

Taking the Bible Seriously

*The unexamined Bible is not worth reading.*¹

—N. T. Wright

Author and sociologist Tex Sample tells a story of his childhood in Mississippi. He says:

My Sunday school teacher in the fifth grade was a man that I'll call Mr. Archon. Mr. A was the wealthiest, most important man in our town. And he was a terrific Sunday school teacher, in the sense that he knew how to talk to us fifth grade boys. He knew things we were interested in and he just knew how to say 'em. And he had what Max Weber called *charisma*. At the same time it seemed that about once a month he would teach us that Black people were inferior, that they were sub-human, that slavery had been right, that it was biblical, and that we southern boys should defend segregation with our very lives. He told us that we especially had to protect southern white girls.

It just so happened that in that same church we had a retired missionary named Miss Hattie Bowie. She'd been a missionary in Korea for thirty years. I never remember a direct confrontation

between her and Mr. Archon, but it seemed like every time Mr. Archon would say some of those terrible things, she had some way of countering it.

She would take us to her house and she had wonderful artifacts out of Korea. She had small houses that Korean people had made. She had wonderful paintings with a kind of a peculiar method that they had used. She had of course Korean dolls and Korean toys that we so enjoyed. It was my first experience with a culture radically different from my own. She also taught us songs. She taught us that song, "Jesus Loves the Little Children, all the Children of the World . . . Red and Yellow, Black and White, they are precious in his sight." And she taught us "Jesus Loves Me" in Korean. I still remember it:

Nal sa-rang ha-shim,
Nal sa-rang ha-shim,
Nal sa-rang ha-shim,
Sung-kyung-ae Seo-it-nae.

That's been a long time ago, but what I remember is that Mr. Archon took the racist story and put God's story in it to support the racist story. Miss Hattie Bowie took the racist story, put it into God's story and *dismantled* it. I have wondered so very many times, what would have happened to me if it had not been for Miss Hattie Bowie.

Any way you slice it, it turns out to be true: how a Christian reads the Bible and the authority she places in its words plays a critical role in the reader's worldview and understanding of a life of faith. But even if you *never* read the Bible, its influence on the world, for good and for ill, is hard to deny.

The Bible has been quoted and misquoted, used and abused, appealed to and discredited. Pastors and politicians, songwriters and poets, have

employed its images to inspire and motivate, to encourage and comfort. But it has also been used as a tool by those who have sought to oppress women, support slavery, justify wars, breed cults, and promote violence, racism, and terror.

It seems ridiculous to have to say it, but the Bible itself defies being defined as a single book with a clear-cut message to the masses. It's not a collection of handy quotes to be randomly plucked out as support for this point or that ideology. It is instead a complex, often confounding collection of strange and wonderful stories cobbled together over thousands of years. In fact, as a record of various peoples' experience of God's faithfulness and human infidelities, the Bible is full of colorful characters, lying, cheating, sex, hate, war, sex, betrayal, murder, sex, letters, poetry, history, sex, great ideas, lousy ideas, and more sex.

Those who read closely find a variety of theological voices. Sometimes those voices are harmonious, other times they create a cacophony of contradiction. For example, many people don't realize that there are two flood stories in Genesis: the familiar one where God has Noah collect two of each animal (Gen. 7:14), and the other where he is to collect seven pairs of each animal (Gen. 7:2). Perhaps we only hear about the two-by-two story because the seven-by-seven version would clutter up the illustrations in children's books and murals.

