

Overturning Tables

Hab_2:2 And the LORD answered me, and said, "Write the vision, make it clear and display it upon the tables, that he may run that reads it".

Mat 21:12 Jesus ... overturning tables said, "It is written, 'house is a house of prayer, but you are hijacking it as a cave for robbers'"

2Co_3:3 As you are epistles of Christ..., written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not on tables of stone, but in tables of the heart.

*To Anne,
My Wife and Life-Long travelling companion.*

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Forward

I envy those with a good imagination. I guess envy is a sin but what else can you do if you desire a good imagination? You can't steal it. If you could, that also would be a sin. Of course there are dangers that come with imagination, so perhaps I should be grateful I don't have too much of it.

Psychologists tell us every human being possesses imagination. But like those possessing money, some are richer than others. Theologians are more inclined to warn us of imagination's dangers. The King James version of the Bible references at least fourteen verses to the imagination of the heart. Most of these are referred to as wicked. One, in Luke 1: 15, reminds us that Jesus came to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts. But for all this, the imagination of the heart is a link into the spiritual world and, provided the heart is pure it is a beneficial attribute for seeing God.

Of course, Jesus came in the flesh to dispel the false imagination encouraged by the teachers of the law. But it has been a long time since Jesus came, and we are inclined to use our imaginations to visualize Jesus and his character. So once again we need to look to a pure and accurate imagination so that we interpret Jesus aright.

This is only the forward so, enough of the discussion around imagination. Except to say this book is a record of a lifetime of questioning that has forced me to examine time and again the difference between what I have been taught as doctrine, what others have tried to tell me Jesus is like, and what I have experienced for myself about God.

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The Christian life is a journey, and in it, imagination gets modified by experience and expectation. As the prophets remind us, imagination is close to the longings of heart and is not always accurate. It picks and chooses what it wants to hear and can be dangerous. But it is necessary in a journey of faith, because we would not start this journey if we had no picture of what we thought might come at the end.

So, as you can see from the contents list, this is a book of little insights I have accumulated on my journey of faith. It questions the heart more than the imagination. It is dangerous to shape imagination just through culture, education, or peer pressure. It has to be based on a relationship with God Himself. The best way I know of doing that is to examine how biblical characters related to God and test my relationship around that.

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Did you know the Egyptians had more than two-thousand gods?

The most High of all these gods was Amun. Amun's right-hand-god was Ra, the god of fire. Whenever the Egyptian army went to war, Amun and Ra teamed up to ensure victory. The Egyptian army called this team Amun-Ra. Amun-Ra was a ruthless combination, destroying anything in the way, the army would help the work of Ra by torching everything in its path.

Ra was believed to visit the sky in his chariot each morning and pass through the realms of the underworld each night. If the weather became cloudy while an army was at war, the soldiers would presume Ra was no longer on their side. That may be why they panicked when the Hebrew slaves, shielded by a cloud, crossed the Red Sea.

The god of the Nile was named Hapi¹. Hapi was the fertility god and very popular throughout ancient Egypt. According to myth, Hapi set out from his home in the heavens, travelled through the land of the dead, emerging in an unknown cave in upper Egypt before taking a journey down the Nile every year. For more than three-thousand-years, people have tried to pinpoint the source of the Nile, and it is still in dispute today. So the assumption he emerged from a cave in the hills was as good as any other explanation to them.

The Arrival of Hapi coincided with the season of floods each year. To appease Hapi and ensure he did not destroy the mud huts along the river's edge, and, of course, to ensure the increase in population,

¹ Or hap or hep

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they were required to throw a firstborn male into the Nile as a sacrifice. One year, during a period when the Egyptian population was in decline and the Hebrew population was on the increase there came a devastating flood. A decree went out that they should use Hebrew firstborn sons to sacrifice to Hapi. Now, this ties nicely into the story of Moses in the bulrushes of course. It also adds credibility to a young Egyptian princess believing Hapi had brought her a present of a baby in a basket when he arrived that year.

Moses would have been taught all about the Egyptian gods once he started school in Egypt. But, before he got there, he was raised by his Hebrew mother. You know the story. When the princess found Moses in the bulrushes his sister Miriam, who was watching discreetly, ran to get their mother to act as wet-nurse. The Princess then paid his mother to bring up Moses until he reached school age. During these days, Moses' mother would have sung the Hebrew nursery rhymes to him in the tradition of all Hebrew mothers. Many of these have been found by archaeologists on clay tablets. Besides the ancient songs about Father-Abraham or Isaac's exploits, how Jacob went down to Egypt and God restored his son Joseph to him, there was also at least one about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It went something like this:

*The sun was rising over the earth when Lot came to Zoar.
Yahweh came out of the heavens
He rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah
He overthrew those cities,
and all through the valley, the inhabitants cried out from the ground.*

So Moses learned from an early age that the God of the Hebrews also played with fire.

