

¹⁴“Now, as you can plainly see, I am going the way of all flesh. All of you know in your hearts and in the depths of your soul that not one of the promises that YHWH your God made to you has failed. Every promise made to you has been fulfilled, without a single exception. ¹⁵But just as all the good promises of YHWH your God have come true, so too can God bring upon you everything evil until you have been wiped off this good land that YHWH your God gave you. ¹⁶If you deviate from the covenant that YHWH your God enjoined upon you and go off to serve other gods and worship them, then YHWH’s anger will be roused against you, and you will quickly disappear from the good land you received.”

Joshua 24

¹Joshua gathered together all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, and called a summit of the elders, leaders, judges, and officials of Israel. Once they presented themselves before God, ²Joshua said to the whole assembly, “This is the word of YHWH, the God of Israel:

“Long ago your ancestors, including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates and worshiped other gods. ³But I took your ancestors Sarah and Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led them through the entire region of Canaan. I made Sarah and Abraham’s descendants numerous: there was Isaac, ⁴and to Rebecca and Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. To Esau I assigned the hill country of Seir, while Jacob and his family went down to Egypt.

Echoing once again YHWH’s words to Joshua at the beginning of the book. ⁵“Later I sent Moses and Aaron, where I struck the Egyptians with plagues—you know well what I did to them— ⁶and after that I liberated you from Egypt. By the time your ancestors reached the Sea of Reeds, the Egyptians were in hot pursuit with their chariots and cavalry. ⁷When your ancestors cried out for my help, I put darkness between them and the Egyptians and made the sea engulf them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians.

“You dwelt in the wilderness for a long time, ⁸and then I brought you into the land of the Amorites living on the east side of the Jordan. They greeted you with hostility, but I delivered them into your power. And you took possession of their land. ⁹Balak, the ruler of Moab ben-Zippor, waged war against Israel. Balak sent for Balaam ben-Beor to curse you, ¹⁰but I refused to listen to Balaam. On the contrary, Balaam was forced to bless you, and I saved you from his power. ¹¹Once you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho went to war against you, as did the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Gergashites, Hivites, and Jebusites. And I delivered them all into your power. ¹²I sent hornets ahead of you, which drove the two rulers of the Amorites out of your way. And it was this—not your sword and bow—that destroyed the Amorites. ¹³I gave you land that you had not tilled, and cities you had not built, and you have settled in them. You now take the fruit of vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.”

¹⁴Joshua then said, “I now call upon you to revere and serve YHWH completely and sincerely. cast off the gods that your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt, and worship YHWH alone. ¹⁵If you do not want to worship YHWH, then make the decision today whom you will worship, even if it is the gods of your ancestors beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you live. As for me and my household, we will worship YHWH.”

¹⁶Then the people responded, “Far be it from us to abandon YHWH to worship other gods. ¹⁷It was YHWH our God who brought us and our ancestors up and out of the land of slavery. YHWH performed those great signs before our eyes. YHWH protected us on the entire journey and among all the peoples whose lands we passed through. ¹⁸YHWH drove out before us the Amorites and all the people dwelling in the land. We too will serve YHWH, who is our God.”

¹⁹Joshua said to the people, “You will not be able to serve YHWH. This is a God most holy, a jealous God, a God who doesn’t forgive your transgressions and your sins. ²⁰If you desert YHWH and serve foreign gods, after all God has done for you, you will bring disasters—fatal ones—upon yourselves.”

²¹But the people protested, “No! We will serve YHWH!”

²²Then Joshua said, “You are your own witnesses that you are choosing to serve YHWH.” “Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied.

²³“Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the alien gods among you and turn your hearts to YHWH, the God of Israel.”

²⁴Then the assembly said to Joshua, “We will serve and obey YHWH our God!”

²⁵On that day Joshua ratified the covenant with the people and drew up statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem, ²⁶which were recorded in the book of God’s law. Then Joshua took a large stone and set it up there under the oak tree close by the sanctuary of YHWH. ²⁷Joshua said to the assembly, “See this stone? It will be a witness against us. For it heard all the words that YHWH spoke to us. If you renounce your God, it will be a witness against you.” ²⁸The Joshua dismissed the people, each to their own holdings. ²⁹After this, Joshua ben-Nun, the servant of YHWH, died at the age of one hundred and ten. ³⁰Joshua was buried on his own in Timnath-serah, north of Mount Gaash in the Hillcountry of Ephraim. ³¹Israel had served YHWH throughout Joshua’s entire lifetime and the lifetimes of the elders who outlived Joshua and experienced everything YHWH did for Israel. ³²And Joseph’s bones, which the people had transported up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the plot of land Jacob had purchased for one hundred pieces of silver from the children of Hamor, Shechem’s father. This became the inheritance of Joseph’s descendants. ³³Eleazar ben-Aaron died and was buried at Gibeah, which was allotted to Phinehas, his son, in the hill country of Ephraim.

