

Words and *The Word*

or

"The Bible says....."

This is a course designed to encourage reflection on the relationship between words and meaning. It is also designed to disarm those of us who would use words--especially the words of scripture--to attack our brothers and sisters.

--Arthur Malcolm Peña

Garfield by Jim Davis

I DON'T KNOW. THE TREE
STILL DOESN'T LOOK
STRAIGHT TO ME



JIM DAVIS 12/14

WHAT DO
YOU THINK?



IT ALL DEPENDS
ON HOW YOU
LOOK AT IT



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Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

--Walt Whitman
(Leaves of Grass. Song of Myself.)

Hello!

You have before you a copy of a rather intensive Bible study course.

It is designed to challenge people--all of us--to think about what we mean, exactly, when we say "The Bible says....". Actually, it is designed to challenge us to think about what we mean *whenever* we say "X says", whether "X" be "the Bible", "Marx", "the Constitution", or "our next-door neighbor".... In other words, it is designed to encourage (even push) us to explore the way in which we extract meaning from, or interpret, not only scripture but all words that we read or hear.¹

Though we will sometimes be asked to consider--and honestly react to--certain interpretations of scripture offered by the course itself, we will generally not be studying any set of predetermined conclusions or interpretations. Rather, we will be focusing mainly on some of the more thought-provoking paradoxes of scripture in the hope that, as we look into them and discuss them and share/defend our different points of view, we will not only have enjoyable and stimulating discussions, but also grow in our understanding of some timeless spiritual truths, as well as deepen our appreciation of the dynamics of interpretation.

Both "conservative" and "liberal" points of view are more than welcome, given that the format is one of simply doing exercises, reflecting on the experience, and answering questions about scripture--questions designed to challenge us to "think (at least) twice" before jumping to any conclusions about what the Bible is "saying". In other words, people are not only free--but are actively encouraged--to have their own opinions and to draw their own conclusions.

Nevertheless, people from either end of the conservative-liberal spectrum can expect to find some aspects of the course rather challenging, even upsetting. A conservative evangelical *may* have moments of discomfort when he is confronted with apparent contradictions, for example, or when he is asked to seriously consider alternative interpretations of scripture. A liberal Unitarian, on the other hand, *may* feel uncomfortable when some "obvious" contradictions turn out to be explainable after all, or when he finds an unexpected richness, depth, and sophistication in the Biblical witness. And people "somewhere in-between" *may* get uncomfortable when certain issues arise which seem to require movement towards either one end or the other of the conservative-liberal spectrum. Or, maybe no one will feel uncomfortable! Who knows? The format of the course itself allows for various outcomes, and the conservative and liberal stereotypes are, after all, sometimes unreliable in predicting how *real* people will react to something which challenges their world view.

For successful completion of the course, honesty is absolutely necessary. Honesty, and the willingness to give reasons for one's conclusions. "Just because" is therefore not usually an acceptable answer to a question asked either by the course itself or by another student. However, one may in fact not know the reasons for having come to some conclusion. In that case, "I don't know" is, of course, an acceptable answer, for it is the honest one. But, naturally, using "I don't know", or "that's just the way it is", as a way to avoid thinking things through is not acceptable in the context of this course.

The "agenda" behind this course is not only personal (as are all agendas), but also political and spiritual. In public debates on controversial issues, I have noticed that people sometimes refer to scripture in order to provide evidence that their own views are supported by "what the Bible says". This is done by people "on the left" as well as by people "on the right"--and by people "in the middle" too! Even when observing non-religious debates, I find the same tendency for people on different sides of some issue to refer to some set of written words--be it the Constitution, the writings of Marx, or the lyrics of a popular song--in order to show that their ideas happen to coincide exactly with "what X says".

After many years of thought and prayer and experience, I have come to the (somewhat obvious) conclusion that an appeal to "what the Bible (or the Constitution, or Marx, or Bruce Springsteen) says" is often used as a means to escape the challenge of meeting argument with argument, or simply to escape meeting other people *as people*. Instead, we too often say "the Bible (or the Constitution, or Marx.....) says X, and that's that, end of discussion"--and then turn our back on our neighbor, hoping he'll just go away (and take his point of view with him).

However, when we use the Bible--or any other set of written words--in this way, the question of interpretation, surprisingly enough, is often entirely ignored. Most of us, of course, fail to *consistently* acknowledge the complexities involved in interpreting scripture. We all slip sometimes, and assume that "what we think the Bible says" and "what the Bible says" are just different ways of saying the same thing. Some of us, however, *never* seem to recognize the fact that we are *interpreting* scripture. Rather, our own

¹ Indeed, though the primary focus is on the Judeo-Christian Bible, this course examines words from other religious traditions as well: Islam, the Bahá'í Faith, New Age thought, and Hinduism.

understanding of scripture becomes "the scripture's understanding of itself"; that is, we assume that our understanding of scripture comes to us directly from the words themselves, with no assistance (or interference) from us, and that "what the Bible says" (i.e. what the words mean to us) should be equally obvious to all who read. "We are not interpreting scripture," we sometimes say. "We are just saying *what the Bible says*" We thus come uncomfortably close to feeling that our own understanding of scripture is indistinguishable from that of God's.

This Bible study is intended to challenge all of us, wherever we may be on the "right-left/ conservative-liberal" continuum. However, I suspect that anyone very firmly entrenched in a "the Bible says X and that's that" frame of mind will simply refuse to take the course. They may, however, choose to take the course either as a personal challenge, or as an opportunity to challenge others. In either case they would be very welcome indeed.

Whatever the motivations people might have for taking the course, or the conclusions they might come to during the course, I hope that the structure of the study itself will allow people to gain a much deeper appreciation of the relationship between *meaning* and *words* --between *The Word* and *words*, so to speak

Perhaps even more importantly, I hope that this study will encourage honest dialogue between people whose political and spiritual world views may sometimes come into conflict. I have faith and hope in understanding and in the possibility of meaningful dialogue. It's true that the specks in our neighbors' eyes usually receive most of our attention; but as long as there is a Now, a Today, I suspect it is not too late to begin to clear out the logs jamming our own vision.

Together, we might just see our way out into more Light.

Now, a few words about the more personal part of my "agenda". As they say, "we teach (wittingly or unwittingly) what we want (or need) to learn". Believing that is true, I therefore consider myself not only a teacher, but also a student of this course.

I have what I call a "fundamentalist mind", and this course is, in large part, aimed at healing this mind. What do I mean by "fundamentalist"? First of all, I do not mean what people call "the Christian Right", for the kind of "fundamentalist" thinking I am talking about is found (at least occasionally) in people of every political and religious persuasion--right-conservative, left-liberal, and middle of the road. And at least one or two very dear conservative evangelical friends of mine are far less "fundamentalist", in the sense I am referring to, than some of my more "liberal" friends.

When I say I have a "fundamentalist mind", then, I mean that, when interpreting words, I too easily overlook not only the situation or context in which the words are spoken or written, but also the *person* who has spoken or written them. Part of what I mean by "fundamentalist", then, is the habit of overlooking the (sometimes very important) roles that situation, context, and source play in determining the meaning(s) of spoken or written words.

I also sometimes fail to appreciate the ambiguity inherent in nearly all words. Instead, I sometimes too quickly and too reflexively project my own fears, hopes, desires, pre-conceptions, mental habits, etc., *onto the words* I hear or see, and then assume that the words actually mean what I have made them mean. That is, I too often jump to conclusions about--and then too quickly react (often inappropriately) to--what the Bible is "saying", or what someone else is "saying".

What I do, in other words, is overlook the fact that *I am interpreting* the words I hear and see, and that what I am *directly* reacting to is my own interpretation of the words--not the words themselves, as such. Though it is a rather simple mistake to make, it in fact pervades my entire view of the world, for though I am constantly interpreting (evaluating, judging, condemning, approving) the world around me, I nevertheless continue to think that the world I see and experience is the real world. In essence, then, my "fundamentalist" mistake is to confuse the world that I have made (by interpreting it) with "the real world as it really is" (whatever that might be). What I think the Bible (or the Constitution, or Marx) says becomes *what the Bible (or the Constitution, or Marx) says*

The opposite of the "fundamentalist mind" is what I call the "considerate mind". To *con-sider* literally means "to be with the stars", and so I like to think of this "considerate" state of mind as the stars' (or better yet, the sun's) perspective on the turning earth of conflicting *opinions*: what is down in Spain is up in New Zealand, what is summertime in Greenland is the heart of winter in Peru, and the whole thing keeps tilting back and forth, and going round and round and round. I think we have all had our share of dizzying encounters with people who, to us, seem to be not only speaking another language but thinking with an entirely alien mind. White is black to them, night is day, up is down.... Common frames of reference seem to be missing, longitude and latitude are measured differently. There is no common center, and the world around--between--us seems to break up into pieces, dissolving into madness.

But the considerate mind, with the stars and the sun, looks rather serenely, steadily, upon all the spinning arguments and turning opinions. It is emotionally unattached to what is ambiguous, debatable, subject to interpretation. It recognizes that what it sees, it sees in its own light--the light within, which it then casts out upon the world. It doesn't automatically *react*, or jump to conclusions as to the meaning of words--or with a hostile glare try to burn up the one who has spoken them--but, instead, considers, wonders, questions, appreciates, and *responds*. Its own light is clear and certain enough for it to be at peace with the shifting thoughts, opinions, and beliefs it happens to shine upon at any given moment. Its only season is Today, Now, and so it holds no one to the past, to words already spoken, but rather accepts every present attempt at communication, every new attempt to say what one *really* means, with open arms.

To me, then, "Now" is the holy time: "Now" is the time to let go of what has been said or not said, to allow each other the chance to rephrase what we mean to say, to back away from the arrogant stands we have too hastily taken, to start again, to overlook mistakes, to seek the truth, to forgive....

Since at times this course requires looking critically at the Trinitarian and Incarnational interpretations of Christian scripture, some people might consider parts of the course to represent an attack on orthodox Christianity. Indeed, people from other religious traditions examined in this course might also perceive their faiths to be under attack. Since I believe that "attack" is, at best, counter-productive, and, at worst, quite destructive, I would ask the students of this course to forgive--or overlook--attack wherever they (rightly or wrongly) happen to feel or perceive it, and to seek out instead whatever may be of real value in these pages.

The line between "attack" and "challenge" may be a rather fine one, but I hope that I have been careful to avoid stepping over it--at least most of the time. Perhaps the line between "attack" and "challenge" is most unclear (at least it is to me) when the course deals with the Bahá'í Faith. However, to the best of my knowledge, the acute tension between certain historical events and the attempt adherents of that faith have made to salvage the integrity of their scripture in response to (or in spite of) those events, make any independent exposition of that faith necessarily--let's say--"challenging".

There is, for many people, redemptive power in the Trinitarian and Incarnational interpretations of Christian scripture. And, of course, millions have found what they feel to be an experience of truth and salvation in the doctrines, the interpretations, of the Bahá'í Faith as well--not to mention the creeds and beliefs of Islam, Hinduism, or New Age thought. And, as far as I know, all of these doctrines have inspired love and liberation at least as often as they have been used to rally people to support a Crusade or an Inquisition. The aim in our examining them, therefore, is not to prove these doctrines wrong, but, rather, to challenge their right to *dominate Christian--and inter-faith--* dialogue, and to encourage our seeing them as at least *partly human (and therefore debate-able) interpretations of scripture*. For as long as we can ignore the role we ourselves play in determining what scripture will mean for us--as long as any interpretation of scripture retains the appearance of unquestionable Divine Truth²--we may be tempted to use the interpretation (the doctrine, the creed) as a weapon with which to crush dissent, end discussion, or otherwise fight, persecute, or run from anyone who appears to threaten or disagree with us in some way.

It is, in other words, an aim of this course to make it more difficult to use the words of scripture, or their official interpretations (i.e. the official doctrines), as a kind of cover or smoke-screen behind which it may be possible to hide unloving attitudes, fear, prejudice, or unexamined assumptions.

In keeping with this aim, then, it is the premise of this course that justice requires recognizing that words may usually be interpreted in more than one way, and that our interpretations often reveal more about ourselves than they do about the words we are interpreting, and that the way we either judge (i.e. "condemn") or refrain from judging the neighbor who may interpret differently is ultimately the way we either pronounce judgement, or refrain from pronouncing judgement, upon ourselves.³

² At no point do I mean to suggest that "there is no truth", or that "all points of view are equally valid". Rather, I mean simply--obviously, tautologically--that human interpretations are human. The degree to which human interpretations may represent divine truth is, of course, an interesting, and perhaps very important question. But it *is*, nevertheless, a *question*. That is, although each individual *may* have his or her mind quite made up, the fact is that *people*--we human beings *as a whole*--do, in fact, have different opinions on the matter. This course is for *people as a whole*, and therefore does not assert the unquestionability or infallibility of any particular doctrine. On the contrary, it necessarily challenges the notion of infallibility--without asserting that infallibility is necessarily impossible.

³ By "judgement" here I do not mean "evaluation of the truth value of a proposition or the moral value of an action"--indeed, this course actually encourages such critical evaluation--but rather a more global feeling of separation from and condemnation of another person, or even one's own self.

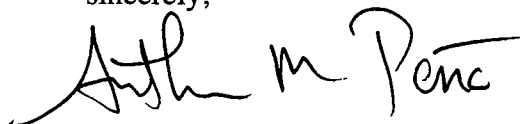
Furthermore, it is important, I think, for us to consider the possibility that a hostile mind may not be able to understand what it hates, or fears. If we are hostile to the idea that scripture may be interpreted in more than one way, let us consider the possibility that our failure to understand other interpretations *may* be due to our own hostility and not to any weakness in the interpretations themselves.

We *may*, of course, be righteous in our judgements. But, then again....

And so I invite you to take this course with me.

Together, on this ever-turning globe, and in a “con-siderate” spirit, let us seek out the truth.

sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Arthur M. Peña". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end of the name.