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After the incident with the Egyptian soldier who ill-treated a Hebrew slave, (you will remember Moses slew the Egyptian and ran into the desert), Moses lived with his father-in-law who was a Midianite Priest. That part of the Fertile-Crescent was under the rule of a Babylonian king at the time. The Babylonians also had a God who played with fire. He had two names. If you were a Pagan, you would call him Nusku; If you were a Zoroastrian you would call him Ahura-Mazda the God of the sun. Zoroastrians believed God made the sun before he created life in order to aid life. Moses' father-in-law, being a priest and living close to Ur of the Chaldeans, would have very likely been influenced by the Zoroastrian branch of Babylon, So fire from Ahura-Mazda was loving and creative, not cruel like god Nusku.

All that is the background. So when God commissioned Moses for a task, he first had to release him from all this clutter of theology in his mind. When God saw Moses turn aside to see the burning bush phenomenon, He saw a chance to move Moses from an intellectual assent with a personal introduction. It was small wonder Moses pondered which god was behind the burning bush. In his mind Moses was asking, 'Who are you'?

Are you Ra? If you are, then I am dead meat!

Are you Yahweh? If you are, I must hide myself lest you punish my sins.

Are you Ahura-Mazda? That might not be so bad, but then, what if you are Nusku?

Fortunately, God reads minds and clarified:

"I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." So Moses covered his face, because he was afraid to look at

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God.

Once announced as Yahweh, Moses tries to hide his face in case he was punished for his sins. But he still had a question that needed answering, God's answer did not resolve Moses' questions. It did exclude the gods of other people groups leaving Moses with a narrower choice. But which Hebrew God was speaking? Remember, the Hebrews had been slaves to the Egyptians for four-hundred-years and had learned to think as the Egyptians thought. The Hebrews would not automatically know which God Moses was talking about.

God continued the conversation:

Then the LORD said, "I have seen how cruelly my people are being treated in Egypt;.... Now I am sending you to the king of Egypt so that you can lead my people out of his country."

Moses is half listening while still pondering his next question, which he rephrases:

And Moses said unto God, "Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and they say 'What is his name'? What shall I say unto them"?"

Are you:

EL-YON,² the Most High God. The God in charge of everything!

EL-SHADDAI,³ (the supreme Magistrate) who watched over them daily.

² Gen_14: 22

³ Gen_17: 1

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EL-OHIM, (Team God)⁴. The name for God when El-Yon teamed up with Roo-akh (the Spirit) and Aw-mar (the word) for creation purposes for example.⁵

JEHOVAH (Covenant God). The God who gave his promise to Abraham.

ADONAI, (Father God). He who leads and trains those he loves that is mainly translated as 'Lord' in our English translations.

EL-OAH, (The great and fearful God). This is the God of uncle Laban; He invoked El-oah when he and Jacob parted company⁶. Later on in history, El-oah became 'Aalah' or Allah - 'The great, all powerful and fearful God', of Muslim understanding.

As good Christians, we are taught that Hebrews were distinct because they believed in only one God. It is true that Abraham came out from Ur of the Chaldeans because he believed in one God rather than the multiple gods of Zoroastrianism, but being under the Egyptians for four-hundred-years, Hebrew people had learned to think differently. They had once again picked up the culture around them and saw one God as a number of different personalities.

Moses was firstly a very intellectual man. Having been to Egyptian University he was equipped to understand life. He had not only learned about politics, languages and economics, but also

4 *The translation Elohim is plural and a clear introduction to the trinity, but is it exclusively so? 'Team God' is my loose interpretation of Elohim [Elohym]*

5 *In the creation account of Genesis ch 1: roo'-akh (translated spirit), and aw-mar' (translated' word' or' said' or 'commanded'), - the word translated God is EI-OHYM (which is plural in the Hebrew), is born out in the repeated phrase 'let us....'; Other examples can be found in Exodus 21 ff when judges are called 'team God' or Elohym. In other places angels are referred to 'Team God'- Such as when Jacob wrestled with 'Team god'*

6 *Abraham's Brother and Jacob's uncle in Gen 31: 42*

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comparative religions. These reinterpreted the expressions of his Hebrew ancestry through the eyes of the Egyptian race. Adding to his dilemma, intellect, and learning were getting in the way of his understanding of the nature of the one true God of the Hebrews. This God did not communicate through intellect but by relationship. The instigator of this strange burning bush phenomenon told Moses that He was the God of his ancestors. This not only narrowed the choices, but it immediately gave him a picture of the relationship between Abraham and his God. In that relationship God was not equal to Abraham or Isaac, but very much one in charge:

