

THE BIBLE: EXPOSED

OR HOW TO BE HAPPY
IN YOUR DISBELIEF

by Reverend
Luci F. Emwhite

The BIBLE: EXPOSED

or

How To Be Happy In Your Disbelief

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The most fun you can have
with your Bible open

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"The Bible has some noble poetry in it; and some clever fables; and some blood-drenched history; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies."

Mark Twain: *Letters From Earth*

NOTE: Except where indicated, the Bible I will be quoting from is the *New International Version*. BCE means Before the Common Era (Before Christ); CE means the Common Era (after Christ); CCR means Credence Clearwater Revival. Also, I do not capitalize *he* or *him* when referring to God, except in direct quotes or in a sense of irony. There is no grammatical reason to capitalize these personal pronouns except as a nod to the church. And let me apologize beforehand for the constant use of the masculine form of pronouns and nouns. That's the way it is with God, so we're stuck with it.

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*Freedom From Religion

Preface

What if there were only two religions in the world? Wouldn't it be logical to assume that at least one of them was wrong? What if there were 33,000 Christian religions and they were all based on the same book? Have you read it? It's called the Bible.

INTRODUCTION

First off, let's decide
Which Bible?

I tell you we got Bibles. Right here in River City. We got Catholic Bibles and Mormon Bibles and children's Bibles and illustrated Bibles and annotated Bibles and talking Bibles and Braille Bibles and E-Bibles. Why, I've seen three-inch, armor-plated pocket Protestant Bibles for soldiers, and gold-encrusted King James deluxe illuminated nine-pounders for your aunt Dorothy in Des Moines. And that starts with *D* and that rhymes with *B* and that stands for Bible. Right here in River City.

Got a thesaurus? Look up *Bible*: New International, Douay, Wycliffe, New English, Pesheitt, Vulgate, Polyglot, Gideons, Targim, Tyndale, the Geneva, the Feminist Bible and *Bobby Ray's Aryan Home Goodbook* are all Bibles, and though they disagree in significant ways, each one claims to be the official word of the one-true-god of the church on Earth.

SAUL'S HOUSE OF BIBLES

Below, find a list of popular Bibles arranged by approximate date of first use. Some of them are only a few words apart; others differ in their entirety. Most are named after the person responsible for the translation or revision. Pick whichever one you like and worship accordingly.

1,400 BCE: The **First Bible** is, of course, the Ten Commandments, written by God.

1,000-500 BCE: Books of the **Torah** are collected.

50-275 CE: **New Testament** is written and rewritten, mostly in Greek.

315: **Codex** (First Bible in book form)

352: **Vulgate** (Latin Bible, with Apocrypha)

610-632: **Qur'an** (Same God, different prophet)

1380: **Wycliffe Bible** (First English Bible. No Apocrypha)

1450: **Guttenberg Bible** (First moveable type book is a Bible)

1517: Luther goes Lutheran, writes **German Bible**.

1520: **Polyglot** (The Bible in three languages, plus some other heavy stuff.)

1525: **Tyndale Bible** (First English Bible direct from the Greek.)

1535: **Coverdale Bible** (First "Modern" English Bible)

1549: **Matthew/Tyndale Bible** (A compilation)

1560: **Geneva Bible**

1568: **Bishop's Bible**

1589: **Doway/Rheims Bible**

1611: **King James Bible** (The mother of all English Bibles.)

1663: **Algonquin Bible** (The first Bible written in America is in Algonquin Indian.)

1830: **Mormon Bible** (Same God, new prophet in a New World)

1833: **Webster's Bible** (Yeah, the dictionary guy had his own Bible)

1881: **English Revised Version**

1901: **American Standard Version**

1971: **New American Standard Version**

1973: **New International Version**

1982: **New King James Version**

2002: **English Standard Version**

2010: **New Revised American International Standard. . . uh, Version**, I think.

2011: **My Version**. (And why not?)

It's Everywhere! It's Everywhere!

We all own one. Even you. According the American Bible Society, 430 million copies were distributed in 2003. Which means there are more Bibles in America than there are Americans. It is the biggest selling book since Guttenberg invented Helvetica. It's been at the top of the New York Times best seller list for 10,400 weeks in a row, which is a miraculous run, especially when you consider that you don't know anyone who has ever actually bought one.

What? You say you don't speak English? No problem. Suppose you speak **Swahili**:

Kwa maana jinsi hii mungu alipenda ulimwengu hata akamtoa Mwanawe pekee, ili kila mtu amwaminiye asipotee; bali awe na uzima wa milele.

John 3:16

Or Gullah:

"Gullah, a dialect still spoken by many Atlantic coast blacks, has its own Holy Bible, in which 'he is not here, but is risen,' becomes 'Jedus ain't yah. E done git op from mongst de ded an E da life gin!'"

Arthur Plotnick: *The Elements of Expression*

Or Pig Latin:

"Monk Translates Bible into Pig Latin"

Weekly World News (December 7, 2003)

ONE BILLION JESUS FANS CAN'T BE WRONG

A recent survey found that eighty-two percent of Americans believe that the Bible is the word of God. If you live in Kansas, odds are pretty good that you're one of them. But even if you live in Bangladesh, even if you've never touched a Bible, it will touch you. The territorial and moral boundaries of nations are drawn in its pages. Wars are fought and people die enforcing these

boundaries. Fundamentalists dress in Bible approved clothes and they get Bible approved haircuts (or not) and they eat Bible approved food. They marry within the church, they vote as a bloc and they share common enemies. Protestants, Catholics, Methodists, Mennonites, Baptists, Anabaptists, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, Branch Davidians, Quakers, Shakers, the Silver Saucer Saviors from Saturn, and a holy-host of others all swear by it. Be ye Christian or Jew, everything you know about your god and his laws and his teachings begins and ends with the Holy Bible. It is without a doubt the **most important book ever written**. Everyone in the world has read it, right?

Bzzzt! Wrong.

More people have read Harry Potter.

Oh, sure, we all know a quote or two, but most of us lack the discipline and mental stamina to hack our way through all 845,000 words. On those rare occasions when we do open it, we might skim over a few verses before running low on motivation. Even your aunt Helen, who has never missed a day of church in her life, rarely quotes past Proverbs. Even your parish priest just picks at it, peeling off a parable here or a prophet there.

Okay, so it's a tough read. That's what Preachers and Rabbis are for. At least we all agree that the Bible is God's perfect word and that the stories are all true and that each lesson is made perfectly clear and that there is zero chance of a misunderstanding, right?

Bzzt Bzzt! Double wrong.

In the Tempe Public Library, cast in amongst the dozens of Name Brand Bibles, there are at least another five hundred books written *about* the Bible. I suspect there may be thousands more. Some are thicker and drier than a stack of stone tablets. No two authors agree on the exact meaning of God's words. On one point, however, they all agree: The Bible doesn't even agree with itself.

Okay, so maybe it's not quite as straightforward and lucid as it might have been. At least the Good Book teaches us right from wrong, right?

Not so much.

"Both read the Bible day and night, But thou read'st black where I read white."

William Blake (1757-1827)

Blake might have added, "Show me a passage from the Bible that offers guidance, and I'll show you another one that teaches exactly the opposite."

For instance, first God says,

"You shall **not kill**."

Exo. 20:13

Then, about twenty minutes later, he says,

"Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each **killing** his brother and friend and neighbor."

Exo. 32:27

First God says,

"You shall **not steal**."

Exo. 20:15

Then he says,

"And so you will **plunder** (rip off) the Egyptians."

Exo. 3:22

In his second commandment, the Lord describes himself as-

"a jealous God, punishing the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

Exo. 4:5

In Deuteronomy, however, he does a one-eighty:

"Fathers shall **not** be put to death for the sins of their children, nor children for the sins of their fathers."

Deut. 7:15

First God announces:

"The Lord is a man of **war**."

Exo. 15:3

Then he smokes a little weed and becomes . . .

"The God of **peace**."

Romans 15:33

God's prophet, Joel, bangs the war drum:

"Beat your plowshares into swords."

Joel 3:10

While his prophet, Isaiah, preaches peace:

"Beat your swords into plowshares."

Isaiah 2:4

First God forbids idols:

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven or earth."

Exo. 20:4

Then, that very same afternoon, he gives these orders to Moses:

"Make a [bronze] snake and mount it on a pole."

Exo. 21:8

Sing: "I don't care if it rains or freezes long as I got my plastic Jesus, ridin' on the dashboard of my car."

Ques: Isn't a plastic Jesus an idol?

Ans: No. About a thousand years after that commandment was written, a flock of Catholics got together and decided that a statue of Jesus wasn't an idol, but was an *icon*.

Ques: What about all those porcelain statues of the Virgin of Guadalupe?

Ans: Icons.

Ques: What about the crucifix I just bought for fifty bucks that contains "an actual splinter of wood from the cross upon which our Lord was crucified?"

Ans: Blessed are the gullible.

And yet, as unsettling as these contradictions may be, they're just petty annoyances compared to the Father/Son disagreement that's been bubbling for two thousand years and has been the cause of innumerable wars and billions of murders.

First God demands:

"Life for life, eye for eye."

Gen. 21:23

Then Jesus countermands:

Hey, daddio, cool your jets.

"If someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Matt. 5:39

Make up your mind, will ya? With all the eye-gouging and cheek-slapping, is there any wonder people are confused? The Bible purports to offer a clear, straight path to salvation, but in truth, it's all over the moral map. As Shakespeare once noted, "The devil can cite scripture for his own purpose." For instance, suppose you want to justify slavery. The Bible will back you up.

"Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves."

Lev. 25:44

Or how about a little ethnic cleansing? Plenty of precedents in the Good Book.

"Destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them and show no mercy."

Deut. 7:2

Or maybe you're a practicing racist, sexist, polygamist or wife-beater. No need to scour the library. There's ample scripture to support your virtues and your vices. Want to start a war? Go on a crusade? Lay claim to some foreign lands? Torture somebody? Win a football game? No problem. According to the Good Book, if you truly believe in him, all you have to do is ask, and Jehovah will be on your side.

Yeah, but what if you're on the *other* team?

"We lost the State Championship because God made me fumble."
Earl "Bubba" Ganoush

"If they made the Bible into a video game, it would have to be rated PG-17."

A.J. Atari: Entertainment Software Rating Board

"The god of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction ...a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."

The God Delusion

Professor Richard Dawkins

Okay, Richard, you don't have to sugar-coat it. The point Dawkins and Shakespeare and Blake are trying to make is that the Good Book is awash in contradictions and moral ambiguity. It is, as almost everyone admits, **open to interpretation**. I might add that it reeks of hearsay and glows with neon anachronisms, as well as unwieldy metaphors, but we'll get to that later. For now, let's just

take a brief look at the history of the Bible and how it came to its present form.

The Oral Tradition

"Moses supposes his toeses are roses, but Moses supposes erroneously." (Singin' in the Rain)

Moses deduces that God hides in bushes, but Moses hallucinates quite frequently. (Me)

According to tradition, the first five books of the Old Testament were supposedly downloaded directly from God to Moses. This is straight from the *How to Start a Religion* handbook. Be ye Christian, Muslim, Mormon, Jew or Scientologist, your religion began with a revelation. For whatever reason, the Supreme Being usually picks some poor, disenfranchised, illiterate nobody as his vessel. Invariably a loner or an outcast (but never a woman), this "prophet" often has rambling discourses with himself and is prone to visions. Gabriel appeared to Mohammed. Moroni told Joseph Smith where to find the Golden Plates. Yahweh was revealed to Moses. L. Ron Hubbard exposed himself to Tom Cruise.

Okay, let's suppose it's true. Moses now carries the complete works of the omnipotent, omniscient, everlasting God in his tiny three pound brain. Did you get that? The entire story of the creation of the universe, all of the commandments and bylaws and everything else that God could come up with to help and guide us on our way, now resides in the trusted memory banks of a nomad who speaks a dying language. To make things even more fun, God tells Moses to spread the word.

"How?" asks Moses. "There's no World Wide Web. No 3d-MindWriters. No Xerox ã copiers. No Officemax ã. Not even a decent Bic ã ball-point pen!"

"Go tell it on the mountain," God suggests.

Sounds easy enough, but can you remember the words to the Preamble to the Constitution? How about all five verses of "American Pie"? *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury? I knew you could.

Now, memorize Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and

Deuteronomy, or about 80,000 words. Come on, Moses did it, supposedly. Oh, all right, just remember one book. Or one chapter. Got it? Good. Now, go tell it to your uncle Paul. Have him tell it to cousin Saul, who will spread the word to his friends down at the mall, and so on, generation after generation. How long do you suppose it would be before subtle changes started to appear? My guess would be, not very long.

Do you remember the old Jack Parr Show? They used to do a bit where Jack would tell a short joke to his Cuban band leader, who would then tell the same joke, in Spanish, to his multi-lingual Brazilian drummer, who would tell the joke, in Portuguese, to a guitar player, who would then tell the joke, in English, back to the audience. Needless to say, by the time it got back around, the joke was no longer funny. In most cases it was unrecognizable. The point is, in less than five minutes, the meaning of one simple paragraph was lost.

Yeah, but that was just a joke. Suppose we had to remember something totally important, like, say, United States history?

U.S. History Pop Quiz

Which of the following are true and which are false.

1. Columbus discovered America
2. The first Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.
3. Betsy Ross sewed the first American flag.
4. George Washington chopped down a cherry tree, then confessed.
5. George W. Bush knows what he's doing.

Ans: They are all false. They are myths. They are stories we have grown up with, stories taught to us in school, which have no basis in fact.

Correct Answers

1. Leaf Ericson beat Columbus by 492 years, and you can't "discover" a country that already has a million residents.
2. French Huguenot pilgrims landed in Florida in 1562, fifty years ahead of the English
3. Betsy Ross sewed *a* flag. She did not design it, nor was it the

first American flag.

4. This comes from a notoriously unsubstantiated biography. And his false teeth were made of ivory, not wood.

5. World history will judge "W" as buffoon numero dos, right behind Idi Amin.

Famous Misquotes

Misquote: "Play it again, Sam."

Actual Quote: "Play it."

Misquote: "Elementary, my dear Watson."

Actual quote: "It was very superficial, my dear Watson."

Misquote: "Money is the root of all evil."

Actual quote: "For the *love* of money is the root of all kinds of evil."

Misquote: "Spare the rod and spoil the child."

Actual quote: "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who disciplines him early is wise."

As you can see, even when it's etched in rock, even when it's burned in celluloid, even if it's in our 8th grade history books, we can still screw it up. The truth is, the *truth*, can get bruised, even in a couple of E-generations. Now, try two thousand years of oral history . . . and a tower of Babel.

MIXED MYTHOLOGY

Do you remember anything from that Mythology class you had right after lunch? Probably not. If you had stayed awake, you might have noticed a similarity between certain stories in the Bible, and the pagan myths of ancient Samaria, Greece or Egypt.

A Few Examples:

Pandora/Eve is the first women. One day she is tempted by the gods/God with a box/fruit which contains plagues/knowledge. Pandora/Eve is curious, so she opens/eats/ the box/fruit and out flies plagues/original sin. Because of Pandora's/Eve's curiosity, humanity is damned/damned. Damn it!

Samson/Hercules is the strongest man alive. He can kill lions with his bare hands. The only way he can be defeated is by a haircut/a magic spell. Quick-tempered and not too bright, Victor Mature/Kevin Sorbo is betrayed by a woman/ a woman.

Jehovah/Santa Claus is all-knowing, all-seeing. He knows if you've been bad or good and he knows when you're awake. If you're good, Jehovah/Santa Clause will reward you with everlasting life/a toy. If you're bad, you get coal-fired/coal. Though Jehovah/Santa Claus is seldom seen in person, his minions are everywhere, especially at the winter solstice.

Creation and Recreation

"Thou alone hast created the world according to thy wishes, with men and their herds and flocks, together with all wild creatures that are on the Earth and that are upon the rivers and soar through the air above us on their wings. How splendid are all the works of thy mind, thou Lord of eternity. On Earth all things are accomplished at a nod of thy head, for thou art the Creator, Thou alone art life, for man lives but through thee."

That is so poetic! What part of the Bible does that come from?

Ha! Fooled you! It doesn't. Pharaoh Akhenaten wrote it about 1310 BCE. It's part of a larger work called *Hymn to the Sun*. Different god altogether.

A flood of floods: The Epic of Gilgamesh, which was written centuries before the biblical flood, contains a similar account of a worldwide deluge. Same plot, same bird sent looking for dry land, same mountaintop landing. Early Sumerians told a tale in which the god, Eki, warns the hero, Ziusudra, that some rival gods are going to flood the Earth. Ziusudra tears down his house to build a boat. There are African flood stories and Native American flood stories and Australian Aboriginal flood stories, etc.

Flood stories, it seems, are as commonplace as floods.

"My mother bore me in secret and set me in a little ark of rushes

and entrusted me to the river."

Sounds like Moses in the bulrushes, doesn't it? It's actually much older. It comes from a tablet written one thousand years before Exodus, and it concerns Sargon of Akkad, one of the great Mesopotamian kings.

You've seen the movie, now read the book. Everyone knows the story of how Moses climbed Mount Sinai to receive the ten commandments. Well, Moses wasn't the only prophet to combine mountain climbing and the law:

"The disciples of Zoraster (700 BCE) relate that one day as he prayed on a high mountain, the lord appeared to him and delivered the Book of Law."

T.W. Sloane

And Minos, a Cretian lawgiver, had to climb Mount Dicta before he was given the rules and regulations by Zeus, while Bacchus, a rival Greek God, kept his laws on two tablets of stone. Now, what do we learn from all of this mountaintop masonry? We learn that gods, in general, hang out in high places, and that once you get past a certain altitude, rocks are the only available writing utensils.

"The Canaanite Epic of Keret tells of a man, like Job, who loses his wife and sons but obtains a new family after regaining the favor of the gods. Unjust suffering is the subject of at least four other Mesopotamian texts, including "Man and His God," sometimes called the Sumerian Job."

Who's Who in the Bible

I could go on and on, but my point is, most of the whoppers in the Bible predate Judaism and Christianity by hundreds, if not thousands, of years. They are myths, campfire tales, fables passed from tribe to tribe, father to son, interpreted and adapted where needed. The Bible is, and always has been, a work-in-progress.

FRACTURED FAIRY TALES

As you know, Homo sapiens, especially the males of the species, have a tendency to exaggerate. This is especially true when it comes to descriptions of size or number. Also, the more often a tale is told, the greater the degree of variation from the original. For instance:

FISHY STORY

Remember when your father told you about his fishing trip? How big was that fish that got away? How big was it the second time he told the story? When the kid next door bragged that his dad caught a fish "THIS big," you said, "Well, my dad caught one **THIS** big!"

Then Jonah got swallowed by a whale.

David and Goliath

56 BCE: David slew Goliath, who was really quite tall.

37 CE: Goliath was a giant, but David knocked him out with a stone from a sling, then cut off his head.

202 CE: Goliath was a giant, twelve-foot-three, but little David killed him with a sling and a prayer, then decapitated him with a single stroke.

2525 CE: Goliath was a superman who weighed three hundred and fifty stones, but he couldn't shoot free throws worth a damn. Then this sailor named David knocked him out in the second round of the playoffs, cut off his head and posterized it!

Which version is right?

According to the oldest available texts, Goliath was "four cubits and a span," which would make him about six-foot-nine, and even that was probably an exaggeration. Goliath may have been King of the Dwarves, but he was relatively short for a giant. He did, however, possess one superpower that was never mentioned in any of my Bible study classes. Goliath had the amazing ability to grow his head back and return to the battle!

"At Gob, Elhanin...killed Goliath."
2 Sam. 21:19

Elhanin killed Goliath? Whoever told this tall tale seems to have forgotten that Goliath is already dead, as well as headless. Oops! How about if we tweak it a little:

"At Gob, Elhanin...slew the *brother* of Goliath."
2 Sam. 21:19 (Gideons)
(Oh, yeah, you remember Goliath's twin brother, Pee Wee?)

Just for fun, let's do something the Bible never does. Let's hear:

The Other Side of the Story
From the diary of **Phyllis Stine**

Dear Diary, There was a fight after school today but David cheated!!! He's such a pipsqueak. Instead of meeting on the battlefield like a man, he pulled out an unauthorized weapon and launched a missile right into Goliath's forehead. Poor Goliath never had a chance.

Ques: Why is this story in the Bible? Is there a lesson we can learn from it?

Ans: Yes. We learn that if we have faith in the Lord, and a suitable weapon, we can overcome and kill and behead someone who would normally kick our skinny butt.

THE WORD OF GOD

also, his syntax:

Pronunciation: "You say *toe-may-toe* and I say *toe-mah-toe*."

Definition: A large, pulpy, edible berry.

Connotation: "Check out that babe. What a tomato!"

Spelling: Normal; tomato. Dan Quayle; tomatoe.

Problem is, words are shifty little things. No matter how precise

we try to be, over the centuries, there will be mutations. Given enough time, the meaning of entire passages will change. You know this is true because even during your own short lifetime words have *morphed*.

Morph: V, from Gk. *metamorphosis*; from *meta* (change) + *morphe* (form). First used to refer to movie special effects in 1991.

Online Etymology Dictionary

THE MORPHING PROCESS AT WORK:

"God *bless* you."

The word *bless* is derived from the Old English *bledsian*. It's literal translation is: "To consecrate with blood." Over the years, *bledsian* shrunk to *blesen* and all the way down to *bless*. So, when you say "God *bless* you," what you are really saying is "God bathe you in blood."

Wilfred Funk, Litt.D. *Word Origins*

If you looked up the word *computer* in 1959, you would have found "Someone who computes." Only a few years ago, if you said a man was *gay*, you meant he was cheerful. ["I am a Gay Caballero;" the Gay Nineties. Gay Paree!]

Picture this: "And God said, 'Let Jonathan be a gay man.'" There might be some confusion. Two thousand years from now, imagine someone trying to figure out the meaning of *phat bootylicious supermodel*. (Particularly hot and tempting overpaid mannequin with a prodigious posterior.)

"Cool is a rule, but sometimes bad is bad."

Huey Lewis

"When Moses came down from the mountain, he knew not that there were **horns** upon his countenance."

Exo. 34:29 (*Latin Vulgate and German Bible*.)

Horns? On Moses? After reading this passage, Rembrandt,

Michelangelo, and a host of other renaissance heavyweights all depicted Moses in this horned condition. That's what the Bible said, so that's the way they cast him. Now, if you're asking yourself, what happened to Moses to cause this devilish deformity, you're not alone. Many early biblical scholars asked the same question. Then, one day, some lowly scribe pointed out that the Hebrew word *qeren*, which meant "to bear horns" was very similar to the word *qaren*, which meant "to shine." As a matter of fact, since there were no vowels, they were more than similar, they were identical: *qrn*? It wasn't until the early nineteenth century that the mistake was corrected and the line changed to:

"When Moses came down from the mountain, he did not know that his face shone."

(So, he wasn't horny, just excited.)

The downside was, it was too late to change all the paintings and statues that depicted Moses in this devilish condition. And what if they were right the first time?

Okay, you lost me again. What's your point?

My point is, languages change, and translating from the Hebrew can be a tricky business. Consider the Hebrew word, *sheol*. One day it meant *grave*, the next day, due to a poorly researched Greek translation, it meant HELL! **Ques:** What if you found out that Mother Mary wasn't a virgin after all? What if you learned that the original Hebrew word, *almah*, which meant *young woman*, had been mistranslated as *virgin*, would you still be a Christian? Would anybody?

VIRGINS

"Behold, a virgin (Almah) shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel."

Isaiah 7:14

EIGHT MORE VIRGIN BIRTHS

1. The virgin, Danae, was the mother of Perseus.

2. The Aztec god, Coatlicue, also a virgin, gave birth to Huitzilopochtli.
3. Buddha sprang from an opening in his virgin mother's side.
4. Krishna was born of the virgin, Devaki.
5. Horus' mother was the virgin, Isis.
6. The virgin, Rhea Sylvia, gave birth to Romulus.
7. Genghis Khan's mother was a virgin.
8. My second cousin, Myra, got pregnant from a toilet seat.

No, I tell you I was there! I saw Moses point his staff, and all of a sudden the Red Sea just split down the middle, and there was this road, dry as the Apian Way!

Reality Check: Scholars translating the Dead Sea Scrolls have concluded that Moses did not actually part a sea, but instead parted a "sea of reeds" (or grass), thereby making Exodus a whole 'nother, story.

First generation: Moses led his family out of bondage.

Second generation: Moses led the people through the marsh to the sea.

Third generation: Moses led the Hebrews through the sea of reeds.

Fourth generation: Moses parted the sea of reeds.

Fifth generation: Moses parted the sea, see.

As you can see, the story of Moses is both badly translated and seriously exaggerated. This is a recurring problem in the Bible. Footnotes on almost every page of my *New International Bible* point to certain words or verses for which there are multiple or disputed meanings. Sometimes even the experts are just guessing, and sometimes they guess wrong. How, you might ask, could a faultless and complete and eternal God have anything to do with such an amorphous assemblage of mucked-up mythology?

Astounding Fact No. 1: Did you know that *Bible* is NOT a Hebrew word? It comes to us from the Latin, by way of Greece, by way of Phoenicia, by way of Egypt. Here's how it happened: The Egyptians invented papyrus, or paper. The Phoenician port city of Byblos was a center for the export of this paper. Along the trade routes, sheets of papyrus became known as *biblos*, after the town of their origin. A stack of papers, or a book, became the plural, *biblia*. The Latin translation of the holy books became known as the *Bible*.

Papyrus to Byblos to biblos to biblia to Bible. Ta da!

THE THOUSAND NAMES OF GOD (1%, anyway)

ADONIS, HEIMDAL, ORMUZD, AHURA, HELIOS, OSIRIS, ALLAH, HEPHAESTUS, PAN, ANU, HERA, PAX, ANUBIS, HERMES, PENATES, ANTHENA, HESTIA, PERSEPHONE, APHRODITE, HYMEN, PLUTO, APOLLO, HYPERION, PONTAS, ARES, IAPETUS, POSEIDON, ARTEMIS, INDRA, PRIAPUS, ATLAS, IRIS, PROMETHEUS, BAAL, ISIS, QUETZCOATL, BACCHUS, JAMES DEAN, SATURN, BELLONA, JANUS, SHAQUILLE, BRAHMA, JEHOVAH, SHIVA, CUPID, JESUS, TAMUZ, JUNO, TERAPHIM, DEMETER, DIANA, JUPITOR, TERMINUS, DIONYSUS, KOKOPELI, TETHYS, EA, KRISHNA, THOR, ELVIS, KRONOS, TLAZOLTEOT, EPIMETHEUS, LARS, TRITON, EROS, MARS, TYR, FAUNUS, MERCURY, URANUS, FLORA, MINERVA, VENUS, FREYR, NEPTUNE, VESTA, GAEA, NEURUS, VISHNU, SHIVA, FORTUNA, TERMINUS, PAX, HESTIA, LEONARD COHEN, NINURTA, NUSKU, ISHTAR.

If someone does not believe in your god, you call them an atheist. To the people who believe in Shiva, or Thor, or Poseidon, *you* are the atheist.

THE NAME OF THE ONE TRUE GOD

The Muslims called him al-Lah. He was Baal to the Canaanites, Marduk to the Sumerians and Aton to the Egyptians. The Hebrew word for God was *El*, but El was sort of a generic God, and the Jews wanted their own national deity. For a while they used *Elohim*, which was sort of god, plural. Then they tried to elevate his status by calling him *El Shaddai*, which meant *God Almighty*, but that implied that there were lesser gods. They eventually settled on Yahweh, which in Hebrew was spelled YHWH, which was written as four dots. Yes, the name of God was written like this: × × × × Now, considering that it was forbidden by Mosaic law to speak God's name out loud, and never having heard the Big Cheese pronounce it ("I am who I am."), they might just as easily have come up with YaH-WHo!

Maybe not.

But it wasn't just *God's* name that changed at every oasis. Personal names were also subject to ethnic editing. For instance, Jesus' girlfriend was not the Greek, *Mary*, but the Hebrew, *Miryam*. Moses was either *Mosheh* (Hebrew) or *Musa* (Muslim), and Bruce was, well, *Bruce*. The reason I bring this up is because I'm about to blow your mind. Are you sitting down? Good. Did you know that Jesus' name was not *Jesus*?

What? you say, incredulously. How could that be?

Easy.

First off, God told Mary to name their son Emmanuel. He didn't suggest a name or two from the baby book, he quite emphatically ordered it: "And his name shall be called Emmanuel." [Matt. 1:23] Mary ignored him. Instead, she named him Yeshua, a nice Hebrew name, which was probably pronounced *Jesh'oo uh*.

And there it might have stayed if not for Alexander conquering the world. When the Greeks published their own version of the New Testament, they pulled an Ellis Island on Yeshua and shortened it up to *Jesus*, a nice euro-sounding name. Then, in 323 CE, a priest named Jerome translated the Bible into Latin. Even though he knew better, he kept the name Jesus. Saint Jerome called his Bible the *Versio Vulgata*, or "Common Translation" and it became a best-seller, a monster hit, number one with a bullet, viral video. There was no turning back.

Oh, I know what you're thinking: "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." No matter what you call him, he's still the son of God, and it's still Christianity, isn't it?

CHURCH SUBSPECIES

Okay, yeah, I'll go along with you on that, for now, but so far we've only dealt with *accidental* distortions of the text. What if the changes were intentional? What if the rewrite was so radical that the result was an entirely new religion? As in:

When William Tyndale translated the New Testament from Greek to English he wanted to return power to the people, so he changed *church* to *congregation*, and he changed *priest* to *elder*. He took

out the word *charity*, which implied that you could buy your way into heaven, and replaced it with *love*. "Faith, hope and love." He didn't know it at the time, but he had inadvertently caused the mutation of a single gene. Say hello to the Puritans. Martin Luther's meddling with the Bible brought us Protestants, Lutherans and a dozen other splinter groups. Over in America, William Miller's readings of Revelation became Millerism, which morphed into the Seventh Day Adventist Church, and in 1955, the Branch Davidians, who branched out into Waco. And so, the limbs reach ever outward.

PUBLISHERS: clearing house

Now, here we are at the dawn of the first millennium of the Common Era and at last it's all down on paper. Or tree bark or leather or something. Trouble is, every Tom, Dick and Hegai thinks he's a prophet. There's way too much material for a library, let alone one book. Someone will have to weed out the pretenders.

CANONIZE (kan-en-iz) *v* 1. To declare to be a saint.
2. To recognize as part of the canon of Scripture.

In other words, from the hundreds of songs and folktales and letters and parables submitted for consideration, thirty-three are *canonized*. Which means they are given the holy stamp of authenticity. Which means a bunch of fat, rich, mostly brown guys (no women) decided who made the cut and who didn't. The chosen books are then arranged in an order that feels right and true. Copies are made. Now, at last, manuscripts are available for study, if not by laymen, then at least by the teachers, or *rabbis*, as they will be called. Now things will be clarified, solidified. Won't they?

Wrong again, manna breath.

JESUS H. CHRIST

Just when we think we've got a handle on it, God decides he wants to be a daddy. Now we've got Jesus and Mary and the Holy Trinity and the apostles and a few hundred more books to contend

with.

"Hold on there," the Jewish elder says. "I think five books is quite enough."

"Not so fast," argues the Mesopotamian. "The one true prophet has not yet appeared."

"Precisely," says Joseph Smith.

"Exactly," says I. I mean, you don't think the vetting process is over, do you? Two thousand years from now, David Koresh might have his own book. Or Jesus Miranda. Or how about *The Gospel of Elvis*?

Elvis died for your sins.

"Thank you very much."

"I do believe that I will be received in Graceland."

Paul Simon: Graceland

Or maybe the Gospel of Sir John, the Elton:

"I think Jesus was a compassionate, super-intelligent gay man who understood human problems."

Elton John: As told to Suzanne Lambert in
THE SCENE

But we are undaunted. We persevere. Once more we harvest, we separate the wheat from the chaff, and we bake up a *New Testament*. The finished product is a wondrous work of literature, but sort of cumbersome and hard to read. (180,552 words) Another problem is, it's written in Greek. And Aramaic. And Hebrew. I, for one, cannot read Hebrew. Most Hebrews couldn't read Hebrew.

"I've got an idea! Let's make one big happy Bible family for everyone!"

Father Guido Sarducci;
Vatican Gossip Columnist

And so it came to pass that the authorized Bible of the Christians was glued onto the Official Bible of the Jews and then translated into Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Jive, Arabic, Latin,

Greek, to the known world and back around again.

Piece o'cake, right?

No, not this time. Ancient Hebrew was the first steno-pool shorthand. The written language consisted of twenty-two consonants, zero vowels, no punctuation, no caps, no spaces, no paragraphs and damn few words. Just endless lines of letters. Oh, and by the way, it read from right to left. Let me put that another way:

SPCNNTTCNPNSWLVN

(No vowels, no punctuation, no caps)

(?spaconnoitautcnuponslewovon)

or was it?

truh niarb ym sekam tfel ot thgir morf gindaer

or

hurt brain my makes left to right from reading

It's like an American tourist driving in London. "Look *that* way, you bloody Yank!"

Did I tell you about the numbers? There weren't any.

"Numbers were represented by Hebrew letters, a fact that provides fertile ground for misreadings and misinterpretations (Many of which are still with us). Thus the specific numbers that are mentioned in the Bible - like the 'sacred' seven or forty - were often chosen for symbolic effect."

Manfred Bartel: *What the Bible Really Says*

In Plain English: Certain words in the Bible were actually numbers, and some numbers turned out to be words, and a lot of it was just church propaganda. Let me give you an illustration: If the nametag on someone's shirt said, TOM MIX, you might think his name was Tom Mix. But maybe it was Tom's section number in Roman numerals [TOM 1009]. Then again, maybe it was just a reminder from Tom's mother to "Get out there and mix."

Ques: Do you mean that the *forty* years the Jews spent wandering in the wilderness might have been only twenty years? Or even ten years? Or seven months?

Ans: Yes.

Ques: And the *forty* days and nights that Jesus spent fasting in the desert might have been a two week vacation?

Ans: Affirmative.

Ques: And the *forty* days and nights of rain might have been . . . what? A weekend in Eugene?

Ans: Mmm, could be.

Ques: And the *FORTY* days and nights that Moses spent free-climbing on Mount Sinai might have been-

Ans: All right already! I get the picture. Letters for numbers. Duh.

Ques: What about the **seven** priests with **seven** horns who marched **seven** times around Jericho on the **seventh** day, thereby bringing down the house?

Ans: Actually, it was one old rabbi with a flugelhorn and cymbals between his knees. Just kidding. The truth is, archeologists studying the site have determined that Jericho had been flattened by an earthquake, not a ram's horn, 400 years before David got there.

Special Dan Brown Note: Another consequence of this numbers-to-words business is that numerologists and other "Bible code" freaks have had a field day translating the various editions of the Bible into numbers and back into code and into mathematical predictions of gloom and doom. Oh, grow up.

Point of Punctuation: Saint Jerome was also the first person to put commas into the Bible. If you don't think this is important, watch how a misplaced comma can change a Baptist into a Catholic. As Jesus is about to die, he turns to his left and says to his crossmate:

"Verily, I say unto thee, this day thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

Or maybe he meant:

"Verily, I say unto thee this day, thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

The first one clearly states that Jesus and the thief on the cross next to him will both be in heaven that very same day, which fits with Baptist dogma. The second one says they will both end up in heaven . . . eventually, which makes the Catholics happy because it implies purgatory.

(Blatantly stolen from *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* by Lynne Truss.)

And his middle initial is not H. (Actually, it's G, which stands for Walter). And his last name, as you well know, is not *Christ*, which means *anointed one* (christos) in Greek. So, while you may pray to Jesus Christ, Myriam of Magdala would have called out, "Hey, look! Here comes Yeshua, the new messiah. Not as tall as I thought he'd be."

FINISHED PRODUCT?

No way, Pompeii.

Fast forward to the middle ages where Pope Whoever IV and King Whatzit VIII are at war over whose version of the Bible is the word of God and whose is bogus, dude. In the Cathedrals of London, a dog-eared thousand-year-old Latin translation is the only authorized text. Church attendance is mandatory, under penalty of death. High mass is performed in Latin, which might as well be Middle Mandarin Martian to the illiterate congregation. There is no English language Bible, and for a good reason. The church fears that the priests will lose power if the common people can read the words for themselves. (Or they might realize it's all a bunch of hoey.)

Finally, in 1380, an Englishman named John Wyclif defies the church and translates the scriptures into working-class English. For his efforts, he is labeled a heretic and sentenced to be burned at the stake. Wyclif wisely flees the country. He even has the good sense to die [1384] before they can catch him. Not to be denied, the pope's goon squad tracks him down, digs up his bones, burns them and scatters the ashes.

Before the dust can settle, along comes the aforementioned William Tyndale to pick up the cause. Tyndale translates the New Testament directly from the original Greek into English, revising it to reflect his own beliefs. This, of course, earns him a one-way

ticket to Hades. By order of the pope, he is strangled (a "kindness"), then burned at the stake.

Meanwhile, over in Germany, Martin Luther is growing skeptical of the whole papal scheme of things. When he catches Pope Leo X selling tickets to heaven [indulgences], he gets pissed. Calling it "an epistle of straw," he literally tears the Book of James out of the New Testament. Leo X gets even by excommunicating Martin Luther, who retaliates by translating the Good Book into German, leaving out the parts he doesn't like. Say hello to the Protestants. Sounds like: protest-tants

As you might imagine, not everyone agrees with the results. Schisms form. Reformations occur. Wars break out. Queens get beheaded. King Charles V fights for the Catholic Bible, while King Henry VIII prefers Luther's version, which allows for a little wiggle room when it comes to divorce. Henry appoints himself head of the Church of England and decrees that Protestantism is the official British hoodoo. However, when "Bloody Mary" assumes the throne, she not only turns everyone back into Roman Catholics, she kills 300 of her closest enemies just to make a point. Queen Elizabeth promptly reverses the previous order. King James finally gets tired of all the childish bickering and commissions a new Bible in his name. The *King James Bible* incorporates a little Protestantism with a splash of Catholicism, a dash of Royalty and a dollop of frankincense. Something for everyone.