It's this sort of puzzling storytelling that leads many Bible readers to conclude that they simply cannot hold a literalist view of scripture. There are just too many inconsistencies for them to take every word as historically accurate eyewitness accounts. Jesus scholar Marcus Borg says of this issue:

There are many Christians in North America who are bothered by any suggestion that the Bible might be anything less than a divine product. There are also millions of people in North America and in Europe who simply cannot be biblical literalists. And my passion, my vocation, my mission even, if you will, is talking to the people who can't be literalists. And what I want to say to

conservative Christians who are upset by this other approach to the Bible is, "What do we say to the people who can't be literalists? Do we say, 'Sorry. Only literalists can be Christians.?' Or, do we say, 'Sorry. God accepts only literalists.?' Now, if you are a literalist and your literalism isn't getting in your way and you're not using it to beat up on other people, I have no problem with it whatsoever. God can work through literalism or nonliteralism. But again, what do we say to the people who can't be literalists? And here, my argument is that a more historical and metaphorical approach to the Gospels, to the story of Jesus, and to the Bible as a whole provides a way for nonliteralists to be Christian.

At issue is the authority of scripture. We have to ask ourselves how we determine the level of trust we place in any written material, including the Bible. As perhaps the bestselling least-read book of all time, the Bible—and our relationship with it—needs to be reexamined.

A SERIOUS RELATIONSHIP

In his bestseller, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Borg writes, "the Christian life is not primarily about believing the right things or even being good. The Christian life is about being in a relationship with God which transforms us into more and more compassionate beings, 'into the likeness of Christ.'"² Likewise, having a relationship with the biblical text, a serious relationship that grows and evolves, has the potential to be transformative as well. Such a relationship might be said to have more spiritual and intellectual integrity than performing the mental gymnastics necessary to cling to the notion of the Bible as a literal, perfect document unaffected by human influence.

Yet many people are afraid that if they admit that there are contradictions in the Bible then the whole thing has to be dismissed as a worthless

lie. While the rift between literalists and nonliteralists has heated up in recent years, it is not a new conflict.

In the early part of the twentieth century, there was a popular pamphlet about the fundamentals of Christianity making its way through the American church. It spawned a whole movement committed to the inerrancy of scripture and other supposedly bedrock doctrines. Defenders of these fundamentals pointed to one verse in the New Testament, 2 Timothy 3:16, which reads, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." This led to a kind of circular argument, in which it was said that because the Bible is without error or inconsistency, it must be the work of God, and because it is the work of God, it must be without error or inconsistency. It doesn't matter which proposition comes first, the other is argued to follow.

In the 1920s, a highly publicized controversy flared up between the mainstream church and what had become known as the Fundamentalists. The so-called Scopes Monkey Trial was front-page news in national newspapers. For the Fundamentalists, this court case represented the battle for the soul of America. On the other side of that battle were the mainline churches. In an effort to stir people to action, one of America's great preachers, Harry Emerson Fosdick, preached a sermon called, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" in which he argued for a nonliteral interpretation of the Bible. He was worried that if the mainline church didn't do more to educate its people about the metaphorical and mythological origins of scripture, it would lose its brightest and best young people. The general disinterest in Christianity and the dwindling numbers in today's mainline churches suggest that he was right.

There are a variety of reasons people are dissatisfied with the church today. But this issue of biblical literalism is one of the most significant. Increasingly, Christians look at the way they are asked to read the Bible and ask themselves why this book calls for a whole different category of reading. Why, they wonder, are they expected to suspend disbelief and

not think through what they are reading the way they would with any other book, issue, or situation? Why are they discouraged from asking questions of this text upon which they are being asked to base their lives?

Biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine explains the situation:

In some churches today, there's a problem: people are hesitant to voice questions, to say, "This doesn't quite cohere. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Last Supper is a Passover meal. But in the Gospel of John, it's not. Did something go wrong? Did Jesus cleanse the temple at the beginning of his ministry? That's John. Did he do it at the beginning of the Passion like in Matthew and Mark? Did he do it twice? Didn't it take the first time? What did he say when he did it?" Jesus didn't ask people to give up their minds. He asked for one's heart. Jesus expands on Deuteronomy in the Great Commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength." It doesn't say, "Give up your intelligence, that good intelligence that God gave you." I think if one's faith is so fragile that the very mention of a possible discrepancy threatens to topple the whole thing, then that faith requires reconsideration.