Arthur M. Peña

For more information, please contact me at:

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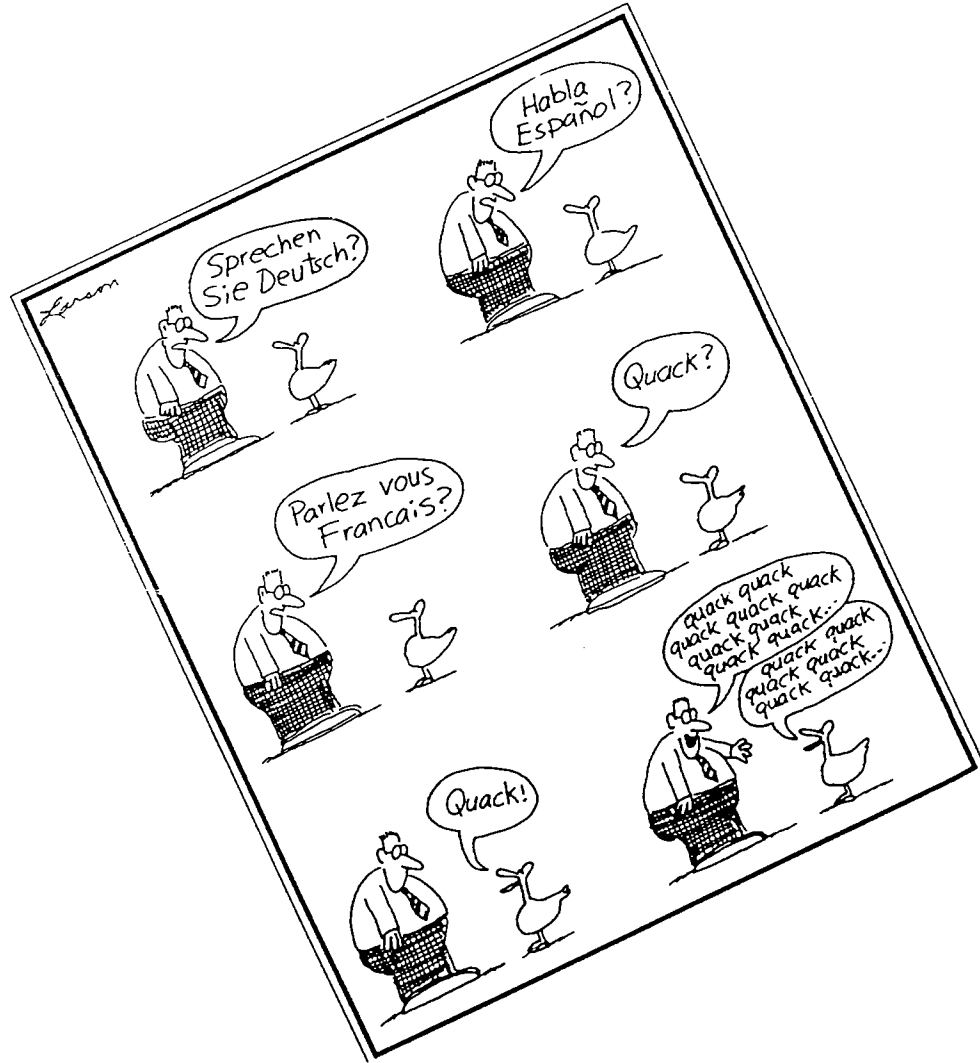


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Epilogue

Step 1) A Whack on the Side of the Head. ¹

Step 2) Light

God is often spoken of as "light". Think about the following physical properties of light (not guaranteed to be scientifically accurate) and explore how they might be applied to God, or our experience of God (and if you do not believe in God, just play along!) :

- in light we can see
- what we see is light
- light can blind us
- the speed of light is constant, no matter what frame of reference we measure it from (whether we ourselves are going fast, or slow; whether we are heading toward it, or away from it)
- the speed of light cannot be surpassed
- time slows down and space expands (from the point of view of an outside observer watching his friend flying along) as the speed of light is approached
- nothing changes from the point of view of the person approaching the speed of light (nothing, that is, except the time and space of the outside observer, which, to the person speeding on his way to light, likewise appears to slow down and expand)
- light is present even in what, to our eyes, appears to be darkness
- sunlight contains all the colors of the rainbow
- different species are sensitive to different frequencies of light, and can thus see different bands of light
- the color we see in an object is the frequency of light which that object reflects (i.e. does not absorb)
- light is not localized, but omnipresent
- massive stars which collapse upon themselves form black holes out of which light cannot escape
- darkness is the absence of light
- light is not the absence of darkness
- light is bent by gravity
- in stars, light is born of fusion
- light is food for plants, which in turn are food for us
- light has both wave-like and particle-like properties
- "sound" which a radio "picks up" and transmits to us is actually light
- ???
- ???

¹A Whack on the Side of the Head , by Roger von Oech; pgs. 8-9.

Step 3) Words and Meaning.

I. Imagine we have just discovered a tablet upon which are written words from a language which no one speaks anymore, which no one understands, and for which no translation into any other tongue is possible. Do the words on the tablet still mean something?

II. "Vala numaya sun gala numaya sun vala" : What do these words mean?

III. Imagine we have just discovered a dictionary of this dead language. We find the definition of "vala": "nu sil may silan shusumu". Do we know what "vala" means now?

IV. If we somehow discovered that "vala numaya sun gala numaya sun vala" could be translated into English as "sun within a moon within a sun", would we be able to determine what the phrase meant now?

V. How do we learn what words in our own language mean?

VI. What does the word "green" mean? "Yankee"? "one"?

VII. What does "*the meaning of a word*" mean?

VIII. Where does the meaning of words reside?

In the words themselves?

On paper?

In dictionaries?

In the sound?

In the human mind of the speaker?

In the human mind of the hearer?

In the "collective mind" of the community?

Nowhere because words don't mean anything?

In the mind of God?

.....???

Step 4) Contradiction and Paradox.

I. What is a "contradiction"?

II. What is a "paradox"?

III. How can we tell the difference?

IV. *Paradox or Contradiction?*

Which of the following statements, or pairs of statements, point to
a truth beyond the seeming contradiction?

- A) Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth.
--Pablo Picasso
- B) If you can remember the 60's, then you weren't there.
--Timothy Leary
- C) He moves, and he moves not. He is far, and he is near. He is within all, and he is outside all. --Isa Upanishad
- D) I the LORD² your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me.
--Deuteronomy 5 : 9
- The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father. --Ezekiel 18 : 20
- E) I and the Father are one. --John 10 : 30
The Father is greater than I. --John 14 : 28
- F) The Father is greater than I. --John 14:28
So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God....And in this Trinity ...none is greater or less than another. --The Athanasian Creed

²In the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, "LORD" in capital letters stands for the Divine Name, or Tetragrammaton: "YHWH" (Sometimes read Yahweh).

V. *Resolving Contradiction into Paradox*

For those statements you managed to harmonize or make sense of in some way, what did you actually *do* in order to see a paradox where, at first glance, you may have seen only a contradiction? Did you...

- give the author the benefit of the doubt (i.e. assume he *means something* by what he's saying)?
- read the complete statement in its original context? (Beware of "...", both in this course syllabus and everywhere else!)
- try to imagine a situation or context in which the "contradiction" would disappear?
- go beyond the literal meaning of the words?
- break some "mental boundaries", or challenge some assumptions, or let go of some preconceptions?
- let your imagination run wild?
- re-think what is "possible" and what is "impossible"?
- ??

VI. *Contradiction or Paradox? (cont'd)*

A) *numbers*

The sons of Arah: 775.

The sons of Pahathmoab, namely the sons of Jeshua and Joab: 2812. --Ezra 2:5

The sons of Arah: 652.

The sons of Pahathmoab, namely the sons of Jeshua and Joab: 2818. --Nehemiah 7:11

B) *love and God*

God is love. --1 John 5:8

'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.' --Romans 9:13

C) *faith versus works*

For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law.... For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'..... So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works....

--Romans 3: 28 - 4 : 6

Do you want to be shown, you foolish fellow, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?and the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'... You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

--James 2 : 21 - 24

D) *justice*

....you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother....it shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

--Deut. 19 : 19 - 21

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

--Matt. 5 : 38 - 39

E) *covenant in the flesh*

And God said to Abraham..."you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant...: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you...So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

--Genesis 17 : 9-14

So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?...He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal.

--Romans 2 : 26-29

F) *sacrifice*

The LORD said to Moses, "Command the people of Israel, and say to them, 'My offering, my food for my offerings by fire, my pleasing odor, you shall take heed to offer to me in its due season...: two male lambs a year old without blemish, day by day, as a continual offering. The one lamb you shall offer in the morning...The other lamb you shall offer in the evening; like the cereal offering of the morning, and like its drink offering, you shall offer it as an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the LORD."

--Numbers 28 : 1-8

"He who slaughters an ox is like him who kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like him who breaks a dog's neck; he who presents a cereal offering, like him who offers swine's blood; he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like him who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations....they did what was evil in my eyes, and chose that in which I did not delight." --Isaiah 66:3-4

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.

--Hosea 6:6

G) *do as I say, not as I say*

And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only what I bid you, that shall you do." So Balaam rose in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab. But God's anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary.

--Numbers 22 : 20 - 22

Step 5) Words and *The Word*.

I. Find a partner.

One of you should now read **Matthew's** version of the birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:18 - 2:23) silently to yourself.

Meanwhile, the other partner should be reading **Luke's** version of the same event (Lk 1: 26-35 and Lk 2:1-52).

When you have finished reading, take turns telling each other what Matthew and Luke say about the birth of Jesus. *According to Matthew and Luke* , **what happened? where? when? why? and how?**

II. Now consider what you have just done:

Did anything surprise you?

How did this exercise make you feel?

Excited? Angry? Fascinated? Afraid? Bored? Happy?

Hostile? Anxious? Suspicious? Peaceful? Confused? Secure?

Smug??

III. Now, assume that both Matthew and Luke are 100% truthful and accurate in their accounts of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Assume that what they *said* happened *did* in fact happen, and that it happened just as they said it did. In other words, assume that they would make ideal witnesses in court: if they say X happened at such and such a time at such and such a place for such and such a reason in such and such a way, then it did.

Now, with the photocopied biblical texts in front of you, attempt to combine the two gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus into a single account. Do not leave out even the smallest detail from either account. Include everything reported by both Matthew and Luke in your combined version.

"Cut and Paste" Procedure:

1. Take the photocopies of the birth narratives and cut them up so that every verse (or section) can be separated from the rest and moved around. (Use a felt board, or pins, or a piece of tape on the back of each segment, so that you can both move the pieces around and keep them in place.)

2. You may want to use Matthew as a kind of skeleton by placing the (now separated) verses from Matthew's account in a column down the left side of a piece of paper (or felt-covered board), and then adding the verses from Luke where appropriate. Try your best to fit all the pieces together so that they make a single story.

Note: If the two accounts fit neatly and complementarily into each other, with no overlap, and no apparent disagreements of any kind whatsoever, you will end up with a single column for the combined version:

Mtt + Luke

If the two accounts fit neatly and complementarily into each other, but there is some overlap--that is, they sometimes say exactly the same thing about the same event--then you will have one rather long main column (made of verses from Matthew and Luke which tell the story) with some parallel (redundant) verses from Luke stuck closely alongside those verses from Matthew which say exactly the same thing:

Mtt + Luke

Luke (redundant verses)

If the two accounts do not fit neatly into each other, but, rather, you find that certain things simply do not match up for some reason--i.e. if you find inconsistencies, or difficulties, or contradictions--you will end up with one column made of those verses from Matthew and Luke which do form one harmonious story, another column made of some parallel or redundant verses from Luke placed right alongside the main column, and then a third column of verses from Luke *placed farther away* to indicate that they do not fit into the combined, or harmonized, version:

Mtt. + Luke

Luke (redundancies)

Luke (inconsistencies)

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING:

AS YOU DO THIS, make notes about the process you are engaged in. **Jot down things you notice as you attempt to harmonize the two gospel narratives.** *For example* , you might jot down:

'had to change a comma to a period',
'had to think differently about the meaning of the word 'then' ',
'researched some non-biblical sources to check out distances and means of travel available in Palestine',
'changed one time sequence',
'gave a couple of things a lot of benefit of the doubt',
'everything fit in quickly and automatically with no effort whatsoever',
'prayed and received guidance on getting X and Y to line up',
'used my imagination a lot',
'found it really time-consuming',
'found it hard',
'found it easy',
'had to change my ideas about what Matthew was saying',
'started wondering about who Luke was writing his account to',
'surprised by the fact that it was possible for me to reconcile what I had thought to be irreconcilable differences between the two narratives',
'surprised by the fact that I couldn't harmonize some things',
'couldn't harmonize everything but enough to feel confident that the rest could be harmonized someday, by someone, given time',
'started to doubt that the two could really be harmonized',
'came up with more than one possible combined version'....

etc. etc.

So, please, keep a written record of what **you** think and do and feel as you attempt to combine Matthew and Luke into a single account. **Be aware** of the things you do to the texts, the different ways you interpret words, any changes in sequences you might make, special problem areas (if any), how you deal with the details, how doing this makes you feel, assumptions you might be making or not making, etc.

IV. Were you able to combine Matthew's and Luke's accounts into a single, complementary, harmonious, non-contradictory account of the birth of Jesus?

<p>If so, how did you do it? Are you satisfied with the result? Why or why not?</p>
<p>If not, why couldn't you do it? Are you satisfied with the result? Why or why not?</p>
<p>Did your original understanding of either Matthew's or Luke's version of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus change in anyway after attempting to combine the two versions into a single, consistent account? Explain.</p>
<p>If harmonizing the two versions required you to change the ideas you had about what Matthew and Luke were saying when you first read them independently of each other, is that OK? i.e. is it OK to bend the integrity, or the internal consistency, or the apparent meaning of the separate versions in order to combine them into one? Explain.</p>
<p>How did this exercise make you feel?</p>

V. Discuss in more detail what you have done so far.

1. Is a complete harmonization of the birth narratives found in Matthew and Luke possible or impossible? Explain.

2. If a complete harmonization is *possible*, how satisfactory is the result?

a. Does it satisfy you? Explain.

b. Would it satisfy, say, a court jury? Explain

c. Would it satisfy the requirements of the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy i.e. would it support the idea that there are no errors, contradictions, or distortions of fact to be found anywhere in the Bible...

...for believers?

...for seekers?

...for non-believers?

...for a court jury?

Explain.

3. If a complete harmonization is not possible, is that a problem?

Explain.

4. Discuss **the process** of attempting to harmonize Biblical narratives, whether or not it was in fact possible for you or your friends to harmonize the two narratives:

a. Was it easy? Hard? Explain.

b. What kind of reasoning and attitudes were necessary to even make the attempt at harmonization?

c. Were any leaps of faith necessary? If so, what kind of leaps were they? Are leaps of faith "reasonable"?

d. Did anything have to change or "bend"? (e.g. previous assumptions? concept of time sequence? concept of inerrancy? what you previously thought of as "possible"? what you previously thought of as "impossible"? first impressions?)

e. Did you have to deal with any uncomfortable feelings? (fear? doubt? anger? pride? resentment? boredom? insecurity? lack of confidence? tension? ambiguity? uncertainty? certainty? unexpected hope? despair? confusion??)

f. Did everyone approach the task in the same way? If not, what were some of the differences?

g. Was it easy or difficult to understand the way your partner went about harmonizing the narratives? Explain.

h.?