Back and forth God's pendulum swings. Before it's all over, whole chapters have been tossed out, new ones added. Some of the books just get bent while others are relegated to the purgatory of the appendix. [see: Apocrypha; Gnostic Gospels; The Life of Adam and Eve; Jesus: the Teenage Years!] This leads to the growth of many new branches on the tree of Christianity. Meet the Baptists. Now there are four. Anglicans. Five! Eastern Orthodox. Six! **Look out!** They're dividing and multiplying! Here comes seven and eight!

True fact: At last count, there were 29,000 species of jellyfish, and 33,000 Christian denominations, all of them based, more or less, on the same book.

SPEAKING OF WHICH:

Current Events: We may be witnessing the creation of a brand new species, er, I mean religion, this very week. Episcopalians are currently voting as to whether or not to ordain openly gay bishops. If they vote yes, I predict a major schism.

News Flash! The vote was yes. I've got a great idea! Let's have a name-the-new-religion contest. Here's my entry: The **E-Bibles** ("Episcopalians who **B**elieve In the **B**ible, **L**eviticus **E**xcluded.")

"Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable."

Lev. 18:22

Lawyers of America, what's wrong with this biblical law?

Ans: Lesbians. Can you say Kama Sutra?

EDITORS

This commandment appeared in the 1631 edition of the King James Bible:

"Thou shalt commit adultery."

Freudian? Though it was obviously an editorial oversight, many Christians - including most heads of state - reverently obeyed the newly revised decree.

According to my *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Desk Dictionary*, an editor's job is (1) to correct and prepare for publication; (2) to compile, arrange and emend; (3) to direct preparation, publication and policy; (4) to keep her damned opinion to herself and not screw up my book. (**Note:** Number four is not actually in the dictionary and will probably be exorcised from this manuscript before publication.)

Editors can't help themselves. Even as I am writing this, a politically correct, gender-neutral version of the bible is in the works at the prestigious Zondervan Publishing House. There, in a corner office, an editor (divinely guided, no doubt) will decree that the word "*mankind*" be changed to "*humankind*."

Cool. Then how about "God, the father" becoming "God, the parents"?

Make it so, Number One.

THE ART OF EDITING

In Genesis Rachel says to her father,

"Don't be angry, my Lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence. I'm having my period."

Gen. 31:35

Sure you are. Anybody wanna bet that earlier versions of this read, "I am unclean," not, "I'm having my period." The most recent Gideon's Bible is even more creative. It says, "The custom of women is upon me." Isn't *that* cute.

Jacob: "Hey, babe, how about we make the animal with two backs."

Rachel: "Not tonight, dear. The custom of women is upon me."

If you want a more recent example of selective editing, consider the ongoing plight of the poor fifth commandment. It started out as "You shall not murder," then it shaded to "You shall not kill," then back to murder. Christians and Jews, take note: For the time being, killing is okay, but you'd better have a darn good reason.

Oh, don't go getting all huffy and self-righteous on me. Like this is the first time this has happened. As a matter of fact, every time a new Bible is published, whether by wit or ignorance, a word or two gets skewed. Often it's an adjustment to the current moral climate, or *zeitgeist*, if you will. Sometimes it's just whimsy. Start with a thousand years of oral history, square by thirty-three thousand denominations, add in a few hundred translations and you've got an arkload of editors, each one making his or her ever-so-subtle changes. If this all sounds suspiciously like evolution, well, that's okay with me.

One last point about editing: **Everyone Does It!**

The truth is, we all have our own personal Bible. Let's take *you*

for instance. Raise your right hand if you believe that Tiger Woods should be stoned to death for working on the Sabbath? Nobody? Well, congratulations, you just edited God's fourth commandment. Then what about Tiger's extramarital affairs? Shouldn't all those wanton women be executed? There goes commandment number seven. Do you have shrimp on your tray? That's a no-no, you know. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are all Cafeteria Christians, picking and choosing what we want from the biblical buffet.

(Hey, you, Mickelson, get your hand down.)

Which brings us to the second decade of the third millennium of the Common Era, otherwise known as [insert trumpet flourish] . . .

TODAY

The Gregorian calendar tells us that a slender twenty centuries have passed since the birth of Christ. According to Bishop James Usher [1581-1656], who used dates from the Old Testament to make his calculations, it was just after nine in morning on the third of October in the year 4004 BCE, or about six thousand years ago, when God created the heavens and the earth. Members of the Eastern Orthodox Church believe that it all started in 5508. Syrians put the date at 5490. The Hebrew calendar says we're in the year 3760. According to the Chinese calendar, it's 4704, "the year of the flaming pig." Stephen W. Hawking puts the age of the earth at closer to 4,500,000,000 years, give or take an eon or two. Enough time, I would think, to finally get this mess straightened out. Now we know what God was trying to say. Don't we?

No, actually, things are more screwed up than ever. People are still arguing--sometimes violently--about what God said and what he meant and which books are the word of the Lord and which ones are the devil's handiwork. [See: Ireland, Belfast] I would bet that God is getting tired of it. I know I am.

Warning:

"I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues of

Egypt. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, then God will take away from him his share in the tree of life, blah blah blah...amen."

Rev. 18-21

As you can see by this bit of lawyerspeak from the far end of my *New International Version*, God doesn't want anyone messing around with his Bible. He expressly forbids the addition or removal of even a single word under penalty of boils. Nevertheless, that's what I'm going to do.

Come on, admit it. The Holy Bible ain't exactly a beach book. It's oppressively long, it's confusing, it's ambiguous, it's repetitious, it says the same thing over and over, and it repeats itself endlessly, just like this sentence. A few chuckles and a chortle wouldn't hurt. How about some moral consistency? How about a little less violence? How about two hundred *fewer* characters? What it needs is a complete deconstruct.

And just what qualifies you to write such a book, Mr. Smartypants?

Two things:

1. I'm one of God's children.
2. He gave me permission. (free will)

Ah, I can see that some of you are already skeptical. Well, how do you know I wasn't *chosen* for the position? How do you know that God didn't appear in my voting booth one day and announce that it was time for an update? Or maybe God only recently got around to reading the Bible, and he, like any other rational being, was appalled by all the blood spilled in his name.

Or maybe I'm the next prophet. Yeah, that's the ticket! Suppose I told you that the Lord spoke to me from a burning weed . . . er, I mean bush, and that he sent me into the Superstition Mountains, where after wandering for seven years, I found seven copper tablets, and that after I had spent seven months deciphering the

code, these are the words that were revealed to me. You wouldn't believe me, would you? I mean, not even a Mormon would be gullible enough to believe such a fairy tale.

So, raise your hands in the air and shout hallelujah! In the name of spreading the one-true-gospel, I will now translate the Bible into common sense. I will sweep the figurative from the literal. I will wring the historical from the hogwash. Glaring errors and scientific impossibilities will be highlighted. When it gets just plain silly, I will gleefully point it out. With the free will that I've been given by the Supreme Being, I will ask lots of questions. *Lots* of questions. Like Martin Luther, I will omit the parts that I don't care for. Like George W. Bush, I will consider myself divinely inspired. Mostly, I'll just tell you what the Good Book says in plain English so you can see for yourself. Why don't you get your Bible out, dust it off, pry it open and read along with me? You'll laugh, you'll cry, you might even learn something that you can use in your temporal life. I can personally guarantee you some spicy quotes you won't hear in church.

"Give up your son so we may eat him today, and tomorrow we will eat my son."

2 Kings 6:28

("Ooh! I'll bring a salad.")

THE OLD TESTAMENT

by

YHWH

as told to Moses

part one:

GENESIS

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth."

Gen. 1:1

"It is sufficiently agreed that all things change, and that nothing really disappears, but that the sum of matter remains exactly the same."

Cogitationes de Natura Rerum
Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

Yeah, yeah, but what about before that? I have a better idea. Start at the beginning. No, I mean *really* at the beginning. Even a god has to have a history, right? Where did he come from? He didn't just pop out of the ether, did he? What did he do for the countless eons before he got around to creating us? We know he has a son. Does he have a father? A creator? A navel? Prostate problems? Wouldn't you like to know more about your Lord? I certainly would.

For instance, what about motive? Did God ever just sit down and ask himself "Why am I here?" or "What is the meaning of life?" Why would a being with an infinite hard drive and total cool want to create an intellectually inferior, short-lived mammal? The Bible says God is the shepherd and we're the sheep. So, we're . . . livestock? Food of the gods? Pets? An ant farm? Cells on a celestial slide? An experiment gone awry? Why would a god feel the need to be worshipped? (Stroke me!) Isn't that a human weakness? Most inscrutable of all, why would a perfect god who already lives in a perfect universe want to screw it up by introducing Satan into the mix?

"I make peace and create evil. I the Lord do all these things."
Isaiah 45:7 (Gideon's Bible)

"I bring prosperity and create disaster. I the lord do all these things."
Isaiah 45:7 (NIV)

"If God is willing to prevent evil, but not able, then he is impotent. If he is able, but not willing, he is malevolent."
Epicurus (350-271 BCE)

And why, I often ask myself, in such a vast universe, is God so

obsessed with the inhabitants of a few miles of waterfront property in Canaan? Doesn't he care about the Mayans? Navajos? Klingons? I guess not, because all the Bible offers is the genealogy of one family of sheepish inbred humans who wandered around a swatch of desert in the middle east for two or three thousand years. And what's up with all the burnt animals?

HOW TO MAKE A UNIVERSE

day one

THE EARTH

"Now the Earth was formless and empty."

Gen.1:2

Sounds easy enough, but I would think you would have to start with bosons and protons and neutrons and such, then work your way up to a Periodic Table of Elements before attempting anything as substantial as a planet. Gravity and magnetism might come in handy, you know, like, for glue. And we're going to need some fuel, so don't forget the two nuclear forces.

UNIVERSAL CONSTRUCTION MANUAL

by God

In the beginning - specifically on October 23, 4004 B.C., at noon - out of quantum foam fluctuation I created the Big Bang, followed by cosmological inflation and an expanding universe. Darkness was upon the face of the deep, so I commanded hydrogen atoms (which I made from quarks) to fuse and become helium atoms and in the process release energy in the form of light. I called this light "the sun," and the process I called fusion. I saw that the light was good because now I could see what I was doing, so I created Earth.

Paraphrased from:

Genesis Revisited, By Dr. Michael Shermer

Ques: Yeah, but where did all those subatomic particles come from?

Ans: “ $E = MC^2$ says matter and energy are the same thing. Since $E =$ zero, the total matter of the universe is zero. Zero does not have to come from anything.”

Particle Physicist Dr. Victor J. Stenger

Of course, we all know that this is not the biblical version. In the Bible, God makes light on the first day and the sun and moon on the fourth day, no particle physics required.

Ques: Who was God talking to when he said, "Let there be light." ?

The next thing on God's to-do list is to get the dark and light separated. After this is accomplished, he gives them names: *Day* and *Night*. Good choice.

"God called the light *day* and the darkness he called *night*."
Gen. 1:3

Humorous Note: Wouldn't it be funny if God had called the day *night*! Actually, God did not speak English. He never said *day or night or thee or thou or shalt*, like in that old English Bible, and he especially never said *verily*. He probably said something in ancient Hebrew which is verily hard to write down because t dsnt hv ny vwls.

"And the evening and the morning were the first day."
Gen. 1:4

Ques: How can you have an "evening and a morning" when there's no sun?

Ans: Shut-up.

day two **EARTH, WIND, FIRE, WATER, ETC.**

In the next paragraph, God makes the sky. The sky, in this case, is defined as the space between heaven and earth. God makes a space. After making the sky, the Creator pulls the plug and lowers the water level down until one third of the planet's surface is dry land.

Ques: If two thirds of the earth's surface is water, why didn't we get gills?

day three **GOD INVENTS PHOTOSYNTHESIS**

(and yet, still no sun)

The third day has to be one of the busiest work days ever. The Bible tells us that it's a bright midweek morning when God creates the plants of the world. "And it is good." Especially the tomatoes, the beefsteak variety, nice and plump and juicy, the kind where the pulp squirts out when you . . . sorry, where was I? Oh, yes, "And it is good." And not only is it good, it is also NECESSARY! Animals (coming soon) will need food and oxygen. From artichoke to zucchini, from ghostly kelp to majestic redwood, God gets down and funky and creates a botanical paradise, a *biosphere*, if you will. The Bible says it takes one day to do this. It doesn't say that God started with single-celled jelly and

worked his way up to more complex life forms. It just says, Voila! Brassica napobrassica! [Rutabaga]

And a very impressive day's work it is, considering that there are 375 thousand different plant species. Did you know that there are seven thousand varieties of apples? God must really like apples, which is strange, because there aren't any apples in the Garden of Eden. Despite what you've heard, the Bible doesn't mention anything about a Macintosh in paradise. It just says "fruit." Some say it was a *quince*, whatever that is, but I'm betting that the Tree of Life was a *Ficus carica* [fig tree]. At any rate, it's obvious that God must have been well prepared. And maybe a little hyperactive.

day four COSMOS

Are you impressed? Well, my friends, hold on to your telescopes, because there's still the heavens to create. And if you think for one second that *our* Lord is going to be content with a few modest sprinkles in the sky, you are wrong, sir! In one frantic afternoon, our Lord whips up a few hundred billion galaxies, each one a glittering, whirling, tentacled typhoon of glowing gasses and multi-colored stars stretching billions of light years across. Our Creator creates more stars in one day than there are grains of sand in all the beaches and deserts of the world! And though these heavenly bodies appear to be standing still, they are actually flying away from us at thousands of miles per second.

Astronomical Anomaly: Proxima Centauri, the next closest star to Earth, is 25 trillion miles, or 4.24 light years away. Surprisingly, Adam sees starlight the first time he looks up. This means that light is breaking the speed of light. (warp 4.24)

For no good reason that I can think of, God makes gazillions of yellow suns that are just like ours. He makes an equal number of red giants, brown dwarves, neutrons, quasars, pulsars and binaries; most of these stars have their own captive planets, and the planets have moons, and in between there are icy comets that

roam like messengers, potato-shaped asteroids, black holes, cosmic rays and possibly a few other bits of *dark matter* too far away or too small to see. And he's not done yet! Yes, God, in his continually caffeinated quest for perfection, makes new stars everyday. He also destroys a few.

Aren't you just amazed? Astounded? Puzzled? All of this outrageous set-decoration, just for puny little us!? What a production! What a God! The irony is that, given the number of possibilities, whether he intended it or not, somewhere in a galaxy far far away, someone who was *not* made in His image is writing a sentence similar to this one:

"Religion is the theory that the cosmic wheel was designed and set spinning to give mankind a ride."

H.L. Menken (1880-1956) *Closing Words*

Note: For those of you who are not familiar with the godless "Big Bang" theory of creation, here it is in a nutshell:

An

Even Briefer

HISTORY OF TIME

THAN STEPHEN W. HAWKING'S

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME

In the beginning **everything** was crammed into a space big enough to hold **nothing**. tic tic tic tic - polarity reversal - **KaBoom!**

(The rest was inevitable.)

Another theory: The universe is a living organism. The earth is a single cell. Mankind is a virus bent on destroying the earth. Therefore, the bubonic plague, the Hong Kong flu, Legionnaires Disease, and British food are all part of the earth's immune system.

"That's ridiculous."

Oh, and like, Samson's superhair is credible?

Alternate theory: What goes around comes around.

Hold on there for a second. I'm still a little confused about the order of things. After God makes light, *then* he makes the sun and the moon? Which he calls "signs to mark the seasons?" What for? A few hours ago we were doing just fine without them. Light and dark were neatly separated, the four seasons were in place, and despite the lack of sunlight, temperatures were staying in the moderate range and plants were thriving. Now, all of a sudden, we need this jillion watt charcoal briquette?

Obviously, we do. God assigns "the sun to govern the day, and the moon to govern the night." Like it would have worked the other way.

day 5
ANIMALS

God's on a roll. On the fifth day he creates fish and birds and insects and mammals and reptiles and some cute little panda bears. Unfortunately, for reasons known only to God, he also creates anthrax spores, heart worms, locusts [17,000 varieties], smallpox, bird flu, swine flu, bovine spongiform encephalopathy and talking snakes. Later that afternoon he makes lemurs, chimpanzees, gorillas, orangutans and australopithecines, just in case humans (coming soon) don't work out. God has a few minutes left over, so he playfully hides the fossilized skeletons of a few million ROES. (Reptiles of Enormous Size.)

Again, something must have gotten lost in the translation. Are we talking twenty-four hours here? He made *all* of the animals in one day? Conservatively speaking, there are about twenty million species running around on the planet. Mostly insects. And it's not like there's some sort of Animal Cracker stamp God could use. You don't need a biology degree to see that a mouse and a moose are more than one letter apart. Consider a rhinoceros next to a rhinovirus. And get this! We're all made out of these tiny little cells, and inside each and every one of those cells is a blueprint for making another you!

And such attention to detail! Have you ever seen a housefly magnified a thousand times? Amazingly intricate. Sometimes the differences are more subtle. For instance, a guy named Darwin did a little research and discovered that some flowers have deeper bells than others. Coincidentally, some birds have longer beaks. Luckily, they both live on the same island. Did you know that there are five thousand kinds of ants? Three thousand bats? Five hundred different species of birds in-

That doesn't sound like a lot of birds.

Wait, you didn't let me finish. There are five hundred different species of birds in *one square mile* of Andean rain forest - which is a nowhere near Mt. Ararat. And there are at least a thousand insects living on each and every tree in that forest. I think it would be hard to blink your eyes that many times in one day, let alone come up with names for all of them. But I'm not God. (I heard that!)

DAY 6

MAN . . . oh, yeah, and woman
(Orchestra, play: Also Sprach Zaristhustra [2001])

Saving the best for last, on the sixth day, God creates man. He is so proud of his accomplishment that he announces it half a dozen times.

"Let us make man in our own image, in our likeness...God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

Gen. 1:26

(Who's your daddy?)

Okay, **OKAY!** I get the picture. You're the man, you made me, we look alike. But who is this *Us* and *Our* that keeps sneaking into the story? Does God have an apprentice? A companion? When God says "In *our* own image" does he mean that we look *exactly* alike? Inside and out? If so, then God must be animalia, chordata, vertebrata, tetrapoda, mammalia, theria, eutheria, primates, hominoidea, hominidae, homo, sapiens. In other words, God is an animal. A mammal, to be specific, with an interior segmented backbone; one who suckles; a four-limbed biped with a very large brain. A human.

"In the beginning, human beings created a God who was the first Cause of all things and Ruler of heaven and earth."

The Origin of the Idea of God

Father Wilhelm Schmidt

"If horses could draw, they would draw their gods as horses."

Homer (800 BCE.)

"If you were a triangle, your god would have three sides."

Christopher Hitchens

What do you think of God's design for the top of the food chain? If you were in charge of bio-engineering, omnipotent and all, is

this frail, fleshy biped the model you would use for your Adam and Eve? Seems a little less than perfect if you ask me. How about some wings? X-ray vision would be cool. A fuse box and a spare heart might come in handy. Gravity resistant breasts! Come to think of it, if we were built for immortality, why would we need two sexes? Isn't God androgynous?

Looking at myself in the mirror, I have to think, *God's body is as screwed up as mine?* Maybe this is inconsequential to him. He probably doesn't play sports, so why would he be worried about a backwards knee joint with an anterior cruciate ligament that snaps like raw spaghetti. Or a rotator cuff that doesn't rotate. Come, let us count the design flaws. What about eyes and ears and teeth that wear out before everything else? As if we weren't going to need them. Or arthritis or diabetes or asthma. Or a heart that breaks so easily. It's as if God said, "You're going to die, but only one piece at a time." And what's up with that useless coccyx bone at the end of my spine? That couldn't have anything to do with a tail, could it? Fingernails? Aren't those, like, talons? Nipples on men? Testicles on the **outside**? Huh? Huh? What about it?

"This long disease, my life."

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

And the cruelest trick of all is the slow descent into old age and mental oblivion. After eighty or ninety years, if we should somehow escape all of the plagues, lightning bolts and car wrecks, our reward is to be returned to our infancy, where we become the same babbling, helpless, toothless, incontinent droolers that we were on the day we were born. And then, when we go, some fool will say, "He died of natural causes." Ha! That's a

laugh. There is no such thing as natural causes. God gave us immortality, then he took it back; therefore, He is the ultimate cause of death, which would surely make it *unnatural*.

Last Will and Testament.

Let it be known by the party of the first part and the Democratic party and all the other parties and whatever it takes to make this damn thing legal that I wish to be unplugged! Am I clear? If I can't do it myself, take this clothespin, attach it to the air hose. Thank you.

CREATION MYTHS

Here are just a few of the thousands of worldwide creation myths. Notice that the one thing they all have in common is that the culture responsible for the myth believes that they were the first inhabitants of Earth.

Ainu Creation (early Japanese)

At first there was only a mixture of mud and water. Then the creator sent down a wagtail (bird) to make the earth. The bird fluttered about, beating his wings until a few dry spots appeared, making the islands where the Ainu live.

Blackfoot Creation (Northern Montana Indians)

The creator God, Napi, or Old Man, roamed from place to place creating mountains, valleys, plants and animals. Taking some clay, he made a woman and child. He named them People, and covered them. When later he uncovered them, he saw that they were changed. Then Napi told them to get up and walk.

Boshongo Creation (Central Africans)

In the beginning there was only darkness, water, and the great Bumba. One day Bumba vomited up the sun, which shone on the water until dry land appeared. Then Bumba vomited up the moon, the stars and the animals.

Cherokee Creation (North American Indians)

Long ago, the Earth was covered by water. Everything that was

alive lived in Galunti, a vault above the sky where it was so crowded that it was hard to move. The animals then sent Water Beetle out to explore. He dove to the bottom of the water and came back with a mouthful of mud, which became the earth.

Chinese Creation.

In the beginning there was a huge egg containing chaos: a mixture of yin-yang, cold-heat, dark-light, wet-dry. A giant, Phan Ku, broke forth from the egg and separated chaos into the many opposites, including man and woman.

Chuckchee Creation (Siberian Eskimo)

Raven lived with his wife in a tiny space. One day the wife said, I shall create something. While she slept, the wife lost her feathers and grew until she released twins. Raven felt that he too must create something, but there was still no earth. As he flew about he urinated and defecated and his excrement became the world we live in.

Crow Creation (Absarkoes plains Indians)

Once there was only water and Old Man Coyote. Old Man asked two ducks to dive into the water. They came back up with a root and a lump of mud which became the earth and all the plants.

Judeo/Christian Creation

In the beginning there was chaos. Then there was a god who created everything out of nothing. Then God made man out of dust and woman out of a rib.

Assorted Questions for Discussion: Does God eat? No? Then why does he need teeth? Or an anus? Unless there was a Mrs. God, why would he need a penis? And if there *is* a Mrs. God, what does she think about that adulterous affair with Mary? Why does God look like a male, carbon-based life form living on a temperate, 1G, water-rich, oxygen fueled planet? And what about our cousins Ogg and Hagg, the Australopithecines? Were those short, hairy, slant-browed, swarthy, knuckle-dragging brutes made in God's image? What about my great-aunt Shirley and her

famous webbed feet? Where do you draw the line?

INTELLIGENT DESIGN?

Don't you just love it when Christians use physics to explain metaphysics. Let's take a minute here and discuss this pre-Darwinian theory that Homo Sapiens are the result of "intelligent design." Bull biscuits. I can shoot one Grand Canyon-size hole in that theory with a few simple Socratic questions:

1. Were you intelligently designed, or did you evolve?
2. If you were intelligently designed, was your designer *designed*, or did he evolve?
3. If you were intelligently designed, and your designer was intelligently designed, then was your designer's designer designed, or did he evolve?

And around she goes. You see where I'm going with this, don't you? Intelligent design isn't an answer to anything. It's just another question. "If God made you, who made God?" And if you say to me that God has always existed, then I will say to you that *matter* has always existed; therefore, God is not necessary. The only possible explanation is that, somewhere along the line, life *had* to emerge from the elements. Whether it happened here, on Earth, or somewhere in a galaxy far far away, we are the obvious and inevitable result of a never-ending, gloriously mind-blowing process called evolution.

"Life finds a way."

Dr. Malcom (*Jurassic Park*)

How it Happened:

As the earth solidified, the heavier elements sank and the lighter ones (hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, etc.) collected on the surface. Sunlight and undersea hydrothermal vents heated this soup, and when it was charged with electricity in the form of lightning, amino acids formed. Meteorites hitting this rich broth at thousands of miles per hour helped in the formation of chains of complex proteins, which are the building blocks of cells. Cook on

low heat for a few billion years.

"Time. Unimaginable tracts of time."

Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

Day 7 THE SABBATH

And so, dear friends, God made the heavens and the earth and all of the plants and animals in six days. On the seventh, he rested. Seven rotations of the home planet. One week. What a coincidence. What I want to know is, why the rush? An elder member of the Methodist Church I attended as a child told me that this was just poetic license. He said that God's idea of a day might not be the same as ours.

I said, "Nonsense. God knows what a day is."

"And the evening and the morning were the first day."

Gen. 1:5

And that bit about Earth being in the middle: Isn't it more likely that the men who wrote Genesis didn't have a clear idea of cosmology and that, given their limited knowledge, the sun did *appear* to go around the earth once every twenty-four hours? (knucklehacker!)

Little know fact: Before the invention of the Sabbath, most people worked seven days a week. No wonder this new religion caught on.

Note: God may have worked hard for six days, but unlike the rest of us, he didn't go back to work on Monday. He took off the next *six thousand years*, which is my plan.

ADAM AND EVE

"Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast

array."

Gen. 2:1

I've still got one more little question about the order of things. Did God create plants first, then animals, then man and woman? Or was it man, then plants, then animals, then woman. Either Moses is telling us two completely different creation stories, or somebody garbled the text, again. In the first chapter of Genesis, God makes plants on the third day, then Adam and Eve on the sixth day. No building materials required.

"Male and female, he created them."

Gen 1:27

However, in chapter two, the story changes:

"And no shrub of the field had yet appeared... and no plant of the field had yet sprung up... the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground."

Gen 2:5-7

Just man, not woman. No plants. No shrubs. Dust required. Then God cultivates "a garden eastward of Eden," and there he puts the man who he has formed. Just the man. Now, what are we missing? Oh, yeah, if there's going to be a second generation, Adam will need a mate. So, either God is working on the Sabbath, or it isn't until the eighth or ninth day that he removes one of Adam's ribs and makes Eve. You'd think that if there was anything the Bible would get straight, it would be the story of creation.

"Then the lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man."

Gen 2:22

Ques. Why in heaven's name would God need a rib? A few days ago he made an entire universe, including millions of carbon-based life forms, out of limited building materials, as in nothing,

nada, squat, zilch. Now, all of a sudden, he needs a rib? The Bible says you will be called *woman* because "*out of man were you created.*" Ladies, aren't you offended by this nonsense? Especially when you consider that, biologically speaking, it's quite the opposite. Nipples on men! And if you think that bit about Adam's rib is insulting, wait until you hear God's *motive* for making you. The Bible says that after God finishes making all the animals, he parades them for Adam. The reason for this line-up is twofold:

Reason No. 1: God orders Adam to give names to all the animals.

Adam: "All right, keep it straight . . . and no animal noises in line. Let's see, I'll call you an Aardvark, and you, uh . . . you're a northern hairy-nosed wombat. Next . . . come on, keep it moving! You're a mountain pygmy possum, slug, mole rat, wookie, frog, humongerosaurus, Yangtze River dolphin. Wait a minute! How did a fish get in line?"

Flipper: "I'm not a fish. I'm a mammal."

Adam: "Well, lah dee dah. Whatever. Next. Flying mammals? I didn't know there was such a thing. How many of you are there?"

Vlad: "If you mean genus, about three thousand. If you mean altogether, you can't count that high."

Adam: "Wo! You're just batty. All of you. Now, get out of here. Next. You're a slender loris. And you're a zebra, obviously. Hey, God, how many more to go?"

God: "What? Oh, about nineteen million, nine hundred thousand and something. I hope you're writing this down, because I dozed off there for a minute."

Reason no. 2: God tells Adam to pick himself a helper. Yes, I swear that's what it says.

"So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the air, and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam, no suitable helper was found."

Gen. 2:20

Poor Adam. No helper. No yin for his yang. No concave for his

convex. I can picture our boy narrowing the field down as he named the animals, searching for a mate. It probably wasn't going to be a beast of the field, and definitely not a bird of the air. His last two possibilities for true love were both from the livestock category, but in the end, neither one was that special girl that he had been hoping for. God feels sorry for Adam, so he puts him to sleep (the first use of anesthesia), removes one of his ribs and bakes up a "helpmate." In the next few pages we'll discuss some of the help Adam gets from Eve.

THE FALL OF MAN (AND WOMAN)

At first Adam and Eve have got it made in the shade with lemonade. They're naked in a glorious garden with three rivers, lots of food, a benevolent God, a tree of life, and one cunning snake. They even have preloaded Hebrew language software. In this "Eden" as God calls it, there is only one rule: "**Don't touch my tree!**" So what do our heroes do?

You guessed it.

Questions for Discussion: Didn't God know his clones were going to be so naïve, so susceptible to snake subterfuge? Hsss! I mean, they *were* born yesterday. They *did* just fall off the turnip truck. This *is* their first rodeo. They haven't even been around the block *once*. Keyword: Clueless. And while we're on the subject of temptation, if the Lord God Almighty didn't want everybody picking at it, wouldn't it have been a better idea to put that "tree of knowledge" somewhere else, like, say, oh, Ecuador, for instance?

Wait a minute! You mean God is *trying* to tempt Eve? That seems a little childish, don't you think?

Yes, there are no apples, but in this glorious Garden of Eden there are two things destined to be unique in all the world's history. One is a fruit which magically imparts both knowledge and shame to its consumer (mostly shame). The other is a walking, talking, high-stepping, peditating, articulating snake.

Here's the whole sordid story:

One day (I believe it was Tuesday), God tells Adam and Eve that they will surely die if they eat the fruit of this one particular tree.

Adam: So, what you're saying here is, I can either live forever in blissful harmony with nature, or I can eat this piece of fruit and die?

God: That's about it. Eternal life, or a fig.

Eve: What if I take just one little nibble?

Mrs. Allen: If you keep playing with yourself, you'll go blind.

Woody: Can I do it till I need glasses?

Unbeknownst to God, Mr. Snake is in the grass listening to every word. Then, when God goes wherever else he goes to do whatever else he does, the snake gets down to business. With style and panache, the serpent struts over to Eve.

"Call me Skank," he says by way of introduction. "God is lying, you know. He's afraid of you. He knows that if you take even one bite of this luscious, tantalizing, tasty, and may I add, nutritious, fruit, you'll become like gods, only better.

Why the snake wants to cause trouble is never fully explained. How the snake has learned to speak fluent Hebrew is never discussed. There's talk that the snake is Satan in disguise and that he's a fallen angel who got kicked out of heaven for starting a war. This implies that (A) not everyone in heaven feels the bliss, and (B) there is violence in paradise. It means that God's creations can't follow simple rules like "No wars in heaven," or "Don't touch my tree." And while we're on the subject, where were all those angels *before* God created the heavens and the earth? For that matter, where was God? Did they have anything to sleep on? Or at least a Lazy Boy?

Can we get back to the story?

Sure.

Eve takes the bait, giving half to her, uh, male companion. Adam goes along with the deal because, after all, Eve is the only woman in the world for him. Also, he's hungry.

Poof!

Adam and Eve suddenly realize that they are buck-naked, though winter might have done this anyway. Even worse, whatever was in the fruit that was supposed to give them knowledge doesn't seem to be working, as evidenced by the fact

that they adorn themselves in leafy lingerie and hide in a bush. I mean, how dumb is that? Like God wouldn't know. For some reason, this sudden modesty seems to irritate the Lord. **Ques:** Is God naked? ("He must have a tremendous schwanstucker.") God calls them out, gives them a severe tongue lashing, then doles out punishments for the guilty parties, along with a few more stringent rules.

The serpent gets the worst of it. God condemns him to crawl on his belly and "eat dust," for all eternity. The Bible doesn't say anything about Mr. Snake losing his vocal chords, but it's been a long time since a sidewinder said howdy. After what happened last time, they might just be keeping their mouths shut.

Eve's dual punishments are labor pains and a demotion to citizen second-class.

"I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain will you give birth to children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

Gen. 3:16

Ladies, did you notice how God has conveniently lumped labor pains and male domination into the same package? You don't suppose this chapter was written by a man, do you? An obstetrician might explain that the pain is due to the fact that we are born with the largest brains in the primate field (three times larger than a chimps). An anthropologist might add: "The pain is part of the bonding process between the mother and her totally helpless infant." Eve is still a virgin, of course, and totally unaware of the depth of birthing pain God is planning. (Give me the meds!)

So, ladies, God made you tighter. And submissive.

Cool rule, Adam thinks. But he doesn't get off so easy. God tells him, "No more free lunches. Get to work." They are all evicted from Eden. As they leave their hometown, God places a couple of cherubim and a "flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the tree of life." As ludicrous as this protective measure sounds, it seems to work, as neither the tree nor the garden are ever seen or heard from again.

Maybe the tree of life died. Ha.

CAIN AND ABEL

"Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain."

Gen. 4:1

Wife? When did they get married? How come we weren't invited to the wedding?

God: "Do you, Eve, take this man, Adam, to be your husband?"

Eve: "I do."

God: "Do you, Adam, take this woman, Eve, to be your wife?"

Adam: "Do I have a choice?"

Cain is the first human born on the planet (Earth). The Bible doesn't say anything about a sex education class, but somewhere along the line, the Lord must have sat down with Adam and Eve and discussed the birds and the bees, because neither of them seems the least bit surprised when a mini-human pops out of Eve's womb.

Eve: "Owwww! Holy Mother of God, that friggin hurts!"

Adam: "It's a boy, but he's all yucky! And you're still connected by this, uh, vine."

Eve: "Well, cut it, stupid!"

Adam: "Oh, gross! Wait a sec . . . there, I got it. Uh-oh, it's leaking!"

Eve: "Tie it in a knot."

Adam: "What's a knot?"

Eve: "You know, like in a rope."

Adam: "What's a rope?"

God: "Would you two just SHUT UP! Give me that thing. Here, you loop this part over this end, then around here and through this part, then pull it tight."

Adam and Eve: "What do you call that?"

God: "Half-hitch."

Murder in the First

Abel is Cain's little brother. Setting the standard for brothers throughout history, they are competitive in the extreme. One Sabbath they both bring offerings to the Lord. God takes a sample of each and says, "Wally, that's fine, and Beaver, yours is good, too."

No, wait, that was Ward Cleaver talking! But that's what God should have said. I don't mean to question the Lord's parenting skills, but I think a murder might have been prevented with a few simple words of encouragement. Instead, God tells them he prefers Abel's immolated lamb over Cain's Waldorf salad, thereby establishing the fact that we are all carnivores. In a jealous rage, Cain kills Abel. When God confronts him with his suspicions, Cain does the teenage shrug and says, "Hey, do I look like a babysitter?"

Not a good answer. "He started it!" would have been better. Cain has no alibi, so he is told that he must hit the road. Here we have the beginnings of a simple code of justice.

CRIME : Eating forbidden fruit

PUNISHMENT: Death (Adam only lives 960 years)

CRIME: Murder

PUNISHMENT: Banishment to the "Land of Nod."

To summarize: The population of Earth now consists of two lying, thieving, disobedient, fornicating sinners, one murderer, a satanic snake and Seth.

Ques. Does God think this is a good start?

THE CONSUMATION OF CAIN AND LADY X

"Cain lay with his wife and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch."

Gen. 4:17

Wife? **Wife!?**

What wife? His little sister, maybe, but we don't want to talk

about that. Nowhere in any version of any Bible that I have ever seen or heard of does God mention making any more people. As a matter of fact, the Bible clearly states that God did NOT make anybody else. Adam and Eve, that was it. Besides, all the other births and begats in the Pentateuch are recorded in mind-numbing detail. Now, all of a sudden, Cain's got a wife?

Yes, and a son. Enoch's birth inspires Cain and he builds a city and settles down, thereby disobeying God, who had ordered him to wander around Nod.

"Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son, Enoch."

Gen.. 4:17

His un-named wife is then heard to say, "A nice duplex wouldn't do?"

Okay, I made that part up. An entire city does seem a bit much for three people, though. (Four, if you count third son, Seth, who would come by on holidays.)

You can skip the next few pages if you want. The only notable part is that some of our ancestors had unbelievably long life spans, as well as matching libidos. Methuselah, for instance, fathered a son at age 173 (pre-Viagra), then lived to be 969. Noah was over five hundred years old when he became a four-time daddy. Also, for those of you who like to keep track of such things, I added up the ages of Adam's descendants and found that a mere 1556 years pass between the creation of the universe and the really big flood. When you think about it, that's not much of a trial run. After some more *begats*, eventually we begets to . . .

NOAH'S BIG BOX

(Ark is a Hebrew word meaning *box*,
not *boat*. Noah built a big box.)

This story sucks! It sucks on so many levels that I don't know where to begin. First off, it's heinous. I mean, mass execution by

drowning? How is that different from a gas chamber? What sort of god does that? Isn't that cruel, not to mention a little overly-theatrical? Aren't benevolent gods supposed to stop floods, not cause them? I don't know about you, but I have to ask myself, why would God go to all the trouble of creating a universe, stocking it with life forms, and then drowning them all because they were a little high-spirited? I thought, if God was so unhappy with the flocks that *He* created, why didn't He just humanely put them down and start over? Against the backdrop of eternity, what's another week? Mind you, this is just my take, but maybe if God had spent more than one day working on Adam and Eve, he might have come up with a more intelligent life form.

"We must question the logic of having an all-powerful God who creates faulty humans, and then blames them for his own mistakes."

Gene Roddenberry

"The worst you can say about god is that basically he was an underachiever."

Woody Allen

HISTORICAL MASS MURDERERS **PERPETRATOR and NUMBER OF VICTIMS**

Ted Bundy - strangled - 33

Chiang kai-shek - marched - 200, 000

Joseph Stalin - purged - .550,000

Adolph Hitler - gassed - 6,000,000

God - drowned - .JUST ABOUT EVERYONE!

Hey, wait a minute! We're talking about killing millions of people here! Do you mean there's not one innocent child anywhere on the whole Earth? Not one righteous blind beggar? Not one single chaste young virgin deserving of life?