Book Introduction:

“Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today”

By John Shelby Spong, Bishop

Part I: Setting the Stage:

1. “Dad, the questions the church keeps trying to answer, we don’t even ask anymore.”
2. “Why are you studying theology?” “Because I want to be a priest in my church”. “Why do you want to spend your life dealing with a medieval superstition?”
3. Sunday after Sunday in the church I had to deal with our traditional Christianity, which I represented, interacted or failed to interact with brilliant, educated graduate and undergraduate university students.
4. I also learned in the church and from the congregation that there was, and I suspect continues to be, a yearning for a meaningful religious experience or, at least, a way to have one’s life enhanced by something beyond itself. The desire to believe in this something or to feel oneself to be embraced by a sense of transcendent wonder appears to be well-nigh universal. On this frontier that seems to exist between contemporary knowledge and religious yearning, I was destined to spend most of my ordained life. I keep recalling the words of the 17th century French philosopher and theologian Blaise Pascal, who wrote: “The heart has its reasons that reason knows not of.”
5. I learned first that a bishop exercises little leadership over local congregations. His or her influence is guided mostly by example over a long period of time.
6. I also learned that most clergy are either unable or unwilling to engage the great theological issues of the day because of their perception that to do so will “disturb the “faith and beliefs” of their people.
7. There was nothing (in either of my books) that had not been discussed openly in my theological training; this was my first awareness of the gap between the Academy and the pew, to say nothing of a gap in honesty between what clergy both knew and believed in what they were willing to say.

8. When one steps outside the circle of one's own religious history to engage another's religious history, the pious religious clichés of the past simply do not work. How can we present the typical Christian claim that Jesus is "God's only son" to a congregation of Jews who believe that God is so awesomely one and holy that to suggest a God had a son seems like blasphemy?
9. My attempts to speak to a non-traditionally religious body of people - was seized upon or attacked by church representatives who were not sure they wanted someone who violated traditional boundaries to serve as one of their bishops. Apparently, my positions, all of which were widely taught and understood by the theological seminaries—including the one that had trained me for ordination—had challenged, frightened and threatened the religious world.
10. My critics could not see that the faith they wanted to define in the most traditional forms appealed not at all to those who had left organized religion and who had no desire to return to antiquated forms of worship
11. Controversy in the Christian church is seldom just about biblical exegesis and theological formulations. By and large people do not want to engage these issues publicly, perhaps because they know deep down that their religious convictions cannot stand much public scrutiny. So most church fights and even divisions are on social issues such as racial prejudice, equality for women or members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, or issues of human sexuality like birth control, abortion and the ordination of women to be priests and bishops. Those issues in which the church has little expertise, have splintered "the body of Christ" into competing groups, rival hierarchies, each with mutually exclusive claims to be the "true church".
12. Observing these events in church life was a little like watching Humpty Dumpty being lived out in history. The theological consensus of the past was being broken into thousands of pieces "and all the churches horses and all the churches men" could not put it back together again. At first the response of institutional Christianity was to seek a Renaissance in security-offering churches, with the old-time religion which was offered together with modern music and charismatic, show-boating Evangelicals who had more volume than conviction and were content to say to people: "You do not have to think about these things; you only have to trust and obey." The just-under-the-surface-crisis in faith will soon go away, they assured their increasingly large audiences. That movement however, proved not to be the wave of the future.
13. The great expansion of evangelical religion, with its rise of mega churches, has now crested and it has actually begun it's an evitable retreat. The second

generation of leaders has not been as compelling as the first. Some of those churches have morphed into feel good places that avoid controversy and critical thought to concentrate on easing their peoples way through life. The biggest sign of the demise of organized religion in our generation, however, has been a statistical downward spiral of mainline churches.