Step 6) Words and *The Word* (cont'd.)

Take the **Resurrection** narratives and attempt to harmonize them by going through **step 5, I - V**, again.

Step 7) "The Bible Says..."

What do we mean when we say "the Bible says..."?
Does the Bible literally "say" anything?
Explain.

I. *Interpretation*

Does the Bible say some things in such a way that there is only one possible interpretation of the words, or in such a way that it is possible to determine which interpretations are right and which are wrong?

Explain.

Give examples.

II. *Our standards: double? or fair?*

When we are talking with people who have come to different conclusions about what the Bible says or does not say (i.e. people either more "conservative" or more "liberal" than we are), are we willing to allow them the same freedom to defend their point of view as we ourselves need or would like to have?

1. Are we willing to let other people use non-biblical sources or refer to non-biblical scholarship if we find that we must do so on occasion as well?

always *often* *sometimes* *rarely* *never* *N/A*

2. Are we willing to let them quote the Bible if we sometimes do too?

always *often* *sometimes* *rarely* *never* *N/A*

3. Are we willing to let them claim inspiration by the Holy Spirit if that is what we do?

always *often* *sometimes* *rarely* *never* *N/A*

4. Are we willing to have our moral behavior scrutinized and made relevant to the discussion if we do the same thing to them?

always *often* *sometimes* *rarely* *never* *N/A*

5. Are we willing to let them talk about personal, subjective experiences if we do so as well?

always *often* *sometimes* *rarely* *never* *N/A*

6. Are we willing to let them refer to and compare different parts of scripture if that's what we want to be able to do as well?

__always __often __sometimes __rarely __never __N/A

7. Are we willing to let them insist that we not compare scripture with scripture if we sometimes insist that they not do so?

__always __often __sometimes __rarely __never __N/A

8. Are we willing to let them appeal to authority if we do so as well?

__always __often __sometimes __rarely __never __N/A

9. Are we willing to justify our beliefs if we make them justify their beliefs?

__always __often __sometimes __rarely __never __N/A

10. Are we willing to say exactly and perfectly what we mean to say and only exactly what we mean to say if we want to insist that they not stumble in their speech?

__always __often __sometimes __rarely __never __N/A

11. Are we willing to allow them to change their minds or re-word something if we find we must sometimes do the same thing?

__always __often __sometimes __rarely __never __N/A

12. Are we willing to allow them to contradict themselves if we sometimes contradict ourselves?

__always __often __sometimes __rarely __never __N/A

13. Are we willing to make an effort to really understand their point of view--to give it every benefit of the doubt and to open our heart to it--if we want them to do the same for us?

__always __often __sometimes __rarely __never __N/A

14. Are we willing to accept things they consider to be "self-evident" if we expect them to accept what seems self-evident to us?

__always __often __sometimes __rarely __never __N/A

15. Are we willing to be as patient with them as others may have been with us?

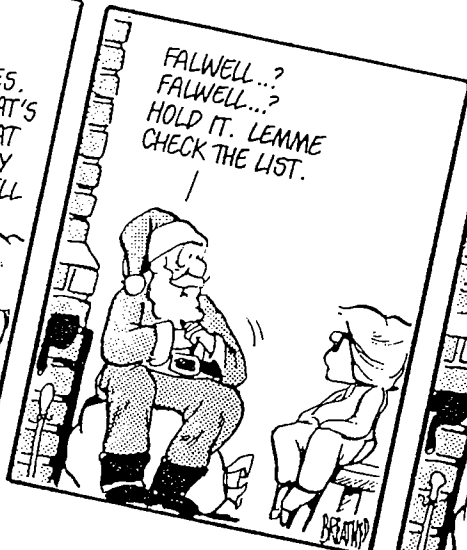
__always __often __sometimes __rarely __never __N/A

16. Are we willing to work on removing the log in our own perception at least as much as we want to work on removing the speck in their point of view?

__always __often __sometimes __rarely __never __N/A



YES. THAT'S WHAT JERRY FALWELL SAYS.



Step 8) Justice and Mercy

I. He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? --Micah 6:8

What is "justice"?

II. I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

--Matthew 9:13 (Hosea 6:6: I desire steadfast love)

What is "mercy"?

III. ...when Rebecca had conceived children, by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works, but because of his call, she was told, "The elder will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?

--Romans 9: 10-14

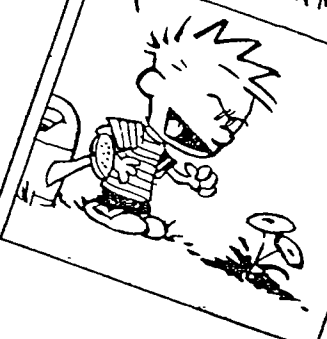
Well? *Is* there injustice on God's part? ³

³ For Paul's answer, see Romans 9:14 - 11:36.... Yes, three chapters worth of an answer, ending with, "for God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all"--Romans 11 : 32. As Peter said (2 Peter 3:15-16): "Paul wrote...according to the wisdom given him... There are some things in them [his letters] hard to understand...." Indeed, Paul's style is not exactly "lucid", but it is challenging. He often forces the reader to go beyond an overly literal interpretation of the Jewish scriptures and beyond a limited, or exclusive view of God's love and mercy: "lest you be wise in your own conceits", or, as the Jerusalem Bible puts it, "in case you think you know more than you do" (Romans 11:25).

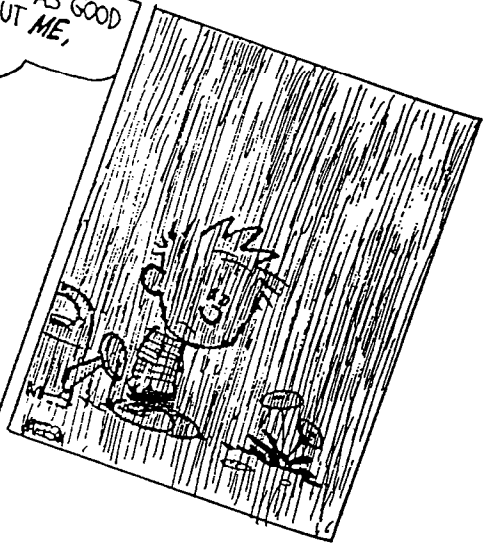
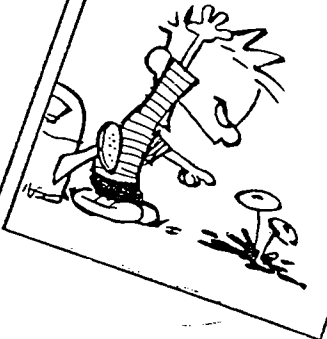
SO YOU WANT SOME WATER,
HUH? WELL, I'VE GOT A BIG
CAN OF IT HERE.



IT'S UP TO *ME* TO DECIDE IF
YOU GET WATER OR NOT! *I*
CONTROL YOUR FATE! YOUR
VERY *LIVES* ARE IN MY HANDS!



WITHOUT *ME* YOU'RE AS GOOD
AS DEAD! WITHOUT *ME*,
YOU DON'T...



IV. *Jonah*

Jonah had been called to "cry against" the city of Ninevah, but instead he tried to run "away from the presence of the LORD". After spending a few days in the "belly of the fish", Jonah was understandably more willing to go and warn the people of Ninevah of impending doom. He became angry, however, because God had the gall to actually spare the people of Ninevah when they repented after hearing Jonah's warning. So Jonah goes off "to the east of the city", builds himself a shelter, and sits down to wait--"till he should see what would become of the city." So, as Jonah sat there waiting for the fireworks to begin....

"...the LORD God appointed a plant, and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort....But...the next day God appointed a worm which attacked the plant, so that it withered....[And Jonah said] 'It is better for me to die than to live.' But God said to Jonah, 'Do you do well to be angry for the plant?' And he said, 'I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.' And the LORD said, 'You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity Ninevah, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?' "

--Jonah 4: 6-11

- A) Why would Jonah have been angry?
- B) Who would you rather have as a neighbor--Jonah, or the Ninevites?
- C) Is peace and forgiveness as colorful and exciting as war, guilt, and condemnation?

V. "Yet you say, 'Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?' ...The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself....But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins...he shall surely live....Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the LORD GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?...Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?"

--Ezekiel 18 : 19-25

Whose way is just?

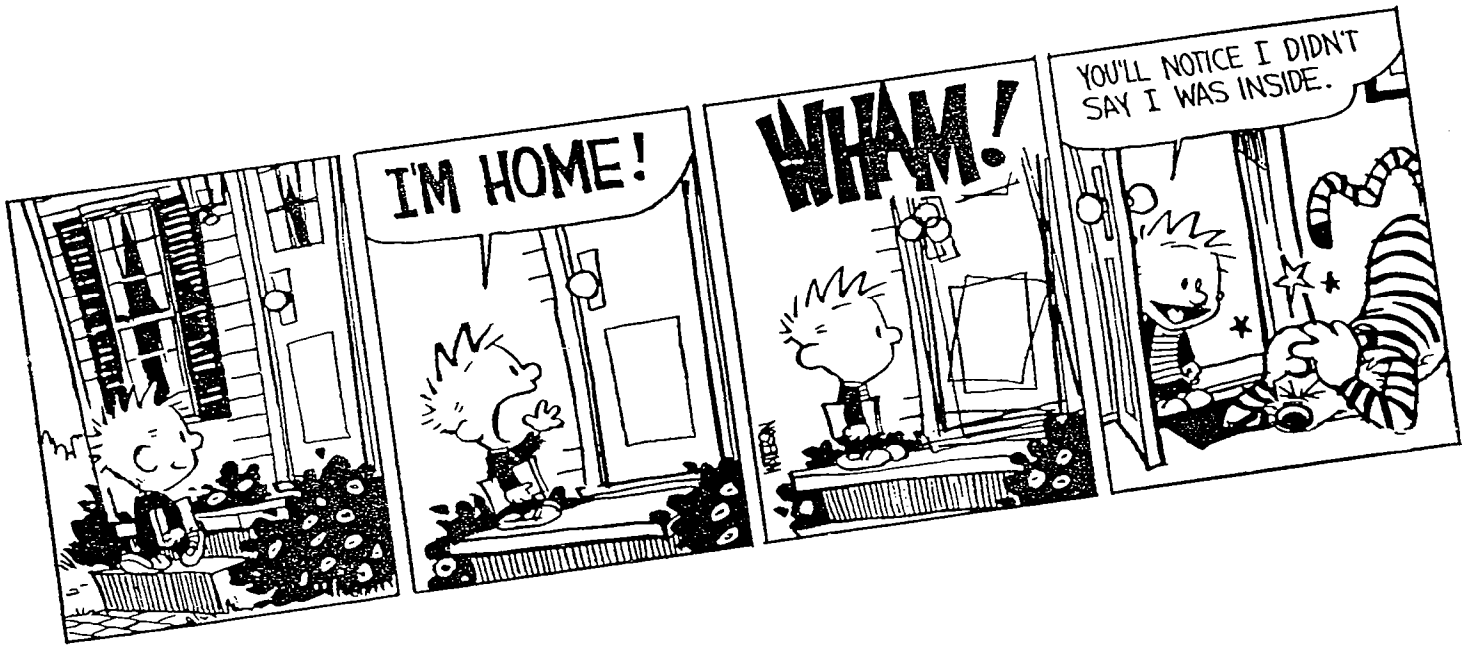
VI. And the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress; even as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisin."

--Hosea 3: 1

I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

--Jeremiah 31:34

Is forgiveness "just"?



I'M HOME!

WHAM!

YOU'LL NOTICE I DIDN'T SAY I WAS INSIDE.

FLEISCH

Step 9) Flesh and Blood, or Food for Thought?

I. *Truly, truly, I say to you*

"I am the living bread which came down from heaven...and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you..." Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" But Jesus...said to them, "...It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."

--John 6 : 52-63

Why do you think Jesus uses such a "hard saying" for those who seem to be taking him literally, yet explains things more directly to his disciples?

Was Jesus speaking "truly" when he told the Jews they had to "eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood"? Explain.

II. *Yet Jesus did not say...*

Peter turned and saw following them the disciple [John] whom Jesus loved... When Peter saw him he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about this man?' Jesus said to him 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!' The saying spread abroad among the brethren that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?' "

--John 21: 20-23

A) *"If it is my will that he remain until I come...."*

Surely one possible interpretation of these words was that John "was not to die". It might even have been the most obvious, or natural interpretation. We can easily imagine the disciples saying, "*Jesus said* that John was not to die." After all, a man who was known to have performed miracles and raised people from the dead could be expected to prevent his specially loved disciple from dying--if it was his will.

But, as John points out, Jesus did not actually *say* "John was not to die"; what he actually *said* was "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" In other words, though "John was not to die" was what many (quite naturally) felt Jesus *meant*, it was not what Jesus actually *said*.

Words and meaning are not the same thing. Meaning is the result of our **interpretation** of words--and we, like the disciples of Jesus, are often wrong in our interpretation.

How else, then, might those words of Jesus be interpreted?

B) *A warning from John?*

We could, perhaps, interpret John to be warning us about the difference between "words" and "meaning"--about the danger of jumping to conclusions when it comes to interpreting what people really mean by the words they use. After all, people have burned other people at the stake for having a different interpretation of the words "the Father and I are one", for example. And, at one time or another, we have all burned other people with our anger and hatred when they have not agreed with us--haven't we?

Ironically, the words "the Father and I are one" are found in the very same gospel of John as are the words "yet Jesus did not say...". The Church has, rightly or wrongly, interpreted the words "the Father and I are one" to mean something like "Jesus is God incarnate". And the Church has, from time to time, violently persecuted those who interpreted otherwise. Perhaps the Church should have heeded John's warning: for Jesus *did not say* that he was God, but, "the Father and I are one"--and those words are, in fact, open to interpretation, are they not?

John's gospel is highly poetical, even mystical. John portrays Jesus as speaking "in figures"; and John uses the words "light", "darkness", "the Word", "one", "Father", "Son", "flesh", "blood", "go away", "come again", etc. in such paradoxical ways that they cannot easily be reduced to simple equations or literal interpretations. Rather, the meaning is more felt, than understood--the words resonate, rather than dictate. There is very little room here, in this gospel, for drawing definite conclusions about what the words and figures mean....Perhaps John looked into the future and saw the endless battles over interpretation of words, and so included a subtle warning in his gospel: "Yet Jesus did not say....".