Not a one. Now shut up and let me get on with it.

As the story unfolds, God has decided to make it rain for forty days and forty nights. His goal is to kill everyone and everything on the planet. No passes! Except, of course, Noah, Shem, Japeth,

Ham and their wives. Noah is deemed to be the only pure-blooded righteous dude around, so God tells him to build a three-story box and load it up with animals. "Put in a window," God says. Good idea. He tells Noah to book passage for his immediate family and two each of every animal. A few days later, God changes his mind and decides that Noah needs to take *seven* each of every "clean" animal.

"...and also seven of every kind of bird, male and female to keep their various kinds alive throughout the world."

Gen. 7:3

That Dreaded Math: Nine thousand species of birds times seven of each means there will be 63,000 birds on board the ark. Guano everywhere. Noah then crams all two hundred million animals into a compound about the same size and shape as a Motel Six.ã He then adds to this cargo the weight of enough food, fresh water and toilet paper to last them all for a year. No, not forty days, like you remember. A whole year passes before the land dries out and they disembark the ark. And what seamanship! After surviving the most perfect storm in the history of the known universe, then drifting for twelve months without a GPS, rudder, sails or bingo parlor, they end up on top of a mountain only a few hundred miles from where they started.

Ques: Is Noah the only boat owner in the world?

Ans: Uh, now that you mention it, no.

Ques: If Noah sighted another boat filled with starving children would he:

- A. Rescue them
- B. Torpedo them
- C. Leave it to God

Ques: How do you suppose a hippopotamus got down from the top of a snow-capped 17,000 ft. extinct volcano?

Ans: He rolled?

Ques: Do you really believe any of this crap? Even if Noah could conjure up every ship in the Navy, he still wouldn't be able to

support even a minuscule sampling of the world's species for one week, let alone one year. [see: San Diego Zoo]

Are you going to make me prove it? Okay, let's do the math. We'll make it easy (for me) and we'll use nice round numbers. Let's suppose that there are only five hundred species on the ark and that there's one male and one female of each. That makes one thousand mouths to feed. Now, according to my encyclopedia, an average adult elephant consumes 350 pounds of forage and 35 gallons of fresh water **every day**. Lions need about ten pounds of fresh meat per day, anteaters need, well, lots of ants, and hummingbirds can live on a couple of ounces of nectar. Let's just go with a low average and say that Noah will need five pounds of food, per day, for each animal.

NUMBER OF ANIMALS ON THE ARK = 1000

AVERAGE WEIGHT OF FOOD CONSUMED, PER ANIMAL,
PER DAY = 5 lbs

TOTAL WEIGHT OF FOOD NEEDED, PER DAY = 5000 lbs

TOTAL NUMBER OF DAYS X 365 days

TOTAL WEIGHT OF FOOD NEEDED FOR ONE YEAR =
1,825,000 lbs

That's almost two *million* pounds of food! Where could Noah possibly find that much grub? The way I figure it, he's a going to need a few more boats just to carry it. How could he preserve it for a year? And let me point out that most of it will have to be in the form of hay or grass, which takes up lots of space and is a serious fire hazard. And what about the animals with "special diets"? Koalas need eucalyptus leaves. Pandas need bamboo. Shem needs pizza! How could they store a million gallons of fresh water?

Travel Agent Quiz: How did all of the animals "throughout the world" get *to* the ark? Was airfare included? When I went on a Caribbean cruise, I had to take a plane to Miami. If I had walked from Phoenix, I would have missed the boat, so to speak. For your local middle eastern animals, such as your lions and tigers and bears and talking snakes, getting on board is no problem.

However, for the animals that live in Peru, such as your vicunas, capybaras and coati mundis, just getting *to* the ark is going to be difficult. They will need boats, lots of them. Did you know that a male three-toed sloth has a top speed of .04 mph? At that rate, it's going to take him about one hundred and twenty-three years to get from Zimbabwe to the promised land.

"Maybe God teleported them?"

Oh, so airfare *was* included.

For the sake of the story, let's just suppose that Noah can build a sea-worthy craft, stock the galley and save all of the insects, carnivores, herbivores, omnivores and blood suckers. What's he going to feed them once the flood is over? Does God think fruit trees can live underwater for twelve months? No, most of the edible plants are dead and rotted. Without plants, oxygen supplies will be severely depleted. Profound changes in the ecosystem will prevent re-germination for a few years at least.

God can make new plants.

Yes, yes! And I'm so glad you brought that up. Yes, God *can* make new plants and he *can* make new humans and new animals. My question is, why didn't he? I mean, why go to all the trouble of stirring up a worldwide flood, then rescuing the chosen few on a totally implausible boat, when all he had to do was say, "Zap! Everyone's dead but Noah and family." Would that have been too easy? Too painless?

All of this forces us to ask the **most obvious question**: If all the animals on Earth can be traced back to a mountain top in Turkey, how come all the kangaroos ended up in Australia? (They're not good swimmers.) Why do all the giant pandas live in a Chinese bamboo forest? How come all one hundred and twenty-seven Mexican spotted owls got stuck in a corner of the Sonoran Desert? And what about pigs? To a pure-blooded, devout Jew like Noah, pigs were unclean, inedible and verboten. Wouldn't it have been better to just leave them behind? And what about bigfoot?

Questions for discussion: Where did a desert dweller like Noah learn how to build boats? How long do you suppose it would take four men and four women to build something the size of the Titanic . . . without Sears Craftsman ã power tools? Did they work

on the Sabbath? According to Alex Trebek, it takes **two thousand** trees to make one wooden frigate. Where's the nearest gopher wood forest? And they're going to need lots of pitch (tar). A couple of tons ought to do it. This is going to be a very expensive project.

"Charge it," Noah said with a sly wink.

Fun With Science!

In order for the flood to cover every bit of land "to a depth of twenty feet," the water would have to be 29,033 feet above the current sea level. I wonder how Noah came up that figure? I mean, twenty feet? Did he row the ark over to Nepal one day and drop a line over Mount Everest? I just hope they all remembered to bring warm clothes. And oxygen masks! And sun screen! Did anyone think to bring a copy of the Bible? Don't tell me you left it on the bureau! Can you remember the words? Not me. I guess we'll have to start over with religion, as well as humanity. And there's going to be some incest!

The Love Boat

Assuming that the idea of bringing males and females on board is reproduction, a majority of the ladies on this cruise are going to get pregnant. My guess is that some of them already are. On a year-long voyage, all but the largest mammals will give birth. Now, considering that your common roof rat [*Rattus rattus*] has a gestation period of about fifteen days, and that they are usually pregnant again before the kids are weaned, and that they commonly give birth to six-to-ten young, and that the young reach sexual maturity in, oh, about three minutes, I calculate that by the end of this voyage on the Styx, Noah's floating menagerie will be up to the lido deck in rodents, and they will have eaten everything edible, including Noah, Shem and Japeth, but not Ham (no pork). Trekkies, think: Tribbles. To even mention insects would be pointless.

Now, class, let's watch the video.

BON VOYAGE

(sound of thunder)

At first it's just another seasonal storm. The Nile and Euphrates flood every year, so no one is worried when it creeps up to the door. Animals take shelter as best they can, while the natives stay indoors. It doesn't take long, though, before it's up past the fifty-year-flood stage and things are starting to float. The animals that can run the fastest are headed for the high ground, trying to stay ahead of the rising tide. Noah's friends and family from the village are pounding on the ark, begging to be taken aboard, but no, they've been condemned to die by an angry God. Wailing and screaming in pain and fear, men and women and children and animals scratch and claw over each others backs, trying to keep their heads above the surging tide. Towards the end of the first forty days, the water is a fetid mass of bloated carcasses bobbing in the muck like rotted corks. Billions of insects and fish gather to feast on the rancid meat of the dead babies. God is okay with this?

Note on Roe vs. Wade: Many of the women who drown in the flood are pregnant, making this just one of many biblical incidents in which God kills fetuses. The Lord is obviously "pro-choice."

Perplexing Fact No. 1: After going to all the trouble of building a boat and taking two each of every animal, what's the first thing Noah does when he gets everybody safely ashore? Why, he barbecues up a few offerings for the lord, of course.

"Taking some of all of the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it [altar]."

Gen. 8:20

Noah: "Unicorn steak, anyone?"

Mrs. Noah: "I'll have the pterodactyl tenders."

Amazing Fact No. 1: Within days of coming ashore, Noah miraculously grows grapes, invents the still, makes wine and gets roaring drunk. Who could blame him.

Oh, I know what you're going to say: "You dipstick, it's all just an **allegory.**"

CONSIDER THIS AS ALLEGORY

When the S.S. Minnow set shore on an uncharted tropic isle, she was carrying five passengers, two crew members, 260 evening dresses, 52 hats, 63 dinner jackets, 27 tuxedos, one white fox and six mink stoles, 127 pairs of earrings, 159 pairs of shoes, 300 pounds of makeup, 3 miles of rope, 6 transistor radios, two cases of D-cells and one red polo shirt with a white collar.

For a three-hour tour.

Okay, I'll buy the allegory argument, but where's the lesson? What are we supposed to learn from all of this monsoon mayhem?

Ans: We learn that God's wrath can be cataclysmic in scale, and that he sets impossibly high standards, and that it doesn't matter how blameless your life, unless you're directly related to Noah, you're fish food.

THE TOWER OF BABEL

God is not exactly pro-education. In fact, all religions are anti-education. God doesn't want anybody to get near his tree of knowledge, he doesn't want men to cooperate and he definitely doesn't want anybody building "a tower that reaches to the heavens."

"For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increases knowledge increases sorrow."

Ecc. 1:18

"We sacrifice the intellect to God."

Ignatious Loyola

"Reason should be destroyed in all Christians."

Martin Luther

"Priests dread the advance of science as witches do the approach of daylight."

Thomas Jefferson

"When the evidence disagrees with a scientific theory, the theory is discarded. When the evidence disagrees with a religious proposition, the evidence is discarded.

Victor J. Stenger: *The New Atheism*

"Religion: A mind-fogged manacle."

William Blake

"The Lord said, 'If as one people they have begun to do this, then nothing they do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.'"

Gen. 11:5

(There goes God saying *Us* again. Who is coming down with him?)

The very next day at the tower construction site:

Abed-nigo: "Hey, Meshach, toss me that ballpean hammer."

Meshach: "Frondo? Mul billo quon fanorri nichto?"

("What? You say you got hammered last night?")

Shadrach: "Nin, lomain, patro san trop-trop om sib."

("No, dummy, he said he nailed your sister last night.")

Mesach: "Comer mis poco pantolones, y fiesta mas, gringo."

("Well, eat my shorts and party on, dude.")

Note: This multiplicity of languages could also be the result of the various tribes scattering throughout the land and becoming isolated for long periods of time until they each developed a dialect that was unique to the area and culture. But that takes frigging forever and God can do it overnight.

Ques: Does this language hurdle set the Israelites back a few years?

Ans: You bet it does! While the wandering Jews are trying to figure out how to get a tent peg to stick in the sand, Pharaoh Khufu is putting the finishing touches on a rather impressive fifty-story pyramid, the Babylonians are refining their math skills, the Romans are installing indoor plumbing, the Chinese are perfecting rocket power (and Ramen Noodles), the Aztecs are studying astronomy, and an anonymous Anasazzi has just invented the video poker machine.

Historical note: In the year 101 CE, the Library at Alexandria, the storehouse of the world's knowledge, was burned. Intentionally. By well-meaning Christians.

Headlines:

Vatican City - July, 1992

After doing three hundred and fifty years of hard-time in hell, the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei has finally been paroled. Recent scientific studies have proven the astronomer's controversial theory that the Earth goes around the sun. The pope said he was sorry. In a soul-searching mass confession, Catholic leaders have conceded that the Earth is *not* the center of the universe. (I am.)

Related note: Thousand of witches condemned and killed by the church in the fifteenth century were not exonerated until 2001.

CIRCUMCISION!!!

"The covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised."

"Gen. 17::9

Let me see if I understand this correctly. First, God creates man, complete with foreskin, then he wants him to slice it off. With a sharp rock. No chloroform. No iodine. NOoo!

Note: For those of you who are not Jewish, a *covenant* is a contract between God and his followers. In this case, God has promised to take care of the Jews if they will cut off the ends of their penises. For some reason, the Jews think this makes perfect sense, even when it becomes obvious that God is not really taking care of them. The Bible says this circumcision rule applies to all males. No exceptions.

"...whether born in your house or bought with your money."

Gen. 17:13

Bought? As in Slavery? As in, circumcise the slaves? No matter what the Good Book says, I don't think this is a good idea.

"The things that you're li'ble to read in the Bible--it ain't necessarily so."

Porgy and Bess George and Ira Gershwin

SODOM AND GOMORRAH

If they haven't already made this into a TV movie, they should. Here's the plot: A man named Lot lives in this city called Sodom, which is sort of like San Francisco, only gayer. One day he is visited by two male, masculine, macho angels. As is customary, Lot invites the men to stay the night. Later, that same evening....

"Before they had gone to bed, all of the men of the city of Sodom - both young and old - surrounded the house. They called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.'"

Gen. 19:4

Hold on there a second! You mean Lot is the *only* straight guy in town? Jerry Falwell and Dr. Laura may think that homosexuality is a matter of *choice*, but I suspect there may be a genetic link at work here. Noah, maybe?

And while we're on the subject of sex, why are Catholic priests celibate? I couldn't find that rule in the Bible. I mean, what is so holy about giving up sex? According to the New Testament, most of the apostles were married, including Peter, Paul and Mary. It wasn't until the fourth century Council of Nicaea that they finally made it official. **No more sex.** No more even thinking about it! Pope Urban II, who obviously had issues, decreed that the wives of the clergy were to be sold and their children abandoned. Harsh, man.

And while we're on the subject of popes, how can you have *two* infallible popes at the same time? What if the Vatican elected a pope, then the bigwigs in Florence disagreed and elected their own pope? Couldn't happen, you say? Well, it *has* happened, at least two dozen times. Pope and antipope. Even crazier, in the year 687 CE, there were *three* popes at the same time.

Theodore Antipope: "Hey, Serge, it's your turn to bless the masses."

Pope Sergius I: "You do it, Teddy. I'm going to take confession from the prostitutes."

Theodore Antipope: "I'm infallible, and I say it's your turn to bless the masses."

Paschal Antipope: "Well, I'm even more infallible, and I say you're both morons. (double finger eye-poke) Nyuk nyuk."

Now, where were we?

Oh, yeah, Sodom. Lot wants to protect his guests from this

homosexual rape, so he offers his two virgin daughters to the men instead. Go figure. The mob declines the offer. God doesn't condone this sort of deviant behavior, so he burns Sodom and Gomorrah to the ground, killing all of the men, women, children, fetuses, embryos, stem cells and sperm contained therein. The Bible doesn't really bother with a reason for the firebombing of Gomorrah. Vagitarrians, maybe? God helps Lot and his wife escape the fire, but she looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Why salt, you ask? Maybe because God wanted her to blend in with all the naturally occurring pillars of salt in the area.

Historical note: The historian, Pliny the Elder, tells of an early Jewish sect called the Essenes who lived in a men-only society. Of course, this does not mean that they were homosexual, just weird.

Literary Note: The Essenes were the editors of the *Dead Sea Scrolls* and the authors of the always popular, still in print, *Decorating Your Cave*.

FUN WITH GEOGRAPHY

According to ancient maps, the town of Sodom was on the Old Spice Road about halfway between Oz and Whoville.

LOT AND HIS DAUGHTERS

WARNING: XXX

Lot and his two daughters take up residence in a cave. I should remind you that these are the same two daughters that Lot couldn't *give* away a few days ago. Anyway, there aren't any real men around, so the daughters both have sex with their father while he is drunk.

STOP!

Stop right there! Send the children out of the room. Are we alone? Good. What the hell are you talking about? Did God save Lot from a fiery death in Sodom so he could have sex with his two virgin daughters? I thought things were supposed to straighten up after the flood? Wasn't that the idea? To cleanse everything and

start over? Well, once more, God's grand plan doesn't seem to be working. Noah may have been law abiding and decent enough, but inbreeding has turned his descendants into a bunch of drunken, slobbering deviants.

The plain truth about alcohol and sex:

Imagine yourself in Lot's place. You've been drinking rather heavily. You're not just tipsy, you're not high, you're not buzzed. No, you're good old American *%^\$#- faced. As a matter of fact, you're so drunk you don't even recognize your own children. And yet, somehow, you impregnate *both* of them? On the same night? Oh, give me a break. Have you ever heard the term "whiskey dick?" How about "Too drunk to f--k?"

At the end of the chapter it says:

"The older daughter had a son, and she named him Moab. He is the father of the Moabittes of today."

Gen. 19:37

Let me take a second here and point out something. This is only one of hundreds of examples of words that could not possibly have come from Moses. How could Moses know anything about the "Moabittes of today?"

ABRAHAM GETS TESTED

God seems to have taken more of a personal interest in the lives of mortals back then, and it wasn't always good to be caught in his gaze. For instance, one day he tells Abraham (formerly known as Abram) to take his only son to an unspecified mountain and to "sacrifice him there as a burnt offering."

Whoa Nelly! Let's give this a little thought. What God is asking for here is a *human* sacrifice, not a goat or a lamb, but Abe's son, a living, breathing human being, sacrificed to an invisible god who seems to take a certain pleasure in having his own creations butchered and burned in his name. Sick!

Oh, I know what you're going to say: "It's a test of faith, you twit." Well, then I say to you, "Oh, really? Suppose Abraham refuses a direct order from God. What then? Does God kill them both? I mean, it's not like the Lord hasn't bumped off a few innocent people here and there. As a reader, though, I wasn't fooled for one second. Just as Abraham is about to stab and slab his son, God jumps in and says, "Okay, you pass."

JACOB

Abraham's son, Jacob, is a sneaky SOB who will do anything to advance himself. First he tricks his older brother into trading his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup, then he fools his dying father into blessing him by putting on a sheepskin and disguising himself as his hairy brother. I would like to point out that this weasel is the same Jacob who will later be renowned among the Israelites and a personal favorite of God.

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Wherein God Invents Religious Warfare and Tithing

After a few more pages of boring family history, we learn about Jacob's dream. (Lots of visions and dreams in the Bible - very few hallucinations) In this dream, Jacob sees a golden stairway to heaven. God stands at the top. The Lord tells Jacob that the land where he is sleeping will belong to him and his descendants forever. When Jacob wakes up, he makes a promise to build a

temple on the spot and to give one tenth of his income to Don Corleone in tribute. Excuse me, I meant to say Jehovah.

"He calls that place Bethel (house of God), though the city used to be called Luz."

Gen. 28:19

One big problem here is that God seems to have promised this "Promised Land" to more than one group, an oversight which causes dissension and bloodshed with the Muslims. Another catch is that there are people already living there. As in: "Excuse me, Luzites, I don't mean to be a bother, but God just gave me this land. You either have to move or die." Jacob tells all his friends about his dream, and they all nod and say, "Yeah, that must have been God talking, for sure."

Ques: What would your friends say if you told them that you were conversing with God in your dreams? They might say, "Time for an intervention."

"Once I dreamed I was the King of Sweden,
and I had everything I was needin',
a house made of gold and steel,
a diamond car with a platinum wheel.
Hi-di hi-di hi-di ho."

Cab Calloway

IMPORTANT HISTORICAL NOTE:

16th century Europeans used a form of this divine logic (manifest destiny) in claiming North America, even though the whole continent was already inhabited from sea to shining sea.

Questions for discussion: If God made everything, why is one place more holy than another? Is Jerusalem holier than Fargo? Is Earth holier than K-Pax? Personally, I think St. Croix is holier than Canaan by a long shot. And what about those sacred rivers, like the Jordan or the Ganges? As you know, water molecules have a tendency to move around from place to place; therefore,

it's more than likely that some Hindu holy water will occasionally get sprinkled on a Baptist. We apologize for any inconvenience.

JACOB MARRIES RACHEL AND LEAH

and Bilhah and Zilpah

and Prancer and Blitzen

Later in his life Jacob falls for a girl named Rachel who has an older sister with "weak eyes." Rachel's father, Laban, makes a deal promising her to Jacob in exchange for seven years of work. Jacob agrees and works the seven years without touching the shepherd's daughter. However, on the morning after his wedding, he is surprised to wake up and find, not Rachel, but Leah in his bed. Oh, that devil alcohol!

Laban explains that it's all been a terrible misunderstanding and that Jacob can have Rachel, too, if he works another, oh . . . let's say, another seven years.

"Duh, okay," says Jacob, who is either (A) very much in love, or (B) a few ewes short of a flock.

After seven more virtuous years, Jacob finally gets to "lay" with Rachel, only to discover that she is barren (and pushing thirty). Rachel solves this problem by giving Jacob her maidservant as his third wife, thereby inventing surrogate parenting.

"Here is Bilhah, my maidservant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me."

Gen. 30:3

"Oh, if you insist."

Notice that God has already coined the euphemism *sleep with* implying that good old fashioned sex is something to be ashamed of. Damned apple!

I hesitate to tell you the whole story of this surrogate parenting arrangement because it gets a little weird and your modern sensibilities might flinch at some of the ritualistic practices of the Hebrews. Still with me? Okay, picture this: At the moment of birth, the surrogate mother straddles the knees of her mistress and drops the baby between her legs. I suppose this is meant to symbolize the actual birthing experience . . . without all the pain, of course.

Sister Leah is jealous of Rachel's growing family, so she gives Jacob her servant girl, Zilpah, as his fourth wife. Everybody gets pregnant. Jacob has twelve sons and a daughter of mixed parentage.

Ques. Twelve sons by four wives? And only one daughter? Don't tell me these Hebrews didn't practice birth control. "Whoops, dropped another one!"

Stop me if I'm wrong here, but don't you get the feeling that God is not only condoning this polygamist behavior, but is, in fact, enthusiastically encouraging it. King Solomon, who has a whole book named after him, had a thousand wives and concubines. Anyone want to take a guess at the average age of the girls in his harem? **Ques:** Why do we teach some parts of the Bible and un-teach others?

Consider the case of Warren Jeffs, the current leader and prophet of a polygamist sect known as the Fundamentalist Church

of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which is a big title for such a little man. Jeffs was recently convicted of "arranging extralegal marriages between his adult male followers and underage girls." As a prophet, he could probably quote chapter and verse describing arranged marriages in the Bible. Indeed, most theologians believe that the marriage of Joseph and Mary was an arranged affair, and that the bride was no more than twelve or thirteen years old. Warren Jeffs will spend most of the rest of his life in prison for doing exactly what the Bible told him to do.

And then there's the problem of slavery in the Bible. In the time of Moses, god-fearing men owned slaves. These slaves were human beings, made in "God's image," but they were bought, beaten and sold as if they were draft animals. Come to think of it, that's pretty much the same way they treated their women. The Bible preaches "do unto others" but it includes despicable laws like this gem:

"When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not be freed at the end of six years as the men are."

Exo. 21:7

A few of the more recent Bibles have attempted to soften up this passage by changing *slave* to *servant* or even *maidservant*, but it's just semantics. The daughter has no choice in the matter. **She's a slave.** Period. And by slave, I mean sex-slave, as the men were free to do pretty much whatever they wanted.

And I was just kidding about Prancer and Blitzen.

RACHEL

Rachel is almost as conniving as her husband. After Jacob has swindled his father and brother out of everything, Rachel steals her father's "household gods." (**Note:** *household gods* are not deities but are talismans and symbolic deeds to the property.) Rachel and Jacob run away with the gods and the goods. Rachel's father gives chase. When Laban catches up with his daughter, Rachel hides the booty in a saddle bag, then sits on it. She explains to her father that she can't stand up because it's the wrong time of the month. I guess the ruse works because they get away.

WWF

"Ladies and Gentlemen, in this corner, **Rock . . . Hard . . . Israel!**"

In this chapter, God and Jacob get into a wrestling match. No reason is given. They go at it all night with neither of them gaining the advantage. God, realizing that he cannot defeat Jacob, resorts to an illegal hold and wrenches Jacob's hip. After the fight, he changes Jacob's name to Israel.

"Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip."

Gen. 32:32

Me neither. Even when tempted with a huge plate of steaming hip tendons I always turn them down "for religious reasons."

Ques: Why does God go around changing everybody's name all the time? I mean, it might be all right if God changed your name to something cool like "DJ Jazzy Jacob" or "The Rock" or something rad like that, but Israel? What does that mean anyway? Nobody seems to know. I looked it up in six different books and the only thing they agreed on was that *el* meant God. *Isra-el* might mean:

God perservereth.

Funk and Wagnall's Dictionary

One who has been strong against God.

Dictionary of Cultural Literacy

He who strives with God.

Who's Who in the Bible

God rules.

Don't Know Much about the Bible

May god show his strength.
A History of God

He who has struggled with God.
The Bible Unearthed

God does not play marbles.
Albert Einstein

As you can see, these definitions are not different in shades of gray, they are night and day apart. And how do you spell Hanukka, Chanuka, Hanukah anyway?

RAPE AND DISMEMBERMENT

Jacob's only daughter is named Dinah. One day she is raped by Shecham, son of Hamor the Hivite, who just happens to live in a town called Shecham. When Dinah's twelve brothers hear about this atrocity, they tell Shecham, "Hey, it's cool, just as long as you and the rest of the males in the city get circumcised." (nudge, wink wink) The men of Shecham talk it over and decide to get circumcised, though the logic of this decision escapes me. Three days later, while the Hivites are still experiencing considerable pain in the penile region, two of Jacob's sons ambush and slaughter them all. The Hebrews steal everything, including the women and children, then they run for the hills. God covers their flanks and they get away clean.

"They seized their flocks and herds and donkeys... They carried off their wealth and all their woman and children."

Gen. 34:28

The moral of this story is, of course, "Don't touch my sister!" Also, the fine for rape is, everything you own, plus one foreskin.

The next few pages are incredibly boring. There are new kings and kingdoms and tribes and gods that go to war; covenants are made and broken; Jacob's family grows like they are truly blessed. It's all kind of repetitious until we get to Joseph.

JOSEPH

Joseph, one of Jacob's sons by Rachel, dreams that he will rule over everyone. His brothers think he's a nutcase and they sell him to Midianite merchants for twenty shekels of silver. In Egypt, Joseph becomes a slave and is put in charge of Potiphar's house. When Potiphar's wife falsely accuses him of trying to cop a feel, Joseph is thrown in jail. The prison warden, however, notices that Joseph is blessed, so he puts him in charge of the prison. Later, when it is made known that Joseph is good at interpreting dreams, Pharaoh springs him from the hoosegow and puts him in charge of all Egypt. Thus, in only a few pages, Joseph goes from lowly shepherd, to houseboy, to jailbird, to grand vizier (vice-president) of Egypt. Seeing how well Joseph is doing, a whole bunch of his friends and relatives immigrate there. This turns out to be a bad move. Just as Joseph had predicted, there are six years of abundance followed by six years of famine.

Thus concludes Genesis.

EXODUS

Scene: Ancient Egypt, in which an unnamed Pharaoh is supposedly using and abusing the Hebrews. I say *supposedly*, because there is no evidence that the Jews had anything to do with building Egyptian tombs or that they were ever enslaved there. Indeed, archeological digs suggest that the local high-rises were built by Egyptian citizens and paid conscripts, which may explain why not one character in the Bible ever mentions the pyramids.

Note: Though cats were revered in ancient Egypt, there's no mention of a feline in Exodus or anywhere else in the Bible.

Our story begins with the current Pharaoh railing about the number of Hebrews in his land and the rate at which they are breeding. He decrees that all the males are to be killed at birth. Moses' mother puts her baby in a basket and sets him adrift on the Nile. She is either (A) trying to save him from Pharaoh's decree, or (B) feeding the crocodiles. As fate would have it, a servant of

Pharaoh's daughter finds him. The princess raises Moses as her own little prince.

After Moses grows up, he decides he doesn't like the way his people are being mistreated. One day his temper gets the best of him and he kills a whip-happy Egyptian taskmaster. (**Note:** This is *before* God said "Thou shalt not kill.") There are witnesses to the crime. Knowing that he will be caught and condemned, Moses heads for Midian, where he meets seven virgin shepherd girls. Then he enters the big chariot race in Rome. No, wait! That was Ben-Hur. Moses marries one of the sisters and settles down.

One afternoon while he is out tending his flocks, Moses sees a burning bush. First an angel appears, then God appears. He speaks to Moses:

"I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

Exo. 3:10

Humbling note: While searching for the cause of this obvious hallucination, I discovered that there actually *is* such a "burning bush." It secretes a flammable, oily resin, which in the hot sun can spontaneously ignite. As the flame only lasts for a few seconds, the bush is "not consumed." So there.

So, we can assume that Moses has seen burning bushes before. It's the message from God that throws him. Moses wants to know God's name, but God just says, "I am who I am." In other words, "Mind your own business, pal." Then God turns Moses' staff into a serpent and back into a stick. **Ques:** What is this thing God has with serpents and foreskins?

Moses, even though he has a speech impediment, reluctantly takes the assignment. When he confronts Pharaoh with his magic stick, the Egyptian leader isn't impressed. Aaron (Mo's bro) tells him that the Nile will turn to blood, which it does. Again Moses goes to the Egyptian leader and says, "Let m-m-my people go."

"Not likely," Ramses replies.

Pharaoh's "heart is hardened by God" and he refuses to sign the

release. Even when plagued with frogs and gnats and flies and locusts, even when bombarded with matzo-sized hail and covered with festering boils; even when his cable TV is disconnected, Pharaoh stubbornly refuses to give in.

Reality check: Many respected biologists have pointed out that you don't need a god to produce such a series of plagues. Periodic algae blooms, called red-tides, contain high levels of anthrax spores. In the blood-colored, oxygen-starved water, the fish die quickly. When there are no fish to eat the frog's eggs, billions of frogs are born. Most of them die of anthrax. With no frogs or fish to eat them, insect populations explode. Clouds of gnats and flies and locusts spread the anthrax to the livestock and on to the general population, creating -- guess what?-- boils and tumors! Any more questions?

Yes, I have a few. Since God already knows what Pharaoh's answer will be, isn't he just tormenting the Egyptians? Why does God need to kill children? I ask you, how could a child be guilty of anything other than the accident of birth? If this is revenge, it goes way beyond an eye for an eye. Why don't the Chosen People just turn around and walk out the door? Can't God cover their butts the way he did for Rachel and Jacob a few chapters earlier, the way he eventually does anyway?

PASSOVER

In this beloved tale, God invents a new religious holiday which the Israelites call Passover, but which Pharaoh calls "You killed my baby, you son of a motherless goat!" I simply call it FONNY (Feast Of No Yeast.) God is adamant on this point: No yeast!

"For seven days no yeast is to be found in your houses. Eat nothing made with yeast. (No beer? D'oh!) On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast..."

Exo. 12:15

All right. **AIlll RIGHT** already! Humble pie it is. God never fully explains this dietary demand ("Because I said so."), but we know he's heavy into symbolism. He does explain about the blood,

though. God tells them to mark all their houses with lamb's blood. That way he'll know who *not* to kill. God then decrees that on that night the "firstborn of Egypt" will all die. This decree includes bunny rabbits and cute little puppy dogs and Pharaoh's only son, who, like so many others in the Bible, is guilty by association. Eventually, Pharaoh, who might be a few spokes short of a wheel, *chooses* to let the Chosen People go. Thus, Moses and his flock set out on a forty-year journey to "a land flowing with milk and honey," or, as the Philistines call the place, "bee and goat land."

Things get off to a rocky start when Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his charioteers to run the refugees down. The Israelites soon find themselves in an indefensible position with their backs against the sea.

"Way to go," someone shouts at Moses. "Who put you in charge?"

But Moses knows something they don't know. With a wave of his magic stick, the waters part. Then, while a pillar of fire holds off the enemy, the Israelites make a run for the border.

Cool! The Jews escape again. End of chapter, right?

No, unfortunately this is Jehovah, the "God of War," and he is not content with just another heroic, last-minute escape. Even though his people are safely beyond Pharaoh's reach, God extinguishes his pillar of fire, lures the Egyptians out into the dry seabed, then drops a billion acre feet of salt water on their heads. More dead Egyptians.

MOVIE MAGIC:

You can thank Cecil B. DeMille and Technicolor for that version, even though it's not from the Bible. As we pointed out in the introduction, God did not really part a Red Sea. It was a "sea of reeds." However, as far as military strategy, there may be a nut of truth in there. If their escape route led through an alluvial swamp, the Hebrews might have crossed at low tide. Then, when the tide came in, the Egyptian chariots would get bogged down in the mud. But then again, it's just a cartoon anyway.

And the moral of this story is, uh, what? Slavery is bad? Especially when you're the slave! Add this new law to God's penal code: The penalty for enslaving Israelites is boils, frogs, locusts,

acid reflux disease, losing your firstborn, and eventual death by drowning.

WANDERING JEWS

According to the Bible, it takes the Jews forty years to get from Egypt to the promised land, a distance of 240 miles. Which means they are averaging about .003 miles per day, or as they say in New Orleans, FEMA speed. One reason for this leisurely pace might be that Moses takes six hundred thousand men and women with him when he leaves Egypt. Add in a couple of hundred thousand children, and that's a lot of Jews! According to my R.O.T.C. field manual, they would form a column of twos, one hundred miles long!

And your point is?

How are you going to feed them? How many tons of food would it take, per day, to keep this group alive? [see: Ark, Noah's] If you know your geography, you know that the Sinai Desert is about as fertile as Death Valley. Even for a god, supplying a group this large is going to be tricky. Yes, it's true that they've all been issued special clothes guaranteed to last forty years, but has anybody thought about water? I guess not, because the Israelites soon find themselves dying of thirst in the Desert of Shur. The only water they can find is bitter, so Moses throws a stick into the well and it becomes "sweet." A month later they are in the Desert of Sin and they are starving.

"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I will rain down manna from heaven for you.'"

Exo. 16:4

Moses: "I hope it's not that yeastless kind."

Aaron: "Yeah, that stuff tastes like adobe. HEY! Damon, better duck your head there. Ooh! Little slow on that one. That might need stitches."

Moses: "Oh, and by the way, have you heard about little Joey?"

Aaron: "Yeah, another case of scurvy."

Moses: "My wife (sigh) has rickets. I think it's caused by a lack of certain trace nutrients in our diet."

Aaron: "Blasphemy! God's just pissed off at somebody, that's all."

The Lord sure has a flare for the dramatic, doesn't he. It's not like he couldn't put the manna into neat stacks, maybe throw in a basket of fruit, he has to cluster-bomb it all over the desert, thereby inventing the *sand*-wich. (Sorry about that, Chief.)

Finally, they all arrive at the base of Mount Sinai where they set up camp. Moses, who is getting on in years (over eighty), decides to go mountain climbing. At the top, he meets God, again. God sends him back down the mountain carrying tablets of stone. Then God calls Moses back up. Then he sends him back down. Then he . . .whew! I'm tired!

While Moses is gone free-climbing, his brother, Aaron, who has to be incredibly dense, takes up a collection of earrings and bracelets, then casts two idols--Golden calves, to be specific--made mostly with gold stolen from the Egyptians.

NOTE: God might cut them some slack here, as they have not yet seen the commandments and therefore don't know that stealing to make golden idols is forbidden.

When Moses finally comes back down from the mountain, he's carrying a couple of hand-engraved stone tablets with him. However, when he sees the golden calves, he is so upset that he drops the stones and breaks them.

EXTRA SPECIAL NOTE: If I were you, I would pay particular attention to this next part, because these hand hewn TEN COMMANDMENTS are the only words that God ever personally wrote down. Here they are in condensed form, with snide comments:

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

1. **You shall have no other Gods before me**

Why doesn't God just say, there *are* no other gods? Isn't he sure? If I said, "No car is going to pass me," wouldn't that imply *other* cars?

2. **You shall not make for yourself an idol**

God does sound a little insecure, doesn't he. Especially when he adds: "I am a jealous God, punishing the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

Stick that up on your courthouse wall, Mr. Tennessee Conservative.

3. **You shall not misuse the name of the Lord**

I saw a televangelist the other day--Joyce something or other--she was covered in bling and dressed like a million bucks, and she was selling prayer cloths in the name of the Lord, and if that ain't blasphemy

4. **Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy**

In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII removed ten days from the calendar. At least one whole Sabbath disappeared! I'll remember that one.

5. Honor your father and mother

What if your mom is a swastika-tattooed Nazi crack whore and your dad is an accident/injury attorney and they didn't want you the first place?

6. You shall not commit murder

Oh, please. The Bible is the bloodiest book I have ever read. God murders innocent human beings (and fetuses) by the millions.

7. You shall not commit adultery.

Unless you are as wise as Solomon or as unscrupulous as David. Oh, and by the way, didn't God know that Mary was betrothed to Joseph when he impregnated her? Isn't there some sort of law against that?

8. You shall not steal

Unless you're stealing from a rival god or clan and you call it plundering.

9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

No, Ruth, it's not the new dress, you're just fat . . . and ugly."

10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house, or wife

Remember back in commandment number two when God said that he was the jealous type? If you look in your thesaurus under *jealous*, you will find *covetous*. So, God can covet, but you can't? Beware the mind police!

11. You shall keep your filthy paws off the choir boys

Do you think anyone will notice if I include this recently discovered 11th commandment?

Pertinent observation: "If god really wanted us to believe the ten commandments, he would have written them on the moon."
Victor J. Stenger

True Jailhouse Confessions
HOW I BROKE ALL TEN COMMANDMENTS
IN TEN MINUTES
by

Texas "Tex" Forbersheim

After work last Sunday, I was over at my neighbor's lah-dee-dah mansion when he came home and caught me in bed with his wife. I tried to explain that it was her idea, but he wouldn't listen, so I broke a statue of Buddha over his *^&%\$ head. He was still breathing, so I stabbed him with a crucifix. Then I stole his Rolex, put his body in the trunk of his Saab, drove it over to my mom and dad's house and left it in their garage.

THE CODE OF HAMMURABI

Before Moses, there was Prince Hammurabi, who also claimed to be working under direct orders from a god, or in this case, a pair of gods.

"Anu and Bel called by name me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, who feared God, to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land."

These laws, known as "The Code of Hammurabi" predate the Biblical Commandments by three hundred years. Consider these gems of wisdom:

"If any one brings an accusation of any crime before the elders, and does not prove what he has charged, he shall be put to death."