A FOURTH MEMBER OF THE TRINITY?

Hebrew scripture scholar Harrell Beck used to stir up people with the exclamation: "The Bible is *not* the Word of God—but the Word of God is in the Bible."³ Beck's point was to remind people that the Bible is not God. For too many faith communities, the Bible serves as an object to be venerated. Instead of seeking the God of the Bible, they almost seem to worship the Bible itself, fearing any suggestion that it is anything other than holy and infallible. According to sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman, it's a form of idolatry that in many traditions makes the Bible a "fourth member of the Trinity."

That kind of bibliolatry fails to take into account the human element involved in the creation of the Bible. Many people cling to the unspoken cultural belief that scripture is the result of a series of supernatural events. Tongue firmly planted in cheek, Harrell Beck imagines the scene: “Long ago, a shepherd boy in Palestine was startled by an ungodly clap of thunder and the King James Version of the Bible floated out of a cloud and settled at his feet. Having an uncanny appreciation for the value of an ancient text in Elizabethan English, the boy immediately took it to the religious authorities for distribution. Voila!”⁴

In reality, the sixty-six separate books crammed together in a not-always-logical arrangement came together in very human ways. With all the haggling and bickering you’d expect from a committee, the Catholic Council of Carthage pulled together one of the first official collections in 397 CE—nearly 400 years after the time of Jesus. What we call the Old Testament is concerned with Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, and a history of the early Israelites. The New Testament is the work of early Christians and reflects their beliefs about Jesus. The Old Testament consists of thirty-nine books, many of which had multiple authors. The New Testament has twenty-seven books, many of which are an accumulation of traditions or of uncertain authorship. Catholic Bibles include an additional twelve books known as the Apocrypha.

The composition of the various books began before 1000 BCE and continued for more than 1,000 years. It included oral material that was repeated from generation to generation, revised over and over again, and then put into written form by various redactors. These editors worked in different locations and in different time periods and with very different socioeconomic, philosophical, theological, and spiritual worldviews. They were most certainly unaware of each other and it is highly unlikely that any of them foresaw their work being included in a cohesive collection of sacred texts. Their work was intended for local use.

The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are examples of books that did not carry the names of their actual authors. Their present names were assigned long after the books were written and circulated

anonymously. Despite the witness of the Gospels themselves, biblical scholars are now almost unanimously agreed—based on evidence within the books themselves—that none of the Gospel authors was a disciple of Jesus or an eyewitness to his ministry.

There are no extant or original manuscripts of these ancient texts. Our current versions of these texts are probably not anything like their original forms. There are countless differences between the oldest surviving copies and the most recent manuscripts. These differences indicate that additions and alterations were made to the originals by various copyists and editors. Scholars give precedence to the oldest texts as they are likely to be most like the originals.

This tangled process is the reason there are stories in the Bible that don't sync—the two creation stories in Genesis, two flood stories, and what scholars believe might be four separate versions of the exodus lurking in the book we call Exodus. While there are four canonical Gospels, the narratives of Jesus's birth appear in only Matthew and Luke (and they don't have the same characters, timeline, or story emphasis). It also accounts for the occasional mishmash of cultural myths and beliefs that find their way into the Bible. Imagine the surprise of Victorian scholars who discovered that story elements in the Genesis flood story had been lifted from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*!

None of this is meant to suggest that we dispense with the Bible or relegate it to a dusty bookshelf along with all the other ancient texts. It's exactly these kinds of inconsistencies in scripture that have led careful readers of the Bible to be curious about what was going on. These people aren't folks looking to discredit the Bible. Far from it! They are people who have dedicated their lives to understanding scripture through and through.