Ridiculous? Could be?

What do *you* think?

III. *Satan*

Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.....And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job...a blameless and upright man...? He still holds fast his integrity, although you moved me against him, to destroy him without cause." Then Satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But put forth thy hand now, and touch his bone and flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face." And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your power; only spare his life." So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD, and afflicted Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head....Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God, and die." But he said to her, "...Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"

--Job 1, 2

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil....he was very hungry. And the tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

--Matthew 4: 1

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

--Ephesians 6:11-12

A) Does "the Bible say" that Satan is "real"?

B) *Strongholds and Arguments*

Words such as those quoted above lend themselves to a literal interpretation--"literal" in the sense that, as we read them, we can easily "see", in our mind's eye, powerful, supernatural, non-physical beings talking with God, or tempting Jesus, or floating over our heads, grinning maliciously (or perhaps gazing coldly), and intending us very great harm indeed. That Satan exists in some real, independent supernatural sense, is thus one possible interpretation of these words. ⁴

Yet, as usual, we also find *other* words, written by Paul himself, that *could* be interpreted as referring to the same reality, namely, evil, yet which suggest a more psychological or naturalistic understanding of what the "war" is all about:

For though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ... --2 Cor 10:3-5

Here, the "strongholds" appear to be not supernatural fortresses at all, but rather very human arguments, and the enemy to be defeated and taken captive are human *thoughts*. In other places, too, Paul speaks of evil in similarly naturalistic terms. He speaks of "a law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members" (Romans 7:23). The "sin which dwells within me", he says, is against his "I", or "inmost self". This war between "the flesh" and "the spirit", between the "natural man" and the "spiritual man", "the world" and "Christ", is a constant theme in Paul's writings.

Not only does Paul sometimes speak of evil in such non-supernatural terms, but at one point Paul even seems to use "Satan" in a way that suggests "he" ("she"? "it"?) can be useful at times:

By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith, among them Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. --1 Tim:19

You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. --1 Cor 5:5

Paul at one point speaks of a "knowledge" which the disciples of Christ have, a knowledge which changes one's perception of things, which distinguishes reality from illusion, "something" from "nothing":

⁴Notice, however, that a literal interpretation would also have us believe God destroyed Job "without cause"--because Satan "moved" him to do so.

...we know that 'an idol has no real existence'.....although there may be so-called gods in heaven or in earth--as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"--yet for us there is one God....However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through being hitherto accustomed to idols, eat food as really offered to an idol...

--1 Cor 8:4-7

Therefore...shun the worship of idols. I speak as to sensible men....What do I imply then? That food offered idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.

--1 Cor 10:14, 19-20

Paul *may* be "saying" that, from a certain perspective, what once seemed real is now seen to lack substance, to lose its power over us, to become "not anything", or nothing--demons, not Truth.

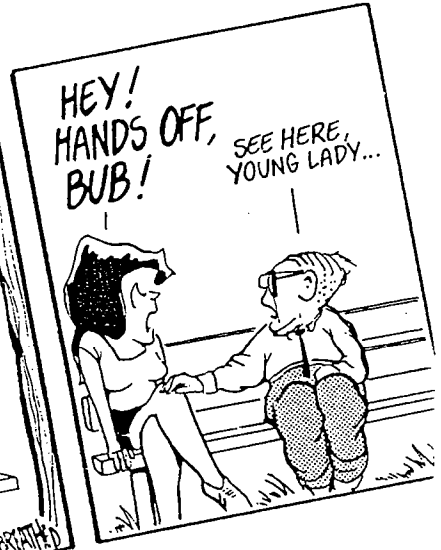
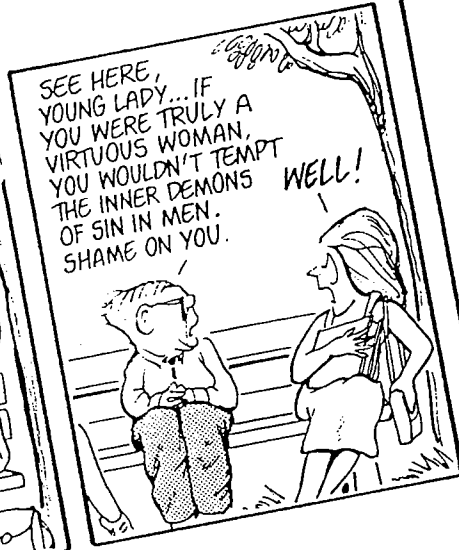
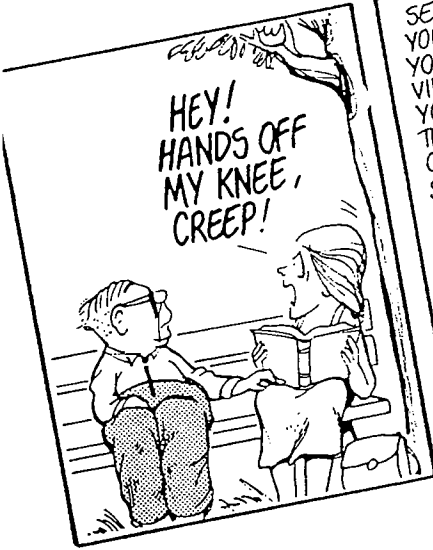
Likewise, in another place, Paul speaks of "elemental spirits of the universe", of "beings that by nature are no gods....weak and beggarly elemental spirits...", beings to which the people were in bondage "when [they] did not know God". Incensed, he says to these people, "You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years!" (Gal 4:3, 8-11).

Again, one way of interpreting what Paul is saying is that these "beings" are not what people think they are. They are, rather, like idols-- "nothing". Or, perhaps, they are like "days, and months, and seasons, and years" i.e. perhaps they are natural things, even animal things, that become "demons" only when human beings deify them, worshipping them as if they were God, or when human beings live according to them as if human life were merely animal life, to be dictated by the animal passions of hunger, physical survival, sexual desire, jealousy, anger, maternal/paternal instincts, the herd instinct, etc:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? --Col 2:20

...our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin....Let not sin...reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. --Romans 6: 6, 12

Thus, just as Paul uses "circumcision" in a highly non-literal, spiritual sense, so he *might* be using the language of the day--"the world", "flesh", "demons", "idols", "world rulers", "principalities", etc.--in ways that, in light of other things he says, could be interpreted non-literally. Indeed, Paul expresses his understanding of the Good News in various ways, sometimes plainly, or discursively, or reasonably--"as to sensible men"--and sometimes rhetorically, allegorically, challengingly, paradoxically--thus appealing to the imagination, to the heart, and in the process knocking one or two of our speeding trains of thought onto more fruitful tracks perhaps....



Matthew, too, offers glimpses of a non-literal Satan. At one point he has Jesus addressing Peter as if he were evil incarnate, yet immediately Jesus associates this evil with a (human) way of thinking:

He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, because the way you think is not God's way but man's."

--Matt 16:23

James likewise seems to have a naturalistic explanation of evil, associating it with (human) desire:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings death. --James 1: 13-15

In the gospel of John, Jesus calls Judas "a devil" (John 6:70). But, was Judas actually a "devil" in the sense of "evil supernatural being"? No. He was, presumably, a human being. Likewise, he says to those who wanted to kill him, "you are of your father the devil...he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Again, presumably, those people were not literally children of the devil. Physically they were children of their parents, and spiritually they were children of God, in the sense that their spirits were from God, Who created them. But they *were* those who stood against the truth: "because I tell the truth, you do not believe me" (John 8:45).

Thus, it may be *possible* to interpret Paul as saying that "Satan" is sometimes useful, that idols and gods and demons are not exactly "real", that the "war" can be talked about in terms of "flesh" and "spirit" as well as in terms of "Satan" and "hosts of wickedness in heavenly places". And we have seen that Matthew has Jesus directly address Peter as Satan, implying perhaps that Satan is a way of thinking more than a malicious supernatural being. And James says that God tempts no one, and that temptation is a matter of one's own human desires, suggesting that James may have a rather naturalistic view of these things as well. And Jesus does not always use the word "devil" in ways we can understand as "supernatural being".

We *could* say that the Bible "says" these things; that is, we *could* interpret the words of the Bible in this way.....Couldn't we?

What do **you** think?

C) *"Picking and Choosing" , or, Are we being consistent?*

If we wish to say that there is a literal devil--i.e. if we wish to take the Bible literally when it speaks of a devil which moves around and speaks and tempts people--what do we do when Jesus says *to Peter*, "Get thee behind me Satan", or when he calls Judas "a devil"? Mustn't we take Jesus less literally here? Notice that taking the Bible literally in one place sometimes means we have to take it less literally someplace else. Some people, for example, want Jesus to mean he is literally God when he says "The Father and I are one", yet they may not want to take him literally when he says: "as you have done unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me".

If we wish to say that there is no literal devil--i.e. if we do not wish to take the Bible literally when it speaks of a devil which moves around and speaks and tempts people--are we being consistent? That is, when it comes to other passages in the Bible which we might like to take literally--say, "The Father and I are one" (in order to support the doctrine of the Trinity), or "God is love" (to support the idea that "love is God"), or "this is my body" (in order to support the doctrine of transubstantiation)--do we have good reasons for taking these other passages literally and not those which speak of Satan and his mischievous activity?

D) *But what about Hitler?or the man in the mirror?*

If you do not believe in a literal devil, what about those people, and those institutions, who seem, at least partially, to "embody" evil: Hitler, Stalin, the CIA, the KGB, etc.? What about rage that leads to murder, or cruelty that leads to torture, or the cold, calculating forces that organize holocausts and pogroms and invasions? What about our impotence in the face of our own hatred, our own viciousness, our own personal pogroms and desire for revenge--sometimes in spite of our best intentions to feel and do otherwise?

What words better describe our emotional, personal experience of these things than that of Satan, the Father of lies, the Adversary, etc.? Good can be experienced personally, in the face of a friend, in the thoughtfulness of a stranger, in the kindness of a mother. Why not evil? Do we gain, or lose, by eliminating language that takes evil personally, so to speak?

E) *The incorporeality of evil...*

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

--Ephesians 6:11-12

--Think about the military-industrial complex for a minute. Is this "flesh and blood", or is it more like "principalities", or "powers", or "world rulers"? Doesn't the industry of death seem to sweep its flesh and blood human agents up into a whirlwind which no flesh and blood human beings seem able to control?

--Think about capitalism for a minute. Is this economic system "flesh and blood", or is it more like "principalities", or "powers", or "world rulers"? Doesn't capital sometimes take on a life of its own--a life sometimes indifferent or even downright hostile to human life?

--Think about the various propaganda systems, both obvious and subtle, both economic and political, which influence, or sometimes even dominate, the media worldwide. Is this "flesh and blood", or is it more like "principalities", or "powers", or "world rulers"? Isn't disinformation a rather incorporeal kind of enemy?

--Think about those (hopefully few) individual priests and evangelists and mullahs and gurus around the world who incite people to hate, who perpetuate prejudice, and who promote ignorance and fear from their pulpits, mosques, and temples. Couldn't these be considered, quite literally, "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places"?

Step 10) "Because you have made sport of me..."

I. Do as I say, not as I say: Contradiction or Paradox?

II. *Balaam*

And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only what I bid you, that shall you do." So Balaam rose in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab. But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the ass, and his two servants were with him.

And the ass saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; and the ass turned aside out of the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the ass, to turn her into the road.

Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. And when the ass saw the angel of the LORD, she pushed against the wall, and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck her again.

Then the angel of the LORD went ahead, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. When the ass saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the ass with his staff.

Then the LORD opened the mouth of the ass, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" And Balaam said to the ass, "Because you have made sport of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." And the ass said to Balaam, "Am I not your ass, upon which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Was I ever accustomed to do so to you?" And he said, "No."

Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way.... And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your ass these three times? Behold, I have come forth to withstand you, because your way is perverse before me; and the ass saw me, and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have slain you and let her live."

Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know that thou didst stand in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in thy sight, I will go back again." And the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men; but only the word which I bid you, that shall you speak." So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak.

--Numbers 22 : 20 - 35

A) *Say what...?!*

God seems to tell Balaam to do something, and then to find fault with him for doing it, and then to tell him to continue doing it.

What is going on here?

B) "Now this is an allegory..."

Writers of the New Testament apparently felt quite free to interpret "scripture" (or the "Old Testament") by taking things out of their immediate context, or in ways that went beyond the obvious, beyond the literal:

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman....Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants.

--Galatians 4:22-24

Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law say the same? For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake?...If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits?

--1 Cor 9:7-11

...Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come...

--Romans 5:14

...there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary; for when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain"....Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself....the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities

--Romans 8: 4-5, 9:24, 10:1

...our fathers...were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock which...was Christ.

--1 Cor 10:1-3

...he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs. For to what angel did God ever say, "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee"? Or again, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son?"

--Heb 1:5 ⁵

⁵According to the RSV Bible, the reference here is to Psalm 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14. First, Psalm 2:7: " 'I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.' I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you...'" Notice that the "me" of the writer of the psalm--as in "he said to me" -- was, presumably, king David. However, in New Testament interpretation, this "me" has come to refer to Jesus Christ. Likewise, the Church interprets "I have begotten you" as literally referring to the immaculate conception of Jesus and to the divinity of "the Son". And here is 2 Sam 7: 14 (4-15 given for context): "But that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD:...I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men; but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul..." Notice that the "kingdom" of king David's offspring is interpreted metaphorically, in Acts, to refer to Christ's spiritual kingdom, which he said was "not of this world"; and the words "when he commits iniquity" --that is, the immediate context of "he shall be my son" --are left out entirely, perhaps

If the writers of the New Testament approached interpreting the Old Testament in this way, perhaps they expected people to interpret what they themselves wrote in similar ways i.e. in ways not tied to obvious, literal meanings, but rather in ways that took thought, leaps of the imagination, a willingness to try on new lenses and to look at the world afresh, freed from what one previously thought was right or wrong, true or false, possible or impossible. In ways illuminated by present, personal experience.

What do you think?