That ought to cut down on the number of frivolous lawsuits. How about this for a quick and easy divorce:

"If a man takes a woman to wife, but has no intercourse with her, this woman is no wife to him."

The **prime commandment** should be "Do as I say, not as I do," because most of the gods pay no attention to the rules. Even Moses doesn't take them seriously. A good example of this comes only a few minutes after he comes down from the mountain. Moses calls together all the Levites who are "for God," then issues

this command:

"Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other each killing his brother and friend and neighbor."

Exo. 32:27

What? You're kidding, right? Are you sure about this translation? First, Moses comes down the mountain with God's laws, written in stone, one of which is, "You shall not commit murder," then he sends his holy warriors off on a murderous spree during which "three thousand of the people die." Makes about as much sense as a deluge.

Stop the presses! Maybe this will clear things up. I've just discovered two more sets of commandments in the Bible. Yikes! That makes three. And guess what! They're not the same. The first two are almost identical except for the bit about the Sabbath. The third one is completely different and contains important laws such as: "Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk." As if you needed to be told.

Hold the phone! I've just discovered a fourth set of commandments. These commandments, however, do not come from God, but from a source almost as holy. They

come from Gene Autry, the coolest, cleanest, swingiest, singiest cowboy ever. And they were not carved in stone, but branded on leather.

THE COWBOY TEN COMMANDMENTS

by Gene Autry

1. The cowboy must never shoot first, hit a smaller man, or take unfair advantage.
2. He must never go back on his word, or a trust confided in him.
3. He must always tell the truth.
4. He must be gentle with children, the elderly, and animals.
5. He must not advocate or possess racially or religiously insensitive ideas.
6. He must help people in distress.
7. He must be a good worker.
8. He must keep himself clean in thought, speech, action, and personal habits.
9. He must respect women, parents, and his nation's laws.
10. The cowboy is a patriot.

Am I weird, or do these actually make more sense than the ones in the Bible? I think I'll keep them in the Skeptics Bible.

An atheist website, **Ebon Musings**, lists these ten commandments:

1. Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you.
2. In all things, strive to cause no harm.
3. Treat your fellow human beings, your fellow living things, and the world in general with love, honesty, faithfulness and respect.
4. Do not overlook evil or shrink from administering justice, but always be ready to forgive wrongdoing freely admitted and honestly regretted.
5. Live life with a sense of joy and wonder.
6. Always seek to learn something new.

7. Test all things; check your ideas against the facts, and be ready to discard even a cherished belief if it does not conform to them.
8. Never seek to censor or cut yourself off from dissent; always respect the right of others to disagree with you.
9. Form independent opinions on the basis of your own reason and experience; do not allow yourself to be led blindly by others.
10. Question everything.

Bible Trivia: There are actually 613 commandments in the Torah, and you've broken at least half of them this week. But don't feel too bad, the pope broke at least a dozen.

613 COMANDMENTS

**Below, find a list of my favorite
commandments from the Mitzvahs.**

Everyone must write his own Torah on a scroll.

Deut. 31:19

Every man must bind a leather pouch containing the Torah to his forehead.

Deut. 6:8

Newlyweds are excused from public service for one year.

Deut. 24:5

Do not castrate any male - human or animal.

Lev. 22:24

Don't eat rats.

Lev. 11:44

Men are fined fifty shekels for seducing a virgin.

Ex. 22:15-16 (Women are stoned to death for the same crime)

Do not cast spells over snakes or scorpions.

Deut. 18:11

No cross-dressing allowed.

Deut. 22:5

Clean a leper with cedar, hyssop, scarlet thread, two birds and running water.

Lev. 14:1-7

Nazarites must not consume wine or grapes or raisins or grape

skins or seeds or anything that looks, tastes or smells like wine.

Num. 64:7

Completely exterminate the seven Canaanite tribes from Israel.

Num. 20:17

Do not marry a eunuch.

Deut. 23:2

Do not eat a shrunken thigh vein.

Gen. 32:33

Do not swear at the judge.

Ex. 22:27

Keep the latrine outside the camp.

Deut. 23:13

If you hang someone, take them down before nightfall.

Deut. 21:23

No witchcraft, astrology, signs, portents, charms, spells, wizardry, magic, or talking to ghosts.

Deut. (all of it)

Slay the idol worshipers and burn their city.

Deut. 13:16-17

Get thee to a nunnery.

Hamlet by W. Shakespeare

MY TEN COMMANDMENTS

1. Don't kill living things for sport or sacrifice, and never ever vote for Sarah Palin.
2. Pay no attention to schedules, which are invariably written for someone else.
3. With great wealth comes great responsibility, so try to avoid getting rich.
4. Get some sun.
5. Remember that you are unique, and that everyone else is just like you.
6. Have your pets spayed or neutered.
7. Music is the language of the future, so learn to play an instrument.
8. Never wait in line, unless it's for (fill in the blank).
9. It's a crowded planet, so limit your family to one or two children.

10. Learn to live with yourself.

The next few chapters are chock full of rules and regulations. Not all of them are worth noting. The significance here is that out of chaos, order is being established. Clans have become tribes have become villages have become kingdoms with rulers and laws. People are learning how to live together. Which, I think, must be the point of these early parts of the Bible. Maybe not.

LEVITICUS

Another title for Leviticus might be: "*The Care and Feeding of Your New Lord.*" Leviticus lays out the regulations for what will and will not be accepted as an offering. For instance, no animals (or people) with festering warts or running sores. If you want to worship correctly, there are procedures to learn. There's the guilt offering, the sin offering, the burnt offering, the grain offering, etc. Even the construction of the altars is discussed in details, details, details!

LESSON ONE

PRIESTS: Now that we have a god and a church and some laws, we're going to need priests. Priests must be ordained. Here are the essential tools and rules for ordination. In this case, we'll use Aaron's sons as an example. First you need to:

"Bring Aaron and his sons, their garments, the anointing oil, the bull for the sin offering, the two rams and the basket containing the bread made without yeast (eye of newt, wing of bat, pinch of oregano), and gather the entire assembly at the entrance to the tent of meeting.

Lev. 8:2

Next, anoint the tent and everyone in it with anointing oil. [For a recipe, see Exo. 13:23.] After that, slaughter the bull for the sin offering. Take some of the blood and with your finger-

"Put it on all the horns of the altar to purify the altar."

Lev. 8:15

The next step is to slaughter the rams; one for the burnt offering, the other for the ordination.

"Moses slaughtered the ram and took some of the blood and put it on the lobe of his right ear and the thumb of his right hand and the big toe of his right foot.."

Lev. 8:23

Then you do the Hokey Pokey and you turn yourself around. Just kidding. But, doesn't all of this rigmarole sound a little like a chapter from Dr. Death's *How to Hold a Satanic Ritual?* Especially the part about "blood on all the horns of the altar." I'd be willing to wager ten shekels of silver that every time the Hebrews performed this "Ordination Ceremony," a new bit of business found its way into the routine. Sort of like vaudeville. How many years did it take to go from a simple "Thank you, Lord," to an expensive ceremony with ornate trappings, exotic oils, dead animals, and a ritual so complex that it required a dress rehearsal?

And Yahweh is not alone in his constant need for positive reinforcement. All of the major gods, I am sad to report, feed on human supplication. From Apollo to Zeus, from Baal to Jim Jones, from Jehovah to Joseph Smith, they all have their own version of the big suck-up. (Excluding, of course, Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, who somehow manages to keep his feet on the ground while allowing the insanity to flow around him.) Who are the masters of window dressing? Which group can lay claim to the title "Kings of Excess?" From what I've seen, so far, by sheer weight of pageantry and costume, Catholicism leads the way in conspicuous ritual, followed closely by Voo Doo and the Ku Klux Klan. What would Jesus think of the Vatican? Holy

Moly!

POPE JOHN PAUL II (the early years)

In Karol Wojtyla's (pronounced: *Kar'ol*) high school yearbook, under his picture it says: Captain of the chess club; voted most likely to be Pope John Paul II, Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Christ, successor to the prince of the apostles, supreme pontiff of the universal church, patriarch of the west, primate of Italy, archbishop and metropolitan of the Roman province, sovereign of the state of Vatican City, servant of the servants of God and an all-around swell guy.

(**Note:** I did not make up any of these papal titles. They're funny enough already I did, however, "dramatize" the bit about the yearbook. Karol wasn't in the chess club.)

Repeat question: What's up with all the pomp and circumstance? Is God really telling Moses that he wants humans to jump through hoops like this? Why would a god, a being with infinite wisdom and total control, need this sort of childish ego massage? It's all just so . . . so human! Maybe God spent too many lonely eons out there in that void all by himself.

"The gods must be crazy."

Aussie Aboriginal saying

Leviticus 18:6-23 concerns your sex life, so pay attention: Do *not* have sex with any of the following:

1. Close relatives
2. Your mom
3. You're mother-in-law
4. Your sister
5. Your grandkids
6. Your aunt
7. Your daughter in-law
8. Both a mother and her daughter
9. Women who are unclean
10. Your neighbors
11. The same sex

12. Animals, unclean or not

13. "Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech."
(Who is this Molech and how did he get in the sex category?)

Simple but direct. If these laws seem like common sense to you, remember that these people are just learning about the horrors of inbreeding, syphilis, jealous husbands, and Courtney Love. Most of the rest of the laws in this book are equally inapplicable to our times. Some are so archaic that even staunchly religious people pay no attention to them.

along with the usual advice to stay away from the pig meat sushi, here are a few more dietary advisories:

"The fat of an animal found dead or torn by wild animals may be used for any other purpose, but you must not eat it."

Lev. 7:24

(There goes that recipe for "roadkill fat pie.")

"But all creatures in the streams or seas that do not have fins or scales...you are to detest."

Lev. 11:10

Or, as the Gideon's version says, "You are not to eat of their flesh." In other words, we're not supposed to eat lobster bisque. It means no clams, no mussels, no shrimp, no calamari, no hip tendons, no crayfish, no gumbo . . . no Cajuns!!

Here's another commandment or two direct from the Lord:

"Do not mate different kinds of animals.

Do not plant your field with two kinds of seeds.

Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material."

Lev. 19:19 (40% polyester 60% cotton?)

"Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip the edges of your beard."

Lev. 19:27

"Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord.

Lev. 19:28

So, the next time you see a teen with a *WWJD bracelet* (What Would Jesus Do), you might remind him or her that Jesus would not sport a skinhead haircut, a tongue stud, or a barbed wire tattoo, especially while eating crab puffs and wearing a leisure suit. Leviticus also explains the rules for the purification of a woman after childbirth.

"If she gives birth to a son, then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. If she gives birth to a daughter...then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified."

Lev. 12:4

Sounds about right to me. After I saw all the lotions and potions my sister left scattered around the bathroom, I always suspected that girls needed at least twice the purification of boys.

NUMBERS

Numbers starts out with a list of the various tribes and a census, wherein all the males over twenty are counted. It doesn't say anything about counting women. It does, however, contain a "test" to see if a wife has been unfaithful to her husband. It goes like this:

The priest puts some holy water into a clay jar then sprinkles in a little dust from the temple floor. After the priest burns some grain, he says an oath to the accused woman and gives her the holy water to drink. If she is telling the truth nothing happens. If she is lying, well . . . let's just say there are consequences.

"May this water that brings a curse enter your body so that your abdomen swells and your thigh wastes away."

Num. 5:22

Intestinal gas? Popeye legs? Is that better than Divorce Court, or what? This book is chock full of blessings and offerings and rituals, but haven't you had enough snake oil already? The rest of the book is about the wandering Jews and the troubles they encounter. In one part they are grumbling about their pitiful meatless condition. God is in a snarky mood, so he sends them some quail and says:

"You will not eat it for one day or two days or five, ten or twenty days, but for a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it."

Num. 11:19

(There's fried quail, stewed quail, broiled quail, quail soup, quail scampi, quail with wine sauce, quail tacos, Bubba Gump's Bayou Quail - ")

Am I the only one who thinks that these Israelites are a little slow

on the uptake? Every time they start bitching about their low position on the ladder of life, God does something to knock them down another wrung. Fifteen minutes after the quail incident, they've forgotten all about it. Miriam and Aaron are again dissing Moses. So, what does God do? To Aaron, nothing. To Miriam . . . leprosy!

"When the cloud lifted from above the tent, there stood Miriam--leprous."

Num. 12:10

Gee, thanks. Just what we needed. Now, along with all the other disgusting diseases, such as ebola, hemorrhagic fever and Celine Dion, God makes one that rots your face off. Later in the same chapter, a man breaks the third commandment by gathering gopher wood on the Sabbath. For his sin this man is punished. No, I mean *really* punished!

"Then the Lord said to Moses, the man must die. So the whole assembly took the man outside the camp and stoned him to death."

Num. 15:35

Have you ever thought about what it would feel like to be stoned to death? "Ow! Stop it! That hurts!" How would you feel if you had to pull the trigger or throw the switch on death row? Is there a lawyer in the house? The point God is trying to make is: Take a day off. I agree, though I think the punishment for disobedience is a little severe.

Meanwhile, back in the Sinai:

The Hebrews have such short memories that it only takes another page or two before the last lesson is forgotten and the wandering Jews again get cranky. They complain to Moses:

"We detest this miserable food."

When God hears them whining again, do you know what he does? Take a guess.

"Tell me it's not snakes! I hate snakes!"

"Then the lord sent venomous snakes among them and they bit the people and many of them died."

Num. 21:6

Quick, has anyone got a cure for a cobra bite? God does. He tells Moses what to do:

"So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then

when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived."

Num. 21:8

(So, golden calves are out, but bronze snakes are in?)

Dumb Question: Wouldn't it be easier to skip the snakes and the totem poles and just kill the troublemakers directly? How about a couple of lightning bolts? Why does God do everything the hard way? The painful way? Oh, and by the way, **snake cults** anyone? In his second commandment, didn't God say, "You shall *not* make for yourself an idol in the form of **anything!**" Well, which way do you want it? Idols, or no idols?

Talking Donkeys?

The venomous vipers in the previous fable may have been legless and mute, but Baalam's donkey has a few words for her master. When his donkey balks and lays down on the job, Baalam whacks her upside the ear with his staff. To his surprise, the donkey responds:

"What have I done to you to make you beat me?"

Num. 22:28

Does anyone remember *Francis the Talking Mule*? How about "Mr. Ed?" No one can talk to a horse, of course, but a donkey, that's another thing. What Baalam doesn't realize is that his donkey can see an "invisible angel of the Lord" standing menacingly in the road with a sword. The moral of this story is, uh, trust your ass?

BAAL OF PEOR

The next chapter begins with an orgy in the desert of Shittim. The party starts when some Moabite women invite the Israelites over to their tent.

"Sunset. My place. We'll down a few skins of wine, indulge in a little hot sex, then worship Baal."

Bible: implied

"So Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them."

Num. 25:3

Not again. Don't these Hebrews ever learn? This "Baal of Peor" seems to be God's chief rival. His name pops up numerous times in the Old Testament. Jehovah doesn't like him or his followers.

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight.'"

Num. 25:3

In other words, let the bodies rot! This is a real slap in the face to an enemy. The Gideon's version of the story gets even nastier. Jehovah tells his troops to slice off the Moabite's heads and mount them on poles in the sun. After killing the Moabite leaders, the Israelites kick butt on the Midianites. They kill all the men, all the boys, and "every woman who has slept with a man." The virgins they take as part of the spoils, along with sheep, donkeys and cattle.

"The plunder remaining from the spoils that the soldiers took was 675,500 sheep, 72,000 cattle, 61,000 donkeys, and 32,000 women who had never slept with a man."

Num. 31:32

Thirty-two THOUSAND virgins? Who did the counting? How did they know?

Soldier: "Are you a virgin?"

Captive: "You got *that* right!"

Soldier: "You look a little past your prime."

Captive: "That's because I've been saving myself for someone like you, big boy."

And what did the army of God do with all of these nubile young women? They did what unpaid soldiers have always done. Need I

be more specific? And did you notice how even virgin women are counted *after* donkeys?

DEUTERONOMY

By the time we get to Deuteronomy, the Israelites have fought and conquered almost everybody in the neighborhood. Except the Amorites. And the Hittites, Gergashites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites and stalactites. Who are we kidding? Most of the Old Testament is just one bloody battle after another. God sometimes leads the way onto the field, and despite his short fuse, he seems to be a pretty good Commander-in-Chief. One of his strategies is: Kill everybody! He tells his troops that he will help them defeat the aforementioned tribes, and he says-

"Destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them and show no mercy."

Deut. 7:2

Note to God: Does the term "ethnic cleansing" mean anything to you?

And now, back to the merciless slaughter of the infidels.

Wait a second. What about human sacrifices and cannibalism?"

I'm glad you asked that. In Deuteronomy it says:

"You will eat the fruit of the womb, the flesh of the sons and daughters that the Lord has given you."

Deut. 28:53

Here's another bit of headhunting from Ezekiel:

"Heap on wood, kindle the fire, consume their flesh, and spice it well."

Ezek. 24:10-12

And in Jeremiah, God punishes some evil doers thusly:

"And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and flesh of

their daughters."

Jer. 19:9

And this from II Kings:

"Give up your son so we may eat him today, and tomorrow we will eat my son."

2 Kings 6:28-29

Now, I'm sure that we can all agree that this Donner party dinner menu is gruesome and pagan, and that such uncivilized behavior is behind us. There is, however, a modern day tribe whose members eat the body of their deliverer and drink his blood. They're called Catholics.

World History: 101

Let's take a moment here and review the history of the world. First there was a murder, then there was a tribal skirmish, then there was a war, then there was a ten-years war, a hundred-years war, a war of the roses, a seven-years war, a few civil wars, a few dozen uncivil wars, a "war to end all wars," WWII, a "police action," an undeclared war, a seven-day war, the "mother of all battles," and most recently, "Operation Iraqi Freedom."

Now, class, what do they all have in common?

"Besides lots of people dying, you mean?"

Yes, besides that.

"Uh . . . God?"

Correct. In every single case, God was on the winning side. Or, as Napoleon once observed: "God favors large battalions."

Repeat question: How long before we get to monotheism?

"Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain."

Deut. 11:16

"A prophet who speaks in the name of other gods must be put to death."

Deut. 18:20

Ans: Not just yet.

CREDIT COUNSELING

My favorite part of the book, so far, is when God arranges for my debts to be canceled.

"At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. (You) shall not require payment from your fellow Israelite or brother, because the Lord's time for canceling debts has come."

Deut. 15:1

Whoopie! How come I never heard of this law before? Because, stupid, you're a Lutheran. And nobody pays any attention to it, anyway. Can you imagine what would happen to Visa and American Express? The western world would crumble.

Attn: Harry Potter fans:

"Let no one be found among you...who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults with the dead."

Deut. 18:9

Then what about all those prophets and oracles and magic potions? Didn't Moses' staff turn into a serpent? What about turning water into wine? Didn't Joseph interpret dreams? Didn't Jesus walk on water? Wasn't Mary a virgin mother? If that ain't magic, I don't know what is.

Yes, but they were all working for God.

So, let me get this straight. As long as you're on God's side, you're allowed to bend the laws of physics?

Correct. As long as you refer to said bending as "a miracle."

What about Houdini?

DEUTORONOMY or here come da judge

Deuteronomy is a law book. It reinforces the covenant that the

people have made with God, and it clears up a lot of the little day-to-day legal issues. For instance, if you're a soldier and you've just captured a woman in battle:

"You may take her as your wife. Bring her into your home and have her shave her head, trim her nails and put aside the clothes she was wearing when captured."

Deu..21:11-12

(Naked, clean-shaven and unarmed? All that crap about love is overrated anyway.)

Suppose you're having trouble with your teenage son. All you have to do is take him to the tribal elders:

"He is a profligate and a drunkard. Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death."

Deu.18:20

Okay, no one in the twenty-first century is going to stone a child to death just because he is drunk or disobedient. So, may I suggest lethal injection?

More Misc. laws:

1. Lying about your virginity is grounds for divorce and/or death by stoning.

(Excluding males, of course.)

2. No prostitution in the house of the Lord.

(you may, however, give it away.)

3. Do not charge a brother interest.

4. You may eat your neighbor's grapes, but don't put any in your basket.

(Does this mean what I think it means?)

5. Do not marry the same woman twice.

("I feel so miserable without you, it's almost like having you here." S. Bishop)

6. Fathers shall not be put to death for the sins of their children, nor children for the sins of their fathers. (Contrary to the fourth

commandment.)

7. Do not muzzle your ox while he is treading out the grain. You are, however, allowed to muzzle your mother-in-law

8. If your brother dies and you refuse to marry his widow, then one of the elders will take off his sandals, spit in your face and say, "This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line." So there.

9. If two men are fighting and one of the men's wives grabs the other guy by the balls, then she shall have her hand cut off. "Show her no pity."

10. Use honest weights and measures. "Hey, Seth, get your thumb off the scale."

11. Give the firstfruits of the soil to the lord.

Just in case you haven't been paying attention, God wants to remind you that if you should be foolish enough to ignore any of these "suggestions," you're in for some serious trouble:

"Your carcasses will be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the Earth, and there will be no one to frighten them away. The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors, festering sores and the itch, from which you cannot be cured. The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind."

Deut. 28:26

(Okay, but don't mess with my dog.)

It takes a few more chapters, but God eventually condenses the punishment for disobedience down to a single word: **Hell!** (more about that later) On the flip side, the Lord promises that you will become wealthy if you obey him.

Ques: Does this mean that all poor people are heathens?

Ans: Most of them, yes.

At the end of Deuteronomy, without crossing the river, Moses finally dies. Actually, he's in perfect health, so God kills him. Even after everything Moses has done for him - like memorizing

the Torah and wearing the same clothes for forty years - God still holds a grudge. The Lord rationalizes this way:

"You broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh."

Deu. 32:51

(Picky Picky)

Bible Quiz: Of the half million or so Jews who escape from Egypt, how many cross over into the Promised Land?

Ans. A handful.

Is that fair? Or God-like? No, it isn't. Even Moses, who did the Lord's work all his life, is denied the simple reward of finishing his journey. In other words, "What have you done for me, lately?" I wonder if, at the end, Moses ever thought back to those days in Midia when he had his own flocks and in the cool of the evening he enjoyed the company of seven beautiful sisters. *If only I had ignored that bush.*

One more quick question before we exit Exodus: If Moses is telling us this story, how could he know about his own death? Or his own grave?

"He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is."

Deu. 34:6

I do! I do! I know where his grave is. It's in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor. Remember? We were just there with those lusty Moabite women. Okay, I don't really know where the grave is located. I don't even know how to find Moab on a map. But with a minor bit of rewriting, I think I could improve this part and remove a lot of the doubt.

"God promised to bury me in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, Tuesday, the twenty-second."

Fic. 101

JOSHUA TAKES OVER

The first responsibility for Joshua is to get everyone across the Jordan River and safely into the promised land. He tells his captain to send twelve men and the ark of the covenant across the river.

His captain responds, "But, sir, it's at flood stage and, I, uh, can't swim."

"Go on," Joshua says, waving his hand, "just walk on across."

His men look at him like he's nuts, but they do as they are told. Not so surprisingly, the minute the ark hits the water, the flow stops and "stands up in a heap."

Not that old trick again!

Yes, if you've been paying attention, you know that this is the second time God has done the "parting of the waters" bit, though damming a river is not nearly as impressive as parting a sea, even a red one. (**Note:** For those few of you who have not seen *Indiana Jones*, the ark contains the stone tablets with the ten commandments, and it has the power to melt Nazis.) Whether by magic or miracle, this dam trick scares the bejesus out of the local pagan armies. "Their hearts melt and they no longer have the courage to face the Israelites." The Chosen People pile up twelve stones to mark the spot. Then God says,

"Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again."

Josh. 5:2

Again! A double circumcision?! Hey, no way! It's as short as it's going to get.

Note: This is where knowing something about God's childhood would come in handy. It might help explain his twin fixations: foreskins and snakes.

JERICHO

Things on Jehovah's side of the river are pretty much the same as on the other. There's still a lot of inter-tribal bickering going on. Also, the locals are reluctant to give up their homeland on the word of some invisible, but otherwise humanoid god. This is inconsequential to Jehovah, who now has a large army and a worthy leader to back up his territorial claims. Joshua turns out to be more of a Rommel-style field commander than a king or prophet. All he does is kick ass and take names. For instance, he takes the walled city of Jericho without any weapons other than a strong brass section. (Tower of Power?)

MUSICAL NOTE: This is the same way the U.S. Army captured Manuel Noriega and Panama City, except they used a Barry Manilow record.

Needless to say, with God lending a hand, Jericho falls, literally. The Lord God is, as always, merciful and benevolent:

"And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox and sheep and ass, with the edge of the sword."

Josh. 6:21

Wo! Brutal, dude.

Interesting fact no. 5: As I hinted earlier, modern archaeological evidence, along with written records, suggests that Jericho was built on a fault line, and that the city had been deserted for more than three hundred years *before* Joshua got there. This, of course, made his job much easier.

GOD STOPS THE SUN

And the war drags on. After being conned into a treaty with the Gibeonites, Joshua has to defend them when a coalition of enemies attack. He asks the Lord for help and the Lord obliges by stopping the sun. How this helps, I don't know, but it makes for lively reading.

"The sun stopped in the middle of the day and delayed going down for about a full day."

Josh. 10:13

"Quick! Junior Astronomers, what's wrong with this passage? Bobby?"

"Sir, stopping the sun wouldn't keep it from 'going down.' Only by stopping the rotation of the Earth could you achieve the desired effect. And either way there would be cataclysmic consequences."

"Correct. Perhaps God has forgotten that he can light up the whole universe without any help from the sun."

Ques: How is it that not one other single living soul on Earth noted this rather strange 48 hour day?

Ans: Beats me.

Now, back to the conquest of paradise.

After Jericho, Joshua conquers the southern cities, then he defeats the northern kings. Along the way he defeats thirty-one kings of Jerusalem whose names I won't bother you with unless I get paid by the word.

Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, Eglon, Geaer, Debir, Geder, Hormah, Arad, Libnah, Adulam, Makkedah, Bethel, Tappuah, Hephher, Pphek, Lasharon, Madon, Hazor, Shimron Meron, Acshaph, Taanach, Meggido, Kedish, Jokneam, Dor, Goyim, Tirzah, Simon and Garfinkle.

"When Joshua was old and advanced in years, the Lord said to him, 'You are very old, and there are still large areas of land to be taken over.'"

Josh. 13:1

Talk about being paid by the word! I mean, did they have to say everything three times? If Joshua is "old," there's a very good chance he's "advanced in years," especially if he's "very old." If I had authored a sentence like that, Mrs. Emmett would have drummed me out of Eng. 29 in the first semester, instead of the second.

Ans: Yes, they did have-

"Wait, I didn't ask a question."

Ans: Yes, you did. You wanted to know if they had to say everything three times, and the answer is yes, they did have to say everything three times. You should remember that these are stories being told around campfires, often to other tribesman who didn't speak the same language or dialect. If a man didn't understand the Hebrew word for *old* he might understand *advanced in years*, or *decrepit*, or *coot*, or *old fart* or-

That's enough.

For those of you who have lost the thread, an aging Joshua is being given a list of which lands remain to be conquered. God explains to the various heads of the tribes of Israel that after the wars are over everyone is going to get a piece of the action.

"Reuben, you and the Gaddites get control of everything east of the Jordan and south of the Nine Tribes territory. Jaz, you get the territory of Jazer. Judah, you and your family get Judea, and Nod, you get, uh, Staten Island."

Block by block, the Godfather, er, I mean God, divides the spoils of war. Before Joshua dies, he makes another covenant with God and records his words in the *Book of the Law of God*.

Note: There's another book mentioned in the Bible called *The Book of the Wars of the Lord*. There are no existing copies. Find one and become wealthy beyond your wildest imagination. Hey! There's a good plot for a novel! Ahhh, Dan Brown is probably working on it already.

JUDGES

The Book of Judges isn't about courts or magistrates or laws or any of that legal crappola. Mostly it's about Judah's rule. No sooner does he take over than there's another war with the Canaanites and the Perizzites.

"When Judah attacked, the Lord gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands and they struck down ten thousand men at Bezek. Adoni Bezek fled, but they chased him and caught him and **cut off his thumbs and big toes.**"

Jud: 4-6

Time out! What is this we're reading here? Severed thumbs? Amputated toes! I thought we were the good guys?

Not hardly. When it comes to religious warfare, God is neither compassionate, nor merciful. In the heat of battle, the Army of the Lord will do anything to win. Unconditional surrender? Ha! Losers die!

"Does God take pleasure in watching us kill each other in his name?"

Joan of Arc

Later in this book there's a gruesome story about a guy named Sisera, an enemy of God, who is on the run. He hides out in the

tent of Jael, a former girlfriend and ally. Little does Sisera know that Jael is now working on the side of decency and all things American, if not religious freedom.

"But Jael . . . picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the tent peg through his temple into the ground, and he died." Jud 4:21

Yep, that oughta do it. Tent pegs in the brain are usually fatal. Or at least debilitating. The moral is, even women can get blooded.

AND NOW PRESENTING: ANOTHER HUMAN SACRIFICE TO YAHWEH

You're just making that up, right?

No, I'm not. Do you remember the story of Abraham and how God asked him to sacrifice his only son on the altar and how God cancelled Isaac's barbeque at the very last second? Well, if Isaac had been born female, he might not have gotten off so easy. Consider the star-crossed tale of Jephthah and his daughter.

Jephthah, the bastard son of Gilead, is a mighty warrior. When the Ammonites attack the Israelites, he is called on to lead the army of God into battle. Jephthah insures victory by making a covenant (arms deal) with the Lord.

"If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return...will be the Lord's and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

Judges 11:30

A mighty battle ensues, but with God's help, the Jews cruise to an easy victory, "devastating every town from Aroer to Minnith." When Jephthah returns home in triumph, the first person who comes out to greet him is his only daughter (nameless, but a virgin). After granting her a two-month reprieve to mourn her virginity (or lose it), Jephthah carries through on his promise to God and sacrifices his daughter on the altar of *You've got to be*

kidding! God does nothing to stay his hand.

SAMSON

King of Israel

Samson is the first Jewish superhero. No, he doesn't wear spandex tights, but he does have a fatal flaw. Though he is able to kill lions with his bare hands, poor Sammy is turned into bread dough by every conniving, Eve-like woman who comes along. Also, he has anger-management issues. When his first wife is "given" to his best friend, Samson kills thirty complete strangers and steals their clothes. He then accuses the men of the town of "plowing with my heifer." (How do you feel about that metaphor, ladies?) In order to get even with these men, Samson decides to burn them out.

WARNING! Rated PG17 for excessive cruelty to animals.

"So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines."

Jud. 15:4-5

Call the ASPCA! Call PETA! Poor little foxes. If you ask me, this is a pretty chicken-shit thing to do, especially coming from a hunk like Samson. The Philistines get even by burning Samson's wife and her father to death. Samson then slices and dices another thousand Philistines using the jawbone of an ass. Then the Hatfields and McCoys get in another shootout.

One lazy afternoon, Samson's new girlfriend, Delilah, asks a completely innocuous, totally innocent question:

"Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued."

Jud. 16:6

Huh? Did I say innocent? Okay, maybe she's into bondage. Samson is wise to her Philistine game, though, and he makes up a

story. Delilah keeps teasing him with her famous *butterfly of love* until he finally breaks down and tells her, "It's me natty dreads, mon." She immediately calls her stylist, Sir Simione of Saul's House of Shears, and has Samson shorn like a summer sheep.

This noggin nudity is like Kryptonite to poor Sammy. His head gets cold and he loses his strength. The Philistines take him prisoner, burn his eyes out, lock him in copper shackles, and put him to work grinding grain.

Is this the end of our hero?

No way.

A few months pass, and as you might expect--as anyone with half a brain would expect--Samson's hair grows back. Sur-prise! Sur-prise! I mean, how stupid are you people? If long hair equals superhuman strength, and short hair equals wussyman, then wouldn't regular visits to the barber be a good idea? The guards who are assigned to watch him must be less than five watts each, because neither of them notices when Super Sam starts grinding grain like a herd of bulls on steroids.

Along about this time, the Philistines decide to throw a wild party with Blind Samson as the entertainment. "Hey, let's rearrange the furniture and watch the big clod stumble around." Samson doesn't think it's funny. Suddenly, at the height of the festivities, things go horribly wrong! This time they've messed with the wrong guy! This time, it's personal. Samson decides it's time to bring down the curtain.

"Then he pushed with all his might and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more people when he died than when he lived."

Jud. 17:30

And so children, the moral of this biblical tale is: You should never give up. Even in the last few seconds before you die, you still have time to maim and mangle and crush a few thousand additional women and children, and possibly even a fetus or two.

After Samson, Israel is kingless for a while, but it's no big deal. Things go on pretty much like before.

SODOM II (no Gomorrah)

There are at least a dozen twice-told-tales in the Bible, so if this next bit bears a striking resemblance to an earlier morality play, it's probably the same story told by two different authors, neither of whom had ever been to Sodom. My guess is that when they couldn't agree on the details, they just put both versions in. Like this:

A Levite and his concubine [also translated as: "ho"] are traveling. At dusk they stop in a town square. An old man offers them lodging for the night and they accept. Later that night, the men of the town surround the house and make homosexual advances. "Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him."

Sound familiar? Sure does. Just as in the earlier tale of Sodom, the accommodating Hebrew offers his virgin daughter to the mob, only this time he's even more generous. He throws in the other guy's concubine. The townsmen take the concubine and rape her and abuse her until she dies. Strangely enough, God does nothing to these rapists/murderers. He doesn't fireball the town or any neighboring villages. He doesn't even give a stern lecture. In other words, homosexual rape is an infamia, but raping and murdering a teenage concubine is okay? Ladies, if I were you, I would not like the precedent this is setting. Wait, it gets worse. The despondent man takes his dead girlfriend, puts her on his donkey and takes her to his home, where he cuts her up into twelve pieces and sends the bloody bits to the four corners of the realm. His goal is to start a war with the Benjamites, the tribe that killed his girlfriend, and that's just what happens. The Benjamites see it coming, though, and they quickly muster an army of "twenty-six thousand swordsmen and seven hundred men from Gibe."

The Israelites counter with:

"Four hundred thousand swordsmen, all of them fighting men."

Jud. 20:17

400,000 Israelites vs. 27,000 Benjamites? Doesn't sound fair, does it? According to my calculations, that's about fifteen Israelites to

every one Benjamite. So what do these fighting Hebrews do? They go to Bethel and ask God for advice. God tells them to send Judah to the front. Judah, however, doesn't seem to have the stones to be a military leader.

"The Benjamites came out of Gibe and cut down twenty-two thousand Israelites on the battlefield that day."

Jud. 20:21

Judah should have asked for a college deferment. After losing 22,000 of his men on the first day, his troops go weeping back to their God asking for help. God tells them to "Go up against them."

"This time when the Benjamites came out of Gibe to oppose them, they cut down another eighteen thousand Israelites, all of them armed with swords."

Jud. 20:25

That's another 18,000 corpses rotting in the sun. The odds are down to twelve-to-one. Isn't anybody going to do anything to stop the carnage? Once more, the army of God retreats, weeping and moaning. "Lord," they plead, "what should we do, fight or flee?" God tells them to try again tomorrow, "and I will deliver them unto your hands."

So, 40,000 dead pilgrims later, God decides it's about time to do something. Why he is on the side of these whimpering maroons is beyond me. They seem at least as barbaric and sinful as anybody else . . . and dumber than your average Philistine.

Once more the Hebrews face the Benjamites on the battlefield, only this time they use the old Lakota "feint and run" tactic to lure the Benjamites out into the open where they slaughter the entire army. As always, they burn the enemy town and kill everyone in it, except for the virgins. The Israelites then make a vow to never allow any of their daughters to marry a Benjamite. This is an easy vow to keep, as the Benjamite men are all dead. (Would this qualify as a holocaust?)

Joseph Stalin said, "One death is a tragedy; one million deaths is a

statistic." Well, here's a statistic for you: Blogger and author, Steve Wells, who obviously has a lot of time on his hands, references by chapter and verse, 2,391,421 deaths either ordered or caused by God. I'm not going to argue with him.

I don't know about you, but I'm glad that Judges is over. All the bloodshed was starting to get me down. Now, here to cheer you up, we present the story of Ruth.

RUTH

The Book of Ruth is about, oh, three pages long. I'll make a short story even shorter. After all the men in their family die, Naomi and Ruth return to their ancestral home in Bethlehem. Ruth soon meets and seduces a wealthy landowner name Boaz. The Lord "enables her to conceive" (Boaz helps) and she gives birth to Obed.

To tell you the truth, it took me a few minutes to figure out why Ruth was given an entire book of her own. Biblical women, unless they're involved in some sort of treachery, don't usually get that much ink. One simple paragraph might explain it all.

"Ruth is the mother of Obed, who is the father of Jesse, who is the father of David, who will slay Goliath and become King of Israel."
"

the end

Reader's Easily Digestible Biblical Quickies

Genealogical Note: The Bible contends Jesus is directly descended from King David, but I don't see how that could be. Isn't God the father of Jesus? Isn't Jesus, actually . . . God?

Truth be told, record keeping was never a Hebrew priority, which means there are plenty of genealogical screw-ups in the Bible. For instance, in Matthew it says that Joseph's father is Jacob, while in Luke it says that his father is Heli.

Big F--G Deal

My point exactly! Who cares.

At the premier of one of Walt Disney's full-length cartoons, an

astute critic pointed out a major hole in the plot.

"Yes," Walt replied, "and mice can't talk."

What does that mean?

It means, why nitpick the details when the whole thing is a cartoon.

SAMUEL

I'm going to be honest with you here. The book of Samuel is so full of holes it could mate with a sponge. I think it's possible that the writers might have gotten into the sacrificial wine. The way I understand it: Samuel's mother is Hannah. Eli is his spiritual advisor. I only mention Eli because God is mad at him and he puts a serious curse on him and his "family and all future generations forever."

"Therefore, the guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering."

Sam. 3:14

Okay, get out your number seven pencil and write this down: **God curses the unborn.** Call it Pre-Planned Parenthood.