For scholars and practitioners such as Reverend Winnie Varghese of the Episcopal Church, this careful biblical criticism is an essential part of the long history of the Christian faith. Varghese points out:

Some of these narratives are poetry, some are collective memories, some are prophecy. They're different genres of text that exist together and from them we discern where God has been revealed

in those communities and where God is revealed to us. So we discern the workings of God in this time through the lens of this text as we gain increasing knowledge about them. Our increasing knowledge of archeology and literary criticism and the social sciences and the humanities takes us to different places with these texts than we would have been even fifty years ago, in some ways, much more accurate places. In some ways, much more complicated places. I believe that we are called to engage that. If we take the text seriously, we have to take the work around it seriously.

Acknowledging the literary challenges the Bible presents is a more honest, faith-filled endeavor than living in denial over its clashing stories and contradictions. In the words of theologian Walter Brueggemann, "The Bible is an act of faithful imagination. It is not a package of certitudes. It is an act of imagination that invites our faithful imagination that makes it possible to live faithfully."

A WINDOW ON THE DIVINE

Author Frederick Buechner uses the metaphor of a window to illustrate how we can hold on to our belief in both the need for questions and the relevance of scripture. He notes that when we look through a window, we don't worship the window. We simply look through it to get a glimpse of the Divine on the other side. Just because there are smudges, swatted flies, and hairline cracks obstructing our view, we don't throw the window out. We learn to distinguish between what is part of the window and what is beyond it.⁵ Even though one can point to countless examples of political and theological spin that are anything but holy, the Bible has nonetheless established itself in our culture as a source of inspired (not dictated) guidance and observations. Although a flawed and imperfect window, it was fashioned by people of faith who have helped generations of seekers catch a glimpse of the mystery beyond.

The Bible is many things to many people. It's what people make of it and what they let it make of them over the course of time. Even if we all read the same translation of the Bible—and there are many different translations, each with its own interpretative slant—it has been said that there are as many Bibles as there are readers of the Bible. We all bring our assumptions, presuppositions, prejudices, and experiences to bear on the text. As William Blake wrote, "Both read the Bible day and night but thou readst black where I read white."⁶ Acknowledging that the history of interpreting scripture is itself in process is one of the first steps in establishing a personal, life-long journey with the biblical text—a sometimes frustrating, often rewarding, and always surprising relationship.

In an effort to explain one of the shifts we need to make on our journey of faith, Marcus Borg speaks of the various stages people pass through as they develop an appreciation of the Bible as metaphor. As young children we interpret the Bible with what Borg calls a "pre-critical naïveté." In this stage we believe what we are told and don't give it another thought. As we get older, we move into a stage of critical thinking in which we unpack our understanding of the world and toss out what we recognize as false, such as the tooth fairy or the idea that you can break your mother's back by stepping on a crack.

While many get stuck in the stage of "critical thinking," there's a third stage that Borg calls "post-critical naïveté" that is demonstrated by the capacity to recognize the truth in the biblical stories, "even as you know that their truth does not depend upon their factuality. And even as you are pretty darn sure that many of them are not historically factual." Using the Christmas story as an example, he explains:

These stories use ancient archetypal language with one of their central affirmations being, "Jesus is the light of the world," the true light that enlightens every person, was even then coming into the world. That's the star, the radiant glory of God, and the angels in the night sky. It's the ability to hear the birth stories as true stories even though you know the star is not an astronomical

object of history but probably the exegetical creation of Matthew as he interprets the 60th chapter of Isaiah. It's a literary creation. Even as you know that Jesus was probably born in Nazareth and not in Bethlehem. And even as you know that Herod the Great never ordered the slaying of all male babies in Bethlehem under age two, but rather that's the use of the story of the birth of Moses in the time of Pharaoh when Pharaoh issued a similar order. The author of Matthew is saying the story of Jesus is about the story of the true king coming into the world whom the evil kings seek to swallow up. This is the story of the Exodus all over again. This is the story of the conflict between the Lordship of God known in Christ and the Lordship of Pharaoh and the rulers of this world. And the rulers of this world always try to swallow up the one who is of God. Post-critical naïveté is the ability to hear that as a true story.