14. If Christianity is to survive it must undergo so radical the transformation that people may well see no continuity between the Christianity of yesterday and the Christianity of tomorrow.
15. I vote for a radical rethinking of our religious symbols. I vote for a reformation that will be so total that many people will think that Christianity has already died.
16. I am not ready to surrender Christianity to a secular future. I am not willing to abandon the Christ experience, which I still find real, simply because the words traditionally used to describe that experience no longer translate meaningfully into the language of our day. I *am willing* to sacrifice all claims to possessing a literal Bible, literal creed or historical liturgies in the Christianity that I seek to create, but I am not willing to sacrifice my conviction that there is something real the draws me beyond myself, which I call "God." I am not willing to see us being a member of a church that has not the courage to seek after the truth of God. I search in the motto of the seminary I attended for the truth of God, "come once it may, cost what it will." I claim today and will in the foreseeable future claim for myself the title "Christian," but I reserve the right to define what that title means. I am not willing to allow the word "Christian" to be claimed or defined exclusively by the voices of the past. I invite you, my readers to journey with me into this new arena.

From: Unbelievable, by Bishop Shelby SPong

Part II – Stating the Problem: *How the First Reformation Began*

On October 31, 1517, so the story goes, a solitary monk named Martin Luther approached the great door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg Germany on which he planned to post a document entitled "The Dispute over the Power and Efficiency of Indulgences." History has renamed that document "The Ninety-Five Theses." It was designed to call the entire Christian church into debate

What Luther was supposedly doing on that day was not particularly unusual. In academic circles throughout Europe, it was normal to post topics for public debate in public places. This was the way theological exploration was conducted. What flowed from that posting, however, was a surprise to Luther. He had touched a match to a massive amount of incendiary material, creating an explosion and lighting a fire that Luther himself could never have controlled, much less extinguished.

Wittenberg's All Saints Church, known then as the "Castle Church," was uniquely qualified to be the place where this place was ignited. It was also called the "Church of Relics," claiming among its treasures vials of milk supposedly drawn from the breasts of the Virgin, straw allegedly taken from the manger of Jesus and even the body of one of the "Holy Innocents," those male babies said to have been murdered by Herod in an attempt to destroy the infant God's promised deliverer!

In Luther's mind it was clear that institutional Christianity has ceased to be the "body of Christ" serving the world. It had instead become a profitable business, designed in such a way as to increase and even enhance the church's worldly power. In order to finance its institutional needs, which included the building of a new basilica at Saint Peter's in Rome, the Vatican had endorsed the practice of selling "indulgences." A "sinner" could purchase one such indulgence and thereby forgo the need to repent. By challenging his practice, Martin Luther was striking a blow to the economic well-being of the Christian church of his time. Beneath the debate, however, was a deeper challenge to all of the authority claims being made by the church on its journey through history.

By the 16th century the power of the Christian church was so deeply entrenched in the life of Europe's culture that for anyone to challenge its claimed authority to define truth was regarded as an act of heresy. That which was named "Mother Church" was the vehicle through which the "Father God" spoke to the world of men and women. An all-male ordained hierarchy, which stretched from the local priest all the way to the papal office, was acknowledged as the only proper channels through which the will of God could be discerned by human beings. That claim is what Luther was challenging.

Over the centuries a hierarchy had in fact defined the content of Christianity. The Nicene creed had been adopted by Christian leaders at the council of Nicaea in 325 CE, and it was believed to have summarized the "essence of the Christian faith" *for all time*. The church claimed for itself the sole right to interpret the sacred scriptures. That was not a difficult claim for a church to maintain in that day, for a few people, other than clergy, could either read or write. Most of the great universities of Europe existed primarily to train the clergy. The average person learned the stories of the Bible, not by reading the biblical text, but by looking at pictures painted by the world's great artists, whose actual knowledge of the Bible was minimal. Almost every church has something called "the stations of the cross" on its walls. This was a pictorial display of the final scenes of the life of Jesus. How closely those stations follow the biblical narrative was of little concern. No one bothered to check. The images along with those in the stained-glass windows, were simply absorbed.

The 16th century was also an age of almost unchallenged belief in a literal final judgment. God was regularly portrayed as a supernatural, all-seeing figure who lived above the clouds, watching human behavior. God wrote down, it was said, the deed and misdeeds of all the people in the "Book of Life," which would determine the eternal destiny of each individual soul. The difference between heaven and hell was enormous, so the bliss of heaven and the peril of hell were regularly made quite vivid, both in the service of the clergy, to which the people listened week after week, and in paintings depicting "Judgment Day" that they regularly saw. The fires of hell quite literally terrified the masses. Guilt was the coin of the church's realm and it permeated the emotions of every "sinner" with whom the church had to deal. Being able to buy an indulgence provided security, for the indulgence assured them of the forgiveness that was, they were certain, the only doorway into heaven. Time in purgatory could also be shortened for loved ones by the purchase of an indulgence. A strict behavior controlling system was held in place by these practices. Unbeknownst to Luther, he was about to pull the linchpin on this entire way of life, causing it to come crashing down in ruins.