Ques: "Do you mean that it doesn't matter how clean my record is, or how many animals I burn in God's name, or how many Hail Marys I say, if there's a sinner back there swinging in my family tree, I'm cursed forever? Even my son is cursed?"

Ans: True. Or, as they say in Mecca, "It is written."

"Jeez. That explains a lot."

The book of Samuel is a new low point for the wandering Jews, not only do they get thoroughly ass-whipped by the Philistines, they let the heathens capture the Ark of the Covenant, or as the Phillies call it, "the box with the rocks."

"The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas died."

Sam. 4:11

When the news of his sons' death is reported to Eli, he falls out of his chair and breaks his neck. His distraught daughter-in-law dies during childbirth. That's five down. God's family curse is working quite well, thank you. The ark, meanwhile, is being passed around from one city to the next. Nobody wants it. When they put it in a temple next to a statue of a Philistine god named Dagon, the pagan statue falls over flat on its face, as if in homage to the God of the Israelites. Everywhere the ark goes, trouble follows. For instance, in Gath:

"The Lord's hand was against that city, throwing it into a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, both young and old, with an outbreak of tumors."

Sam. 5:9

As you might imagine, the pock-marked people of Gath want this Pandora's Box out of the city, and fast, so they Fedass the ark overnight to the city of Ekron. The results are the same. More tumors. More dead innocent children. (I may be out of line here, but I think it's possible that whoever is carrying the ark is also carrying the disease that causes the tumors, but I'll play along.) The Philistines ask their god for guidance. Dagon wisely decides that they should load the ark on a cart and send it back to its rightful owners, along with a "guilt offering of five gold rats and five gold tumors." The ark is returned, intact, to the Israelites at Beth Shemesh. Now the plagues can stop, right?

Well, not just yet.

"God struck down some of the men of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy of them to death because they had looked into the ark of the Lord."

Sam. 6:19

Hey, God, lighten up! I have to tell you that I've backtracked and searched the text, but I can't find where you or anybody else said that looking inside the ark was punishable by death. Must be a

new secret commandment: "Thou shalt not peek"

The Chosen People get their ark back, but it doesn't take long before they're restless again. They tell Samuel that they want a king. Sam tries to talk them out of it by explaining all the rotten things that a king might do to them, like conscriptions and taxes and all. But they don't listen. Finally he relents and appoints a man named Saul to the position. The problem is, Saul is a Benjamite. (I thought they were all dead? Does this make Saul a holocaust survivor?) The people don't accept him. Neither does God. That is, until they are under siege by the Ammonites. On the verge of yet another humiliating military defeat, the Israelites offer to make a treaty with their enemy. The king of the Ammonites sends this reply:

"I will make a treaty with you only on the condition that I gouge out the right eye of every one of you and so bring disgrace on all Israel."

Sam. 11:2

The Israelites are left with two choices:

- (1) Bring eye patches back into fashion.
- (2) Get some help.

All of a sudden the people are looking for their king. Old King Saul is out plowing a field when the messenger arrives with bad news from the home front. Saul quickly formulates a plan. He takes two oxen and cuts them into pieces and sends the pieces throughout the land with a message that says, in effect, "You've just been drafted. Show up or you will look like this." Three hundred thousand fighting Hebrews respond to this call to arms. Once more, the Jews have their enemy vastly outnumbered. Will our heroes face them in battle? No, they still have to resort to dirty tricks. First they tell the Ammonites that they will surrender to them at daybreak, then they wait until nightfall, sneak into the enemy camp and . . .

"Slaughter them until the heat of the day."

Sam. 11:11

Hey, check out this new video game I just invented:

"The War of the Gods."

It starts out with each player choosing a god. These "gods" then maneuver their armies around the "holy land" trying to acquire territory while either killing, enslaving, or converting as many people as they can. Whoever ends up with the largest number of believers gets to be the "One True God." Miracles o'plenty.

(reset)

Hey! Wait a minute! You don't suppose that . . . nah.

Have you had enough of the carnage? Too bad. Tonight's main event is:

DAVID VS. GOLIATH

First, a little background on the challenger:

David, son of Jesse, great-grandson of Ruth, is a harpist and a "fine-looking man." Actually, he's still a boy, and rather slight of build. Saul is still king, but the Lord has been giving him migraines.

"The Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him."

Sam. 16:14

(Does it seem to you that there's a touch of sadism in the Lord's methods?)

The only thing that seems to cure Saul's headaches is music. Harp music. David plays for him and Saul likes David. I mean he *really* likes him. Saul asks Jesse if David can "remain in my service, for I am pleased with him."

While this harp serenade is going on behind closed doors, God's Army of the Holy Land is locked in a Mexican stand-off with the pagans. The Israelites are bivouacked in the hills on one

side of the valley, while the Philistines are camped on the other. Every afternoon, the leader of the Philistines sends his champion down into the valley. Goliath calls out to the Israelites to send out their best man:

"If he is able to fight and kill me, we will be your servants; but if I overcome and kill him, you will be our servants and serve us."

Sam. 17:9 (Gideons)

From the Israelite side of the valley comes a deafening silence as thousands decline the challenge.

("Sorry, I've got a dental appointment this afternoon.")

Now, before you go making a foolish wager, let me give you the "tale of the tape" on Goliath, just so you'll understand where the Israelites are coming from. He's nine feet tall [NIV] and built like a triad of Doric pillars. He wears a bronze helmet and one hundred and twenty-five pounds of scale armor. He wears bronze greaves [chaps] and carries a sword, a spear, and a javelin slung on his back. The point of his spear weighs more than little David. He is one mean dude and quite articulate as well.

One afternoon when David is delivering a corned beef on rye to the front lines, he happens to overhear a conversation:

"The king will give great wealth to the man who kills him [Goliath]. He will also give him his daughter in marriage and will exempt his father's family from taxes."

Sam. 18:25

We all know what happens next, right? Okay, I'll tell the story anyway. Little David volunteers to fight Goliath, which draws a few chortles from the soldiers. The shepherd boy brags that he has already killed a bear and a lion with his bare hands, so surely the Lord God is with him. This makes sense to the rest of the gutless warriors standing around, so they send him out armed with only a sling and a prayer. As the combatants move toward each other, David lets fly with a smooth stone:

"The stone sank into his forehead and he fell face down on the ground."

Sam. 17:49

David takes Goliath's own sword and uses it to cut off the giant's head. Of course, this unnerves the rest of the pagan army and they tuck tail and run like jackals. The Israelites take off in hot pursuit, shouting, "Hey, I thought we had a deal! You're supposed to be our slaves!" When David returns home, the women of the town greet him with song:

"Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands."

Sam. 18:7

David takes Goliath's head and weapons home and puts them in his tent. Then he goes to meet the king. For obvious reasons, King Saul does not like the song the peasants are singing. Fearing David's newfound popularity, Saul tries to kill him. Not once, but twice, he tries to "pin David to the wall" with his spear. David eludes him. (Use the force, David, use the force.)As for the promised marriage to the king's daughter, David takes one look at Merab, the eldest daughter and declines, saying, "Uh, no thanks. I am not worthy." Saul then offers his younger, prettier daughter, Michal. He says to David,

"The king wants no other price for the bride than a hundred Philistine foreskins."

Sam. 18:25

David brings in *two hundred foreskins* and a rebate coupon and claims his bride. Even though David is now his son-in-law, Saul is still jealous and set on killing him. One night he sends men to murder him in his own bed, but David is forewarned by Michal. He and Jonathan escape.

Jonathan?

Let me tell you a little bit about this kid, Jonathan. First off, he's Saul's son. Second, I think he's kind of sweet on David. Yeah, I know how the Lord feels about homosexuality, but whoever

wrote this part doesn't seem to be so vehemently opposed.

"Jonathan said, 'whatever you want me to do, I'll do for you.'"

1 Sam. 20:4

"And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself." (Rosie Palm?)

1 Sam. 20:17

"Then they kissed each other and wept together - but David wept the most."

1 Sam. 20:41

"There is some consecrated bread here - provided the men have kept themselves from women. David replied, 'Indeed women have been kept from us. The men's things are holy.'"

1 Sam. 21:4-5

Holy things? Consecrated dicks? Sacred wieners? Blessed wangs? Okay, it's only circumstantial, but it is thought-provoking. Saul is now trying to kill David *and* Jonathan. David hides in a field while Jonathan tries to work things out with his old man. At one point David escapes to the land of Nod where he goes to a priest named Ahimelech and asks if he can buy weapons.

RABBI AHIMELECH'S WAR SURPLUS

Blessings, Bibles and Blades

Ahimelech tells David that the only sword he's got left is the same one that belonged to Goliath.

WARNING! Possible spot quiz.

If you've been paying attention, you know that the last time we saw Goliath's sword was when David put it in his tent in Jerusalem. Call it the spoils of war. Now, somehow, it has magically winged its way across the desert to land in the land of Nod, where it has come to rest in the priest's tent. David doesn't seem the least bit curious as to how this happened. He gladly pays

money for his own sword.

In the next scene we find Saul going into a cave to "relieve himself." By another strange biblical twist of fate, this just happens to be the same cave where little David is hiding. While the king is busy doing his business, David sneaks up behind him in the dark and cuts off . . . a corner of his robe. (bet you thought I was going to say foreskin.) He then offers this fabric remnant to the king as proof that he could have killed him if he

wanted to. The king is overcome with gratitude and he forgives David.

Huh? Forgives him for what? Curing his headaches? Killing his enemies? Marrying his daughter? Once again, I suspect that whoever wrote this chapter might have gotten into the grapes.

And so, at last, we leave Samuel behind and unroll to . . . Samuel? What! You mean there's two of them?

Special Editorial Note: I always thought they had a religious reason for dividing some of the books into two parts. As it turns out, a scroll could only hold so many words, and when it ran out, they just started again on another scroll.

2 SAMUEL (new scroll)

This book starts out on a rather pitiful note when David slays the messenger because he doesn't like the message that Saul is dead. This makes David king. I still haven't figured out the order of succession, but I think it's whoever calls "I got game."

More Gratuitous Violence

Of all the passages I have read in the Bible so far, this next one has got to be the dumbest yet. With enemies at every gate, the Jews are now killing . . . the Jews? Right. Here's the setup: King David's men, led by Abner, are on one side of the pool of Gibeon, while king Saul's men, with Joab in charge, are on the other. Obviously, there's bad blood.

"Then Abner said to Joab, 'Let's have some of the young men get up and fight hand-to-hand in front of us.'"

2 Sam. 2:14

Oh, goody! Mortal combat. Twelve guys from each group get up and go at it.

"Then each man grabbed his opponent by the head and thrust his dagger deep into his side and they fell down together."

2 Sam. 2:16

And the Lord said, "Let there be twenty-four more dead guys."

No, he didn't really say that, but if there's some other point to this, I missed it. Unless, of course, graphic violence in the Bible serves the same masters as the violence on TV: Tonight's episode, *Death at Gibeon's Pond*. But first, a message from God.

THE ARK STRIKES AGAIN

As we plow our way through the Book of Samuel, we find King David consolidating his authority. The real symbol of power is the ark, so David marches his army to the house of Abinadab to retrieve it. They load it on a new oxcart and set out for the house of a Hittite. When one of the oxen stumbles, a man named Uzzah reaches out and grabs the ark to keep it from falling in the mud.

Uh-oh. I fear consequences and reprisals.

"The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act, therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark.

2 Sam. 6:7

First Question: If God kills you, do you go straight to hell?

Second question: Why doesn't God want anyone to look inside the ark, or even to touch it. I'll bet you ten bucks there's nothing in there. It doesn't matter, though, because the whole thing is conveniently misplaced. Sure. I mean, it's no big deal. It's just God's handwriting. So what if the most important religious symbol in Jewish history is left in a pedicab. "Hey, don't blame me. The last time I saw it, Bathsheba had it in a bar in Babylon."

Note: Ethiopian Christians claim to have the Ark of the Covenant safely housed in a monastery in the small town of Aksum; however, only one priest is allowed to see it, so we'll have to take his word for it.

David Goes Power-Mad

When David finally gets back to Jerusalem, he is surprised by a voice from his past. Suddenly, his wife is back in the picture. Michal is watching David from a window as he dances

triumphantly, and may I add, nakedly, into the city with trumpets blaring. Michal confronts her long-lost husband and says:

"How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls...as any vulgar fellow would."

2 Sam. 6:20

(Didn't her mother warn her about dating harpists?)

God obviously doesn't appreciate her heavy-handed use of irony. The chapter ends with this curse:

And Michal, daughter of Saul, had no children to the day of her death."

II Sam. 6:23

Hold on there a second! What about this sentence from the very next page?

"But the king took the . . . **five sons** of Michal, daughter of Saul."

II Sam. 21:18

So, does Michal have "five sons" or does she have "no children"? Once again, the Bible has it both ways. You might also have noticed that the subject of infertility comes up frequently in the Bible. Righteous women have lots of children - *male* children. Sinners have none. Therefore, if you have no children, you are a sinner. This seems to be the most humiliating punishment God can inflict on a woman.

DAVID AND BATHSHEBA

Do you remember those Bible comics? David was often on the cover. Close your eyes and see if this fits: David is wearing a white, embroidered mini-tunic with a rope for a belt. He's wearing leather sandals, hippie style. There's a leather pouch over his shoulder and he's carrying a harp. His hair is medium ash brown, curly, and held in place with a headband. He has freckles, a cute little button nose and perfect teeth. In other words, David is just your typical middle eastern shepherd boy. Not.

One night king David is prowling around on the roof of his palace when he spies a beautiful woman taking a bath. (The role of Bathsheba will be played by Sophia Loren.) The king sends someone to find out who she is. When David learns that the woman's name is Bathsheba and that she is the wife of a Hittite named Uriah, his ardor is not cooled. He sends for her:

"She came to him and he slept with her. (She had purified herself from her uncleanness.) The woman conceived and sent word to David saying, I am pregnant."

II Sam. 11:4

Things sure move fast in the Bible, don't they? David is smitten with Bathsheba and he plots to get her husband out of the way, permanently. He sends a message to his field commander, Joab, saying:

"Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die."

Sam. 11:15

Good plan. Craven, but effective. Except for one small detail. God is watching. The Lord doesn't like David's peeping-tom antics, and he doesn't like his adultery, and he doesn't like the fact that he has disposed of Uriah in such a cowardly fashion. So what does God do? Why, he aborts Bathsheba's baby, of course. That's right, God kills one more helpless infant. Jehovah then sends a plague on Israel and another seventy thousand innocent people die. Once again, God completely misses the mark, punishing everyone but the guilty party. David finally gets tired of the stink and builds an altar on the threshing floor. After this act of submission, God backs off a little.

So, what do you think of the story of David so far? I used to think of David as a role model--you know, *The Little Engine That Could*. Now that I've read the whole story I'm not so sure.

Let's review David's life and career:

He briefly plays harp for the king, works as a shepherd and a

delivery boy, sucker-punches a dwarfish giant, then kills ten thousand Philistines. Using hundreds of Philly foreskins, he buys a wife, who he immediately deserts to run off with Jonathan, the son of Saul. Jonathan dies in the war and Saul kills himself. David dances naked in the street, becomes king, moves into a cedar palace and spies on his neighbors from the roof top. He impregnates another man's wife, then has her husband murdered. Because of David's sinful ways, God kills an additional seventy-five thousand tribesman. God does this because he's fond of David?

What If David Had Missed?

What if David's stone had missed? Or what if Goliath had been wearing his [required] Philistine safety helmet, the kind that covered the forehead? The passage might have read something like this:

"As the stone glanced off Goliath's helmet and fell harmlessly to the ground, a hush fell over the crowd. Little David was last seen moving quick-step over the hill in the direction of Jerusalem, where he and Jonathan share a quaint loft apartment to this day."

Fic. 101

Do you know the old saying, "The nut doesn't fall far from the tree."? To illustrate, here's a few lines about David's offspring:

AMNON AND TAMAR

"In the course of time, Amnon, son of David, fell in love with Tamar, sister of Absalom, son of David." 2 Sam. 13:1

Once you untie this verbal knot, you'll see that Amnon is in love with his sister. Not only that, but when she denies his affection-

"He refused to listen to her, and because he was stronger than she, he raped her."

2 Sam. 13:14

And you thought Caligula's family was dysfunctional! Keep reading. It gets nastier. Brother Absalom doesn't go for this incestuous behavior, so he plots against Amnon. After luring his brother to a meeting tent, Absalom gives orders to his soldiers:

"When Amnon is in high spirits from drinking wine and I say to you, 'Strike Amnon down,' then kill him."

2 Sam. 13:28

"Brother stabbers! Sister rapers! And we was all sitting there together on the Group-W bench!"

Alice's Restaurant by Arlo Guthrie. (sort of)

KINGS

As this chapter opens, David is old and feeble. (I'll bet he's "advanced in years.") His servants say to him:

"Let us look for a young virgin to attend the king and care for him. She can lie beside him so that our lord, the king, may keep warm."

Kings 1:2

"It's good to be da king."

Mel Brook

Meanwhile, there's a power struggle going on among David's sons to see who gets to be the next king. Adonijah tries to steal the election, but the Supreme Court (God) rules in favor of Solomon (George Bush). One of the first things King Solomon does is kill his brother. Not very wise, but very biblical.

That same Thursday night, Solomon has a vision. (**Note:** God doesn't talk directly to people after Moses, but he still appears in dreams and visions. Sometimes peyote is involved. See: Pat Robertson.) When God asks him what he desires the most, Solomon asks for wisdom. This is a good request for two reasons: (1) God is impressed by his humility. (2) Wisdom is a trait missing from his gene pool. God grants his wish.

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

Settling disputes is one of the king's main duties, so when two whores come to him, both claiming to be the mother of a baby, Solomon unsheathes his sword and offers to divide the child equally. The child's real mother pleads for his life, while the other bimbo says, "I get the breast."

TV Note: This was also the theme of a recent Maury Povich Show.

When the people of Israel hear about this episode, they are really impressed. They think, *this may be our most intelligent king yet*. They are easily impressed. Solomon's kingdom is peaceful and prosperous. With the six hundred pounds of gold he receives in tribute and taxes each year, he finally gets around to building the temple that's been promised since Jacob saw the ladder. The Ark of the Covenant is placed in the finished temple, and God shows he is pleased by attending the grand opening disguised as a dark cloud. Solomon marries the Pharaoh's daughter and builds himself a royal palace. When the Queen of Sheba [**Geographical Note:** Where the hell is Sheba?] hears about what a wise man the king is, she brings him a caravan of incense and spices and such, plus about four pounds of gold. There are rumors of a dalliance. After his hook-up with Sheba, Solomon has a thing for foreign women, including-

"Seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines. "

Kings 11:3

This means that Solomon is sleeping with most of the royalty in the middle east. It means that he can have sex every day for two years and not see the same woman twice. It means he needs a palace with lots of bathrooms.

Just like Hugh Hefner, though, Solomon gets old. Senility sets in and he starts drooling and building temples to rival gods. Yahweh is irritated by this, and he tells Solomon that he's going to

subdivide Israel amongst his sons. Thus begins a line of succession that starts bad and ends worse. Jeroboam, Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Omri and Ahab all take turns being king, but none of them measure up to the old man. The

worst of them is Ahab, who "did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him."

What could Ahab possibly do that is so bad that God calls him the worst king of them all? Rape his sister? Nope. Sheep? Uh-uh. Scuttle the Pequod? No, he marries Jezebel, serves Baal, and builds an Asherah pole, which may be either phallic or totem.

Hit the Pause

Let's slow down for a second and collect our thoughts. Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Those of you who have been reading along, is this what you expected? Me neither. I mean, here we are, 313 pages into God's handbook for life on Earth, and we haven't even gotten around to monotheism yet. Let that sink in for a minute. We're one third of the way through the Bible and everyone believes in more than one Supreme Being.

"It is very difficult to find a single monotheistic statement in the whole of the Pentateuch."

Karen Armstrong: *A History of God*

The Philistines have a god. The Benjamites and Hittites and Parasites all have their own gods. Every tribe, every clan, every household has its own private territorial deity. And we're not even counting all of those "foreign" gods, like Zeus or Apollo or Odin or Ronald Reagan. The Israelites have a god, but they can't seem to agree on a name for him. Adonai, Yahweh, Elohim, El Shaddei, and Pubert are all mentioned, except that last one. Stranger still, the gods all acknowledge each other. Even old YHWH just shrugs it off with "You shall have no other Gods before me." He might have added, "or else."

"I am...quite appalled by the disgraceful behavior of all the characters involved, including God."

J.R. Ackerly (1896-1967) Letters

So, do you think we could get on with the story?

I guess so.

Along about this time a prophet named Elijah comes into the

picture. Elijah predicts a drought and a famine, which usually means God is unhappy with someone. [Early theorem: $G+D = F$. That is, when G is God, and D is Drought, F is always Famine.] In this instance, God is ticked off because King Ahab's wife, Jezebel, is turning everyone on to Baal, again.

After hearing his name a dozen times, always in a negative tone, I decided to do a little research on this guy Baal. It didn't take long to find out why he was so popular:

Baal & Sex!

It turns out that Baal is a fertility god who keeps two consorts, Asherah and Astarte. Sex is not only allowed in Baal's church, it's part of the service. On holy days, while the Israelites are over at the Tent of Worship, burning small helpless animals, the Baal supporters are having their morning orgy. Which god would you choose? Don't answer that!

(Ques: Were Baal's supporters called Baalites? Baalics? Jocks?)

Elijah, to counter this hedonism, challenges four hundred prophets of Baal, along with four hundred prophets of Asherah, to a fire-starting contest to see who has the most powerful mojo. Both groups build fire pits, fill them with wood, put on some steaks, then sit back to watch the show. Elijah says:

"Then you call on the name of your god and I will call the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire - he is God."

1 Kings 18:24

An enthusiastic crowd gathers to watch the competition. The pagans go first. They call out Baal's name, asking for fire, but Baal is either not listening, or he's in the "tent of relieving."

Elijah taunts them: "Shout louder!"

All eight hundred prophets of Baal dance and shout and rip their clothes and whack themselves with swords until they're bleeding profusely, but their god is probably off with Astarte, uh . . . consorting.

Then it's Elijah's turn. Even though outnumbered eight hundred prophets to one, he feels relaxed and confident. He turns to the

audience and says, "If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is god, follow him."

I don't have to tell you who wins. Jehovah not only lights both fires, but in a blinding flash, he burns up both stacks of wood, an entire ox, twelve stones, twelve jars full of water, and any left-over credibility. Flush with victory, Elijah orders his followers to "slaughter the prophets of Baal." Which they do.

Note: God eventually stops answering these childish challenges. He does, however, continue his custom of slaughtering his rivals.

So, as we close another chapter, we find the Chosen People asking themselves, "Chosen for what?" Canaan, this "holy land" flowing with milk and honey, given to them by God, turns out to be mostly desert with an insatiable thirst for blood. At the end of the book, Ahaziah is king of Israel and Jumpin' Jehosaphat is king of Judah.

2 KINGS (new scroll)

As the book unrolls on Kings, part dos, we find that King Ahaziah has injured himself in a fall from his balcony. He sends messengers to the god of Ekron to consult the prophet Baal-Zebub (sound familiar?). The king wants to know if he will recover from his injuries. As fate would have it, another rival prophet, Elijah, intercepts the messengers and sends them back to tell Ahaziah, "You will not leave the bed you are lying on." In other words, sorry king, but you're dead meat. Ahaziah doesn't want to believe it, so he sends his main captain and fifty more soldiers to arrest the offending prophet. Elijah confronts the troopers and says:

"May fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men."

2 Kings 1:10

Which it does.

The king then sends another captain and another fifty men, who end up just as toasted as the first group. Ahaziah must have a lot of captains, because he sends a third company of fifty after the

prophet. This captain-number-three, however, is smarter than the others, and he kneels before Elijah and gives himself to the Lord, thereby saving his butt. Ahaziah dies anyway.

As you might expect in a book named *Kings*, along with the usual treachery and bloodletting, there are a series of uninspiring leaders. God performs a couple of minor miracles, like purifying some water, filling up some empty oil jars and curing another dose of tumors. Magic 101. God also feeds one hundred men with twenty loaves of bread. Light eaters. Nothing Sigfried and Roy couldn't do.

And while we're on the subject, let's take a moment here and talk about magic . . . er, I mean miracles.

MIRACLES

What exactly is a miracle? And doesn't it seem like there are a lot more of them than there used to be? Lately, if it's good news, it's a miracle. And I don't mean that flippantly. Imagine that you're the sole survivor of a plane crash that killed three hundred people. Is it a miracle that you lived? Or is it a miracle that three hundred other people died? If thirty thousand Mexicans die in an Earthquake and one newborn baby lives because she is still attached to her mother, is that a miracle? If the U.S. beats the Red Army Hockey Team, that must be a miracle. If a kidnapped toddler is returned safely, that surely must be a miracle. It seems to me that God likes to take credit for the good stuff, but he no longer accepts responsibility for the bad stuff. "Plagues, floods, shifting tectonic plates, sterility . . . sorry, not my problem."

Then the Bible's definition of a miracle would be: "Defying some pretty long odds."

The Skeptics definition is a squinch tighter: "Defying *impossible* odds."

For instance, if no more children were ever kidnapped or molested, that would be a miracle. If no more planes crashed, miracle. If the Arizona Cardinals won the Super Bowl, definitely a miracle. If everyone always agreed with me . . . well, you get the

idea. A devout skeptic distinguishes between a true miracle, and the merely miraculous.

ELISHA

Being a prophet must be profitable, because there sure are a lot of them. It's at this point that Elisha takes over the business from Elijah. One day Elisha is walking on the road to Bethel when some local teenage gang-bangers begin to taunt him, making fun of his bald head. They shout, "Go on up, you baldhead." (cle-ver)

"He (Elisha) turned around and looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of them."

Mauled by bears? In the name of God? Hey, Elisha, chill! I know it must be tough being a hairless prophet, especially with all the full-bearded, long-haired competition around, but I don't know if that warrants such a draconian response to a little teasing.

I CHRONICLES (and II on two scrolls)

Have you ever done a genealogical study of your family? If you believe in the Bible, this is where you start--you, me, everybody. Beginning with Adam, all the male descendants are listed. Pages and pages and pages of them.

Skip it. It all dead ends at Noah anyway.

Next comes a chronological listing of the kings of Judah and Israel.

Boring.

Then the author goes back over certain historical dates giving us a *Reader's Digest* version of the victories and defeats. Some of the violence has been censored, though, along with other unpleasantness. Here we are, just a few thousand years into the story of humanity, a mere three hundred and fifty pages into the Bible, and already history is being revised.

There is one small, seemingly insignificant detail which they save until the end. Round about six hundred years before the birth of Christ, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylonia, conquers the Israelites. I know. Hasn't everybody? Yeah, but this time it's

different. This time Israel ceases to exist. This time the Babylonian king burns Jerusalem to the ground, steals the ark and everything else of value, then--and this is where it differs from other conquests--instead of killing everyone, Nebuchadnezzar deports them. Guess where? To Babylon! That's right, the king sends the Jews to his home town. Sure, he puts them to work, but he doesn't kill them or even put a lot of effort into converting them.

This is a radical new approach to the art of subjugation, and it has a profound effect on the religion of the Israelites, and, as it turns out, the world. Suddenly, the Jews are a people without a country. The Israelites are minus one Israel. What will hold them together? Why, God will, of course! This homeless condition forces them to practice their religion in the midst of dozens of other no-name gods. Thus, of a necessity, the rituals are strengthened, especially the Feast Of No Yeast (Passover). The true Synagogue is born here. A sizeable portion of the writing that ends up in the Bible is written here in Babylon. True monotheism finally takes root here.

Note: I'll bet you didn't know that *Synagogue* is not a Hebrew word, but is Greek for "place of assembly?" Therefore, all churches, all Elks Clubs, your uncle Ned's basement, and the YMCA are all synagogues.

EZRA

Ezra's book opens on a note of hope as Cyrus, the king of Persia, conquers Babylon, converts to Judaism and tells the Jews they can go home and rebuild their temple. I would have called this book: *Exodus II, the Return of the Hebrews*. This time, however, instead of a forty-year desert expedition, most of the Jews are back in the promised land in less than seven months. Some of them don't go back at all. Some of them marry foreign women, and some of them have--dare I say it!--children of mixed blood!

When does Ezra come in?

Right now.

Along about this time, a prophet named Ezra arrives on the scene with a letter of introduction from Artaxerxes, who refers to

himself humbly as "King of Kings." Ezra is a scholar and teacher who is well versed in the teachings of Moses. He brings one hundred and fifty men with him (and probably some donkeys and women). Ezra is a religious man and an all around good guy who's only fault is his bigotry. He is firmly opposed to mixed marriages.

FROM THE BIBLE

"The people of Israel have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable habits. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. They have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other."

Ezra 9:1-10

NOT FROM THE BIBLE

"The people of the Fatherland have mixed with the Jews and their detestable habits. Germans have taken Hebrews as wives for themselves and their sons and have mingled the blood of the Master Race with the peoples around them. They have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other."

Mein Crap

Under relentless pressure from Ezra, the Jews who return to Israel are forced to give up their foreign-born wives and children. He organizes a sort of kangaroo court and the names of all the offenders are recorded.

NEHEMIAH

This is the most boring book so far, so let's not waste a lot of time. Nehemiah talks about the rebuilding of Jerusalem and about the people who return to the city. They all sign another contract with God and reaffirm their goal of racial purity. Somebody gets circumcised. Let's move on to-

ESTHER SAVES THE JEWS

or

The Big Beauty Pageant of 462 BCE

This is the first book in which God doesn't have to punish or rescue the Jews. As a consolation, we are treated to mankind's first beauty contest. ("Here she is, Ms. Judea.") On a related note, we get to meet the most liberated woman in the Bible. No, it's not Esther. Esther is in the beauty pageant. It's a gutsy woman named Queen Vashti who is responsible for the flowering of feminism, and indirectly, its antithesis, the sexist pig perversion known as *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?*

Here's how it happens:

King Xerxes [pronounced: anyway you want] is the ruler of one hundred and twenty-seven provinces. He's got gobs of cash, but is low on self-esteem. To impress his friends and rivals, he decides to throw *the* party of the season. It's a Gatsbyesque affair with military leaders from Persia and Midia mingling with merchants and moguls, paupers and princes.

"Wine was served in goblets of gold, each different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant."

Esther 1:6-7

In other words, open bar! Free booze! And this is not your ordinary go-home-at-daybreak Malibu shindig. No, this party goes on for 180 days.

Late one night, Xerxes, who has been drinking heavily, staggers to the podium and says, "Welcome to the Sahara, where the liquor is hard and the broads are soft."

No, wait! That was Sinatra in Vegas. Xerxes just says "Fetch my woman." He sends his eunuchs to bring out his most prized possession, his queen, Vashti. Her naked beauty, he is sure, will impress his guests even more than the handmade gold goblets. The queen, however, is busy with her own plans and she politely refuses to be put on display.

Way to go, queenie!

King Xerxes is astounded, amazed, confounded, flabbergasted, and in a word, surprised by her refusal. Such a thing has never happened before. Not in all the history of the realm has a woman

ever refused a direct order from her husband, let alone her king. In order to help him decide what to do, Xerxes calls a council of the seven nobles of Persia and Media. It's a somber affair. Nobody is sure if there's even a law to cover the crime. Banishment, they decide, would be for the best. As King Xerxes gets up to go, the nobles say, "No, stupid, we meant banish Vashti." The council posts a general notice: "Every man should be ruler over his own household."

So, where's the beauty contest?

I'm getting to it.

As far as I can tell, Queen Vashti goes the way of Eden, the Tree of Knowledge, and Jimmy Hoffa. She disappears. Xerxes has no queen. Something must be done. His council of nobles comes up with a visionary plan:

"Let a search be made for young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of the realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be given beauty treatments, then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king and he followed it."

Esther 2: 3-4

"It's good to be da king."

Mel Brooks

Ques: If your job title is **Provincial Commissioner of Young Virgins**, should you ask about vacation days?

I thought this was the Book of Esther?

I'm getting to her.

A Jew named Mordecai has a cousin named Esther who is a rare beauty and a virgin as well. Mordecai enters Esther into the "Who Wants to Marry a King" beauty contest, but advises her not to say anything about being a Jew. All the contestants are to stay at the citadel in Susa, where Hegai, the head eunuch, is in charge of the king's harem. Hegai falls for Esther and arranges for her to have the nicest dressing room, the finest food and the best beauty treatments. He also gives her advice on how to please the king. (A

unique eunuch!) To make a long story short, the contest is rigged. And so it is to this very day.

A Persian girl named Salome is voted Miss Congeniality, but Esther really fills out a robe, so she wins the contest and becomes queen. Xerxes still doesn't know she's a Jew.

Not long after the contest, a Jew-hater named Hamon is elevated to "a position above all others." When Mordecai, Esther's cousin and sponsor, refuses to bow down to Hamon, he "burns with anger." When he finds out that Mordecai is a Jew, Hamon is even more ticked-off. The only course of action, he decides, is to get rid of ALL the Jews. Hamon doesn't bother with political or economic or religious excuses, he just wants the Jews dead, period.

He and King Xerxes throw *purs* (lots, dice) to pick a date for the slaughter to begin. The thirteenth day of the twelfth month is as good a date as any. Funds are allocated to pay for the army of mercenaries who will do the killing. Hamon says he will chip in ten thousand talons of silver. According to a footnote in my Bible, this is equal to four hundred and seventy-five tons of silver.

Humorous note: Wouldn't it be funny if King Xerxes had said, "I will pay ten shekels of silver for every Hebrew foreskin." Ha ha. The jokes on you, kingy. The Jews don't have foreskins. (Hey, maybe that's why . . .)

Once again, things look bleak for the Chosen People. Queen Esther, however, is not entirely reliant on her cleavage. Using logic and skillful rhetoric, she convinces Xerxes to let her people go.

"'If it pleases the king,' she said, 'and if he regards mein high favor and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, and blah, blah, blah...'"

Esther 8:5

I don't know about you, but this sort of forceful argument would certainly win me over. Anything to get her to shut up. Not only does Xerxes let her people go, he grants them license to go on a

murderous, vengeful rampage.

"The Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men. They also killed the ten sons of Hamon."

Esther 9:5

After Hamon and his kids are dead, Xerxes hangs the whole family, just for fun. Once again, the Jews escape from somebody. I've lost track. Is this the third or fourth time? Mordecai gets most of the glory, even though Esther did all the canoodling. The Jews celebrate this event, calling it Purim. Which means the whole thing was just a roll of the dice.

THE STORY OF JOB

or

Satan's First Assignment

You've heard the old saying "he has the patience of Job." After you've read this book you'll know the meaning of the word **UNDERSTATEMENT**. Job isn't just tested, he is reduced to smoke and ash. **Satan** makes his first marquee appearance in this book, though he doesn't seem to have the character fully fleshed out yet. A footnote in my New International Bible tells me that *Satan* means *accuser*. I'm assuming they mean in Hebrew. Beyond that tidbit, there's no information given as to his motive.

One day Satan comes to visit the Lord. Though they both behave cordially enough, right from the start you can see they don't like each other. They seem to have opposing philosophies, at least on some moral issues. God brags that his man, Job, is the most righteous Earthman since Noah, calling him "a blameless and upright man." [Job 1:8]

Satan laughs in his face. "Ha! Sure he's righteous. He's righteously rich! He's got a nice family, a big house, a phalanx of servants, and seven thousand camels. Take all that away and he'll switch sides faster than an Afghan rebel."

God quickly defends his man. "I'll bet you a shekel, he doesn't."

"Okay, you're on."

So, even though Job is totally cool, God gives Satan the power to screw up the guy's life. And does he ever!

One day a servant comes running in to Job's house and reports to his master that all of his donkeys and oxen have been lost to a Sabean raiding party:

"They put the servants to the sword and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you."

Job 1:16

Before this messenger even has time to sit down, another guy shows up with more bad news:

"The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you."

Job 1:17

Almost immediately, another servant comes running in to report trouble in the south pasture:

"The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and carried them off. (Carried a camel?) They put the servants to the sword and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you."

Job 1:18

Before this last guy has time to finish his report, a fourth messenger shows up:

"And Captain Ahab beckoned and all followed. I alone escaped to tell this tale to thee.

Ishmael: *Moby Dick*

Oops, wrong book! The fourth messenger calmly reports to Job that his house has just collapsed, killing all seven of his kids. "And I am the only one who esc-

Yeah, yeah, we know, you're the only one who got away. Have you noticed how cleverly Satan has made all of this look like a

series of unfortunate accidents? Sure. Fireballs from heaven and raiding parties and collapsing houses and all. Could happen to anyone. Job is stoic throughout. All of this depressing news at once makes him eager for a haircut, but it doesn't make him any less God-fearing. He steadfastly, patiently refuses to curse the name of God. Satan is at a loss as to what to do next, so he goes back to heaven and asks God for a little more leeway.

"Look at it from my viewpoint," Satan reasons, "we took his fortune and his family, but he's still got his health. Let me rough him up a little and he'll fold like a taco."

God replies, "Okay, but you can't kill him."

"Nah, that's your job."

"So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head."

Job 2:7

Then Job's wife says to him:

"Are you still holding on to your faith? Curse God and die!"

Job 2:9

I mean, look at yourself. You're one big scab!

Job is obviously weakening and he starts cursing the day he was born. His wife, as you can see, is no help at all. Luckily, three of his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, show up to lend moral support. They talk him through it, and in the end, they all pray to God, who is moved by Job's devotion and courage. God restores all of his former health and wealth, even throwing in a few extras. Job gets a new house, seven thousand new camels, and seven new sons, plus three additional daughters.

Sooo many questions.

What is the point of all this drama? It must be in the Bible for a reason? Are we all supposed to feel good that Job kept his faith and reclaimed his worldly goods? What about his original seven

kids? How do you think they feel? Oh, I forgot. They're dead! Crushed like melons at a Gallagher concert. Hey, God, does the term "collateral damage" mean anything to you? Timothy McVeigh used it when referring to the nineteen dead children in the Oklahoma City bombing. In Job's case, seven innocent children, a herd of sheep, and countless, blameless, nameless slaves are sacrificed. Why? Because God and Satan had to play their silly little ego game.

Let's look at this book another way. Suppose Job would have lost his patience and sworn, "I curse thee, oh Lord."

Now what would God do? Punish him? Ha, that's a laugh. There's nothing left of the man as it is.