C) *The Bible says...and then it says....*

Scripture says, or "speaks words". But then it also *says* , or means something, does it not? Returning to the story about Balaam, now--how might we interpret the story if we said that each of the different characters in the story represented one or more of the following things:

Balaam:

religious zealot, seeker, intellect, attempts to understand life, desire to do the right thing, stubbornness, willfulness, ego, the letter of the law, the priestly classes, interpretation, judgementalness, superego, self

the ass:

neighbor, heart, grace, mercy, the subconscious, the spirit of the law, a prophet or prophets, words, spiritual interpretation, Self

the angel:

conflicting religious paradigms, changing covenants, conflicting advice from friends and family, unfathomable nature of action and reaction, life predicaments, the law, the words of God, meaning, words, contradiction/paradox

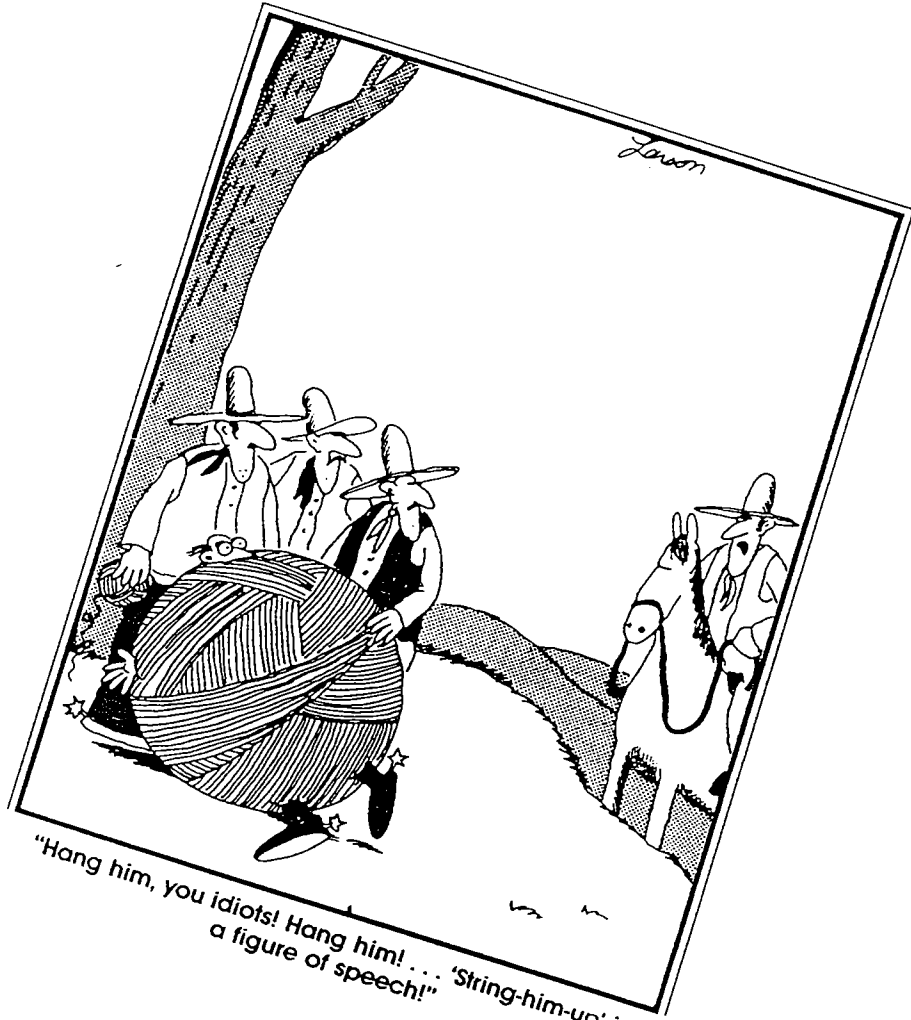
Try playing with different combinations of these possible interpretations.

D) What did Balaam do that the LORD did *not* tell him to do?

E) If Balaam is being tested here, what is the nature of the test? Did he pass the test?

F) Is there any way to interpret the story so that every part of it is meaningful, or is there always something that doesn't quite fit in, something that doesn't quite fit our interpretation?

because they would not apply to Christ, who was "sinless". Notice that selection, or "picking and choosing" is always involved in interpretation.



"Hang him, you idiots! Hang him! ... 'String-him-up' is a figure of speech!"

Step 11) “...Perfectly One...”

--John 17 : 23

I have said this to you in figures.

--John 16 : 25

I in them and thou in me

--John 17 : 22

thou in me, and I in thee...they in us

--John 17 : 21

I am in the Father and the Father in me

--John 14 : 11

I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you

--John 14 : 20

I. Take these figures of speech and try to represent them in the form of a diagram, a drawing, or symbols. In other words, try to turn the figures of speech into figures we can see. What kind of visual representation(s) do you come up with?

II. What does "to be one" mean?

III. Look at the Eastern symbol of the relationship between yin and yang.

In what ways (if any) does this symbol fit the figures of unity found in the gospel of John?

In what ways (if any) does it not fit?

How does this make you feel?

Why?

**Step 12) Trinity and Incarnation--
Translating Scriptural Paradox into Creed:
From "Son of God" to "God the Son"**

I. *How do you read ...?*

Find the pages containing the scriptural selections for Step 12.

This is a list of some of the statements from the Bible which some people consider relevant to determining "what the Bible says" about the relationship between/among the following: "God", "the Father", "the Son of God", "the Spirit", "the Son of Man", "Christ", "Jesus of Nazareth", and "men/human beings".

A) *what the Bible says...*

Each person should read approximately one page of the statements and then try to come up with a theory as to what those selections from scripture are "saying" about the *meaning* of "God," "the Father", "Christ", "men", etc., and about how these entities are all related to each other. In other words, "**according to scripture**" (i.e. according to your interpretation of what scripture is "saying"), who is/was Jesus of Nazareth? And, what is/was his relationship to God and Man?

When you have come up with a possible answer yourself, get together with other people who have read different pages, and try to come up with one answer--one theory about the nature of Jesus *according to scripture* --that satisfies everybody.

If it helps, imagine that you are a council of bishops who have come together to determine what the Church should be teaching about the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God and man.

What is your "council's" recommendation?

Can you all agree?

Note: As you read the selections from the Bible, try to assume that there are no contradictions there. Try, in other words, to think in terms of paradox, in terms of **meaning** beyond apparent contradiction. And **remember**: you are trying to determine what you think *the Bible* is saying--*not* what *you* think the *truth* of the matter is.

B) *what the Bible really says ...*

Can the Bible be interpreted in more than one way regarding the nature of Jesus of Nazareth and his relationship to man and God?

If so, is there any way to decide which interpretation is the one that represents "what the Bible is *really* saying?"

Explain.

C) *the way we approach it all....*

What kind of mind-set or "heart-set" or attitude did you have as you read the Bible verses to see "what the Bible had to say" about "Jesus", "the Father", "the Son", etc.? What kind of assumptions did you make?

In other words, *how* did you go about interpreting the words of scripture? *How did you read ...?*

--prayerfully?

--faithfully?

--critically?

--uncritically?

--assuming that scripture is paradoxical, but non-contradictory?

--assuming that scripture may contradict itself?

--metaphorically? allegorically?

--literally?

--sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically?

--assuming the Bible supports the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation?

--assuming the Bible shows that Jesus was only a man, and not God?

--???

--???

How might your mind-set, "heart-set", or assumptions have affected your interpretation? Explain.

D) *What does the Bible say? Is what the Bible says true?*

Notice that the question of *what the Bible says* is not necessarily the same as the question of whether or not what the Bible says is *true*. Indeed, we may simply be curious about "what the Bible says" without being interested in whether or not it is true, factual, conforming to reality, etc.

Are there any advantages in approaching the Bible in this way?

Any disadvantages?

How might this approach affect our interpretation of what the Bible says?

Or we may *first* ask ourselves what the Bible is saying, and then try to decide whether or not we think it is in fact true.

Are there any advantages in approaching the Bible in this way?

Any disadvantages?

How might this approach affect our interpretation of what the Bible says?

Or we could, if we decided to, first assume that the Bible is telling the truth, and *then* ask ourselves what it is "saying", or what it means.

Are there any advantages in approaching the Bible in this way?

Any disadvantages?

How might this approach affect our interpretation of what the Bible says?

E) *The Word of God or the words of Moses, Isaiah, Matthew, Paul...*

Assume, for the moment, that the Bible is the Word of God in the sense that God--as a conscious, willing Being--is *trying to say something to us* through the people, events, and words that make up the Bible, or even through all the historical events surrounding the writing, editing, and propagation of the Bible.

Given that assumption, are the intentions of the writers and the message that God wants us to get necessarily the same thing?

In other words, certain people wrote the books of the Bible, and, presumably, they meant something by what they said i.e. they were more or less consciously trying to say something.

But is what they meant to say the only possible interpretation of their words?
Could they have said something they didn't mean to?

...or have said more than they realized?

...or have meant to say more than they did?

...or have themselves, deep down, really meant more by the words they used than they were fully conscious of?

...or have been wrong--and we were meant to see it?

II. *The Athanasian creed*

The doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are, to many people, deeply meaningful ways of interpreting the words of the Bible, of transmuting the seeming contradictions of Judeo-Christian scripture into meaningful paradox.

The Athanasian creed, written in Greek, expresses these doctrines as follows:

Whoever will be saved shall, above all else, hold the catholic faith. ⁶ Which faith, except everyone keeps whole and undefiled, without doubt he will perish eternally. And the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one: the glory equal, the majesty coeternal...The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated...So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God...The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone, not made nor created but begotten. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son, neither made nor created nor begotten but proceeding...And in this Trinity none is before or after another; none is greater or less than another; But the whole three persons are coeternal together and coequal, so that in all things, as is aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped. He, therefore, that will be saved is compelled thus to think of the Trinity.

Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe faithfully the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man; God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of the substance of his mother, born in the world; Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father as touching his Godhead and inferior to the Father as touching his manhood; Who, although he is God and man, yet he is not two but one Christ: One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh but by taking the manhood into God; One altogether, not by confusion of substance but by unity of person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ...This is the catholic faith which, except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved.

⁶"catholic" = "universal", not "Roman Catholic"

A) What do the **words** of the creed **mean**? How do you **interpret** them? (Notice that even creeds must be interpreted!)

B) What do you think about the attempt to translate the contradictions and/or paradoxes of scripture into a creed?

Is it...unavoidable? wise? misguided? helpful? mystifying? clear?
mystical? absurd? ingenious? clever? sublime? blasphemous?
human? divine???

C) *"he who loves is born of God and knows God"*

--1 John 4:7

The doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation were voted on by a council of bishops and made official church dogma about three centuries after the birth of Christ. Although all the bishops who voted were reading the same scriptures, there was considerable disagreement over what the scriptures actually "said" about Jesus. Of course, given the fact that people must interpret the scriptures --i.e. that the scriptures do not interpret themselves--we should not be surprised that the bishops did not all agree.

Do you suppose the bishops loved each other?

Do you suppose the debates were held and the vote taken in the spirit of love? Would it matter?

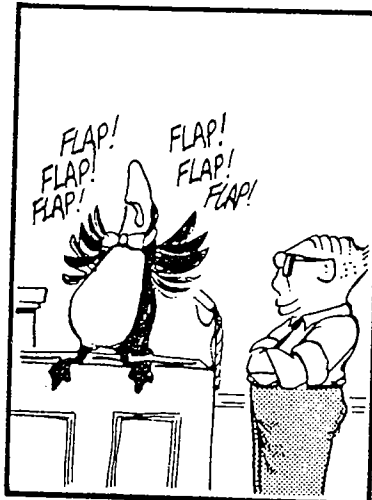
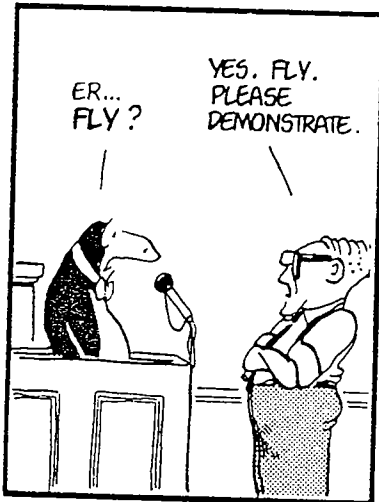
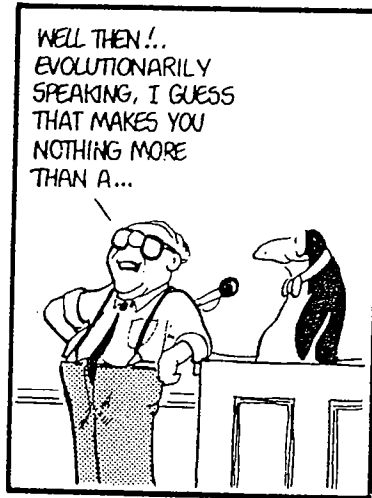
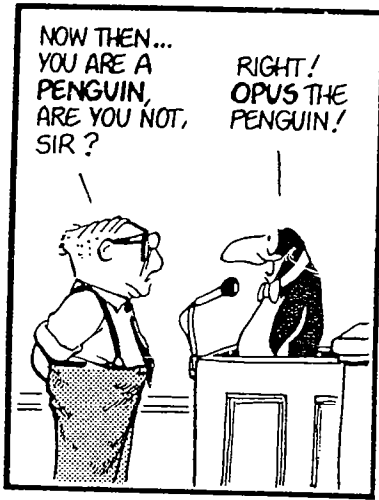
Do you think adopting the doctrine helped them love each other more?

D) *creed as litmus test of orthodoxy*

Since the establishment of the official interpretation of the scriptural paradoxes regarding the nature of Jesus, most Christians (rightly or wrongly) have looked at the scripture through the interpretive lenses of the Trinity and the Incarnation. And, in general, adherence to the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation has been used as a kind of touchstone, or litmus test, to determine whether or not an individual or a particular church is "really" Christian or not.

Is having a "litmus test" good? useful? necessary? --??
bad? useless? unnecessary? --??

What do **you** think?



III. "Mystery" and Greek Philosophy

It has been the implicit premise of this course that justice requires recognizing that words may be interpreted in more than one way, and that our interpretations often reveal more about ourselves than they do about the words we are interpreting, and that the way we either judge (i.e. "condemn") or refrain from judging the neighbor who may interpret differently is ultimately the way we either pronounce judgement, or refrain from pronouncing judgement, upon ourselves. ⁷

For the sake of justice, therefore, let us turn now, and reconsider what scripture "says" about Jesus of Nazareth. That is, let us look at some passages of scripture without the interpretive lense of the Trinity to color (rightly or wrongly) our view, in order to see if other interpretations are indeed possible. Other interpretations may not always hold up under close scrutiny, of course; but let us also look at ways in which the Trinity and Incarnation, as interpretations of scripture, may themselves not always be satisfactory either.

And, above all, let us consider the possibility that a hostile mind may not be able to understand what it hates, or fears. If we are hostile to the idea that scripture may be interpreted in more than one way, let us consider the possibility that our failure to understand other interpretations *may* be due to our own hostility and not to any weakness in the interpretations themselves.