For at least 200 years after Luther, Europe was roiled by this reformation conflict. Traditional circles tried valiantly to re-establish the religious authority of the past and to impose it in new on the entire social order. At the same time those who had been the repressed victims of this religious control system reveled in their new-found freedom and rejoiced in the future opportunities they were opening to them. They, therefore resisted any attempt to harness or stop the winds of change. Conflict between yesterday and tomorrow engulfed the Western world. A thirty-year war raged across Europe as traditionalists and reformers fought to impose their understanding of God on their opponents. The sinking of the ships of the Catholic Spanish Armada sailing toward Protestant England was even said to prove that God was on the side of the reformers. The traditionalists had the power of history and authority on their side. They could quote "the doctrines and dogmas" of the church, which they believed reflected God's will. The

reformers needed a counterclaim, and they found it in the authority of the Bible, almost always literally understood and called the "word of God". So "the church teachers" became the claim of one side and "the Bible says" became the claim of the other. When both sides in any conflict believe that they speak for God, the result is that each side demonizes the other. That was the backdrop through which each side, in that moment of history, endured a bitter and destructive struggle that we call the Reformation.

Martin Luther, the almost-accidental originator of this sixteenth-century reform movement, opened the doors for changes that he had never imagined. Those doors would never close again in the same way. Feelings were destined to reach an emotional intensity not seen before in human history. Was Luther talking about the pope or the devil when he wrote: "The prince of darkness grim, we travel not for him. His rage we can endure, for lo his doom is sure. One little word shall fell him." That one little word was "alone." It was by faith "alone," not by works or deeds, that salvation was accomplished. Indulgences were works! The result of this struggle was, therefore, always inevitable. In time, Martin Luther was condemned by the church, excommunicated as a heretic and driven into hiding. His life in danger, he was protected by certain political princes of Germany, who saw in Luther's upheaval a way to break the power and control of the Vatican and thus to allow both nation states of Europe and their wealth to develop independent of religious control. It was a tumultuous time in European history.

For so much anger, hostility, war and bloodshed to be displayed and for so many people to be persecuted, incarcerated and killed seems strange today when we seek to identify the substance of the debate that broke Catholic hegemony in the past apart. Just as today's church controversies tend not to be rooted in doctrinal issues, the battles of the reformation were not about real issues of faith or belief. The reformation ultimately was not fought over what a Christian must believe to be a Christian, but over issues of institutional authority and power.

Both sides of this movement of conflict still read the same Bible, still recited the same creed and still sang the same hymns. Liturgical patterns did change, but for the most part the ancient liturgy of the church were not only still recognizable but they were also conducted in the same churches. Protestant polity became more democratic and less hierarchical. The people in Protestantism had more decision-making involvement, while Catholicism continued to operate under the slogan: "Father knows best." For the most part, despite the intensity of the struggle, the essence of Christian faith continues to be talked about in traditional and recognizable ways. The primary change was that doctoral debate was no longer controlled by the church hierarchy; in other words, the church was no longer acknowledged as the final arbiter of truth.

In reality this single change opened up other vast readers for transformation. From the leaders of science, free now from ecclesiastical control, came a new understanding of how the world operated, which challenged the Christian formulas of antiquity. Changes began to come in unceasing waves, each building on the last. The result of these and so many other cascading insights was that the traditional Christian concepts became less and less intelligible to more and more people. Those are the facts that are still today building pressure for a radically new kind of reformation. This one will not be about issues of authority; it must focus on the substance of Christianity itself. The questions which Christians are forced to ask today are qualitatively different from those that the Christians of the 16th century were asking. We want to know whether the idea of God still has meaning. We ask whether the historical creeds commit to us things that we cannot possibly still believe. We wonder how or if we can still use those creedal words with integrity. Can those 4th-century documents still be authoritative? Can there still be a definition of ultimate truth? Are not the claims of an infallible pope or an inherent Bible both ridiculous in today's world?

That is the place where we must begin the process of finding new words for our faith. The old words have lost their ability to serve in this way. This journey will go beyond the clichés of yesterday and will call us to a new Faith for tomorrow, it will be an exciting adventure. This may be the theological ride of a lifetime.