PSALMS

The word comes from the Greek *psalma*, which means: to pluck a string--a harp, for instance. There are a lot of *firsts* in this book. It's the first book in which people are talking to God, not the other way around. It might be the world's first opera. It's definitely the first hymnbook. *Psalm* is the first word whose letters can be rearranged to spell *lamps* and *palm*s. (And *plasma*, if you count the root.) There are one hundred and fifty Psalms, and they differ widely in style and theme. They range from the serenely confident 23rd Psalm (come on, say it with me):

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

To the plaintive 42nd:

"My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go meet with him?"

To the bitter 137th:

"Fair Babylon, you predator...a blessing on him who seizes your babies and dashes them against the rocks."

(Extra: BABY BASHERS BLESSED!)

To the fatalistic 144th:

"Oh Lord, what are human beings that you regard them, or mortals that you think of them? They are like breath; their days are like a passing shadow."

To the greedy 151st:

"Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz. My friends all drive Porches; I must make amends."

That's not a Psalm.

It is in this Bible.

PROVERBS

Proverbs are a lot like Psalms, only less musical. Most of the Proverbs are terse, Confucian-like sayings, moral suggestions or words to live by. Some of them sound like advice from your astrologer. Or your psychiatrist. Or Ben Franklin. Most of them would fit in a fortune cookie. One, at least, is way out of line.

Observations:

"Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion."

11:22

"For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword."

5:3

Good advice:

"When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise."

10:19

"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up

anger."

10:15

Bad advice:

"He who puts up security for another will surely suffer. But whoever refuses to strike hands in pledge is safe. (Even at 23% interest?)"

11:15

Really bad advice:

"He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him early."

13:24

Special note to God. Here on Earth there is no justification for hitting a child, especially with a rod, and certainly not in anger. You not only advise child abuse, thereby perpetuating what we now know to be a chain of violence, but also imply that any parent who raises healthy, happy children without beating them is somehow less than holy. I predict that this proverb will slowly disappear from the world's Bibles, starting with the new Zondervan politically correct version (hint, suggestion, wink). Or even better, a complete rewrite!

"He who spares the rod loves his children, for he knows that life's lessons are not taught through violence."

Skeptics Bible

Okay, so it's not what God said, and it's not even close to what he meant, but by now you've figured out that God is not perfect. No, edit that. By now you should have figured out that this biblical Jehovah we're reading about is as flawed as the rest of us. You can go ahead and read the remaining proverbs if you want, but I suggest moving on to-

ECCLESIASTES

or

"Everything is Meaningless."

In my Bible, this book gets moved up front. Talk about your skeptics! Some of the chapter themes: Wisdom is Meaningless. Pleasure is Meaningless. Toil is Worthless. Wealth is Meaningless. Sex is okay.

Sounds like someone could use a hug. Or a visit from his Auntie D'pressant. The first words of the book are:

"'Meaningless, meaningless!' says the teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.' "

Ecc 1:2

He goes on to say:

"As a man comes, so he departs and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind."

Ecc 5:16

"All man's efforts are for his mouth yet his appetite is ever satisfied."

Ecc 6:7

"To everything (turn, turn, turn)
there is a season (turn, turn, turn)"

Pete Segar/Byrds

And concludes with:

"And the day of death better than the day of birth."

Ecc. 7:1

Jeez, cheer up! Look at it this way: You've just written a ten thousand word essay on why life sucks and you got away with it. Job never complained about anything and look at what God did to him! You have succinctly pointed out that life is short, hard, and hardly worth the effort it takes. Everyone dies, you have suddenly

realized, even rich people, even saints. Your life counts for nothing, and your last breath is no more important than a troglodyte funeral. It doesn't matter what you do or who you worship, the results are the same. After that cold slap in the face, what we need is a little reassurance.

No, what we need is a little of that human touch. So, put on your Barry White eight tracks and turn down the oil lamps because here comes King Solomon's Song of Songs.

I WRITE THE SONGS

I'm not going to try to blow any frankincense up your nose. These so called "songs" are nothing more than seductive love poems. Most of them feature a female seductress. At times bordering on pornographic, they are meant to excite, arouse, titillate and otherwise facilitate the act of physical love. God isn't given a second thought.

"While the king was at his table, my perfume spread its fragrance. My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh, resting between my breasts."

1:12

"Your two breasts are like twin fawns that browse among the lilies."

4:4

"I liken you my darling to a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of pharaoh."

1:9

(hot and sweaty?)

I could go on and on.

I think I will.

"My lover is mine and I am his, he browses among the flowers."

2:16

"Let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits."

4:16

This book, as you can plainly see, does not belong in the Bible. It belongs in the Kama Sutra and was probably slipped in here by mistake. Either that or some priest or prophet got caught with his knickers down. The sacred and the profane.

"Come on, Solly. You promised you'd put my poem in your book!"

ISAIAH

Here comes another vision. Or is it a dream? Or is it an omen? A message from beyond? Delirium tremors? Anyway, God is kvetching to Isaiah. The perplexing part is, the Supreme Being seems a little depressed; almost as depressed as that teacher back in Ecclesiastes. (meaningless, meaningless) At times he sounds like he's just about to give up on his little earthly ant farm.

"Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me... I cannot bear your evil assemblies."

Isaiah 1:11-13

After a while he gets so frustrated he just says,

"Stop doing wrong. Start doing right."

Isaiah 1:16

(also from: "I Think I'll Just Stay Here and Drink" by Merle Haggard)

Isaiah then claims to have seen a vision of the Lord seated on a throne, "high and exalted."

"Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying."

Isaiah 6:2

You don't see these six-winged seraphs around much anymore, and that may have something to do with their habit of flying around with one pair of wings over their eyes. (Watch out for that tree!) I don't know about you, but I had always assumed that God made plants, animals, bugs and humans and that was it with life forms. Boy, was I wrong! So far we've met seraphs, angels, cherubs, cherubim, walking snakes, talking donkeys and cloven-hoofed, horny little devils. What's next? (Oh, just wait until you get to Revelation!)

Later in Isaiah, in chapter eleven, there's a tantalizing bit that might be an early peek at heaven, though God is still referring to it as "My holy mountain." (Olympus?)

"The wolf will lie with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox."

Isaiah 11:7 (And Jerry Falwell will lie down with Larry Flynt!)

Ques: So, in heaven, everyone's a vegetarian?

Ans: No, not possible. Numerous studies have proven that a lion who eats nothing but straw will wither away and die within a few months. Not to mention the awful taste.

Oh, I know what you're going to say: "If God wanted you to, you could live on nothing but Cheez Whiz and Twinkies."

Good point. If God wanted you to, you could live on nothing but nothing. So, this whole thing about lions and lambs and restricted diets is sort of meaningless.

The book of Isaiah is mostly soothsayers, prophets and oracles. One of them offers a glimpse of what will come to be known as "Judgment Day."

"See, the Lord is going to lay waste to the Earth and devastate it. He will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants - it will be the same for priests as for people, for master as for servant...The Earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered. The Lord has spoken this word."

Isaiah 24:1-3

Note to God: Better hurry up or we just might beat you to it. In case you haven't looked in on us lately, a sizable portion of the planet has already been "laid waste and plundered."

Yes, it seems God is going to kill everybody and wipe the slate clean again, only this time he's skipping the flood and opting for a more humane approach. Instead of drowning everybody, he's going to ruin, lay waste, devastate, scatter and plunder the people. Either way, the results are pretty much the same. Lots of innocent dead human beings. Then, just when we think we've got this God figured out, he does an about-face:

"So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again, though the mountains be shaken and the hill be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken, nor my covenant of peace be removed, says the lord, who has compassion on you."

Isaiah 54: 9-10

(He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not, he-)

Definition of an abusive lover

He is demanding in the extreme.

He is controlling.

No matter what you do, it's not good enough.

Everything is a test.

He punishes you when you fail.

He thinks he's god!

(Inspired by *The Lamb of God* by Vicky Campo)

The Lord concludes the book of Isaiah with this scary prediction:

"From one new moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me, says the Lord. And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who have rebelled against me."

Isaiah. 66:23

POETIC AFTERTHOUGHT: This is my favorite quote from Isaiah, though you're not likely to hear it in church.

"The sword of the lord is bathed in blood."

Isaiah 34:6

Isn't that rhythmic? And gruesome? "Kill for Yahweh! Rah! Rah! Rah!" The word that best describes the God of Isaiah? How about *bipolar*? Or how about *petulant toddler who missed his nap*. (That's six words.)

JEREMIAH

It's about time. I was getting thoroughly depressed with Isaiah. In this book, God is speaking through Jeremiah, a priest. Once again, confusion reigns. An early passage seems to suggest that God can see the future.

"The word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.'"

Jer. 1:4

While the next one says exactly the opposite:

"I had planted you like a choice vine of sound reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt wild vine?"

Jer. 2:20-21

Even Nostradamus would be befuddled by this nonsense. As Vinnie Barbarino often said (hands over ears), 'Stop it! I'm so confused!'

LAMENTATIONS

Here we go again with the whining and the complaining and the kvetching and the lamenting. Oh, woe is me! Jerusalem has been destroyed. Lots of tragic poetry, but nothing we haven't heard before. If there was a soundtrack to this book, it would be in a

minor key, a funeral dirge.

"How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who was once great among the nations!"

Lam 1:1

"Oh lament, oh lament!" The rest of the book is just more of the same. As a matter of fact, in case you haven't figured it out yet, most of the Old Testament is just the same bloody battle for territory and power repackaged a dozen different ways.

EZEKIEL

I hate to cut Ezekiel short. His prose is more fun to read than most of the books, and he comes up with some truly stony imagery. In one part he sees a "windstorm coming out of the north," and in this storm are four creatures who have wings and calf's legs. Each of these creatures has four faces looking in four directions. One face is a man, one is a lion, one is an ox, and one is an eagle. Even though they have wings, these composite creatures roll around on wheels that have eyes around the rims. Above them stands the Lord looking like he is made of "molten metal." Even though Ezekiel is obviously on shrooms, God wants to send him to Israel with a message to straighten up and fly right, or else. He hands his prophet a scroll and says:

"'Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll.' So I ate it and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth."

Eze. 3:1-2

Do you get it? The meaning of the scroll-eating part is obvious, but the creature with eyes on its wheels? Your guess is as good as mine.

Once more we venture into virgin territory. I'm going to assume that this next bit is meant to be taken metaphorically, and that God is not really talking about deflowering another young woman:

"When I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointment on you."

Eze. 16:8

Let's take a second here and talk about virginity. As I pointed out

earlier, most of the time, the writers didn't really mean *virgin*, but were referring to a *young woman*. In either case, the word *virgin* appears in the modern Bible **forty-nine times!** This is more than in any other book I know of, except, of course, *The Michael Jackson Story*. One reason for this is obvious. In the biblical world, the only thing of value a woman could truly call her own was her virtue. Only whores had sex outside of marriage. When a census was taken, only maidenheads were counted. If yours was, uh . . . defective, you might as well be standing with the sheep. Now, I can appreciate a fresh face as much as the next guy, but I'm thinking there must be more to it. I'm thinking it's probably about genes. We must make babies! We must pass on our genes! We *must* overpopulate the planet. A not-so-famous philosopher once said, "Everybody does everything in order to get laid." Everybody, except, of course, Jesus, who might be the only adult male virgin in the Bible. Not only that, "So's your mother!"

DANIEL

With a special guest appearance by
SHAKETHEBED, MAKETHEBED
AND TOBEDYOUGO

Daniel and three of his friends are among the many Israelites who are captured and exiled to Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar doesn't believe in the god of the Jews. Like a lot of the kings of old, he thinks he *is* god. To prove it, he builds a ninety-foot statue of himself made of gold. (Must have been a heavy sucker!) Everyone who passes by is expected to bow down to this pagan idol. When Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, refuse to bow down to this false god, the king has them tied up and thrown into a fiery furnace, which he has heated up to extra, extra hot. (11 on the dial.) In fact, the furnace is so hot that the poor guards get barbequed like weenies. To his surprise, however, when the king looks again, he not only sees our three heroes walking around in the fire, unbound, but there is a fourth figure with them who looks like "a son of the gods." When they all exit the furnace, they are un-scorched and smoke-free. Which is more than I can say after one night in the Vine Tavern.

DANIEL (1-0) VS. LIONS (40-1)

Sports note: Daniel defeated the lions in the "Thrilla in Judea."

Do you remember the parable of Daniel and the lion's den? Yeah, okay, but do you know the whole story? I'm going to warn you, it gets a little gory. Here goes:

When some administrators and tattletales report that Daniel is breaking the law by praying to his own God, King Darius arranges a test. He has Daniel thrown into a den with a family of underfed lions, then he seals the entrance with a rock.

"See if your God can get you out of this one," he says, but it's obvious that the king's heart isn't in it.

The next morning, when Darius goes back to check on Daniel, he finds him alive

and well and uneaten. The King is actually quite pleased by this. He gets down with the Lord, and to demonstrate his newfound faith, he throws the stool pigeons to the lions. Just what God would do. The cats rip the rats into bite-sized bits. That very afternoon, Darius decrees that the God of Daniel is the King of Kings, the Head Honcho, the Big Kahuna, Capo de Tutti Tutti.

Ques: "Is there a moral to the story of Daniel that we can teach our children?"

Ans: Yes. Don't be a tattletale or you'll get eaten alive by hungry lions.

HOSEA

The next couple of books are fairly short and incredibly boring. In your Bible, they might be in a different order, or they might not be there at all. You might even find a book or two that isn't in my copy. The whole thing is getting really repetitious anyway. Hosea is just another prophet or medium or something telling us what God has in store for those who don't walk the straight and narrow. Yawn.

JOEL

I wonder if Billy knows that *Joel* means "judged by locusts" in Hebrew. There are lots of bugs in his book, and we know where they came from. God sent them. I guess he was out of snakes.

AMOS

More plagues. More locusts.

OBADIAH

In which God gets angry at some place called Edam and threatens to turn it into a "small and despised nation." Sort of like New Jersey. He must have succeeded, because I never heard of the place.

JONAH

As young impressionable Bible students, we learned the story of Jonah and how he got swallowed by a whale. There are probably a

few of you out there who still remember the details, like how he got in there, how he got back out, and the fact that it wasn't a whale. That was Pinocchio. For the rest of us, let's review:

Jonah is not the most dedicated servant of the Lord. When he gets orders to take the word of God to "the great city of Nineveh," Jonah hops a freighter heading the other direction. When a violent storm overtakes the ship, the superstitious crew members are pretty sure Jonah has something to do with it. They figure it's because of Jonah's disobedience that God has decided to sacrifice another boatload of otherwise innocent sailors. Jonah starts feeling guilty about skipping out on the Lord, so he says to the crew:

"Pick me up and throw me into the sea and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

Jonah 1:12

The sailors toss him overboard and the sea immediately calms down. God is remorseful and he sends a "big fish" who rescues our hero by swallowing him. Three days later the fish vomits Jonah up on dry land.

My first reaction to this story was "Eeeuw! Fish vomit!" My second reaction was to say, "not freakin' likely." Yes, there are great white sharks and a few other denizens of the deep who are big enough to eat a human, but most of them prefer to chew us up one chunk at a time. Which leaves us with this problem: Whales are not fish. Also, they don't eat people, and you wouldn't last ten minutes inside one anyway as you would soon be suffocated in a slurry of krill.

Oh, I can hear you murmuring: "If God wanted you to, you could live inside a minnow." Okay, I'll concede that. I'm not questioning his ability, just his methods. If I were God, I would have had a cute dolphin like Flipper show up just in the nick of time to give Jonah a ride to dry land. It's more inspiring and it's a hellava lot more believable.

MICAH

In which God turns Samaria into a "heap of rubble."

NAHUM

ho hum

HAAKKUK

Haakkuk is either the sound of Adam choking on a fig, or the last name of a Swedish hockey player. By the time you get here, you will have read everything in the Bible ten times.

ZEPHANIAH

Nobody ever gets this far into the Bible, so I'll bet you never heard of this book. Me neither.

HAGGAI

God wants a new house.

ZACHARIA

To my utter amazement, I found this passage in Zachariah:

"And they reported to the Angel of the Lord, who was standing among the myrtle trees. 'We have gone throughout the Earth, and found the whole world at rest and at peace.'"

Zach 1:11

At rest? No wars? Sounds heavenly, doesn't it? This would be an excellent point at which to end the Bible. Unfortunately, God keeps going. As a matter of fact, after a few words from Malachi, he introduces us to his son, Jesus, the flower of a one-night-stand.

Thus concludes The Old Testament.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

by

A Whole Bunch of People Who Never Met Jesus.

"If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith."

I Cor. 13:14

(duh)

"They worship me in vain, their teachings are but rules taught by men."

Matt. 15:9

(you think?)

REMINDER: BCE means Before the Common Era, or before Christ. CE means Common Era, or after Christ. BBC means British Broadcasting Company, home of Monty Python.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

First off, I think it could use a catchier title. I mean, it's two thousand years old, so it's hardly what you'd call *new*. Also, as it turns out, there are *newer* testaments, including a book from some guy named Mohammed and another one from an American named Joseph Smith. There's also L. Ron Hubbard's sly wink, and of course, the one you're reading right now. It's all just a matter of who you trust and how far you want to let it go. If it were up to me, I'd call it the CDT, or the *Completely Different Testament*, because it does a one-eighty from the old book. In the Old Testament, the Jews are the Chosen People, while in the new book, only those who accept Christ as their savior are allowed into paradise. In other words, the Jews, who don't believe that Jesus is the son of God, are reassigned to hell. As illogical as this sounds, these two inharmonious religions share space in the same book. A Holy Book? A Good Book?

Ques: Wouldn't one religion invalidate the other?

Ans: You would think so, wouldn't you.

Ques: What did they call the Old Testament when it was new?

STILL MORE FUN WITH ETYMOLOGY

"TESTAMENT"

Did you know that the word "testicle" derives from *testament*? In ancient times, when a man would "testify," he would put his hands over his genitals. This, of course, would not look good in court (or church), so we now have men place their hand on the Bible instead of their balls.

Ques: Do you believe everything you read?

The timeline here is a little confusing, so try and stay with me. The earliest books, the synoptic gospels, weren't written until about fifty years after Jesus' supposed crucifixion. Most books were written in Greek. The first official canon of the New Testament appeared in 150 CE; however, it wasn't until the big Bible convention of 367 CE that the New Testament, as we might recognize it today, was released to the public.

Also, as was the case with the Old Testament, there was some disagreement about the contents. Hundreds of local authors were clamoring for inclusion. Papyri were coming in from the four corners of the empire. (I always wanted to say *papyri*) One popular book told about the early life of Mother Mary; another one told the story of Jesus' youth. Neither of these books made the cut. Why? Because I said so. For obvious reasons, the editors gave a thumbs down to the life story of Mary Magdalene, even though it was a real bodice-ripper. The Book of Judas was just plain creepy (Judas thought Jesus was from the planet Barbelo). The children's favorite, "Bel and the Dragon," was also removed from the starting lineup. The final roster included some Romans, a couple of Corinthians, a few Galatians, some letters, some epistles to apostles, two Peters, four Johns and a Jude. The only thing they all had in common was Jesus. They told how he was born, how he died, and how he did everything within his power to make up for all the trouble caused by his domineering, quick-tempered, jealous father. Pasted on at the end is the truly horrific Book of Revelation, an obvious attempt to scare the crap out of you.

So, how come the Christians waited until fifty years after the death of Christ to publish such an inspiring story?

Another good question. Maybe the apostles were just being cautious. Maybe they were thinking *our main man Jesus has just gotten himself crucified with this "King-of-the-Jews" stuff*. High priest Caiaphas is a nervous wreck. Governor Pontius Pilate is leery of Zealots in the streets. The Romans are using Christians as lion food.

Simple Simon says, "Let's lay low for a while."

Or maybe they were just being practical. One of the principle tenets of Christ's teachings was that the world would end in their lifetime. "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." [Matt. 3:17] Many people believed Christ's arrival was the signal for Armageddon. Some believed his death would usher in the new kingdom of God. Some people believed the tooth fairy left shekels under their pillow. A great many people actually *wanted* the world to end. You probably know a few. So, why write it down? They surely wouldn't need a Bible in heaven. Or hell.

Logical, but only part of the big picture.

The truth is, during his brief lifetime, Jesus Christ wasn't the superstar he is now. Though the seed had been planted, the story needed some time to come to fruition. Without these twenty-seven books, none of which are first-hand accounts, most of which were written long after his death by men who had never met the Messiah, the only thing we would know about Jesus is that he was crucified. The New Testament *is* the Christ. Outside of the Bible, there is scant evidence of his existence. The historian Tacitus mentions that someone who called himself Christus was crucified by the Romans, along with two hundred thousand other seditious Christians. Another Roman scribe wrote about Chrestus. That's close, but in both cases, *christos* is not really a name, but is Greek for Messiah, and I would be willing to bet that there was more than one nutcase roaming the countryside claiming to be the son of God. [See: Monty Python's *Life of Brian*]

Note: The Bible tells us that Jesus will be back. Unfortunately, because no specific date is mentioned, every self-medicated cuckoo clock on the block thinks he's the second coming of the Lord. The authorities in Jerusalem have a temporary holding cell for the "Messiah of the Day."

Being the leader of the Skeptics, I had to ask myself how it was that the son of God could be such an undocumented nobody during his own lifetime, especially considering all the hoopla surrounding his immaculate birth. I mean, it's not like it was a big secret or anything. Not only was it predicted, but it was up in neon in the form of a "Star of Bethlehem." How, you ask, could Jesus grow up so invisible that even in Nazareth, in his own neighborhood, down at the local watering hole, he was just the son of Mary and Joseph, older brother of John, nothing more. What about Toddler Jesus? Adolescent Jesus? Jesus in Smallville? Jesus and Mary Magdalene?! What happened to the twenty-seven years between the manger and the ministry? Where was God all that time? Talk about your deadbeat dads. No wonder Jesus had parental issues.

"If any man come to me and not hate his father and mother...he cannot be my disciple."

Luke 14:26

How, I often asked myself, did the son of God maintain his anonymity for most of his life? Did he have a secret identity? After many months of meditation, the answer came to me in a vision. The Christian Broadcasting Network was not yet on the air.

More than anything, the New Testament is a birth announcement. It's the birth announcement of a religion. Here comes Christianity! Though Jesus' death caused barely a ripple at the time, the resulting tidal wave is still hard to fathom.

MATTHEW

Mark, Luke, John and the rest.

Special Note to the Reader: We went through the Old Testament one book at a time. That won't work here. Not only would we be jumping back and forth in time, we would be re-teadinthe same ground four times over, only wearing different huaraches.

Instead, I'm going to cut and paste it all together so that it plays from womb to tomb to Armageddon. I'm going to tell it like a story, not a series of letters or testaments. Where the various authors disagree, I will gleefully point it out. Didn't I tell you this would be fun!

JOSEPH AND MARY

Our tale begins in a dusty backwater burg called Nazareth. There, Mary, a young virgin of twelve or thirteen summers, is betrothed to Joseph, a significantly older man. Though Joseph comes from a good home and respectable lineage (King David himself, or so they say), he has no money or formal education. His girlfriend is just as poor. Mary and Joseph are not royalty or priests or prophets or warriors. They're not sinners or saints. They're just a couple of starry-eyed kids living in nowhere-ville. Little do they know what adventures the Fate Sisters have in store for them. Little do they know that God's capricious digit of destiny is swinging in their direction and that it will soon change their lives . . . change the world! If only they had read the Old Testament. If only they could read.

"Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign: Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel."

Isaiah 7:14

Note: To avoid confusion, we'll call him Jesus.

One day Mary goes to her fiancé and says, "Joseph, in case you haven't noticed, I'm preggers. But here's the funny part. I'm still a virgin." Without batting an eyelash, she explains to her betrothed that an angel of the Lord has appeared to her in a dream. "The angel said I've been chosen by God to bear his son. If you must know, these are his exact words."

"Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Luke 1:28

(Try that line on some babe at the bar.)

Pause.

During which Joseph contemplates the implications of this startling bit of information.

Lonng . . . Pause.

During which Joseph is probably thinking, no wonder they call this *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. But he's a nice guy and he doesn't ask any embarrassing questions.

I have one. How was this child conceived?

If you remember your Greek mythology, you know that the gods were always screwing around with mortals. Animals, too! Most of the time they used the tried and tested, mother nature approved, TAB (A) in SLOT (B) method. The Bible doesn't get too explicit on this point except to hint that the conception was immaculate. The way I see it, there are only three possibilities:

1. God made a fetus and placed it directly into Mary's womb. In which case Mary is just a surrogate mother and Jesus is not genetically related to her or to Joseph, which makes him a clone "made in God's image."

2. God fertilized one of Mary's eggs. (See: *Rosemary's Baby* . . . no, maybe you'd better not.) In this case, Jesus is the son of Mary and God. He is *not* related to Joseph or to King David or even to Ruth. He is *not* the "son of man."

3. Joseph impregnated Mary the old fashioned way. God is *not* the father. Jesus is the mortal son of Mary and Joseph, who may have known more about the Old Testament than we were led to believe.

POSSIBLE SCENARIO #1

One day at the well

Mary: "I'm pregnant. Sooner or later I'm going to have to tell my father something."

Joseph: "Wait! I've got an idea. The way I see it, either we tell everybody you're pregnant, in which case I will be humiliated. Oh, and by the way, you will be stoned to death for having premarital sex. *Orrrr*, you can have one of your visions and we can claim to be the ones mentioned in the ancient prophecy."

Mary: "But that means we'll have to move to Bethlehem."

Joseph: "No way. I've got a thriving carpentry business going here. Tell you what, we'll wait until you're almost ready to drop, then we'll take a week off for the, uh, tax census. Yeah, that's the ticket!"

Mary: "What tax census? There's no tax census."

Ques: "Why not the *Daughter* of God?"

Ans: Because somebody's gotta die, and it wouldn't have been cool to crucify a woman.

Ques: "What about Saint Joan? Didn't the Catholics burn Joan of Arc at the stake?"

Ans: Not exactly. What they did was . . . yeah, okay, that's pretty much what they did.

Ques: "What about all those witches they killed in-"

Ans: All right, you win. It could have been the *daughter* of God. But it wasn't. How about if we move this soap opera up into the twenty-first century and see how it plays.

POSSIBLE SCENARIO #2

Scene 14

EXT. CLOSE UP - NIGHT

It's a balmy June evening. A full moon. Palm trees sway as the music swells in a minor key (Em). The camera zooms in on the lead actor's face. Young Joseph Trent wears a look of consternation. His girlfriend, Mary Aldridge, has just informed him that the little dot has turned blue, the rabbit has died, the stork is on the way, there's a bun in the oven, and that she might be pregnant. Joseph's tortured features are understandable. (Emmy ominations soon.) He knows he's not the father because he's been practicing (organ creSCENDO) **Abstinence Before Marriage**. (Hey, I said it was fiction!)

Joseph: "I thought you said you were a virgin?"

Mary: "Uh, yeah, I did . . . I mean, I am. That's what's so weird."

Joseph: "Then how . . . er, I mean, uh, who's . . . the father?"

Mary: (pointing up) "God."

Joseph: (pointing up) "You mean, like, God, the one up there . . ."

in heaven?"

Mary: "That one."

Joseph: "Oh, I guess it must be okay then. Well, gotta run. Talk to ya later."

Yes, just like you and me, Joseph is a little skeptical. His first impulse is to give Mary the brush-off before she starts to show, but after he has his own weird dream, he changes his mind and decides to merrily marry Mary. This is where the various stories get a little twisted.

In the book of Luke, Joseph loads his pregnant child-bride on a donkey and hauls her off across the desert on a mid-winter, five-day trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, his ancestral home, for a tax census, of all things. Doesn't that sound romantic? Wait, it gets better! If the New Testament teaches us anything, it's that you should always make room reservations ahead of time. Besides the census, there's a camel dealer's convention in town. All the rooms are booked, even the Motel One. Because of this, God's son is born in a manger, which is a polite way to say a feeding trough in a stall in a stinky old barn. Thus, the traditional Christmas nativity.

Mark's version is a little different. In his book, Jesus is born in a house. Other gospels say he was born in a cave. In the Koran, Jesus is born under a palm tree in the desert. In the Skeptics Bible, Jesus is born in the back of a '55 Nomad woody.

Historically speaking, none of the above.

Now, before you go getting attitude on me, remember that this period of history is well documented in sources *other* than religious writings. This is the first century, for Christ's sake! Books are everywhere! As a matter of fact, there are so many books that some of them have already been banned and burned. And there are true historians such as the Jew, Josephus; and Tacitus, a Roman, to give us other perspectives. There are even beat poets such as Ovid. And best of all, there are records being kept by kings and courts.

many of these records are written on stone, and many have survived the centuries.

The problem is, the scriptures don't always jive with history. For instance, we know that the only Roman census of that era was taken in 6 CE, or six years *after* the supposed birth of Christ. Also, there was no such law that said a woman had to follow her husband to his ancestral home. Women in the Bible, as we have learned, were seldom counted. And what sort of man would ask his pregnant child bride to make such a journey? Okay, most of them. But it still sucks. Ladies, imagine yourself pregnant--no, very, very pregnant--taking a trip like that on the back of donkey.

Joseph: "Are you comfortable, dear?"

Mary: "I want a divorce . . . and I have to pee, again."

Give me a break! This whole scene stinks of retro-fitting. If Jesus was born in Bethlehem, wouldn't they call him Jesus of Bethlehem? A Bethlemite? Bethlehemian? Jesus tells us that Nazareth is his hometown. So do Mark and John. Even God calls him a Nazarene [Matt. 2:23], and he oughta know. Then why does the gospel of Matthew say Jesus was born in Bethlehem?"

The answer is simple. **There was no birth certificate.** Whoever wrote these early books had never met Jesus, and they either didn't know or didn't care where he was born. They were trying to win converts to a new religion, so when they penned the story, they put the birth in Bethlehem, thereby fulfilling a prophecy from the Old Testament. The manger was a nice touch, keeping it humble.

LESSON 23: Predicting an event is much easier if you wait until *after* the event.

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

Hosea 11:1

So, it appears as if the Bible might have been off on the birth

location by a couple of hundred miles. As secret agent Maxwell Smart often said (thumb to forefinger), "Missed it by *that* much." As least they got the birth date right, didn't they? I mean, there's that guiding light and some shepherds and three kings and flocks and angels and Ram's horns and stuff to mark the occasion. He is the son of God, after all. His mother is a virgin! Someone must have made note of such an important birthday, right?

Uh . . . no.

Even though earlier biblical births and begats and battles are specifically dated, when it comes to God's son, no date is mentioned. Our only clue comes from the angel who plays the part of the home-pregnancy test. The Bible tells us that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary in the *sixth* month of the year. Add another nine months and that would make Jesus' birthday sometime in March or April, depending on whose calendar you're using. Or, to put it another way, if Jesus was actually born in late December, then either Mary was *already* **three months pregnant** when the alleged angel appeared, or Jesus was a preemie. The ramifications of this would require another book.

Then how did we end up with Christ's birthday on December the 25th?

Because it was already a holiday, stupid. In the pagan calendar it was the winter solstice, a time of celebration and renewal. Fertility gods such as Baal and Astarte were celebrating by drinking lots of wine, running around in the nude and, uh, whatever. Any old excuse for an orgy. Sun worshippers were also in a party mood.

"In Rome, the week preceding the solstice was the Saturnalia, an orgiastic festival that concluded with *gift giving* and *candle lighting*. (Merry X-mas)"

Manfred Bartell

What the Bible Really Says

So, what you're saying is, the date was selected for recruiting purposes?

Now you're catching on. You see, in Jesus' time, you might control the populace with taxes and a well-armed militia, but it would be better if you could unite them under one god. In order to win as many converts as possible, the authors chose a date that the people could relate to.

Okay, so maybe the Bible is a little off on the place and the date. What's a couple of miles and a few months when we're talking about God Jr. At least they got the year right, right?

Nope. Nyet. Negativo. Nein. Not exactly.

The Book of Matthew says that Jesus was born during the

reign of King Herod.

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem..."

Matt. 2:1

Problem is, King Herod died in 4 BCE, or four years *before* the supposed birth of the Messiah.

Okay, then what about that star of Bethlehem? Surely someone, somewhere, would have noticed a star that defied all the laws of gravity and motion, a star brighter than all the rest . . . a star that hovered over a barn!

You would think so, wouldn't you? There *was* a conjunction of planets visible from that latitude. But that happened in 6 BCE. Also, according to Chinese records, there was a

supernova, which surely would have been eye-catching, but that happened in 10 CE. No, the truth is, outside of a few wise men and some shepherds, not one other person on the planet noticed anything unusual in the sky that winter.

SING: "We three kings of Orient are-"

Uh-uh. They weren't kings or wise men, they were Persian magicians (magi), supposedly sent by Herod, a king who was already dead.

Shepherds out tending their flocks? Do they do that in late December?

You see where I'm going with this, don't you? All of these mistakes in time and place and date and circumstance, what do they all have in common? **Ans:** They aren't mistakes at all. They are in the Bible willfully and with purpose. They are all part of a plan to turn Jeshua, a wandering philosopher from Nazareth, into Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Campaign slogan: "Beware of false prophets." The New Testament is the original self-fulfilling prophecy. As Kenneth C. Davis points out in *Don't Know Much about the Bible*, the authors of the New Testament were "cutting the foot to fit the shoe." In Detroit they call it reverse-engineering. In Hollywood they call it a "star vehicle." Rudyard Kipling would have called it a "just so" story. According to Manfred Barthel in *What the Bible Really Says*, the New Testament is an "*etiology*, a narrative that blends fact and imagination in an attempt to describe the cause of some phenomenon." For example, there are large salt deposits around the Dead Sea. Over the centuries, some of them have been carved by wind and rain until they vaguely resemble animals or people.

"Hey, Archie, look at that pile of salt! It looks like an old woman."

"Edith, you dingbat! That *is* an old woman. Lot's wife, to be precise. That's what happens to you when you don't obey your husband's commands."

"He turns you into a pile of salt? What about that pile over there? Is that Lot's dog?"

POSSIBLE SCENARIO #3

Imagine a gathering of veteran screenwriters working on a TV sequel to the Old Testament:

GOD, THE NEXT GENERATION

Fade in:

INT. A SMOKE FILLED ROOM

Four grizzled men and one fresh-faced woman sit around a folding table.

CARL: (chewing on a cheap cigar) "Okay, the Old Testament says the messiah will come out of Egypt. But, then it says he was born in Bethlehem. Another part says he's a Nazarene. Then he moves to Capernaum. Lots of frequent flyer miles."

MOREY: (blowing a puff of blue smoke) "My parents lived in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, but I was born in Jersey. What's so hard about that?"

MARSHALL: (crushing out another Camel) "Okay, then the problem is, how do we get Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where she gives birth, and then get the baby Jesus from Bethlehem to Egypt and back again."

CARL: (taking a drag off his stogie) "How about this: King Herod has heard rumors about the birth of a messiah. The king is the nervous type, so he orders that every male under the age of, uh, two-years-old should be killed."

MOREY: (blowing a smoke ring) "That's good! Go with that!"

CARL: (exhaling) "Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus escape to Egypt just in time to evade Herod's henchmen."

MOREY: "Perfect! It even alludes to Moses and the Passover."

MARSHALL: (spitting a tobacco crumb) "Oh, yeah, I see where you're going! Then, after Herod dies, Jesus makes his triumphant return. Thus, he's a Nazarene, born in Bethlehem, who comes out of Egypt and settles on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Voila!"

CYNTHIA: (coughing and gagging) "I don't think the legal department is going to buy it. I mean, not only is King Herod already dead, but he never ordered any mass child murders."

MOREY "So sue me. Two thousand years from now, who's gonna know?"

Meanwhile, back in Galilee:

After Jesus comes out of Egypt, he immediately disappears for another ten years. No one seems to notice that the son of God is missing. What happens during these formative years? The Bible doesn't say. The next time we see him, he is a smug twelve-year-old student sitting on the steps of the temple, bantering with a rabbi. Mother Mary, who hasn't seen her son in four days, comes looking for him, but he tells her to bug off.

"Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here in my father's house?"

Luke 2: 49

After that, Jesus drops out of sight for another eighteen years. There's no record of this time in the Bible. Does he move out of his mom's house? Get a job? Is he a carpenter, like his, uh, stepfather? Or is he just another hippie freeloader? Is he circumcised? How does he live so anonymously when everyone knows he's the son of God? The Bible says that after Jesus is born, Mary gets busy. Which means Jesus has numerous brothers and sisters. Don't these siblings know they're related to the son of the Lord God Almighty who created the universe, as well as southern California?

Phillip: "My big brother can beat up your big brother."

James: "That's probably true. Jesus is kind of a wuss. It's his father you have to worry about."

Ques: What about love? In the Gnostic Gospels (unofficial books), there are rumors of an affair with a woman who has the same name as his mother. Jesus kisses Mary "passionately" and often. (She sings: "I don't know how to love him.") There's talk that they might have done more than just kiss. Jesus Junior? Son of the son of God? Or maybe even the granddaughter of God! That would be something.

As far as siblings, brother James is the only one who plays a part in the Bible. Mother Mary appears here and there, including at her son's crucifixion, but is otherwise ignored. Joseph disappears from the narrative almost at the moment of birth.

Note: Though Jesus is resurrected, soul *and* body, and though he eventually goes to heaven, never to pay taxes again, and even though Mother Mary eventually joins him, they both continue to make earthly guest appearances for the next two thousand years. Mary spends most of her time in rural Mexico, where she often appears in disguise. Some of her favorites are the backlit cloud, the grilled cheese sandwich, coffee grounds, and the always entertaining, ceiling water stain. It's only in the last few years, however, that she has been seen in the company of Bigfoot and Elvis.

After Jesus dismisses his parents on the temple steps, the story doesn't pick up again until the Messiah is almost thirty. His ministry is short-lived, lasting only three years, but the impact will be felt worldwide. The most famous speech of Jesus' brief career is his "Sermon on the Mount," which has to be one of the most eloquent and quoted speeches in history. Most Bible historians believe that this sermon is not a single speech, but is more of a compilation of his greatest hits. If you want to hear it live, pick any old all-American Christian church and attend the Sunday service. You'll hear the local pastor sermonizing from his own mount.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Close your eyes and let me take you back to a special day in Galilee. It's the year 30 CE, or thereabouts, a sultry Tuesday afternoon. Clouds are rolling in off the water and there's a charge in the air that has nothing to do with the weather. Even the Roman guards can feel the electricity. They've heard the rumors: Jesus is coming! With a shoestring budget and very little advance billing, this new messiah has drawn a sizable crowd to the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is now thirty years old. He believes he is the son of God, and so do many others.