⁷ By "judgement" here we do not mean "evaluation of the truth value of a proposition or the moral value of an action", but rather a feeling of separation from and condemnation of another person, or self.

A) *I am God*

Nowhere in the Bible does Jesus actually say--*in so many words*--"I am God". Do you think this is significant?

If Jesus *had* said "I am God," then certainly one possible interpretation of those words would be that Jesus was claiming to be God Himself in bodily form. And yet, that is not the only possible interpretation of those words, is it?

How else might the words "I am God" be interpreted?

Surprisingly enough, the word "be" can mean many different things:

When Romeo **says**, "Juliet *is* the sun!", what does he **mean**?

When Jesus **says** "Judas *is* a devil", what does he **mean**?

When Louis XIV **said** "L'état c'est moi" (*I am* the State),
what did he **mean**?

Depending on the context and on our point of view, then, the word "be" can mean anything from "lights up my life like/warms my heart like/gives me life like", to "does evil like/ thinks like/ is mistaken like", to "am the beneficiary of/am the real authority of", etc.

What other meanings can the word "be" have?

As a matter of fact, the words "I am God" have received various interpretations throughout history. For example, Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, had this to say about the "Manifestations of God" (what he calls the people who founded the major religions of the world i.e. Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, the Buddha, etc):

Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: 'I am God!' He verily speaketh the truth.... For it hath been repeatedly demonstrated that through their Revelation, their attributes and names, the Revelation of God, His name and His attributes, are made manifest in the world. Thus, He hath revealed, 'Those shafts were God's, not Thine!' [Qur'an 8:17]. And also He saith: 'In truth, they who plighted fealty unto thee, really plighted that fealty unto God.' [Qur'an 48:10] And were any of them to voice the utterance: 'I am the Messenger of God,' He also speaketh the truth...They are all the manifestations of the 'Beginning' and the 'End', the 'First' and the "Last'...--all of which pertain to Him Who is the innermost Spirit of Spirits and eternal Essence of Essences. And were they to say: 'We are the servants of God,' [Qur'an 33:40], this also is a manifest and indisputable fact. For they have been made manifest in the uttermost state of servitude, a servitude the like of which no man can possibly attain. Thus in moments in which these Essences of being were deeply immersed beneath the oceans of ancient and everlasting holiness, or when they soared to the loftiest summits of divine mysteries, they claimed their utterance to be the Voice of divinity, the Call of God Himself. Were the eye of discernment to be opened, it would recognize that in this very state, they have considered themselves utterly effaced and non-existent in the face of Him Who is the All-Pervading....Methinks, they have regarded themselves as utter nothingness, and deemed their mention in that Court an act of blasphemy. For the slightest whisperings of self, within such a Court, is an evidence of self-assertion and independent existence." From The Book of Certitude, by Bahá'u'lláh; p.179-180.

Thus, the "am" of "I am God" *could* mean "represent", or "speak for", or "stand for", or "manifest", or "show the nature of", or "am totally immersed in and wholly identified with"--could it not? This interpretation is at least *possible*, is it not?

What do **you** think?

How do **you** interpret the words "I am God"?

And, *why* do you interpret them in that way?

Explain.

But, of course, Jesus did not actually *say* "I am God". So, let us look now at things he did say, or is reported to have said.

B) *I am*

"if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins" ; "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He" ⁸; "before Abraham was, I Am" (John 8: 24, 28, 58).

Given that "I AM" is the name of YHWH, it could certainly appear that Jesus is claiming to be God here--that is, we could interpret these words, *in light of the Athanasian creed for example* , to mean that Jesus is claiming to "be" God; at least as far as "touching his Godhead" goes. And, when he speaks of himself as "*me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God* " (John 8:40), or says "*the Father is greater than I* " (John 14:28), or says "*the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me* " (John 14: 24), etc., then we could, along with the Athanasian creed, say that Jesus Christ is "inferior to the Father as touching his manhood". And when Jesus says "I and the Father are one", we could interpret, through the lense of the Athanasian creed, that Jesus Christ is indeed "God and man, yet...not two but one Christ...one not by confusion of substance but by unity of person, for as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ", and that "we worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance".

Thus, looked at through the interpretive lense of the Trinity, it may indeed seem "obvious" that, when Jesus says "I am", he is claiming to be God Himself. And, after all, this has been the official church interpretation for 1700 years now, so it is supported by a very long tradition as well. ⁹

⁸Note that the RSV bible does not capitalize "he"; and the Jerusalem Bible, in its commentary, equates this "I am He" with the "I am" or "I am He" of YHWH. In Greek, I believe, the two words involved are an emphatic "I am". If Greek is anything like Spanish in this regard, then the Greek "I am" could, like the Spanish "soy yo" (literally "am I"), be translated into English as "it's me/it is I", or "I'm the one", as in, "Who is it?*It's me /It is I* ". Thus, perhaps we could translate the "I am" of Greek as "It is I"/"I am he", and interpret these words as: I'm the one you are looking for, or, I'm the one you call God, or, I'm the one you call Christ, or...? Or perhaps the "I am" in Greek should be translated simply as "I am"--and interpreted as an assertion of being, of existence, of eternal life, or even of undefinability. Or...?

⁹The value of this "support" is debatable, however. Many age-old traditions have, of course, turned out to be false, and yet were at one time defended (even violently) by the Church--the flat earth idea, for example. And the fact that the "orthodox" Trinitarian position came to prevail in Europe *may* also be explained--not as a result of God's will--but as a result of Imperial edict and violent suppression of "heresy". And the Church's way of swaying interpretation to the winds of worldly convenience would also argue against any *necessary* divine approval of its views: with the rise of capitalism, for example, the scripture's command to "not lend upon interest to your brother" (Deut 23:19) has,

However, since the Athanasian creed interprets "the Son" to be referring sometimes to Jesus' "manhood" and sometimes to Jesus' "Godhead", it has to also emphasize that his manhood and Godhood are nevertheless *still* "one".

So, we are back to that word "one" again, aren't we?

After having considered the Athanasian creed, do we understand better now what it *means* "to be one"?

Some of us do, perhaps.

But perhaps, to some of us, it is all still "Greek".

For those of us--believers and non-believers alike--who do not speak Greek, or who do not understand Greek philosophy, it may be impossible to understand the Athanasian creed.

Some of us may simply feel uncomfortable with the more simplified "Jesus is God" version of that creed.

Some of us may not clearly understand the relationship between Jesus and God and Humankind at all, or have any brilliant theory whatsoever as to the finer points of their "oneness".

Perhaps this doesn't matter. Or perhaps it does.....

Is it *true*, as the Athanasian creed would have it, that "the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity" and the "one God in three persons and three persons in one God" without any "confusion of persons or dividing of substance" is what "a man" must "believe faithfully and firmly"....or else "he cannot be saved"?

What do **you** think?

conveniently, dropped out of collective awareness or concern; and where slavery has been the basis of an economic system, there too Tradition has done its share of "picking and choosing" from scripture to justify what was materially convenient. Tradition is not to be discarded lightly, to be sure; but neither does it seem worthy of our complete trust, does it?

If we *don't* assume the Trinity, what other interpretations become possible? How else might the words "I am", or "I am he", be interpreted?

How do **you** read.....?

-- Maybe Jesus is saying that when we cast out or crucify *any* son or daughter of man (even "the least of these my brethren", Matt 25) we have thereby also cast out or crucified a son or daughter of God, *our Father*, Who is *our* I AM, in Whom *we* "live and move and *have our being*". And so, when we oppress our neighbor--whose very being is our being--we crucify our very own soul, and cast out our very own selves, and thus choose death instead of life.

-- *Or*, maybe, when Jesus says "before Abraham was, I am", we are, literally, hearing the fulfillment of the prophecy: "I will put my words in his mouth" (Deut. 18:18). That is, maybe, when Jesus says "I am", he is speaking for God: i.e. the words we hear are God's words. That is, maybe Jesus is speaking "*in the name* of God"....

(What else might "to speak in the name of God" mean?)

-- *Or*, having said "I am" could be what Jesus was referring to when he said "*I* have manifested *thy name* to the men whom thou gavest me" (John 17: 6).

-- *Or*, maybe Jesus meant that as the people did "unto" him, so they did "unto" God, because he was God's messenger, his representative, his image, on earth: "I am He". If we spit on the image of the sun we see in a mirror, for example, haven't we, in a sense, spit on the sun itself (at least in so far as we have shown what we think of the sun itself)--without actually having literally spit on the *sun itself*? Couldn't belief in Jesus and treatment of Jesus be equated with belief in God and treatment of God without having to interpret it as Jesus' literally being God Himself? Thus, seeing Jesus might be the same as seeing the Father, and yet Jesus--"the image", "the first born of *creation*"--could still say "the Father is greater than I". And the Word, which "was God", might "be" God in that same "perfect image" sense too, might it not? Even more simply: when we find a man who embodies perfect love--who demonstrates perfect love, makes manifest perfect love--certainly we are seeing not only a man but also God, Who is love, are we not? And our reaction to the love we see in that man is the same thing as our reaction to God, is it not? Might not this "mirror" or "perfect image" metaphor be as good a way of harmonizing the paradoxes of scripture as the Athanasian creed?

Certainly, in making sense of the paradoxes of scripture, we *may* talk of "substances" and "persons" and "Godhead" and "manhood"--but *need* we?

What do **you** think?

C) *hostile minds, disciples, and interpretation*

Notice that in the eighth chapter of John, where we find these "I am" statements, Jesus is fielding questions and accusations hurled at him by hostile people. Here too, as in other instances in which people of hostile minds tried to pin him down on who he was, or tried to pin *on* him the claim of equality with God, he responds in ways that *could be interpreted* as a *denial* that he was claiming to be God (John 8:17,18,26-29,40,42,50,54; 10:35-36; Luke 18:18), or as a denial of any exclusive claim to divinity (John 1:12,13; 8:12 (see Matt. 5:14),42,47; 10:31-39), ¹⁰ or in ways that simply boggle, or offend, the overly literal mind (John 8: 56-58; 6:52-63).

However, to his disciples, to those seriously trying to understand and live by his words--instead of just reacting to their apparent literal meaning as the others did--Jesus sometimes speaks differently, more "plainly", as it were (though still not in a way we could exactly call *unambiguous* ...): "the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (6:63).

Yet, how do we know when Jesus is speaking "plainly," or when he is speaking "in figures", or when he is speaking with the intention to challenge people's literal-mindedness, or when he is speaking to test their hearts?

How do we know when to take his words literally, or when to take them with a grain of salt, or when to take them metaphorically?

How do we know how to read?

Explain. Give examples.

¹⁰Notice that Jesus doesn't stop with the assertion that "I am in the Father and the Father in me", does he? He *extends* it--in the same language, using the very same words, making the very same identifications--to those who love each other as well, doesn't he? "I in them and thou in me"... "thou in me, and I in thee..they in us"... "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you".... In "the figures" he uses, Jesus *leaves no room* for distinction, for separation, does he? The "in-ness", or unity, completely overlaps--folding upon itself, trading places, embracing and being embraced--does it not?

D) *YHWH* and *the Lord*

Acts 2:34

The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet. (RSV)

The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for you. (JB)

Assuming the Trinity, of course, we could look at the words in Acts which read, "The Lord said to my Lord", and conclude that the use of the same word "Lord" for both "God" and "Jesus" is implying the Trinity. In other words, if we assume the Trinity, we can conclude the Trinity. However, look at the Hebrew psalm being quoted here:

Psalm 110:1

The LORD (YHWH) says to my lord: "Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool." (RSV)

Yahweh's oracle to you, my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand and I will make your enemies a footstool for you'. (JB)

Notice that the Hebrew psalm does not use identical terms for God and Jesus, as in the Greek, but rather calls God "YHWH" and the Messiah "lord".¹¹

How might this affect our interpretation
of the Greek version found in Acts?

Explain.

¹¹In English we no longer use this word "lord" very often. In Spanish, however, "señor" is used daily: when it is used in Church, the English translation would be "Lord"; when it is used on the street, the English translation would be "Mister". Thus, in Spanish, the ambiguity of the word "lord" is perhaps more obvious than in modern English.

E) *"My Lord and my God!" Yet Thomas did not say....*

In the gospel of John we read that the famous "doubting" Thomas, after having seen Jesus alive, "answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'" (John 20). Perhaps Thomas is addressing Jesus as "my God" here. This is certainly one possible interpretation, though, of course, what Thomas might have *meant* by "my God" is itself open to interpretation.

But notice that it is, after all, Thomas who is speaking--not Jesus. Jesus is not explicitly claiming anything at all here. Rather, he is his usual evasive and mysterious self, neither denying nor confirming, but rather questioning, challenging, prodding. Typically, he responds not with a confirmation of what Thomas said, but with a question, and then a comment that turns the situation into a lesson: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

And it doesn't *quite* say that Thomas said that Jesus was God, does it? It just says that, when Jesus told him to be "believing", Thomas "answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'" Beware interpretation! Remember John 21:20-23: "yet Jesus did not say...". That is, the most obvious interpretation is, apparently, not always the correct one (see Step 9, II). And remember that "Jesus said *to Peter*, 'get thee behind me *Satan* !'", yet Peter was not literally Satan, though Jesus *addressed him as such* .

Thus, Thomas *did not say* "Jesus, you are God Himself", but rather "answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'" . How we interpret those words is up to us, is it not?

John *may* have *meant* that, for Thomas, Jesus was God Himself. Or he may have meant that, for both Thomas and himself, Jesus was God Himself. Or, he may have meant that Thomas was professing faith in Jesus as Lord and in God as God (Thomas may have looked at Jesus when he said "my Lord" and then looked up to heaven when he said "my God"). Or, he may have meant that Thomas was simply exclaiming out of joy in his new-found faith, and have been thinking only of God when he said both "Lord" and "God": i.e. "thanks be to God that I have seen the light!" Or, he may have meant that Thomas was praising God, the Light, the Word, he saw manifest "in" Jesus, his "Lord", the mirror, or image, of that Light, that Word. Or.....?

Remember, Thomas *did not say*

F) *variations*

Sometimes certain passages have come down to us over the centuries with "variations", that is, alternative versions of what the actual original words were--i.e. at some point in the past, either some people made mistakes when copying or interpreting the words, or they changed the words on purpose for some reason. We have some of these passages, with some of the variations, below. As you read them, ask yourself the following questions:

If we believed in the Trinitarian interpretation of scripture, which variation would we prefer?

If we did not believe in the Trinitarian interpretation of scripture, which variation would we prefer?