And God said unto Moses, 'I AM THAT I AM: say unto the children of Israel, I AM has sent me unto you'.⁷

It was not until later in his spiritual journey that Moses twigged:

'Hear O Israel, Elohim (your team god) is in fact one God – Jehovah – the covenant God'⁸

Between these two points Moses had to learn to trust this God who hid behind an elusive and unhelpful statement 'I Am who I am'. It took a step of faith to act upon a request from a God he could not name. This was different to the relationship of an Egyptian leader, for them naming something or someone, gave control over him, her or it.

Less and less today Christians see God as 'I Am'.

Increasingly today, Christians want to name God in order to limit his character. Increasingly I hear Christians, (thinking like the

⁷ Exo 3: 14

⁸ Deut. 6: 4 In Today's English, we say Father, Son and Spirit are one God.

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Egyptians), talking of the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New. Oh, they say, I prefer the loving, forgiving, long-suffering God of the New Testament to the judging, punishing God of the Old. In fact, I can count on one hand the number of sermons I have heard based on the Old Testament this past year. We down-grade sin, judgement, and God's standards by emphasizing only a loving-God. It allows many churches to abolish Hell from the pulpit. Universalism⁹ is finding its way back into the church again, and in doing so it is weakening repentance, sin and such-like doctrines. After all, God loves everyone, doesn't he? By our logic and understanding of love, God will not punish anyone, will he? Our society has banned chastisement, so God will accept you no matter how you regard him, won't he?

'I AM what I am', tells a different story. It reminds us that God has attributes or characteristics built into his personality. When we acknowledge God is patient, we do not mean his patience never runs out. Ask Noah.¹⁰ Ask the people of Babel.¹¹ Ask Lot and his wife.¹² Ask Pharaoh.¹³ Ask Belshazzar.¹⁴ Ask a rich man named Dives, or a poor man named Lazarus.¹⁵ Check out the book of Revelation. God is not limited by love but by '*I AM*'!

If there is one lesson we must quickly learn from this passage it must be to take God seriously. If the recorded age of Moses is correct, it took some seventy years for Moses to finally get to meet the real God of his ancestor Abraham. Like so many today, his

9 *Universalism first appears at Babel then in Noah's time when everyone did as the counselled in their own heart. It raised its head again in the late 1800's in the guise of Unitarianism.*

10 *Gen ch. 6*

11 *Gen ch. 11*

12 *Gen 19: Lk 17:32*

13 *Ex ch. 7 to 12*

14 *Daniel ch. 5*

15 *Lk 16 26-31*

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intellect had caused him to fit God to his ideas through mental gymnastics and analysis rather than accepting a simple personal encounter. He had assented to God. He had acknowledged him with a tipping of the hat, so to speak. He had heard of the exploits his ancestors had attributed to God and respected their right to believe in him. But now he was faced with a God outside of his preconceived understanding. A God who was not prepared to conform to the concepts of a human mind.

To Moses this was a revelation. He had been comfortable living a quiet life in a small town, doing what most people have done for thousands of years, raising a family and tending home interests. The shock when God regarded it as His right to want more from Moses, was rather disturbing to him. Moses had been nurtured and shaped by God from bulrushes to burning bush.

In the world of the six-month-old baby, all is love. Parents feed, clear up, provide, choose and so on. The baby knows nothing of the fuller character of its parents, until it reaches the 'terrible-twos,' when it discovers different parental attitudes. Now parents say No! Parents gang up saying, '*Clean up your own toys*'. Parents say '*Bed Time*' when the child disagrees. Parents say '*Don't Touch -it will hurt*'!

What has happened? The parent has not changed, well just a bit perhaps. The Parent sees the future of the child through experience. The parent has an aim and responsibility to the whole of the child's development. The child is now old enough to understand love includes discipline, purpose, direction, intention, and many other spiritual characteristics essential to growth. At the burning bush Moses has to face the fact that his past was only preparation for his

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future. God was no longer in the background looking to his need but now required co-operation in future tasks. God had timed his training to meet this precise point in history. What he had learned and how his character had developed over time had to change direction here because this was the time of his calling. His character and skills were not perfected as we shall see in his later life, but it was time for his ministry to begin.

I am always surprised when small children draw a picture of a train. Even in this day and age it is usually a steam train. Is it not drawn from life experience? No! Rather it comes from the imaginary world of Thomas-the-tank-engine. It bears no relationship to a real overcrowded commuter world of adults on the underground in the rush hour.