As people are given permission to think critically about the Bible and are resourced with a broad understanding of the history, culture, and political intrigues that originally drove the content, story lines, and theologies of the canon, the text can become less of a stuffy rulebook and more of a lens through which one's spiritual seeking and life journey comes into focus.

The re-visioning of Christianity that is already emerging in the world is motivated in part by taking the Bible seriously and not literally. The core message, dogma, and practices of the Christian faith in today's world are being reevaluated with a love for and relationship with scripture at its center.

Thinking Theologically

We must get away from this theistic supernatural God that imperils our humanity and come back to a God who permeates life so deeply that our humanity becomes the very means through which we experience the Divine Presence.

—John Shelby Spong

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is an account of a journey of faith. The sojourner, named Celie, discovers new ways of understanding religion and of imaging the Divine. In one of her letters to her sister, Nettie, Celie writes about a conversation she's had with her friend/lover Shug: "She say, 'My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being a part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.'"¹

To think theologically is to ask the questions of how the Divine is intertwined with the world: How do we understand the unfathomable mystery that we've come to call God? Is there a God whose character and ways of

relating to the world can be explained in ways that make sense? As Culver “Bill” Nelson has suggested, even the word “God” itself is a “very slender word that simply covers our shivering ignorance.” Exploring these and other questions and concepts is at the heart of thinking theologically—a practice in which we all engage, whether we know it or not.

Reading the Bible closely, it becomes clear that there’s no one way of understanding who God is and how God relates to the world. Hebrew scripture scholar Rolf Knierim opens his *The Task of Old Testament Theology* by stating that, “The Old Testament contains a plurality of theologies.”² The Bible is the witness of generations of faithful people recording their own understandings of the divine in their particular time, place, and culture. This theological pluralism reveals changing, developing, and sometimes conflicting ideas about God.

The challenge of thinking theologically is about maintaining a creative tension between various perspectives—an exercise that generates dialogue, not absolute certainty. At its best, thinking theologically is not about facts, but about wrestling with often abstract ideas and concepts.

Winnie Varghese puts it this way:

I think a theological framework keeps us with the perspective that what God desires for us is much greater than what we can imagine amongst ourselves. The gift of theological thinking is that it can give us a freedom to hope for much more than seems practical. It should make us seem a bit foolish, I think, what we dream of as justice, what we dream of for our families, what we dream of for our nation and for the world, because we are supposed to be trying to view the world with God’s vision and not just with what we can imagine. From the beginning, our imaginations about who we can be are just far too small.

Traditional understandings of Christology, Atonement, and the Incarnation are all in flux. In fact, many people find these concepts to be irrel-

evant to contemporary spirituality. Yet thinking theologically creates a disequilibrium that makes us continually rethink our beliefs in light of our changing understanding and ongoing experiences. In many ways, this entire book is an exercise in thinking theologically.

To demonstrate how thinking theologically helps us make sense of the often confusing or contradictory ideas of the Bible, we'll spend this chapter looking at two of the major ideas that create conflict among people of faith. The first is the language we use for the Divine. The second is the notion of "omnipotence."

SPEAKING OF GOD

Many of us get in a rut with our language about or image of God. We find that our view of God is narrow and constricting. As our life experience broadens our understanding, some of us become conflicted over whether we can believe at all. Maya Angelou relates how in her twenties in San Francisco she "became a sophisticate and an acting agnostic." She says, "It wasn't that I stopped believing in God; it's just that God didn't seem to be around the neighborhoods I frequented."³ Harry Emerson Fosdick was fond of telling the story of a distraught student who exclaimed, "I don't believe in God!" Fosdick replied, "Tell me about this God you don't believe in; chances are I don't believe in that God either."⁴

Mystics, theological thinkers, and the Bible itself have shown that there are as many images and ideas to express the Divine as there are experiences of God. The biblical writers use a rich pallet of metaphors and poetic language to point toward what is ultimately a mystery. The Divine is described as a potter, a cup (of cool water), a path, a safe place, a rock, a burning bush, an eagle, and a whirlwind—all wonderful metaphors that help us assign a variety of attributes to the Divine without being the exclusive last word.