"Everything that we know about Jesus Christ conforms so perfectly to the clinical picture of paranoia that it is hardly conceivable that people can even question the accuracy of the diagnosis."

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965)

"Jesus could have been an ordinary deluded creature."

Sigmund Freud ((1856-1939)

"The whole religious complexion of the modern world is due to the absence from Jerusalem of a Lunatic Asylum."

Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) *Impressions and Comments*

"When is Jesus going to bring the pork chops?"

George Carlin

His audience consists mainly of the sick, the lame, the unclean, the French. Most of them don't have two shekels to rub together. The people gather in as close as possible, hoping to hear the words of the Christ, the son of God, the Messiah whose coming has been prophesied for many years. Jesus, they believe, is the savior who will release them from their earthly bonds and raise them to the kingdom of heaven. The son of God walks among them. In a calm yet clear and resonant voice, he says,

"MATZO BALLS! FRESH LENTILS! FISH ON A STICK! Get 'em while they're hot!"

No, wait, that wasn't Jesus! That was Judas. Jesus says,

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth."

Matt. 5:5

Hallelujah! Can I get an amen on that! This particular "beatitude" has great appeal for the masses, who are decidedly meek and easily led. Even when God tells them he intends to "lay waste" to the Earth, the meek still seem grateful for the inheritance. Why they would want to inherit a wasted, plundered planet, I don't know. That doesn't sound like a blessing to me. Jesus goes on to bless various other groups, including the poor in spirit, the pure in heart, and the E Street Shuffle.

It's obvious from the start that this is a different sort of message from a new kind of messenger. Jesus may be as megalomaniacal as his old man, but his methods are pure Mother Mary. While his father calls us sheep, Jesus calls us the "salt of the Earth." God is vengeful, Jesus turns the other cheek. God slays his enemies, Jesus invites them in. God plunders, Jesus gives. God condemns, Jesus saves. God parts the waters, Jesus just walks across. God likes heavy metal, Jesus prefers Broadway. It almost seems as if Matthew and Mark are disavowing the Old Testament, as if they're trying to humanize a god who hasn't made a public appearance in quite a few years, a god who is in danger of becoming too distant to be relevant.

Note: Certain sects still hold that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are two different gods. The Gnostics believe that the God of Moses, the jealous God who sent plagues and caused Earthquakes and floods, was an evil God.

There's no denying that Jesus has powers beyond those of mere mortal men. Because of this, he is a frequent guest at wedding parties, where he often turns water into wine. (In high school we

called it "spiking the punch.") On a more sober note, Jesus also heals the sick, raises the dead, restores sight, stops seizures, cures toenail fungus, drives out evil demons, and feeds the poor. Problem is, he does this one person at a time.

I have an idea. Instead of healing a leper, how about curing leprosy? And instead of healing a cripple, how about a cure for polio? Maybe you could point out a few preventive measures. Hey, Jesus, did either you or your father, at any point, consider letting us know about GERMS?

No, the biblical God must have flunked microbiology. Even though he supposedly created all creatures, great and small, he doesn't seem to know about bacteria. Come to think of it, God doesn't seem to know much of anything about the world he created. How is it, you might ask, that the God of Moses is no more knowledgeable than a shepherd boy. Don't you think it's strange that there's not one tiny little scrap of information in the scriptures that would be known by a god, but not by a contemporary mortal? Go ahead, try and find one. I'll wait. And don't you think it's sad that in place of all the useful information the Bible might have given us, we are left with page after page of the sort of misinformation which we now consider supernatural mumbo-jumbo. Let me give you a few examples:

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS:

To insure a good harvest, sacrifice a goat.

WHAT THE BIBLE SHOULD HAVE SAID

Rotate your crops. Try a little organic mulch. Plan ahead.

THE BIBLE SAYS:

I will send a plague on the hebrews. 75, 000 will die.

BIBLE SHOULD HAVE SAID:

Wash your hands in hot soapy water. Wear a lambskin.

SAYS:

The lord will send a great fire from heaven.

SHOULD HAVE SAID:

Get yourself a lightning rod.

SAYS:

The sun will turn to darkness and the moon to blood.

SHOULD HAVE SAID:

The moon came between the earth and the sun. It's called an eclipse, you twit.

SAYS:

The world is firmly established. It cannot be moved.

SHOULD HAVE SAID:

The earth is flying around the sun at 67,000 MPH.

SAYS:

The Lord make Michal barren.

SHOULD HAVE SAID:

David was shooting blanks.

SAYS:

Don't eat pork

SHOULD HAVE SAID:

Get your skinny butt down to Sweet Baby Ray's for some BBQ.

FIVE LOAVES AND TWO FISH, INC.

40 Holy Road

Capernaum, Judea 00007

Listen, J.C., I've got a plan. With a few more of these "bottomless breadbaskets" of yours and a good distribution network, we could work miracles. Let's do lunch. ha ha.

J.B.

And that bit about Jesus driving out demons, let's talk about that for a minute. First off, what is a demon anyway? If God made everybody and everything, then he must be the responsible party, right? Are evil spirits and demons the same thing? Are there degrees of demonic possession? Like, can you be slightly possessed? That would help explain my father's side of the family. How do demons get inside of so many good people? Especially innocent children? Like Linda Blair. How does a demonic possession differ from an epileptic seizure? A hormone deficiency? Roid rage? A brain tumor? An acid flashback?

And what about this guy Lazarus? Raising the dead is one of the tricks that Jesus does best, though most of his early resurrections are performed on people who are only marginally

dead.

"Jesus said, 'Go away, the girl is not dead but asleep.'"

Matt. 9:24

"It just so happens that your friend here is only MOSTLY dead."

Miracle Max: *The Princess Bride*

Lazarus is a different story altogether. He hasn't taken a breath in ninety-six hours. He's wrapped in a shroud. It's hot! There's a stench of decay in the air. Flies are buzzing! Buzzards are flying!! Lazarus is not just merely dead, he's really most sincerely dead.

"Religion offers the neurologically highly implausible premise that we will survive the death of our brains."

Richard Dawkins

My question is, how dead is *too* dead? How much cellular deterioration can a body sustain and still be brought back to life? Or, as you might ask your insurance agent, "How much damage before I'm totaled?" Jesus is resurrected after only three days. So, is five days, or six, or even a week possible? Matthew tells us about a bunch of "God's Saints" who are resurrected on the same day as Jesus. The first thing these dead saints do is go to town where they are "seen by many."

Hey, wait a minute! Isn't that the same plot as *Night of the Living Dead*?

THE APOSTLES

By his thirtieth birthday, Jesus heads a thriving ministry in Galilee. Using this small lakefront village as his home base, he wanders from town to city, preaching his liberal, pacifist politics to the masses. The locals feed him and he sleeps in their houses. Life is

good. It's during this time that he puts together his A-team: The Apostles of Christ.

Now it's Jesus times twelve:

1. Andrew
2. Bartholomew; a.k.a. Nathaniel; a.k.a. "the son of Tolomai;" a.k.a. "Slick Bart."
3. Doubting Thomas, maybe
4. James, the son of Zebedee (doo-dah)
5. James, the younger
6. John, James' brother.
7. Matthew, the tax collector
8. Philip from Bethsaida
9. Simon, "the zealot"
10. Simon, "the Garfinkle"
11. Thaddeus, the funky
12. Judas Iscariot, the Benedict Arnold of Christianity.

This is a team like no other team in history, and that includes the Miracle Mets and the '94 U.S. Hockey team who, with great coaching and some seriously bloodthirsty checks, managed to defeat the godless horde from the frozen north. And Jesus is the greatest spiritual leader since Vince Lombardi, or is it the other way around? As they wander from town to town, Jesus teaches his students how to perform their own magic tricks, er, I mean miracles. Then, as rabbis, they go out on walking tours of the middle east, performing at weddings and Bar Mitzvahs, spreading the word of the Lord in every size venue. One of their favorite teaching methods is the parable.

PAR-A-BLE *n.* A short narrative making a moral or religious point by comparison with natural or homely things.

For instance, a wise man builds his house on rock, not on sand. And the kingdom of God is like the mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, but when full grown becomes a great tree. And a shepherd with one hundred sheep will still look for one lost lamb. And a net cast into the sea brings in a few endangered species with the tuna.

And so on.

This simple down-to-earth logic works well on the locals who have had it up to here with all the Greek and Babylonian and Cultic mysticism. Even the God of the Jews is way past the deadline on his promise of deliverance. The consensus of opinion is that life sucks and that there must be something better. People are looking for a light in the dark, a leader with a code of conduct in a universe of cruelty and chaos. Jesus is the right man at the right time.

"The new theology succeeded not because it could be demonstrated rationally but because it was effective in preventing despair and inspiring hope."

Karen Armstrong *A History of God*

"Religion, *n.* A daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the unknowable."

Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914)

The Devil's Dictionary

Of all the sayings of Jesus, the most often quoted is,

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

or, as it says in Leviticus,

"Love your neighbor as yourself."

Right on! Do your own thing, but temper it. Not very original, though. Most people call this the Golden Rule, or the "foundation of the New Testament." A famous rabbi named Hillel called it "the whole Torah." Confucius put it in reverse when he said, "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others." Aristotle taught that we should "behave as we wish others to behave." Buddhism teaches us that "One should never do to another that which one regards as injurious to one's own self." John Wayne said, "I won't be laid a hand on, and I won't be wronged. I don't do these things to others, and I expect the same." Miss Manners always says, "Don't annoy me and I won't annoy you."

As you can see, the sentiment is universal and probably as old as time. Victor J. Stenger, in his book, *The New Atheism*, contends that "We are endowed with a moral faculty that guides our intuitive judgments of right and wrong." In other words, before Jesus, before Zeus, before Homo Sapiens, it was the one essential rule of communal living. My guess is that it was the first law ever verbalized. When Ogg stole Hagg's fish, Hagg said, "Grmph erg nanga," which roughly translates to, "I bet you wouldn't like it if I stole *your* fish." Then she whumped him with a tree stump.

In one memorable scene, Jesus comes upon a group of people who are getting ready to stone a woman to death for the crime of adultery. (**Note:** This is how the sport of "dodge-rock" was invented.) This is not a vigilante mob, mind you. These people are only doing what God has commanded. Jesus intervenes:

"Let him who is without sin cast the first st-"

Thud!

"Owww!"

"Peter, what the heck do you think you're doing?"

"Well, you said-"

"I meant . . . oh, never mind."

These are the salad days. Things are going well for Jesus and his band of twelve. "The Way," as the new religion is being called, is gaining followers in every town. One reason for this is Jesus, himself, who must have aced the Carnegie course. Another reason is POOR PEOPLE! Hundreds and thousands of them. Jesus makes a solemn promise to his followers that in heaven the tables will be turned. No one will be able to buy their way in.

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Matt. 19:24

As a matter of fact, none of the billionaires, including the Ewings and the Clampetts, are going to get close enough to even get a sniff of paradise. Ted Turner and Donald Trump don't have a prayer. Carnegie and Rockefeller are already downstairs, stoking

the fires of Hades with Pennsylvania bitmus. Bill Gates' ongoing efforts to turn the human race into the Borg will guarantee a lower level in Hades where he will be forced to watch the video *Disney On Ice* for all eternity.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on Earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven."

Matt. 6:19

As it turns out this vow of poverty is pretty much ignored by the church hierarchy. During the middle ages, the popes make a killing selling "indulgences." For those of you who are not catholic, an *indulgence* is sort of a first class ticket to paradise. Anyone who makes a sizable donation to the church is thereby absolved of their sins. The bigger the sin, the more lira required. This is still the screed of the televangelist: "Every dollar you send gets you one step closer to heaven."

While we're on the subject, let's take a second and talk about this place God calls heaven.

HEAVEN (see illustration; hardcopy only)

"One day of praying and six nights of fun.
The odds against going to heaven, six to one."
Jimmy Smith: *A Walk on the Wild Side*

1. VALHALLA
2. HAPPY HUNTING GROUND
3. ELYSIAN FIELDS
4. NIRVANA
5. FINAL REWARD
6. PARADISE
7. ZION
8. OLYMPUS
9. PLAYBOY MANSION
10. AVALON, ODIN'S HALL, IDAVOLL, ASGARD, HEIMDALL'S HALL, BALDER'S ABODE, VINGOLF,

LYSIUM

11. THE HAMPTONS (IN SEASON)

12. 1969

CONTRACT (covenant):

The party of the first part (you) will work for the party of the second part (God) your entire life without pay. You will worship, humor, and otherwise suck up to him. You will give to God one tenth of what you earn. In return, after you're dead, He may or may not let you past the velvet rope.

[Sign here](#)

Heavenly Question 1. Where exactly *is* heaven?

In the Old Testament it says that heaven can be reached either by golden stairs or by building a tower of sufficient height. It can't be very far, though, because angels come and go at a moments notice. God and Satan commute daily. In most movies (and in all cartoons) heaven is just above the clouds. People never see their feet, as they are constantly ankle-deep in a mist. If this is true, then it must be in another dimension. I know this because I've looked out the window of many jet planes and I've never seen anyone walking around out there. No, I take that back. There was that one time in 1967, but I never ordered the mahi-mahi again after that.

Heavenly Question 2. In square miles, how big is heaven?

For obvious reasons, the Bible is a little vague on this point. In one part it says "the mustard seed is larger than the heavens." However, in Revelation, John sees the heavenly city of New Jerusalem coming down out of the clouds. An angel measures it and finds it to be a square whose sides are 12,000 stadia, or about 1,400 miles long. (**Note:** a *stadia* is equal to five furlongs, fifty cubits and 20,000 leagues under the sea.")

Doesn't sound likely to me. New Jerusalem may be significantly larger than a mustard seed, but it is hardly large enough to hold everyone who wants in. Consider that it has to

house about thirty percent of the living population of the Earth. Then add in another couple of billion Christians who are already dead. Plus every good Christian who is going to be born from now until judgment day. Count all the "clean" animals, especially dogs (*All Dogs Go to Heaven*). Let's say five to ten billion humans and a few hundred trillion animals. There should be trees and grass and oceans and places to fish and beaches and mountains to ski on, etc. And remember, some of us need more space than others. Unless we're going to be constantly bumping into each other, I think heaven should be at least twice as big as the Earth.

The way I heard it, only your soul goes to heaven, not your body.

Oh, then any old shoebox will do.

Heavenly Question 3. Who gets in and who doesn't?

For Christians, entrance to heaven is granted only to those who have accepted Christ as their savior, confessed their sins and learned the secret handshake. Let's see who makes the cut.

In: Tammy Faye

Out: Ghandi (Hindu)

In: Rev. Al Sharpton

Out: Albert Einstein (Atheist)

In: OJ Simpson

Out: Nicole Kidman (Scientologist)

In: Rush Limbaugh

Out: Mick Jagger ("Won't you guess my name?")

In: Kathy Lee Gifford

Out: Bill Gates (way too rich)

In: Timothy McVeigh*

Out: Bob Dylan (way too confused)

In: Adolph Hitler**

Out: Mark Twain (declined the offer of eternal life)

In: Satan***

Out: Pope Leo X (Prime candidate for Satan's top spot in hell)

*Now don't start writing me nasty letters. I'm not defending the

Oklahoma City bomber, I'm just pointing out the well-known-fact that he was a Christian, and that before he was stoned to death . . . er, I mean executed, he got down on his knees and asked forgiveness for his sins.

**I'm also not defending that Nazi jerk Hitler, even though he was a part-time Catholic who loved children and dogs and who married his lifelong love in a Berlin bunker before he died. I'm just saying that if a priest performed the wedding, then a confession could have been made.

*** In the Koran, Satan goes to heaven. And why not? Can't he confess his sins?

"How is one to explain that neither Hitler nor Himmmler was ever excommunicated by the church?

Eli Weisel (1928-) To Be a Jew

As you can see, the admission standards seem to be fairly low. Actually, because of a serious loophole, anyone who wants in can get in. The rules state that anytime up until the instant of your death you can confess your sins to Jesus, and just like that, you're forgiven. When you consider the large number of pedophile priests, it's obvious that there are a great many who are counting on this last minute appeal. Heaven, it seems, is not necessarily full of the best or the brightest. Rigid conformity is the rule, and you *are* being watched!

Heavenly Question 4.

Do all dead children go to heaven? What happens if you're born unclean on the streets of Calcutta and you die before you ever hear the word *Jesus*?

Surprise Answer to Heavenly Question 4.

It just so happens that Pope Benedict XVI has only this past year [4-20-07] rescinded the pseudo-doctrine of limbo. This sudden change of policy means that all those un-baptized babies, embryos, fetuses, sperm and stem cells that have been floating around out there for hundreds of years can finally ascend to Paradise. Which means that all the preceding popes were wrong,

and therefore, fallible after all.

Heavenly Question 5. What's up, up there?

Will we grow older in heaven? Can I be younger? Fifteen, maybe? What about housing? The Bible says there are thrones and mansions in heaven. Does this mean there will still be a class structure? Will some people be more equal than others? Can I have a penthouse of my own? Will New Jerusalem be the only city? Will virgins stay that way? I've heard there are wars in heaven. Will I have to fight? What's the temperature? I like it in the high nineties. What about nightlife? Will we still live on a twenty-four hour schedule? (Funny, I never did before.) Will there be sunsets? Will there be cars or will we just fly around on our wings? Can I have a '57 T-bird? That would be heavenly, at least for a while. Then I'd probably want a Dodge Viper. What is *bliss* anyway? Is that the latest designer drug? What if you don't like harp music? And what about the arts? Don't all great artists have to suffer? I mean, how many masterpieces were painted by artists who were blissed-out?

One Day in Heaven

Edgar Allen Poe: "Hey, Vinnie, how you doin'?"

Vincent Van Gogh: "Downright blissful, Eddie. How about you?"

Poe: "Ditto, but more so. Hey, you want to hear my new poem?"

Van Gogh: "I'm all ears. Ha ha! Get it?"

Poe: "Okay, here goes.

 'Don't worry, be happy, Lenore

 Don't worry, be happy, forevermore."

Van Gogh: "That's it? Kind of short isn't it? Catchy, though. Here, check out my new painting."

Poe. "Very nice. When did you start working in crayon?"

HEAVENLY HEIRARCHY

JESUS -- GOD -- MARY

 Our Lady of Fatima

 Our Lady of Lourdes

Our lady of Guadalupe
Our Lady of Medjugorje
Our Lady of Akita
Our Lady of Zeiton
Our Lady of Tattoon

Angelic Choir

First Sphere:

Seraphim . . . Cherubim . . . thrones

Second Sphere:

Dominions. . . Virtues . . . Powers

Third Sphere:

Principalities . . . Archangels . . . Angel

5,120 Saints (not counting Mother Teresa)

23.2 Billion Guardian Angels

Man

Woman

Satan

HOLLYWOOD AND HEAVEN

About once a year they make a movie about an angel who comes down to Earth to help someone. It's a daily occurrence on TV. What do they all have in common?

Ans: None of the angels wants to go back to heaven. You know what this says to me? It says that paradise may be all blissful enough at first, but after a couple of thousand years, it gets tedious. It says that Mother Earth, for all her faults, is still the residence of choice, even among the angels.

Would you agree with this bit of ancient wisdom? "One man's heaven is another man's hell?" Yes? Then how about this: "One man's trash is another man's treasure?" Same thing, right? One more: "You can't please all of the people all of the time, unless you give them a full frontal lobotomy."

All homilies aside, no two humans are going to agree on what constitutes a good time. For instance, God says the lion will lay down with the lamb and they will both eat straw. This may sound like heaven to the lamb, but for the lion this is surely hell.

"Hey, you, King of the Jungle, you want another bale of hay?
Har har."

"'Our kingdom go' is a necessary and unavoidable corollary of
'Thy kingdom come.'"

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963)

Ask yourself this question: Is it possible to be happy *all* of the time? How can you have a *high* if you never have a *low*? I would think they were sort of dependent upon each other -- like *bittersweet*. Aren't the greatest comedies framed in pathos? I think it's all a question of balance. Lose your hearing and a single note will ring like the bells of St. Mary's. Lose your sight and a shadow will shine like eternity. Ask your obscenely rich friends and they will all tell you the same thing: "When you can have anything you want, anytime you want it, you still want more."

"Instant gratification is way too slow."

Dave Barry

"Mama told me enough was enough. She was wrong."

The "Divine" Miss M

"Too much of a good thing . . . is wonderful."

Mae West

The way I see it, heaven is just personal contentment. It doesn't have to be perfect. As a matter of fact, the more perfect it becomes, the less heavenly. As long as you're reasonably happy and you're not causing too much trouble, what else counts? Eternal life? Ha! Most of the people I know are bored already. How many crossword puzzles can you do in an eternity? How many reruns of Matlock can you watch? Let's face facts. This planet Earth, the one I'm standing on right here, right now, this *is* heaven. Mine, anyway. And you're just playing a bit part.

"The average man or woman does not know what to do with his life, but wants another one which will last forever."

Anatole France (1844-1924)

COMPARISON

HEAVEN: ETERNAL BLISS.

HELL: ETERNAL TORTURE (hint: pretend you like it)

HEAVEN: GOLDEN HARPS.

HELL: BAGPIPES 24/7

HEAVEN: WHITE ROBES.

HELL: SPEEDOS FOR ALL

HEAVEN: NO HARD DRUGS.

HELL: DRUGS, WHEN AVAILABLE

HEAVEN: NO GAYS, LESBIANS OR TRANNIES.

HELL: GAME SHOW HOSTS

HEAVEN: NO GAMBLING.

HELL: GAMBLING ALLOWED, BUT EVERYBODY WINS

HEAVEN: TOFU AND MANNA.

HELL: TOFU AND GRITS

HEAVEN: SAUVIGNON BLANC.

HELL: JAEGERMEISTER

HEAVEN: EVERBODY LOVES EVERYONE.

HELL: ONE LOVE, UNREQUITED

Review: What have we learned about heaven so far? It's up, though not necessarily on our plane of existence. You have to know the password. There's no pain, no suffering, no starving children, no Valium, no padded rooms, no broken hearts, no phone sex, no taxes, no Mississippi delta blues; in short, none of the things that make life on Earth so dear that we cling to it like a beggar clings to a crust of bread, even when we are promised a feast in paradise. And while we're on the subject:

HELL!

"Believe as we do or thou shalt be burned."

William Graham Sumner (1840-1910)

"You can and you can't --

You shall and you shan't --
You will and you won't --
And you will be damned if you do."

Lorenzo Dow (1777-1834)

It's down, it stinks of brimstone (farts), it's mercilessly hot (Gila Bend in July), and Satan rules. Surprisingly, that's all the Bible says about that. Most of what we know about hell comes to us from other sources, including a three-part poem written by Dante Alighieri [1265-1321 CE]. Dante borrows a bit from Virgil's *Aeneid*, stirs in another cup of mythology, a dash or two from the Old Testament, blends it all in a Ptolemaic universe, and calls it, of all things, the *Divine Comedy*. I mean, like, har-dee-har. If this is a comedy, then *The Exorcist* must be hilarious. Even the *Cliff Notes* version must have scared the crap out of a few medieval swingers.

Cantos 11-12

Dante sees the shrieking spirits sunk in boiling blood, some even to the eyebrows.

Cantos 18-19

Dante sees that the bottom of the chasm is full of round holes. From each of these holes protrude the legs and feet of a spirit with the rest of the body upside down in the hole. The soles of their feet are on fire.

Surprise Literary Note: Dante just called his poem *The Comedy*. The "Divine" part was added by an overzealous editor three hundred years later.

In the first part of the book, *Inferno*, Virgil leads the author on a tour of the nine circles of hell. [see illustration] "Hey, this isn't one of those time-share things, is it?" I don't know about you, but the only thing I would need to know about Hell is written on the door:

"Abandon hope, all ye who enter here."

"Uh, no thanks . . . why don't you guys go on ahead. I'll meet you back at the bar."

Rudy Alighieri (Dante's cuz)

Each descending circle is based on a particular sin and has its own form of cruel and unusual punishment. It should be noted that Dante is not God, and that his choice of inmates is both personal and suspect. Dante sees many of his former friends and acquaintances. He sees corrupt popes and politicians and old lovers and teachers he didn't like. He sees Mohammed! Hell, as you would expect, is thoroughly unpleasant.

The brains are boiling in the skull, the heart in the breast glowing and bursting, the bowels a redhot mass of burning pulp, the tender eyes flaming like molten balls.

James Joyce

Questions for discussion: Why would Jesus tell me to love my enemies, then send *his* to eternal torture? Does he understand the meaning of **eternal**? I'm talking pain, baby, pain, forever

and unforgiving. Couldn't God just let the sinners die? You know, like, "dust to dust?" It's not like they would be any more trouble.

Good Answer! Good Answer!

"The infliction of cruelty with a clear conscience is a delight to moralists. That is why they invented Hell."

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) *Sceptical Essays*

This is a tremendously important point, so let's stop and think about it for a minute. Suppose you discovered that your next door neighbor had kept a young girl chained to a wall in his basement where he raped and tortured her daily for years. His reason: "She was a whore." You'd think he was a sadistic freak, wouldn't you? Well, the Bible condemns prostitutes to hell where they are tortured beyond even death's redemption.

"The most moralistic have the deepest darkest shadows."
Deepak Chopra

Okay, I confess. I have sinned. None of the big ones, mind you, like murder, or adultery, or eating a BLT, or being born in Tehran. It makes no difference. In the high court of Jehovah, even the slightest sin, unatoned, carries a severe and lengthy punishment. And with 613 commandments, Hell is going to be crowded. As a consolation, most of your friends will be there.

Consider this as allegory

When Sheriff Andy Taylor had to go to Mount Pilot for a convention, he left Deputy Barney Fife in charge. By the time Andy got back to Mayberry, Barney had arrested and jailed almost everyone in town, including Aunt Bee

What the heck does that mean?

It means that almost everyone knows someone they would send to hell.

PLAIN TALK ABOUT TORTURE

Catholics know a lot about torture. Do you remember the Inquisition? Of course you do. Beginning around 1233 CE in Europe, the Catholics began their infamous heresy trials, which they euphemistically called *inquisitions* - as if they were going to lob a few easy questions your way and then send you home with "these wonderful parting gifts, including *Inquisition: the Home Game*."

No, this was God's court, and anyone who questioned the authority of the church or the Bible was dragged before the Grand Inquisitors. After that, it was confess or die. Women suspected of being witches were burned alive. Almost fifty thousand of these women were burned on the pyre over a three hundred year period. Men whose eyebrows met in the middle were accused of being lycanthropes (werewolves) and were similarly toasted. There were

dozens of church authorized tortures. For instance, if you were so blasphemous as to suggest that Earth was *not* the center of the universe, you might be stretched on the rack, or boiled in oil, or covered with burning coals, or forced to watch Pauly Shore movies all day.

One of the pope's favorite sports was the "arrow of truth," in which the poor heretic was tied to a stake, then asked a series of questions. As each question was answered, an archer would shoot an arrow at the subject's heart. If the arrow missed its target, then God must have deflected it; therefore, the subject must be telling the truth. As you might imagine, there was lots of blood. More serious sins called for more serious punishments. If you were a follower of Baal or Mohammed, for example, you might have important organs removed . . . while you watched! In the end, almost everyone confessed to some sin, real or imagined.

"They tortured him, seeking in him their thoughts."

Stanislaw J. Lec (1909-1966)

It wasn't until 1816 that Pope Pius VII finally condemned torture. Ultimately, all the tortures ever devised by man are just candy kisses compared to one day in Satan's fiery furnace. What sort of God would do this to a child? Not mine.

Can we get back to the story?

I guess so.

To bring you up to date, Jesus is in serious trouble. He's taking flak from all sides. One problem is the Romans, who have begun to persecute his followers. His biggest headache, however, is the Jewish high priest, who is obviously jealous. Jesus calls the twelve apostles together and calmly tells them that he is going to die. How does Jesus know this? Because his dad told him so.

At least JC isn't being a total wuss about the whole thing. Instead of sneaking out of town, or copping a plea to a lesser offense, he rides straight into Jerusalem, trumpets blaring, banners unfurled, surrounded by a gaggle of family and friends. He even uses the "east gate" and rides in on a donkey, once again fulfilling an ancient prophecy. Some of his followers toss confetti and streamers while others line the road with palm fronds.

Hey, there's a good idea for another holiday. We'll call it Fronds Friday!

It was Sunday.

Oh.

Meanwhile, in the halls of justice, Pontius Pilate is wondering what all the hubbub is about. As Governor of Judea, including the city of Jerusalem, it's his job to keep the peace. It's not the plum assignment he had been hoping for. Still, he seems to be a fair man who is only trying to work his way back to Rome. Pontius has heard about Jesus. He also knows about the other rival Jewish sects, and frankly, he's worried. It's one thing for a prophet to go running around calling himself *messiah* (lots of those); it's another thing altogether when he calls himself "King of the Jews." Blasphemy is not against Roman law. Treason is. Meaning: there's only one *king*, and he's in Rome. By riding straight into the heart of the business district and kicking over the tables of the money lenders, then throwing all the tea into the harbor, Jesus forces Pontius Pilot's hand.

THE LAST SUPPER

Is there anyone out there who has *not* seen Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*? Go ahead, raise your hand. Nobody? Okay, we've all seen it. Guess what? It's wrong. Leonardo may be the greatest artist of all time, but he does lousy research. Jesus and his disciples did not eat their final Passover meal sitting erect in chairs at a table. They reclined on sofas or pillows, as did most nomadic peoples (a custom I would like to see imported to the U.S.). Even the Bible says they "reclined to the Passover meal."

Okay, let's assume it was a Passover meal, even though John says otherwise. And, no, that's not Mary Magdalene on his right, just an effeminate John. Before they eat, Jesus gives everyone a foot bath. Then he breaks a loaf of bread and gives everyone a chunk. (**Ques:** Does he wash his hands between the foot bath and the bread breaking? Is there any wonder these people have every known skin disease!)

"Take, eat," Jesus says, "this is my body." Then he offers them a cup of his blood. "Just kidding. It's wine. Ha ha."

The Gospel of John leaves out the bread and wine part of the

story, while Luke reverses the order and doubles the wine. In a third book, Judas sneaks out before the last round of drinks. Judging from what happens next, it's obvious that the apostles were drunk. It doesn't matter, though, because Jesus knows what's coming. He even knows the identity of the traitor. After the communion, there's a lot of reminiscing about the early days of the movement. It's a bittersweet affair.

True Confessions: Even though I'm not Catholic, I snuck into church one day and endured my one and only Eucharist. I ate Christ and drank his blood. I spent an hour kneeling on the floor, and what did I get? "A light lunch and sore knees." [W. Allen]

Okay, I'm only going to ask this question one more time: Do you really think God wants us doing tricks for treats like circus dogs? Why all the kneeling and bowing and scraping, and why all the demeaning rituals? If I didn't eat your stupid wafer, would that make me any less holy? And why repeat the same ceremony over and over. If I suddenly changed my mind and decided that I wanted to be a Quaker or a Jew or a third day Morphidist, wouldn't God know anyway?

Wait a minute! You don't think the whole thing could be motivated by greed, do you?

Yes, evidence suggests that the Catholics of the world have turned this pseudo sacrificial ceremony into the foundation of a billion-dollar-a-year Wafer and Wine business. I mean, is the Vatican impressive, or what? Talk about your corporate headquarters! And have you seen the pope's wardrobe closet? One pair of his shoes cost more than I make in a year. And the artwork in his house! Mama Mia! One picture *frame* is worth more than my truck.

IMAGINE

Imagine that you have just been elected Pope. Imagine that you're first Papal decree is: "All the church's holdings are to be sold. All the gold in the Vatican is to be melted down and sold and the money given to the poor; furthermore, we're getting rid of all those silly pseudo military guys who stand around like barber poles. They will be replaced by mannequins. Also, my staff will be reduced to five, including my fiancé. You can have the scepter and the ring, but I'm keeping the funny hats."

Imagine yourself out of a job.

Note: I knew that the church was wealthy, but until I read about some of the settlements in the child molestation cases, I had no idea how wealthy. To date (2010) 2.7 billion dollars has been paid out to victims of the catholic clergy. Where were they hiding all that money? Was it in the bank? Tax free? Or did they have pedophile insurance? I hate to be the one to break it to you, but all that tithing, all those donations you made to the church, look where it ended up. I have one small suggestion: If you should win a lawsuit against a priest, do something charitable with the money. How about a buck or two for the needy? Maybe a small percentage of the take for knee pads? And while we're on the subject, do you have any idea how much of the world's prime real estate is occupied by buildings that are only used one day a week? Hey, there are people sleeping in the streets! Partition the Vatican and every homeless man, woman and child in Italy could have their own eight by ten room.

True fact no. 61: Half a million children die each year from insect-borne diseases.

True fact no. 62: A mosquito net costs fifty cents.

True fact no. 63 My ex-girlfriend's church just spent \$250,000 on a *pipe organ*!

True fact no. 64: Less than twenty percent of what you drop in that collection plate gets to someone who needs it. The rest is used to buy costumes, hats, musical instruments, golden icons, red wine, lawyers and a legion of lawyers and lobbyists.

How about this for an alternative: Instead of tithing that ten spot, wait until you get out on the street, then drop it in the palm of the first needy person you see. Skip the middle man. Jesus won't care.

Note to all TV preachers: Stop showing me pictures of starving African children! Show me one starving televangelist and I'll send you all my cash. And would someone please tell that lady preacher with the gorgeous, waist-length, auburn tresses that her collar is on way too tight.

Stop it! You're ranting again.

Sorry. Where was I?

"Mount Something or other, I think."

Later, on a hilltop near Jerusalem, Jesus and his band of twelve are doing some time-intensive praying. For the previous three years, the son of God has been telling everyone within earshot that "the end of the world is near." This time he's right. It's over. For him, anyway.

Just then Judas approaches [stage left]. With him are the temple authorities and a cadre of Roman troops. Judas walks straight up to Jesus and gives him a big wet kiss. ("No tongue!") This is the sign the soldiers have been waiting for. There's a brief scuffle, during which one of the soldier's ears is cut off. I don't know about you, but I find this picture of Apostles in a sword fight rather disconcerting. What ever happened to "Turn the other cheek?" Jesus, the eternal pacifist, not only stops the fight, but he miraculously reattaches the soldier's severed ear. "Just a couple of stitches." The son of God is arrested, his hands are bound, and he is dragged before the high priest.

Really Big Important Question: Did God send Judas to betray his son? In John 13:2 it says the devil made Judas do it. In the same paragraph it says that all things are under God's command. LINEAR THINKING: God makes devil - devil possesses Judas - Judas betrays Jesus - Jesus is crucified. So, in other words, God murders his own son? Oh, I get it. It's all part of the **Grand Plan**. It's because **He** loves us, even though *we* are not perfect, that he has to kill his son. It's because *we* have all sinned that **Jesus** has to die.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son-"

Gave? Gaaave!?

What did God give? God took. God forsook. He took his son's life. Or was it his own life? Isn't that suicide? Deicide? Then he took him up into heaven. Or was he transubstantiated? God took him from his mother. He didn't *give* anything, unless you count a two thousand year guilt trip. And don't hand me any of that crap about Jesus dying for my sins. First off, Jesus is *not* dead. The Bible says he's in heaven, body and soul. Second, I wasn't even born. I didn't have anything to do with it, and I don't need anyone making symbolic sacrifices for some supposed sin that I haven't committed, yet. It's a bum rap and I ain't taking the fall. Call my lawyer. Find someone else to be your patsy. And while we're on the subject, I've never owned a slave and I didn't keep nobody down. I never went back on a treaty with a Native American. I think George Armstrong Custer was an arrogant boob. I've tried to forget the Alamo. I admire Betty Freidan. **Stop trying to make me feel guilty!**

(Slap!) Wha-?

Jesus just got arrested.

Oh, yeah, right.

There's a lot of confusion and disagreement as to what happens next. Matthew says that Judas is paid "thirty pieces of silver" for his treachery, while Mark says that Judas rats out Jesus for strictly political reasons. In Matthew, Judas feels bad about the whole thing, so he gives the money back and hangs himself. However, in Acts, Judas buys some land with the "blood money," then he dies in an accidental disembowelment. John says that Jesus turns himself over to the Roman soldiers without so much as a good night kiss from Judas. The Warren Commission has concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

So, whose version is right?

Does it matter?

I guess not.

As for the trial, it's a travesty of justice, a mockery, a sham, a lynching. In John, Jesus is taken to appear before the Jewish high priest Annas, while in Matthew it's high priest Caiaphas who casts

judgment. Either way, it sets the groundwork for two thousand years of anti-Semitism. Jesus is accused of plotting to destroy the temple. This sort of accusation may be enough for the Jewish council to start handing out rocks, but they're not the final authority. In Judea, Pontius Pilate decides who lives and who dies.

The Jews take the messiah to the governor and hand him over, along with a list of spurious charges including tax evasion, conspiracy to destroy private property, advocating the overthrow of the government, and giving liquor to minors at a wedding. Jesus acts as his own defense attorney, which is never a good idea. Anyway, he doesn't have much of a case. Character references? Ha! That's a laugh. His best friends, his so-called "disciples," have gone to ground like rabbits. Peter thrice denies knowing anyone named Jesus. ("Jesus? About this tall? Long hair? Beard? Halo? Nope, haven't seen him.") Mary and Joseph are nowhere to be found. Even his brothers and sisters have abandoned him. No one comes to his defense. Worst of all, he confesses! *Mama Mea Culpa!*

"'You are a king then,' said Pilate.

.Jesus answered, 'You are right in saying I am a king.'"

John 18:37

Your honor, I object! All of this testimony is totally immaterial and irrelevant. I mean, the outcome is preordained. Where would we be if Jesus had been found **not guilty**? Without his martyrdom, "The Way" would probably have turned out to be just another dead end street.