*Moses was
happy to see
God as a
distant non-
interfering
god*

Unfortunately, when we first meet God we meet him with the similar naivety. Moses was happy to see God as a distant non-interfering god, or even Yahweh-Jira, a loving providing god. After all, his last forty-years had been good for him. He lived comfortably with his family and little harassment in his daily routine. But his encounter at the burning bush put pay to this. He now had to face a different reality. The Christian who stays within his early preconceived ideas of God has trouble relating to God or finding his purpose for being alive. There comes a time in any relationship where we have to ask two questions if that relationship is to mature. Asking the first question Moses asked, ‘Who are you?’, led quickly to Moses’ second question ‘*Who am I?*’¹⁶

We cannot understand the whole impact that this encounter made upon Moses until we understand the culture of his time. By asking

¹⁶ *Exodus 3: 11*

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God his name, Moses was doing very much more than asking for a handle. The Hebrew culture had a totally different concept of a name to today's culture. The Hebrew word for 'name' is *shem*. Like so many other words it does not just translate as name but often describes character. Moses was asking, 'What is your character'? What is your essential nature? For example, when Adam named the animals and rivers it was to capture their character. '*The shem*' [name] of the first river is Dispersive [Pison]: because it divides and waters the whole Land.'¹⁷ Noah called his three sons 'Famous' [Shem], 'Good-Looking' [Ham] and 'Warm-hearted' [Japheth]. Shem here does not mean Noah named him 'name' but 'Famous' or 'man of Stature'. We learn that when God said of David:

*The fame [shem] of David went out into all lands; and the LORD brought the fear of him upon all nations.*¹⁸

When Abigail spoke to David about the behaviour of her husband towards him, she said, 'Surely his name [*shem*] fits him to a tee'. She was referring to his character because his name was Nabal translated as 'stupid'.¹⁹

Well known is Esau, so named because he was hard and hairy. Well known also is Isaac, named at first because his parents laughed at the idea of his birth, Jacob [*Supplanter*], who started life competing with his brother was later renamed Israel. What then is in a name? If the character and the personality are captured like a snapshot in the name, then the level of authority is implied by the name plus. Moses was an intellectual not easily convinced. After all, time and time again names were changed in scripture. The name given at birth was

17 Gen 2:11

18 1Ch 14:17

19 1Sa 25:25

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not always fulfilled in later life. So we have Abram (who is Ab [father and source] ram [exulted or head]), renamed in Faith as Abraham [Father and source of multitudes].

We have Jacob [*underminer or supplanter*], becoming Israel; Ish [*man or Issue*] Ra [*disagree or oppose*] El [*God*]. Together this equals ‘man in an argument with God’. Fortunately Israel lost, but not before he had secured both a blessing and a wound from God to remind him of his surrender for the rest of his life.

Increasingly today Christians want to name God in order to limit his Character.

So it is that, determining a person’s character starts with a name as a starting point. Added to which are marked actions of that person. Moses’ intellect needed more to satisfy his curiosity about this God. He had seen the action but needed a name to pin this God down to his intellectual concept. The personality is not limited by a name, that only gives a starting point. When Moses took off his shoes, he was recognizing he was on another’s territory. This was Hebrew custom whenever a person stepped into a dwelling place. This burning bush marked the boundary to an area ‘set aside’ [*qôdesh—in the Hebrew*]. Qôdesh, later translated as Holy. The strength of this holiness is governed by Hebrew grammar not by the word itself. In the same way we might denote a degree of intensity by using good, better or best, to mark degrees of excellence. Hebrew grammar adds weight by repeating the word. Any king might be qôdesh but God is *qôdesh-qôdesh-qôdesh*, [Holy, Holy, Holy], the ultimate in Holiness. The act of taking off his shoes was the starting place of normal respect followed by an intention to find out more. The intention was to find out which God was responsible for this burning bush. When Moses discovered that this place was occupied by the God of his fathers Abraham, Isaac

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and Jacob it brought a further progressive reaction.

When the LORD saw Moses coming near the bush, he called him by name, and Moses answered, "Here I am." God replied, "Don't come any closer. Take off your sandals—the ground where you are standing is holy. I am the God who was worshipped by your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Moses was afraid to look at God, and so he hid his face.²⁰

Discovering which god was responsible, brought a demonstration of humility. A reverence for his Father's God required a demonstration of humility. No wonder he covered his face as soon as God said he was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the God who created everything. This was the God who held mankind accountable for sin.

So now we can move on.

²⁰ Exo 3:4-6

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