One of the most common ways of imaging God is as a father. Listening to many prayers and liturgies, one might think it was the *only* image of God in scripture. However, God is also imaged as a mother in Deuteronomy 32:18: "You forgot the God who gave you birth"; as a woman in labor in Isaiah 42:14; and as a comforting mother in Isaiah 66:13. Is God a mother? Yes. A father? Yes. A rock? Yes. A wind? Yes. Everything we use to refer to God is simply a limited, human effort to explain the unexplainable. To be aware of our language and its implications is a great exercise in thinking theologically—remembering that the language we use to describe the Divine will directly influence how we relate to the Divine.

This is not a minor question. A person's—or faith community's—view of God shapes everything else about it. New Testament authority John Dominic Crossan suggests four questions for today's Christians:

1. *What is the character of your God?* When you think about God what are you imagining?
2. *What is the content of your faith?* We can't imagine any longer that the person says, "I have faith," and you say, "That's great." There are certain faith-based initiatives that aren't very great. Al Qaeda is a faith-based initiative. So I want to ask, What is the content of your faith? What do you believe in? If you tell me you believe, what do you believe in?
3. *What is the function of your church?* What are you coming together for? And if you tell me you come to gather to worship God then I will repeat the question.
4. *What is the purpose of your worship?* In case you've said you are going to worship God in that preceding one, how does God want to be worshipped? Does God simply want prayers said—or is God more interested in prayers that lead to a life? And then of course, it goes back to, What is the character of your God? It is a

circular exercise where each question flows into the next. These are the questions we have to face.

The ideas we hold about the nature of God and the language we use to describe God play out in small ways—how or even whether we pray, how we think about our purpose in life, how we relate to those who do not share our beliefs. But they also influence how we see the world and, ultimately, God's role in that world.

WHAT KIND OF POWER?

When remembering the old elementary school riddles like, If God is all-powerful, can God create a rock too heavy for God to lift? or, Can God create a square circle?, it doesn't take much life experience to realize just how silly and shallow such questions are. Does that rock really matter when you've lost a loved one, when you can't feed your family, or disease has compromised your health? When you're unemployed or divorcing or lonely? Yet the theological construct of "omnipotence," as questionable a concept as it is, has stuck around for centuries. There is something about the idea of an all-powerful God that continues to be compelling for many Christians.

Thomas Aquinas formulated our modern idea of omnipotence in the thirteenth century. He reckoned that in order for God to be God, God must hold more power than any earthly ruler. The highest conceivable form of power must be the Divine power. So the biblical term "Almighty" became all-powerful or omnipotent. What exactly does the highest conceivable form of power look like? Aquinas wasn't very clear on this.

However, many people operate with the understanding that the highest conceivable form of power is the power to determine every detail of what happens in the world. But there's the rub: when unexplainable catastrophe strikes, God is left wide open for people to ask, Why did God

do this to me? or to cover for God by ascribing mysterious, Divine intentions behind even the worst catastrophes.

The road that follows a belief in an omnipotent God is a muddy one to say the least. If God has all the power, shouldn't everything be good? What about evil and those times when we choose the lesser good? Does God underwrite evil for the sake of letting us have free will? Does God permit sin in order to delude us into thinking we have the final decision? It's a road that gets God mixed up with some pretty shady business—up to and including natural disasters that can't be attributed to human freedom—even insurance companies call them “acts of God.” What does it say about a Deity who has all the power and still allows horrible diseases, accidents, and natural disasters to occur?