In the second greatest all-time miscarriage of justice [See: O.J.], Pontius Pilate literally washes his hands of the whole mess. In other words, he throws Jesus to the wolves. He lets a vigilante mob decide the fate of the Christ.

"String him up!" someone shouts.

"Wrong dang movie," someone else points out.

"Thunderdome?"

"You're getting warmer."

"Crucifixion?"

"Correct."

So, Jesus, the "King of the Jews," is crowned with thorns, then made to carry his own instrument of death through the streets of the city. The mob taunts him, saying things like, "Look at the king now. Not so high and mighty, are you?"

A brief note about the death penalty: Jesus is not being singled out for some cruel and unusual punishment. In his world, crucifixions are daily occurrences. Emperor Nero goes one step farther. He uses crucified flaming Christians as torches to light his orgies. Nice guy. Spartacus and all of his men are crucified along the Apian Way and left to rot. This is the ultimate fate of anyone who threatens the authority of Rome. Most of the time, it's a slow, excruciatingly painful death. However, if they nail your feet to the post, as they did to Jesus, it's almost a blessing, as you will bleed to death *before* the vultures start their dinner.

And it could have been worse. Jesus might have been fed to the lions, or stoned to death, or simply thrown into the fiery furnace. But, of course, none of these other punishments would have allowed the son of God his famous last words:

"Father, forgive them for-"

About those last words: Like everything else in the Bible, there is some disagreement about what was said, and in what order. Taking a sentence or two from Matthew, one from Luke, and a line from John, Jesus' last words probably went something like this:

Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing.

Truly, I tell you that today, you will be with me in paradise.

Woman, here is your son . . . Here is your mother.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Imagine there's no heaven.

It is finished.

All and all, I'd rather be anywhere but Philadelphia.

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

Jesus is laid to rest on the same day he dies. Joseph, a rich, secret disciple from Arimethea pays for the funeral. He and another guy place the body in a cave, then they roll a big rock over the entrance and that's all she wrote for Jesus, right?

I don't think so.

As you know, Jesus rises. The circumstances, however, are not all that clear. As the old law enforcement adage goes: "Eye-witnesses to a murder or an ascension don't always agree on the details." Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, but there are significant differences in their official police reports. Allow me to condense the testimony of the four main witnesses, plus one more witness who wasn't heard from in the scriptures.

John

In John, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb *alone* and discovers that it is empty. First she goes and tells the disciples the good news that Jesus has risen. Later, she goes back to the tomb and meets Jesus, himself, who is dressed as a gardener.

Matthew

Three days after Christ's entombment, a strange Earthquake rattles the area. When the *two* Marys check the tomb, the rock has rolled and the king has risen. An angel tells them that Jesus is gone, but then Jesus appears in person and tells them to go back to Galilee.

Ques: Does God need to move a rock to get his dead son out of a cave?

Mark

The two Marys are told by a single white-robed man that Jesus has risen.

Luke

When the women enter the tomb, they see *two* men in "dazzling clothes" sitting in the otherwise empty chamber.

Joseph of Arimethea

"Shh. Hey! Be quiet! Everybody, listen up! John, you and Pete get that rock out of the way. Matt and Luke and I will take the body and hide it over at my place. When the soldiers come back in the morning, Mary Magdalene will bat her eyes and tell them that Jesus has risen. She'll quote some scripture and they'll all believe it because it says so in one of those old testaments."

Ques: I thought only your soul goes to heaven? Why does Jesus need to take his body with him?

Ans: If the corpse just sat there stinking up the place, who would believe the resurrection story?

Even stranger: The Bible says a man named Enoch rode a whirlwind up into heaven so that "he would not see death." In other words, he was still alive! Free pass.

Stone's Conspiracy Theory: Jesus Christ didn't die on the cross. Joseph of Arimethea bribed the chief executioner into faking the nails and the blood, then tying Jesus loosely to the cross. Christ played dead until "entombed," then disappeared into history.

Shortly thereafter, Jesus is safely in heaven. No, this time we really mean it. He is "carried up into heaven" (Luke), or "taken into heaven" (Mark), or "lifted up on a cloud" (Acts), or "gone like a cool breeze." (Chuck Berry) For once, God's plan seems to be working. The story of Jesus' miraculous resurrection spreads like a kindergarten cold. Seeing the popular results, the disciples slowly come out of hiding and resume their work. To help matters along, King Saul, who starts out persecuting Christians, ends up converting. This gives the new religion a real kick-start. Later, after King Constantine has a vision of a cross in the sky, he announces that, henceforth, Christianity will be the state religion

of Byzantium. It takes a few centuries, but Jesus and Company eventually overwhelm most of the lesser gods.

Other than that, I couldn't find anything that we haven't heard before. Some miracles are performed, which helps the movement grow. And, yes, there's still a lot of religious persecution going around, along with a martyrdom or two, and you know what that can do for a cause. There are visions and prophecies and threats of hellfire and blah blah blah. Preachers continue to preach the golden rule, but few of them practice it. Anyway, you can read on if you want to, but you won't find any real insights into the religion. Me, I'm skipping ahead to that crazy book of Revelation.

REVELATION

"All hell broke loose."

John Milton; *Paradise Lost*

"It ain't over till it's over."

Yogi Berra

"It was a one-eyed, one-horned, flying purple people eater."

Sheb Wooley

The way I understand it, this so-called *Revelation* was given to Jesus, who passed it on to an angel, who told the whole bewildering story to John, the apostle. John then wrote a series of seven letters to seven churches warning them that they had better straighten up "For the end is near." Now, where have I heard that before?

Lamont, the Boy Who Cried Wolf

One day a shepherd boy named Lamont felt lonely and bored, so he decided to have some fun at his grandfather's expense.

"WOLF! Help! WOLF!," he cried as loud as he could.

When his grandfather came hobbling, staff in hand, the boy laughed so hard he fell down

"I was just kidding," he said.

Later, after his grandfather had gone to lay down for his afternoon nap, the boy decided that, if it was funny the first time, the second would be even better.

"**WOLF!**" Lamont screamed at the top of his lungs. "**HELP ME!** There's a giant **Wollif!**"

This time, when the old man came limping down the path, he slipped in a pile of dung and whacked his elbow on a rock. Lamont thought that this was the most hysterical thing that he had ever seen and he laughed until he ran out of breath.

"Very funny," his grandpa said, wiping sheep dip out of his ear.

Later than night, before he went to sleep, Lamont said his nightly prayers: "Lord, I pray, keep us safe from harm."

"No can do," the Lord answered.

Lamont blinked his eyes open and peered up at the heavens, a puzzled look on his face. You see, the shepherd boy was not used to conversing with the Lord.

"Uh, what did you say?"

A sonorous voice answered from beyond the stars. "I said, 'No can do.' That's plain enough, isn't it? Don't you understand simple Aramaic? It's nothing personal. It's just that armageddon is near - you know, the end of time, the final reward, the ascent to-."

"Oh, yeah, sure," the shepherd boy said with a smirk. "I've heard that one before."

The End

Is that a parable?

Sort of a parable wrapped in a fable. A parafable? A Pharble?

Jesus said: There be some standing here, which shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

Matt. 16: 27-28

Since Jesus has yet to return, this means that either (A) someone who knew the Son of God is still alive, or (B) Jesus was misinformed.

Face it. Doomsayers are everywhere. They started their act 500

years before Jesus was born, and they've been trying to scare the piss out of you for the last two thousand years. I can't remember a time in my life when there wasn't some nut-job prophesizing the imminent doom of mankind. Hundreds of these dates with destiny have come and gone without ruffling the space/time continuum, and yet the faithful just keep on keeping on.

I remember back in the winter of 1962. I was in high school, and my true love, a Jehovah's Witness, told me she couldn't go out with me anymore because the world was going to end on the day before the Carnation Ball. In other words, in one week, I got a zit big enough for Guinness, lost my date to the big dance, and learned the awful truth that the world was going to end on Friday. In my case, the world may have crashed, but for the rest of you, it went on pretty much the same as before. After I broke up with Diane, I learned that Jehovah's Witnesses were prone to premature revelations.

Others who have recently predicted Armageddon include the Reverend Jim Jones, whose followers made the decision not to wait for God, and the members of that Heaven's Gate cult who believed Haley's Comet was Jesus' rocket ship and that they could hitch a ride to paradise. They put on matching Nikes, took some poison and went out to meet the ship. The last big one was New Year's Eve, 1999 (Y2K) when a couple of math-impaired zealots added up a thousand years of this and a thousand years of that and came up with The Apocalypse! Didn't happen. The next big one is scheduled for 2012, but I wouldn't bet on it. What I would bet on is that, in your home town, within a mile of where you live, on any given Sunday, there are half a dozen preachers preaching, "The end of time is near!"

Funny thing is, they're right. All of them. There's no doubt that the world will end sometime, probably even "soon" on a cosmic scale. If an asteroid doesn't broadside us, or if we don't nuke ourselves into extinction, or if we don't die by some gruesome pandemic flesh-eating bacteria, or if we don't get flash-fried by a rogue solar flare, or if we aren't exterminated by a more advanced race from the planet Melmac, eventually, in a few billion years, our heat lamp will burn out, and that, as they say, will be that. Whenever and however it happens, you can bet your sweet ass

that some fool will jump up on a hickory stump and shout, "I told you so."

Special note to God: Maybe you should explain what you mean by "the end time is near" before people stop taking you seriously. At least give us a hint.

Special note from God: All right, smartass, if you really want to know the exact date, I'm shutting down the human race on Sunday, February 22, 2021, right after the Super Bowl. Are you happy now?

Damn! I guess I won't be around to see it.

With that in mind, are you ready to meet your maker? Good. First, a word of caution. With all the mystical numbers and symbols and many-horned beasties, this last book can be a little intimidating. If you can't figure it out, don't feel like the Lone Ranger. Biblical scholars and theologians and code freaks worldwide have been arguing about it for centuries; the main question being, who wrote this crap?

Bernice Wilcox; Managing Editor:

"Is that all there is?" (Closing her Bible, she sighs.) "I mean, it's a good book, but not a great one. I mean, where's the retribution? Where's the payback?"

Simon Shooster; Assistant Editor:

(Standing, head back, arms spread in a parody of a crucifixion.) "And so, children, Jesus Christ died and went to heaven. The end."

Reggie Flyboy; Sanitation Engineer:

"Kind of leaves ya flat, don't it? You know what I'd do? I'd put in one more book . . . kill the bad guys all at once, like Sam Peckinpah. Lots of explosions, earthquakes, monsters from hell, that sort of thing. Truth, Justice and Liberty will prevail. Religious freedom . . . eh, not so much."

Madge N. Meenachid; Marketing Specialist:

"We can't do that. Too gruesome for a G-rated family book."

Reggie:

"What if it's all just a dream?"

Bernice: "Perfect! Except change *dream* to *vision*."

So, buckle up tight and keep your arms inside the car at all times. I hope you haven't just eaten. Especially pork. You've had bad dreams before? Well, they're just Pooh stories compared to this sicko nightmare. John sees creatures that won't be seen again until Timothy Leary's farewell party. (He was outside, looking in.) The Book of Revelation is a numerological, astrological, nostradamical, proctological, psychedelic acid bath. It's the two minute warning of the Bible. Get your *^&% together, because this time we mean it.

"Those who are late will not get fruit cup."

ARMEGGDON

(all in)

In this "vision," John sees a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it that looks like jasper. The throne is surrounded by twenty-four sub-thrones occupied by twenty-four elders dressed in white and illuminated by seven lamps. Four creatures appear that are covered with eyeballs, "even under their wings." They sing: "Holy holy holy." They sing it constantly. All day, all night.

The man on the center throne has a scroll in his right hand. The scroll is sealed with seven seals. A mighty angel asks who can break the seals, but no one volunteers. Then one of the elders says that the Lion of Judah is able to break the seals and open the scroll. A dead lamb steps forward. He is surrounded by "four living creatures with seven eyes and seven horns."

The lamb opens the first seal and out comes a white horse with a rider who is "bent on conquest." When the lamb opens the second seal, a red horse comes out who has the power to "take

peace from the world." The third broken seal brings forth a black horse whose rider is holding a pair of scales. The fourth horse is pale and deathly. Hades follows close behind. The fifth seal reveals the souls of those who have been persecuted for their beliefs. The sixth seal lets loose another Earthquake. The moon turns blood-red and the stars in the sky fall to Earth. Mountains and islands melt away like ice cubes.

Before the angel opens the seventh seal, 12,000 members of each of the twelve tribes are marked on their foreheads. These 144,000 marked men represent the ones who will go to heaven. I guess the marks are so God won't get confused and accidentally take a Muslim . . . or a woman. Yes, as it turns out, the chosen 144,000 are all male virgins "who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure." [Rev. 14:4]

Only male virgins get into heaven? No wonder Islam is the fastest growing religion.

When they finally get around to opening the seventh seal, there is "silence in heaven for about half an hour." An angel lights some incense, then throws it to the ground causing even more earthquakes and lightning. Seven angels with seven trumpets sound the call for hail and fire mixed with blood to fall on the Earth. A third of the Earth is toasted. The second angel sounds his trumpet and a third of the fish die and a third of the ships sink. The third angel blows his horn and a star falls into the water making it poisonous. The fourth angel blows Taps and a third of the sun is destroyed, along with a third of the moon and stars.

"A third of the day was without light and also a third of the night."
(Night without light? Hm?)

The fifth angel causes a star to fall, opening up the abyss. Smoke billows out of the hole darkening what's left of the sun and moon. Huge locusts swarm out of the hole, stinging people with their scorpion-like tails. These killer locusts are as big as horses with lion's teeth and crowns of gold, but they don't sting the people with the marks on their heads. Everyone else will "long to die, but death will elude them."

The sixth angel sounds her trumpet and four more "special"

angels are released to kill a fourth of the population. Out of their mouths come plagues, fire and sulfur.

Attention math geeks: I'm sure you've noticed that God has, by now, killed or destroyed an impossible $4/3$ of everything. And doesn't it seem like it's taking a lot longer to subdue this one little pissant devil than it did to make the entire universe?

Along about this time, another angel comes flying down from heaven with a rainbow over his head, a face like the sun and legs like fiery pillars. With one foot on the land and one in the sea, he shouts, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down."

The seventh angel sounds her trumpet and the angels sing along:

"The kingdom of the world had become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ..."

Rev 11:15

So, that's the end? It's all over, right?

No, there's just a little bit more.

"A great and wondrous sign" appears in heaven. It's a pregnant woman with a gown of sunlight. She's standing on the moon and wearing twelve stars in her hair. Just as she's about to give birth, a red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns comes flying into the story. It's **Saaatan!** (**Note:** This is the *only* description of Satan in the Bible.) With his tail, he sweeps a third of the stars out of the sky and flings them to Earth. His real mission, however, is to eat the child that is about to be born. He fails and the child goes to heaven. The dragon starts another war in heaven. Michael and the other angels battle it out with Dr. Evil, who is eventually thrown back down to Earth.

"Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ."

Rev. 12:10

Okay, now it's all over but the shouting, right?

Uh . . . no.

Satan, still in his dragon guise, goes after the birth-mother but is foiled when she grows "the two wings of a great eagle" and flies away to a place where she will be taken care of "for a time, times and half a time."

How long is that anyway? ($X + 2X + .50 X = 3.50 X$) ?

Finally, Satan is vanquished. **He's dead.** All right? Satan? You can forget about him. You won't see him no more.

But wait! Just as he's about to die, he gives his evil powers to a new creature, and this guy is Uuuugly with a capital *U*! I've got to be honest with you. This new villain is too ridiculous even for the cover of a Crypt Keeper comic book. The cheesiest monster in the hokiest Japanese horror movie wouldn't even come close. Picture this: Satan II, like his predecessor, has seven heads and ten horns. However, this time he has a leopard's body, feet like a bear, and a mouth like Joan Rivers. He also has a "blasphemous name" tattooed on each of his heads. The most amazing part is, even after all the chaos and destruction of the last few days, some of the remaining Earthlings actually bow down and worship this composite doodle.

Let's stop here for one second and discuss the nature of pure evil. I know it's kind of late in the book to be asking, but what reason does Satan have for causing all the trouble in the history of the known universe? What's his motive? What does he get out of the deal? Does he actually *like* living in hell? This rivalry between God and Satan, is it all just a game to see who collects the most souls? Is there, like, a trophy or a ribbon or something for the winner?

Please, I've had enough of the violence! How much longer is this battle between good and evil going to last?

Hang in there, buddy. We're almost to the climax.

The beast with ten horns gives his remaining cult followers a

tattoo on their forehead: 666. Just as God culled and marked his 144,000 purebloods, Satan has to brand his cattle.

Ironic Note to Satanists: First off, early Bibles had the number as 616, not 666. Secondly, as it turns out, 666 isn't a power number or a portent of evil. It isn't a number at all. As I pointed out earlier, Hebrew letters stood for numbers, and in this case, 666 is a reference to Rome, or symbolically, Babylon, both hated enemies. According to Manfred Bartel, 666 is a pun.

And Now, the Exciting Conclusion!

God, to counter Satan's new army of sixes, sends in a squadron of harpists.

"That's right, Ma'am, we're musicians, and we're on a mission from God."

Elwood Blues

The harpists start playing a song. The elders all know the words and the 144,000 redeemed souls sing along. The devil's troops, however, aren't hip to the jive. A white cloud appears. Seated on the cloud is one "like a son of man."

"So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth and the earth was harvested."

Rev. 14:16

After human souls are harvested, another angel harvests all the Earth's grapes and "blood flowed out of the wine press, rising as high as a horse's bridle for a distance of 1,600 stadia." (**Note:** For those of you who have yet to master the biblical system of weights and measures, John is describing a lake of blood, five feet deep and 180 miles long, I think.)

Things look bleak for the remaining nonbelievers. Just when you think it can't get any worse, seven more angels show up with seven bowls containing seven more plagues. Now, it's the sixes versus the sevens. The first angel pours out a bowl of boils on the people who are marked 666. The second angel pours her bowl into

the sea and all of the fish die. The third angel does the same to the rivers and springs. The fourth angel pours his bowl on the sun. His bowl must contain gasoline or something flammable, because the sun gets hotter than normal and scorches everyone.

The fifth angel pours it on Satan "and his kingdom was plunged into darkness."

"Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the name of God because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent..."

Rev: 16:10-11

What? Are you stupid? Hello? Anybody home in there? For God's sake, repent! You guys with all the sixes on your foreheads and the boils on your groin, you lost the war! Okay? You chose the wrong side. Seven always beats six. "Always bet on black." Confess, convert or die!

God, as usual, is in no mood for leniency. He pours a bowlful of woe on the Euphrates River, which causes it to dry up. This produces evil spirits disguised as frogs. These frogs go bounding off to gather the remaining pagan kings in a place called Meggido. Finally, the seventh angel pours her bowl into the air. God announces, "It is done."

Yeah, but does he mean it this time?

Not a chance.

I didn't think so.

God then bombs the Babylonians with hundred pound hailstones. He also torments them with lightning, earthquakes and another plague or two. In the midst of all this carnage, an angel takes our narrator on a quick tour of the battlefield where he meets a woman in scarlet riding another multi-horned beast.

"This was written on her forehead:"

MYSTERY
BABYLON THE GREAT
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH
(She had a really big forehead!)

The seventh angel offers to explain all of the rampant symbolism:

"The beast which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come out of the abyss and go to his destruction."

Rev: 17:8

Well, that certainly clears things up. The seven heads, the angel explains, are seven hills. Get it? Again, it's Rome, or symbolically, Babylon they're talking about. Babylon, the angel says, is going to be repaid for her evil ways. "Burn the witch!" Finally, Satan is chained and thrown into the abyss.

Oh, I know what you're thinking. This bad boy has more sequels than Jason and Michael and Freddie put together. How does old Beelzebub escape this time? **Ans:** He doesn't. He doesn't have to. They *let* him out. Due to another loophole in God's law, Satan only gets X number of years in purgatory. The Bible leaves us with this warning: When Satan gets out again, there's going to be hell to pay.

The last paragraph of the book, as I pointed out earlier, is written in lawyerspeak. It says that if anyone changes even one word of the text in the Bible, their name will be removed from the Book of Heavenly Admissions. When you consider the vast number of prophets, popes, politicians and scribes who have felt the call to edit God's words, this seems like a rather toothless threat. Just in case, though, the same goes for my book. Except your name will just be removed from my E-mail list.

All of this fun could have gone on for another ten thousand pages or so, but some rich, fat, mostly brown guys in funny hats decided to put the kibosh on it.

Omega

Before we get to the exciting conclusion, let me ask you a serious question. Has any of this made even a tiny dent in your belief in the Bible? Well, if you have doubts, let me reassure you that you're in good company. Consider the following list of non-believers. In no particular order:

EPICURUS - WOODY ALLEN - ANDREW CARNEGIE -
IVAN PAVLOV - SIGMUND FREUD - CLARENCE DARROW
- RICHARD STRAUSS - BERTRAND RUSSELL -
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU - LINUS PAULING - AYN RAND -
KATHERINE HEPBURN - FRANCIS CRICK - NOAM
CHOMSKY - JAMES D. WATSON - WARREN BUFFET -
CARL SAGAN - GEORGE CARLIN - LEONARD SUSSKIND -
BRUCE LEE - STEPHAN J. GOULD - RICHARD DAWKINS -
STEPHEN HAWKING - MICK JAGGER - RICHARD
LEAKEY - DAVID GILMORE - BRIAN ENO - STEVE
WOZNIAC - JODIE FOSTER - MARK ZUCKERBERG -
CONFUCIUS - BEN FRANKLIN - THOMAS PAINE - MARY
SHELLY - SIMON BOLIVAR - JOHN STUART MILL EDGAR
ALLEN POE - ELIZABETH CADY STANTON - GEORGE
ELLIOT - WALT WHITMAN - SUSAN B. ANTHONY -
THOMAS HENRY HUXLEY - MARK TWAIN - THOMAS
HARDY - AMBROSE BIERCE - FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE -
THOMAS EDISON - LUTHER BURBANK - GEORGE
BERNARD SHAW - PIERRE CURIE - H. G. WELLS - H. L.
MENKEN - JAMES JOYCE - MARGARET SANGER - D. H.
LAWRENCE - VIRGINIA WOOLF - DIEGO RIVERA -
ARTHUR RUBENSTEIN - IRVING BERLIN - SIR ALFRED
HITCHCOCK - CHARLIE CHAPLIN - H. P. LOVECRAFT -
PEARL S. BUCK - ALDOUS HUXLEY - ERNEST
HEMINGWAY - NOEL COWARD - VLADIMIR
NABOKOV - GEORGE ORWELL - B. F. SKINNER -
HOWARD HUGHES - JOHN PAUL SATRE - ROBERT E.
HEINLEIN - OSKAR SCHINDLER - ALBERT CAMUS -
ISSAK AZIMOV - GENE RODDENBERRY - RICHARD
BURTON - GEORGE C. SCOTT - FRANK ZAPPA - STUART

W. WULZE, AND NINETY-THREE PERCENT OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF SCIENTISTS ARE ALL ATHEISTS. THE OTHER TREE PERCENT ARE JUST PROTECTING THEIR GRANTS.

CONCLUSION

The following news stories were taken from the pages of the *Arizona Republic* newspaper within a two week period. All were before 9-11

ALGERIA REBELS MARK 6th YEAR

Algiers, Algeria - Algeria's Muslim insurgency marks its sixth anniversary today, its death toll 75,000 and climbing after 41 peasants were killed.

BRITAIN'S ULSTER GOVERNOR TO VISIT PRISON'S INMATES

Belfast, Northern Ireland - In a bold bid to stem rising violence, Britain's Governor for Northern Ireland will visit the high-security Maze prison and meet with some of the province's most notorious killers of Catholics. (10,000 dead over last 30 years)

600 AFGHAN CIVILIANS KILLED BY RELIGIOUS ARMY

Islamabad, Pakistan - At least 600 civilians were dragged from their homes and shot to death by the Taliban religious army.

SRI LANKA SABOTEURS EXPLODE BOMB AT TEMPLE

Kandy, Sri Lanka - Three suicide bombers crashed a truck through the gates of Sri Lanka's holiest Buddhist Temple of the Tooth, where a tooth that the faithful believe belonged to Buddha is kept. Eight people were killed and twenty-three were wounded sparking ethnic rioting.

GIRL DIES IN FAILED EXORCISM

New York, NY - The family of a teenager struggled all afternoon to rid the screaming, crying girl of a "demon" before her mother suffocated her with a plastic bag.

I count 85,609 dead people. This, in two weeks. I could have included the story about the suicidal father who took his two babies to heaven with him rather than leave them with their "possessed" mother, and the one about the young man who killed his father after "communing with the devil," and the one about the mother who let her nine-year-old daughter wither away to less than twenty pounds because it was "God's will." I could have included the story about the knifing victim who bled to death when she refused life-saving intravenous blood on religious grounds. I might even have included the man who was sentenced to death for her murder, which would bring the total to 85,616. In two weeks.

While we were on our knees, 85,616 human beings died for a god. Buddhists were killed and Muslims were killed and Protestants and Jews and Catholics bled and innocent people died by the thousands. According to the teachings of their chosen religions, the killers believed they were defending the "one true faith" and that by killing the infidels they would be rewarded in some blissful afterlife where everyone was either a harpist or a virgin. The sad part is, the people who died also believed they were bound for glory. The even sadder part is, they were *all* wrong. They're just dead.

And these deaths were just the ones reported in an Arizona newspaper. I might have counted the millions of Africans who die yearly from AIDS while the church forbids the use of condoms. I could have included the thousands of women who have died from cervical cancer because the pope is opposed to the use of a vaccine that would immunize them against the Human Papillomavirus on the grounds that it would encourage promiscuity. And I could have gone on counting into the future, or I could have counted backwards into history and the sum total would be in the millions.

Questions for discussion: If a million humans died due to an

infectious disease, wouldn't we be mobilizing all of our resources to combat such as scourge? Wouldn't we be hard at work on a cure? Wouldn't we immediately quarantine those affected and seal off the areas of contagion? Why then do we bow down to the carrier?

Put this book down for a second. Take a deep breath. Now, go over and turn on CNN. Let me guess. There's trouble brewing in the middle east. If it's not boiling, it's simmering. I know this because there is *always* trouble brewing in the middle east. Before the Bible, before the Iliad, before writing, there was bloody turmoil in the Cradle of Civilization.

"Be fruitful and multiply," God told his recruits.

And as the militant fundamentalists have multiplied and gone forth, so the disease of religion has spread. Read any history book from any country, any century, and you will find that this same pointless holy war has been dragging on for thousands of years. From the first tribal skirmish, to the conquistadors, to the inquisition, to 9-11, to the latest war in Iraq, it's just been one damned thing after another. The Bible is supposed to bring people together, to comfort and heal, but it has had quite the opposite effect. The Koran has been no help at all. These so-called holy books just give us one more reason to start a fight. Whether we call it a crusade or a jihad or a blood feud, it's just intolerance masquerading as religious fervor.

"Please, I have a question."

Yes, Miss Alabama?

"Can't we all just learn to get along?"

Now that you mention it, yes we can.

TWELVE STEPS TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (freedom from religion)

STEP ONE

Read the Bible

"We need more atheists and nothing will get you there faster than

reading the Bible."

Penn Gillette

Read all of it. Even the boring parts. Even the horrific parts. Most of the God-fearing, church-going, holier-than-thou people I know have never gotten around to it. While you're at it, remember that there is such a thing as HEALTHY SKEPTICISM!

STEP TWO

Read the Koran

Okay, get a Cliff Notes version. Or read "*Why I am not a Muslim*", by Ibn Warraq. Why? Because there are more Muslims than Catholics. Because Islam is the fastest growing religion. Then try *Siddhartha* (Buddhism), *The Vedas* (Hinduism), *The God Delusion* (atheism), *Inherit the Wind* (Creationism), or *Dave Berry Turns Forty* (Humorism). Be sure to read *A History of God* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Even better, go talk to the believers. After that, talk to the non-believers. Get to know a little bit about how the rest of the world thinks. Try to understand that there are hundreds of religions out there and that they are no more or less irrational than yours. Admit that you are a Christian because you were born to Christian parents in a Christian country. Admit that if you had been born in Mecca you would be a Muslim, and if you had been born in Bangkok you would be a Buddhist, and that if you had been born on Tatooine, you would be a student of The Force. I know that this sounds like a lot of work, but the subject matter is important. After all, it's your **SOUL** we're talking about. Also, there's a reward. Dedication will bring you to the ninth wave of enlightenment, so to speak, in which you will at last understand the one essential truth of the cosmos.

"Which is?"

"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

Sherlock Holmes

Therefore, since it is **impossible** for there to be more than one Creator, either we are all praying to the same god, or there is **no such person**. Let's go back to the source and tighten that up a little:

"Entia non-sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem."

["No more things should be presumed to exist than are absolutely necessary."]

Occam's Razor: William Occam 1280-1340

The question then becomes, is God necessary? The obvious answer is no, not if you go to step three.

STEP THREE

Accept Science Into Your Life

"There was a time when the sciences were repressed and the church was all-powerful. We called it the dark ages."

Ruth Hurmance Green

Join Galileo and Hubble. Put your eye to a telescope and consider the vastness of the universe. Sit beside Leeuwenhoek. Peer into a microscope and marvel at the intricacy of life. The scale is astounding. And yet, because of science and scientists, it is all within our reach. As long we ask questions, as long as we pose theories and test them, slowly but surely, doors will open, lights will come on, and there is nothing more rapturous under heaven than the sudden revelation of truth.

Pope John Paul II said, "Faith should never conflict with reason." Good for him. To accept a premise on faith alone is like driving with your eyes closed.

STEP FOUR

Join the Family of Animals

Well-Dressed Apes: Local 283

We share 99.4% of our DNA with chimpanzees; 75% with fruit flies. All living things share a common ancestry. The only

difference is, chimps and flies don't worry about what comes *after* death. By elevating Homo Sapiens to demigod status, we cheat ourselves out of the primal joy of just being alive.

STEP FIVE

Go to Church

Or go to a synagogue or temple or the Christian Swinger's Club or whatever. Sing up a storm. Hold hands and rejoice in the companionship. We all need to belong. But don't just sit there all day with your feet going to sleep, your butt numb, listening to some shill giving you *his* or *her* interpretation of a book you should have read yourself. What a world-class waste of time! I have a better idea. How about a field trip? Why don't we all go out and build a house for a homeless person. The park could use some sprucing up. Maybe an afternoon at the old folks home. Or the animal shelter. Can you imagine what we could accomplish if all the time and money wasted on pie-in-the-sky promises was channeled into something more immediate. To hell with the Sabbath. Let's make it a day of philanthropy and elbow-grease on a neighborhood scale.

A little less preaching and a lot more practicing, please.

STEP SIX

Pray

Especially when the prayer involves singing. I know this sounds like the antithesis of everything else in this book, but prayers are often cathartic - at least for the person doing the praying. When six people kneel and pray around the bedside of a terminally ill child and she miraculously recovers, God usually gets the credit. But the healing power didn't come from above; it came from within the child and from the hearts and minds of those who *willed* her to live.

Now, close your eyes and imagine a world with six BILLION units of cooperation. What if we learned to focus this incredible power? What if we . . . evolved?

"I am myself a dissenter from all known religions. I do not believe that, on balance, religious belief has been a force for good. I regard it as belonging to the infancy of human reason, and to a stage of development which we are now outgrowing."

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)

Sceptical Essays.

Let's try something. Pick a date and a time - say, 7:30 PM EST, June 1, 2013. Now, everybody, go outside. I'll sing a C note, you sing an E. Have your brother sing a G note and your mother sing the B. Get your neighbors involved. Get the whole world in on it. Sopranos, hit that high C. Basses, give me a low E. Those of you with good ears, hit that B. Guitar players, play the chord. Turn your amp up to ten, or even eleven. Hold it for an hour. Everybody with a shofar or a sitar or a clavinet or a balalaika or a zither, give me one glorious earth-shaking, mind-blowing E major seventh. I wonder...

There will come a time, not so far into the future, when the residents of planet Earth will find themselves in such close harmony that healings which we now consider miraculous will become mundane daily occurrences. There might even be a resurrection or two.

STEP SEVEN

Forget About Heaven

I know this is a hard step to take, but it has its rewards. Once you accept that all you get is 80 or 90 years, you will find yourself greeting each day, each minute, with a little more enthusiasm. If you will just stop worrying about the next life and get on with this one, you might even live a little longer because of it. Take some comfort in knowing that the second you close your eyes for the last time, someone else will open theirs on a new world. As a further consolation you can go to -

STEP EIGHT

Stop Blaming the Devil

There is no such place as hell and there is no satan. Eternal torture is the antithesis of all that is godly or righteous or human. Satan is a literary device. Batman battles the Joker. Sherlock Holmes matches wits with Moriarty. Ahab stalks Moby Dick. Jekyll struggles with Hyde. Baal wrestles with Lotan. God fights Satan. The true demon always lies within.

Accept personal responsibility.

STEP NINE

(a) Love

Love somebody. Be loved. Your village shaman may offer advice and counsel, but religion must *never* keep two people apart, or even worse, force them together.

(b) Sex

Have some. A vow of celibacy is an affront to all the laws of nature and can only cause trouble, as evidenced by all the sadistic nuns and fallen priests. Sex is as natural as breathing. Just be careful and try not to hurt anybody.

STEP TEN

Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is near! But not like you think.

We call ourselves human beings and we like to pretend that we are the crown jewel, the end-all/ be-all of creation. Truth be told, evolution stops for no man or woman. As a species we've only been around for a few hundred thousand years. Our cousins, Ogg and Hagg, the Australopithecines, strutted their stuff for two *million* years before they were replaced by Homo Habilis and then Homo-whomever, and so on, until we came along.

Well, don't look now, but here comes superman!

"Man is something to be surpassed."

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

And if you think it's going to take another million years, you'd

better open your eyes. It's happening right in front of you. Look at your kids. Are they taller than you? Stronger? Are they faster than a speeding bullet? Are they hard-wired for the electronic age? You bet your sweet genes they are. But that's not where the real metamorphosis is taking place. We're getting smarter! And it's happening at an exponential rate! We are no longer hunter/gatherers. Indeed, there are a number of respected scientists who have recently suggested that we might not even be Homo Sapiens much longer. We have evolved into thinkers, builders, inventors. After fifty thousand years of drawing stick figures on cave walls, look at what we did in a few generations.

First we made a mud brick, then we built a pyramid, then a Taj Mahal and an Empire State Building. First we invented a wheel, then we made steel, then we put them together and made an automobile. In less than one hundred years we flew from a sand dune in Carolina to the edge of the solar system. DNA was discovered fifty years ago. The microchip is only forty years old. The internet is brand new. Tomorrow . . . ?

And now, class (drum roll, please), a few examples of what we're going to do in the *next* one hundred years.

1. Hydrogen fuel cells will end the fossil fuel wars.
2. Limited climate control will tame floods, droughts, hurricanes.
3. Agro-geneticists will conquer famine.
4. Nanotechnology will get to the heart of the matter.
5. Disease will no longer be a major cause of death.
6. Someone will be born off-world.

Hey, God, don't look now, but that single bite from the Tree of Knowledge is coming to fruition.

What? You say you want more? You say you want eternal life?

Not likely.

But if you'll settle for two hundred healthy years, we can do that. We'll just dive into the gene pool and swim around until we find the one with the timer on it, then we'll reset it. And that's just for starters. In our spare time we'll cure diabetes and asthma and blindness and obesity and dementia and breast cancer; we'll rewire

all the broken spinal cords and we'll make bionic limbs that look, feel, and function like the real thing. HIV will go the way of smallpox. And if the holy men will just stop blocking the door and get behind stem cell research, we'll grow our own lungs and kidneys and spleens and brain cells and ball joints and whatever spare parts we need to keep the old jalopy running. All of these miraculous things will be done without any help from God, and they will be done despite His near constant foot-dragging. Everyone will get his or her full measure of life. It may not be heaven, just a little east of Eden.

Special Note: For those of you who still crave immortality, here's an idea: Leave a body part or two for someone who needs it. Have them pledge to pass on the favor. Start a chain of organ donations. It will be almost like living forever.

STEP ELEVEN

Do Unto Others

This is a truth so pure, so simple, that it should trump all the sacred texts and all the commandments and laws of mortals and gods. Live and let live. "Be excellent to each other." Give respect, get respect. Is that so hard? Do we really need a bunch of rocks in a box to teach us that murder is wrong? Do we need a priest to tell us that cheating someone or stealing from them is a sin? Or that mercy and justice and fidelity and charity are the most noble, the most righteous, the most *human* traits? The biblical God thinks of us as spoiled goods - natural born sinners. **He's wrong!** Most of the people I know are inherently good-hearted. It's in trying to emulate the Creator that we most often break the golden rule.

"Instead of pulling us beyond our limitations, God encourages us to remain complacently within them; He can make us as cruel, callous, self-satisfied and partial as He seems to be."

Karen Armstrong: *A History of God*

But it runs deeper than that. The words *do unto others* are active, not passive. Humans are not just communal, we are bound by the

nature of the species to help each other. If, by our inaction, we cause someone else to suffer, then we have defeated the true purpose of our astoundingly large brains. We didn't get fangs or talons or poison glands or body armor, we got compassion. It is so instinctual that when we perform even the smallest act of charity, we immediately feel better about ourselves.

STEP TWELVE

Put Away Your Bible

"The historical saga contained in the Bible was not a miraculous revelation, but a brilliant product of the human imagination. It was an epic saga woven together from an astonishingly rich collection of historical writings, memories, legends, folk tales, anecdotes, royal propaganda, prophecy and ancient poetry."

The Bible Unearthed: Finkelstein and Silberman

"The Bible is...a chaotically cobbled together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors, and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries."

The God Delusion: Richard Dawkins

Put your Bible up on the shelf next to your Greek mythology. Put down that cross. Do you feel the weight being lifted from your shoulders? Do you feel the guilt dissipating like noxious fumes? Now that you've read it, now that you've studied it, you know it's just a book. Mostly fiction. Whatever history it offers must be viewed through a stained glass eye. It was not written by God. Any of them. God did not dictate it, nor did he inspire it or reveal it. Men wrote it; primitive, afraid of the unknown, sometimes cruel, superstitious and all-too-human, fools. The Bible may have had its time and place in the epic story of the human race, but we're older now, and we should know better.

the end