Some might object to questioning anything but the pure and complete sovereignty of God, but there are lots of other ways to think of God than as one who rules over everything. In fact, the biblical witness makes it clear that this royal model of all-powerful kingship is just one feeble attempt to grasp a concept that is impossible for our minds to comprehend. What is clear is that the idea that God is in possession of all the power turns life and all of creation into a really bad puppet show.

Theologian John B. Cobb Jr. explains it like this:

First of all, the doctrine of omnipotence is not a biblical doctrine, so this is not an argument that should go to the heart of our faith. But from maybe the second century on and perhaps earlier, people thought, “Well, God is powerful. Certainly the God of the Bible is powerful and if we're really going to say the best things we can about God then we have to say, ‘God has *all* the power.’” But the irony is that if you say God has all the power then that means he has no power at all because power is a relational term. And if I can influence the behavior of another human being, that's exercising significant power. If I can lift a piece of paper, that's not really such a marvelous demonstration

of enormous power. Relational power is really the only kind of significant power there is. But the notion of omnipotence tends to focus on coercion.

The way we think and speak about God ripples into every aspect of our theological thinking. That's why it's worthwhile to step back from our language and ask questions about why we say what we do about God and what those words and images might mean. The Bible offers a multitude of images and ideas about the Divine. On their own, not one of them is right. Taken all together, they testify to the liveliness of theological thinking over the ages and the wisdom of the biblical compilers in including them all. If all we ever do is ask questions of these images and ideas, then we've gone a long way toward the practice of thinking theologically that will see us through to another level of understanding the Divine.

The practice of Christianity is rife with a variety of theological problems and concepts that cripple its relevance in the minds of many twenty-first-century people. But one of the most notable characteristics of the Judeo-Christian tradition has been its amazing flexibility in withstanding the changes and adaptations brought to them by cultures they encounter. The Bible itself is witness to the same event or idea being represented in a variety of theological interpretations, each of which was included in the canon of scripture despite obvious differences. Wrestling with those differences has always played a significant role in the history of both Jewish and Christian concepts of the Divine—and can again play a part in rethinking many of the staid theological ideas that have become stagnant and unhelpful in the twenty-first century.



BEYOND THE SIXTH GRADE

Graduated from theology
In the sixth grade
No need for Sunday School again
Too much struggle for mom and dad
To plead that young soul into a classroom
One more Sabbath.

Others finished with biblical studies
Just after clergy words and hands
Confirmed the journey.

For few remaining
Or handful brought later by a party
Simple answers served.
Just when spicy foods and rich meals
Could be appreciated,
Peanut butter and jelly fare, crust off,
Served cut in half
As to a preschooler.
As school encouraged wrestling with Plato and heavy weights
Church promoted "simply believe."

No one would conceive of youth departing
Chemistry, government, orchestra and basketball
Because knowledge and skills sufficient.
No memo to sit this one out
Concerning race relations and global affairs.
No teacher would convey the theory
That the universe would crack,
All knowledge shatter

LIVING THE QUESTIONS

If questioned, tugged, and manipulated
This way and that.

Monday-through-Friday learner she became
So did he.
Absorbing the mysteries of the galaxies,
Reveling in literature,
Practicing cello and backstroke,
Pondering ancient philosophies of the wise ones.
Delighted by discoveries within and beyond self,
Thrilled in the land of accomplishments
And meaningful living.

All the while religious education —
Perfect attendance awards
With Bible school art
Tucked in a scrapbook on a top shelf.
Journey with the Creator deemed complete
In an “all I need to know I learned by sixth grade” approach.

Is it any wonder that it is both stunning and refreshing
To consider divine study —
The kind where head and heart muscle grow
As we grapple with God?
Areas atrophied and places newly discovered
Surprised that Holy Mystery can withstand
Questions, fears, disillusionment, prods, and amazement —
As can our faith.

— Cynthia Langston Kirk