How might the beliefs of today's translators influence which variations they decide to put in the main text, and which variations they merely mention in the form of footnotes?

Which variation correctly reflects the original wording?

Keep these questions in mind, then, as you read the following:

....awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ [*or* of the great God and our Savior, *or* God, and of our savior Christ Jesus], who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity
--Titus 2:13

...in the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ [*or*: of our God and the Savior Jesus Christ]. May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.
--2 Peter 1-2

No one has ever seen God; the only Son [*or*, God, *or* , God, only begotten], who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. --John 1 : 18

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He [*or* Who, *or* God, *or* Which, *or* It] was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.
--1 Tim 3:16

But of the Son he says, "Thy throne, O God, [*or*, God is thy throne] is for ever and ever..." --Heb 1:8 [Compare psalm 45: Your divine throne endures for ever and ever. *or*, Your throne is a throne of God, *or* Thy throne, O God]

...and he will be their God; his name is God-with-them [*or*, and he, God with them, will be their God, *or*, and God himself will be their God, *or*, and God himself will be with them] --Rev 21:3 (JB)

Notice how much difference a comma, or a "the", or a change in the grammatical construction, or an alternative reading can make! Is it safe to base much hope for doctrinal certainty on passages such as these?

G) *"Thy throne, O God"*

Let us assume, for the moment, that "Thy throne, O God" was what the authors of Hebrews 1:8 and Psalm 45 originally wrote.

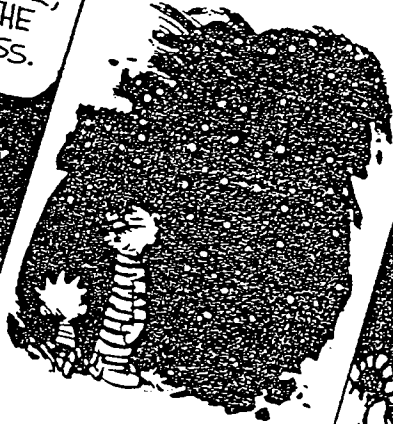
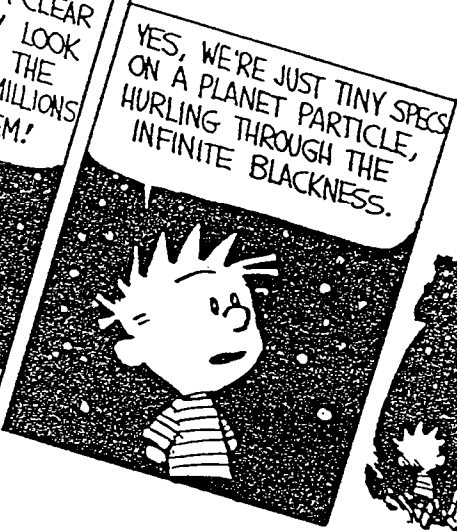
Note, however, that the words "throne" and "kingdom" themselves are, in the Christian scheme of things, interpreted metaphorically. Indeed, that was what made many people decide that Jesus was not the Messiah--because he was not *literally* a king, and did not have a *literal* throne. The author of Hebrews would not, therefore, want us to take "Thy throne" literally--would he? How, then, do we know whether or not he wanted us to take "O God" as literally implying that Jesus was God Himself?

How else might we interpret
the words "But of the Son he says...O God"? ¹²

Put yourself in the position of first century Jews awaiting a Messiah who would literally be king with an earthly throne.

How would you feel if someone came and told you
that you must not cling to a literal interpretation of scripture,
but rather understand it spiritually, metaphorically, allegorically?

¹²The Jerusalem Bible comments on psalm 45: "In the Bible the title 'God' is given to the angels, to leaders and judges, to Moses, to the ghost of Samuel, to the House of David, and to the Messiah". The JB gives us the following references: psalms 8:5 and 58:1; and Ex 4:16 and 7:1; and 1Samuel 28:13, and Zecch 12:8, and Is. 9:5. We should, perhaps, refer to John 10:35 as well. Also note that Hebrew had no capital letters, so when translating the psalm into English we could write "O god" instead of "O God".



H) *debating mysteries*

People have debated for centuries whether or not Jesus was both "God and man". And they have debated for centuries about what the words "both God and man" might *mean* .

However, in the scriptures, the relationship between Jesus and God was generally referred to as a "mystery", and was expressed time and time again in metaphorical language and in paradox, thus making it difficult to achieve any dogmatic "Greek-ish" finality about the actual meaning of the words. Meanwhile, it is possible to interpret scripture as saying, time and time again, that concrete acts of love--the ways we actually respond to and treat our neighbor--are the *true* litmus test of our knowledge of God.

Mysteries are essentially paradoxes which point to a meaning beyond the ability of words to express, beyond the ability of our minds to comprehend intellectually. And, as anyone who has tried to understand paradoxes will tell you, the process is not so much one of analyzing as of opening up, transcending, feeling, imagining--of standing under, and putting on, and seeing with....and then, presumably, acting differently, more lovingly.

Nevertheless, debates about this mystery often reverse the scriptural priorities, and so place the defense of doctrinal orthodoxy before the practice of charity and good will. Incarnate human hearts seem prone indeed to divisiveness, argument, and the desire to be "right" (orthodox). And incorporeal human institutions, with the power they can amass through abstract organization (i.e. propaganda, bribery, the appeal to pride or "specialness", hierarchy, fear, etc.), sometimes bring this perversion of scriptural priorities to its logical outcome: inquisitions, the crushing of dissent, and terrorism both material and spiritual--in a word, crucifixion.

Can mysteries be rationally debated as to their
ultimate truth value?

What purpose is being served by such debates?

Are our hearts being tested, as we choose between debate
and the practice of kindness?

IV. *our interpretations: illumination or obfuscation?*

An interpretation should illuminate words--should "shed light on" them, or "bring out" their meaning, or "give" them meaning.

The Trinity and the Incarnation may provide a way to understand some of the apparent contradictions of scripture, resolving them into meaningful paradoxes. Or at least they may serve to *enshrine* some aspects of the mystery, as it were--even if they don't necessarily "explain" it.

As with any interpretation of the Bible, however, the Trinity and Incarnation do not necessarily illuminate *all* of the apparent contradictions to be found in scripture. In fact, the Trinity and Incarnation may even *obscure* the meaning of what would otherwise be rather straightforward passages of scripture.... :

A) *"Jesus is God"*

Let us take one popular understanding, or expression, of the Trinity as an example: "Jesus is God".¹³ "Jesus is God" may offer a valid interpretation of the paradox "The Father and I are one", or of "Before Abraham was, I am," (though, naturally, there are other possible interpretations of these words as well). But, again, keep in mind that the *words* "Jesus is God" are not "Biblical", in the sense that they do not appear anywhere in the Bible. Strictly speaking, they are not even found in the Athanasian creed. They are, rather, an *equation* which the Bible--full of metaphor and paradox, *not* mathematics or Greek philosophy--does not make, at least not "in so many words".

What happens, then, when we apply this equation--this "flattening out" (as it were) of the rounded and resounding paradoxes--
to *other* verses of the Bible?

Is the meaning of those verses illuminated, or obscured?

Can we be *consistent* in our interpretation of every part of scripture if we insist that Jesus is, quite literally, God?

¹³There are other interpretations of the Trinity which are less "literal", less flatly equational, as it were. However, for the purposes of examining what happens when we try to translate the paradoxes of scripture into words not actually found in the scriptures, let us use the words "Jesus is God"--flatly interpreted--for now. By "flatly interpreted" I mean read like an equation instead of like a mystery open to various interpretations. For we should remember that even the *words* "Jesus is God" need not be read "flatly"--that is, they *could* be interpreted in more than one way.

Take the words "*God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified* ," for example. If we say, *flatly* , that "Jesus is God," how do we interpret these words? Can we read them as "God has made *himself* both Lord and Christ"?

Or take the words "*But God raised him up ...*", and, "*This Jesus God raised up ...*". If Jesus *is* God, then what is happening here? How do we interpret these verses? Is God raising God up?

Or take "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God .*" If the Word was God and God was the Word--i.e. if they were identical--then we could say "In the beginning was God, and God was with God, and God was God", but does this shed any light on the scripture? Does this illuminate John's hymn? Is this meaning-*full* ?

Or take, "*And the Word became flesh .*" Does "became" mean "turned into"? If not, what does it mean? If God, the Creator, is the Word--or if the Word *is* God--then has the Creator "become" creation? If not, what *has* happened?

Or take "*I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God* ". If Jesus is God, then what is he saying? "I, God, my God, your God, am ascending to Myself"?

Or take "*a voice from heaven, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased .*" Is this God literally talking about himself: "This is I myself, with whom I am well pleased"?

Or take "*But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God..* " Has God sat down at the right hand of God?

Or take "*So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, 'Thou art my Son....'* " Do the words "Jesus is God" help us understand what the writer is trying to say here?

Or take "*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers....to him who was able to save him from death.... Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest....*" Did God pray to himself? Did God designate himself high priest? Did God "learn obedience"? Was God "made perfect"?

Or take "*For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brethren .*" If "he who sanctifies" is Jesus, our brother, then, according to this passage, he and we "have all one origin": presumably God. But if Jesus *is* God, then how do we interpret this passage?

Or take "*The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 'For God has put all things in subjection under his feet.'* But when it says, '*All things are put in subjection under him,*' it is plain that he is excepted who put all things under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one ." Are we to understand that "God himself will also be subjected to himself who put all things under himself?" Doesn't that destroy the very point Paul is making: "it is plain that *he is excepted* who put all things under him" ?

Or take, "*But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only* ". If "Jesus is God", then a part of God does not know what another part of God knows?

Or take "*He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation* ". If "he" is "God", then God is also the "first-born of all creation"? Can the creator be creation?

Or take, "*And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done* ". Who is Jesus talking to? Himself? If Jesus is God, why does he speak of his will as if it were different from the Father's?

Or take Hosea 6:2 (which Christians believe refers to Christ's resurrection): "*After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him* ". The "he" here is YHWH. If this verse refers to *Christ's* resurrection, and if Jesus is YHWH, then how do we interpret this verse?

Or take "*no man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us*" (1 John 4:7). If Jesus is God, then can we still say that no one has ever seen God?

Or take, "*If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved* ." Are we to understand by this that Jesus is God and that God raised God from the dead?

Does "the Bible say" that we are to confess with our lips that Jesus is God?

What do you think the Bible says?

Now, take a few minutes to review the Athanasian creed. This creed is not exactly "equational" in its interpretation of the paradoxes of scripture. It does not quite say, *flatly*, that "Jesus is God". Or does it? What *does* it say? Does the creed--in its full version--do a better job of illuminating the meaning of the verses examined above than the "Jesus is God" version of the Trinity?

Yes? No?

Explain. Give examples.



"Big Bob says he's getting tired of you saying he doesn't really exist."

B) "the Son of God""I in him and he in me "....."a man "

Jesus is referred to in all sorts of ways: "in the form of God", "a man", "lord", "Christ", "Son of God", "image of God", "Word", etc.

We find, however, that he is never unequivocally (i.e. flatly) equated with God. Nowhere do we even find the *words* (however we might interpret them) "Jesus is God" or "I am God" or even "I am the Father", for example. He is, however, unequivocally called "a man", and, in many ways and on many occasions distinguishes himself from God: "the word I speak is not my word...", "the Father is greater than I...", "My Father and your Father, my God and your God...", "Our Father who art in heaven....", "not my will, but thine, be done...", "I am the Son of God", etc.

Thus, although some mystical, paradoxical, or relatively obscure passages *may* be *interpreted* to mean that Jesus is God (e.g. "the Father and I are one", or, "Before Abraham was, I am"), Jesus is at least as often distinguished from God in ways less open to mystical interpretations. 14

In general, when we are faced with a variety of passages describing someone, or something, or some relationship, and when these passages range in kind from those which are mystical, obscure, or seemingly contradictory to those which are straightforward and relatively obvious, how do we go about harmonizing them all? Do we try to interpret the obvious in ways which harmonize with our understanding of the more obscure, or, conversely, do we try to interpret the obscure passages in ways which harmonize with our understanding of the relatively obvious and easy-to-understand passages?

Juliet is the sun!
Juliet is a girl.

Do we try to understand "girl" in terms of "sun" or "sun" in terms of "girl"? Do we try to understand how a girl might also literally be the nearest star, which we call "sun", or do we try to understand how the attributes of this star might somehow also be found or perceived in the "girl"? Or do we revolutionize our concept of both "girl" and "sun", seeing both as "one", yet "distinguishable"?

¹⁴ In this world of beings, all apparently separate and at odds with each other, the "oneness" and "peace" of Being is *mystical*, that is, beyond the grasp of the intellect. "Mystery" does not necessarily imply "falsehood". And the Trinity is hardly to be rejected on the grounds that it is a mystery. For, of course, even the Greek counsel to "know thyself" is beyond the grasp of the intellect, for, as the Hindu Upanishads ask, "Can the knower be known?" For the intellect, the answer involves a contradiction. For the intellect, the father of science, the Knower and the process of Knowing and the Known must all be distinct: "I" can "look at" a "flower"--but the flower is not I; "I" can "look at" an "image of myself" in a mirror--but the image is not I; "I" can study the brain--but the brain is not "I". "I" can "know" an "object". But can the object of knowledge know itself? Can I know I? Can Knower, Knowing, and Known be three and yet one? But "self-knowledge" implies that, indeed, the knower, the knowing, and the known *are one*. And so the intellect stands before this mystery either bewildered and angry--or humbled and at peace, having reached its limit. And so, it seems to me, the Trinity is hardly to be rejected on the basis of its being a "mystery".

C) "me" "the Father" "a man"

He who has seen me has seen the Father. --John 14

*You seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth
which I heard from God.* --John 8

Contradiction or Paradox?

How do **you** read?

D) "*one's own interpretation*"

"No prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation", Peter says (2 Peter 1:20).

Now, what does Peter *mean* ? i.e. how do we *interpret* his words , namely, that "no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation"? With another word, perhaps: humility. That is, perhaps we should argue about "words" a little less, seek out *meaning* a little more, and recognize the influence of our own fallible minds when it comes to interpreting words a lot more often.

"He that will be saved is compelled thus to think of the Trinity... "

What do **you** think?

E) "human tradition "

Paul warns the Colossians (2:8-10):

See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe¹⁵, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fulness of life in him who is the head of all rule and authority. (RSV)

Make sure that no one traps you and deprives you of your freedom by some secondhand, empty, rational philosophy based on the principles of this world instead of on Christ. In his body lives the fulness of divinity, and in him you too find your own fulfillment, in the one who is the head of every Sovereignty and Power. (JB)

Now, passages such as these are, today, sometimes quoted under the assumption--the interpretation--that Paul is warning Christians about people who would question the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. That *may* be true. But then again...

The doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation could themselves be considered that very "human tradition" Paul speaks of, could they not? After all, since these doctrines are not found in the actual text of the New Testament, they must represent a *tradition of human interpretation* of the words of that text, must they not? ¹⁶

And what could be more human, more philosophical, more hair-splitting, more (potentially) time-wasting and smoke-screening--more "Greek"--than speculations and endless debates as to the Unity of Three and the Three-ness of Unity?

And what could be more like "human tradition" than some of the historical consequences and historical "fruits" of the establishment and propagation of those doctrines? **Remember:** The politics surrounding the Councils involved the forced exile of those whose views were not popular. And Crusades, Inquisitions, and Holy Roman Conquest are hardly mere "blips" on the historical screen of beliefs and the fruit of beliefs, are they? From "compelled thus to think" to just "compelled" there is not such a great leap, is there? ¹⁷

¹⁵Note that "elemental spirits of the universe"--which *sounds almost like* "spirits" or "demons" or "goblins", or some such thing--is, in the Jerusalem Bible, translated/interpreted as "principles" and "rational philosophy".

¹⁶Note: the Roman Catholic Church would probably maintain that the tradition itself is infallible in this regard--i.e. that the majority vote of the Council of Nicea was itself the will of God, or the interpretation of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁷Some maintain that these things are only the result of the "human" side of the otherwise "holy" Church, and that the doctrines of the Church are true, in spite of what some of their proponents have done or said. But, again, "compelled thus to think" is very strong language, and it *could* be argued that it reflects the bitterness of rival bishops more than it does the love of Jesus Christ.

Some might point to the words "in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily," and then claim (interpret) that Paul is "telling us" that Jesus is God Incarnate, and exclusively so, and that therefore Paul could not have meant the Trinity and Incarnation when he spoke of "human tradition". Possibly.

But, as usual, all words are open to interpretation: "dwells bodily" does not, as a matter of fact, have only one possible reading. And, of course, as usual, there are *other* words to be found in the Bible too, words which defy exclusive deification of Jesus and which, instead, suggest (i.e. could be interpreted to mean) that divinity dwells in all of us as we sanctify human relationships through the practice of oneness, or love.

If, in Jesus, "the son of God" and "the son of man"--a "*brother*" to man (Heb 2:11), "the light that enlightens every man," "the light *in the world*" (John 1), "the first-born *of creation* through whom *all things* were made" (Col 15:1)--if, in him, in the very heart of creation, the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, then we *could* (perhaps) say that in all men, too, the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily ¹⁸: "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"... "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you".... "he is the head of the body, the church"... "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me"...

That is, we *could* interpret all this to mean that Deity dwells bodily, that is, in us, when we love each other and live love--break bread, drink, table, sup, take nourishment--together: "we, though many, are one body in Christ"... "the bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?"... "*he was known to them in the breaking of the bread*".

What do **you** think? ¹⁹

¹⁸ Whether or not, in us, that deity is fully, consciously, realized may be another matter...

¹⁹In the second letter of Peter, where we find the words "*no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation*", we also find: "*but false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies*". Some of us apply the words "false teacher" to those who question the Trinity or the Incarnation. Some of us do so sincerely, according to our consciences, after having thought deeply and prayerfully about these things. Some of us, however, apply the label "false teacher" to one who disagrees with our interpretation of the Bible--not because we feel, deeply and sincerely, that Love is being attacked by what the false teacher teaches, but, rather, merely because the other person disagrees with us, or because they frighten us, or because they make us feel uneasy, or question things we have always assumed. It would behoove us to be careful in our judgements, would it not? As we judge, so will we be judged, will we not?

F) *The Gospel:* *interpretation?* *or* "*breaking bread together*"?
 creeds? *or* "*Christ crucified*"?
 us and them? *or* "*one man in place of two*"?

Much time and effort is spent on arguing about "what the Bible says", and yet, many times, we forget that what we are really arguing about is our differing *interpretations* of what the Bible says.

That is not to say that all interpretations are equally valid, of course--at least not from the standpoint of accurately identifying what the writers of the New Testament actually *meant* to say. But, of course, those writers are not with us today to tell us which of us has "got it right", so to speak. In their absence, then, we can only appeal to each other's "reason", or "common sense", or "inner light", or "willingness to listen to the Holy Spirit"--but, alas, what is sensible to one is not always sensible to another, and what the Spirit says to one doesn't always seem to be what He says to another (or, at least, we don't always seem to interpret Him in the same way). We can quote from the Bible and throw the words at each other--but to quote is to do nothing but repeat the very words being argued about, as if repetition of the *words themselves* could show the other person why their *interpretation* of the words is "wrong" and ours is "right"! Even if we refer to other words from other parts of the Bible to support our argument, those words too will necessarily be subject to interpretation.

Whether or not the Bible is *The Very Words of God*--i.e. both "infallible" and "complete"--it is also, in fact, a collection of many different texts with no single "forward" or "preface" explaining how we are supposed to read it all; neither is there any "study guide" or "workbook" or "teacher's edition" that comes with it to tell us how we are supposed to interpret it. Some claim that the Bible itself tells us how to interpret it: but "what the Bible says" about itself is *itself* open to interpretation.²⁰ Some claim that "tradition" tells us how to interpret. But the traditions also differ...

Our interpretations will always differ, it seems. Even the creeds--which we devise in order to bring about preciseness or uniformity in belief--are themselves not uniformly interpreted.

²⁰ There are, however, words in the Bible that speak of how other words in the Bible should be read: "yet Jesus did not say..." (John 21:23); "Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him...There are some things in [his letters] hard to understand" (2Peter3:15-16); "no prophecy is a matter of one's own interpretation" (2Peter1:20); "about this we have much to say which is hard to explain...you need milk, not solid food...Let us...go on to maturity...And this we will do if God permits" (Heb 5:11-12; 6:1-3); "I speak in a human way" (Rom 3:5); "I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations" (Rom 6:19); "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 15:12-13); "I have said this to you in figures" (John 16:25). In other words, we could "say" (i.e. interpret) that "the Bible says" that we should be *very careful* in our interpretations, that we shouldn't take everything literally, that different points of view exist in the scriptures, and that the Bible is not the final revelation. We could say that the Bible says these things--but, as always, we must remember that when we say "the Bible says", we can only mean "we interpret the Bible thus".

When we find ourselves in disagreement, we often look askance at each other, suspecting dishonesty, ignorance, or demon-possession at work in the heretical notions being expressed by our neighbor. And we may be right. Or, we may be wrong....

But whether we are right or wrong, isn't it true that, miraculously, what we expect of our neighbor is often what we end up getting from him? That is, when we look with suspicion, we find our suspicions to be well-founded; when we look with forbearance, we find our patience well-rewarded. Whether or not this is an absolute law of God or nature, haven't we all experienced this at one time or another? And, when the tables are turned, don't we in fact find it hard to resist taking the very shape imposed upon us by the mold of our brother's judgement upon us? When he suspects foul play on our part, though we are innocent, is it easy to feel and act innocent anyway, while standing under the steady gaze of his suspiciousness? And, when he looks kindly upon us, with forbearance, in spite of our *not* being innocent, isn't it easier for us then to seek to make amends and not only be forgiven but also to forgive whatever perceived slight it was that made us do whatever it was we did in the first place?

There is, apparently (i.e. we *may* interpret the Bible to be saying that there is...), no divine arbiter of justice when it comes to judgement, for, "*as the Bible says* ": "the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son" (John 5). Yet this same Son says, "I judge no one" (John 8), and, "judge not, that you be not judged" (Matt 7). What can all this mean? That the Father has given all judgement to Jesus, and yet Jesus will not judge?!?

Well, maybe the answer lies in something Jesus told Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16). When we bind our brother, he is bound--when we free him, he is free: he will be (at least more or less) as either our suspicions or our forbearance will allow him to be, will he not?

And, as we have done it unto *him* --"the least of these my brethren" (Matt 25)--so we have done it unto the Son, that is, unto *ourselves* , have we not? For "my Father" is the same Father as "your Father" (John 20:17), after all. That is, *we* are, in some way, "the Son" of "the Father", are we not? And we *may* indeed judge--for all judgement has been given us. But, since "with the judgement we pronounce we will be judged", it would, in fact, behoove us to "judge not"....

After all, the Lord's prayer says not "forgive us so that we might then forgive others", but rather, "forgive us our debts *as we have forgiven* those who are in debt to us". All judgment has been given to the Son--that is, to us. We judge and so are judged--not by God or Jesus of Nazareth--but by our own judgement.

Sound reasonable? Sound "Biblical?" Sound true?

What do **you** think?

How do **you** interpret?

How do **you** "pick and choose"?

If, to one person, the words of scripture mean that Jesus is in fact God, is it wise of him to condemn his neighbor--to judge him, to cut him off, to cast him out, *to look askance at him* --for having a different interpretation?

If, to another person, the words of scripture mean that Jesus is not God, is it wise for him to condemn his neighbor--to judge him, to cut him off, to cast him out, *to look askance at him* --for having a different interpretation?

Certainly, the power of wholeness, integrity, and salvation that many people experience in their devotion to Christ--however they may interpret the words of scripture--is a precious thing. So, interpretation--a thing so frail, so fraught with misunderstanding, so prone to causing divisions--should not stand in the way of personal transformation, freedom, and new life, should it? For Thomas, maybe Jesus is God (whatever that means for him), for Mary maybe Jesus is Rabbi (whatever that means for her), for Peter maybe Jesus is Christ (whatever that means for him).... But interpretation should not get in the way of getting saved, or breaking bread together, or attending to the neighbor left for dead along the road, or visiting the sick, or letting our light shine, or forgiving each other, or refraining from judgement....

Yes? No?

Not all interpretations are life- or love-supporting. To seek out truth, and to "test" all things--to honestly evaluate all points of views--is therefore probably both good and necessary. We should not be spineless, or sink integrity and salvation in a mire of undiscerning "toleration". But, is it really wise to go beyond the actual words and metaphors and paradoxes found in scripture, and attempt to *lay down the interpretative law* in creeds and doctrines and dogma, pretending to both ourselves and others that our own, necessarily *human* interpretation has somehow been by-passed?

Is it really wise to go beyond "the Son of God"
and say, instead, *dogmatically* , "God the Son"?

Is "he that will be saved" *really* "compelled thus to think of the Trinity"?

If the scripture says "confess with your lips that Jesus is *Lord* " (from Rom 10:9), is it wise to *insist* that one should therefore confess that Jesus is *God* ?

Juliet is the sun!
Juliet is my beloved!
Juliet is a girl.

Who is Juliet? *What* is Juliet?
....*to whom* ?
....*for whom* ?
....*and why* ?

What do **you** think?

Step 13) ²¹ The Resurrection

Some of us believe that Jesus' physical body was in fact literally raised from the dead. Some of us feel that we can, to our own satisfaction, personally square this interpretation with other things the Bible says as well. And, of course, this interpretation has power: interpreted as a sign of Christ's victory over death--both spiritual and physical--the resurrection can release us from fear, and free us to love more boldly, more wholly.

But does "the Bible say" that we are "compelled thus to think" of the Resurrection in order to be whole, to be saved? Or are other interpretations not only possible, but potentially redemptive as well?

Think --really think --before answering:

What is the real heart, the very essence,
the absolute core and foundation of your faith?

What *really matters* to you? What belief, for you, is--or must be--
unshakeable, unquestionable? Why?

If another person interprets scripture differently,
is that a threat to your faith? Why or why not?

²¹Thirteen: not necessarily a bad number, considering that the 13 North American colonies were able to win their revolution; and Christ plus the 12 disciples makes 13!

I. *"with their bodies"*

For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man...at whose coming all men will rise again with their bodies and will give an account of their own works...This is the catholic faith which, except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved.

--Athanasian Creed

What do you think "with their bodies" means?

II. *"their eyes were opened..."*

While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him....And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself..... When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight.

--Luke 24

Interesting, isn't it? He is recognized not in the interpretation of scripture, but in the breaking of bread.... And he vanishes out of their "sight" when their "eyes" are "open".... That is, they seem to see him physically before they "recognize" him; and then, as soon as they *recognize* him, and their "eyes" are "open", they no longer see him physically: "he vanished out of their sight".

When Jesus said "the eye is the lamp of the body" (Matt 6),
what did he mean by "eye" and "body"?

III. prophecies (in translation)

Sometimes the New Testament writers quoted from a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures called the Septuagint (or LXX). In Acts 2:25-28, for example, Luke (the assumed author of Acts) portrays Peter as quoting from the LXX version of a psalm of David. In this passage, Luke has Peter interpreting the psalm as applying prophetically to the resurrection of Jesus. As you read, do not forget that this is an English translation of a Greek translation of an ancient Hebrew text... :

Acts 2: 25-28

For David says concerning him [Jesus], "I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will dwell in hope. For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let thy Holy One see corruption. Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou wilt make me full of gladness with thy presence." (RSV)

...as David says of him [Jesus], "I saw the Lord before me always, for with him at my right hand nothing can shake me. So my heart was glad and my tongue cried out with joy; my body, too, will rest in the hope that you will not abandon my soul to Hades nor allow your holy one to experience corruption. You have made known the way of life to me, you will fill me with gladness through your presence." (JB)

Now, Luke has Peter go on to make the following argument based on the above quotation, which--*do not forget*--is an *English translation of the Greek-language version of the Hebrew psalm*:

"no one can deny that the patriarch David himself is dead and buried....But since he was a prophet...he foresaw and spoke about...the resurrection of Christ: he is the one who was not abandoned to Hades, and whose body did not experience corruption. God raised this man Jesus to life...[and made him] both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:29-36).²²

Thus, Luke has Peter make the argument that, since "David himself is dead and buried", David could not have been referring to himself in this psalm, for *his* body presumably decayed and "experienced corruption". However, "since [David] was a prophet...he foresaw and spoke about...the resurrection of Christ", whose body, Peter (according to Luke) asserts, was raised from the dead and so "did not experience corruption".

However, look at (a couple English versions of) the original Hebrew version of the psalm:

²² Notice that we find, once again, that the Greek in which Acts was written has used the same word "lord" for both Jesus ("Lord and Christ") and YHWH ("I saw the Lord").

Psalm 16:8-11

I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also dwells secure. For thou dost not give me up to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the Pit. Thou does show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fulness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures for evermore. (RSV)

I keep Yahweh before me always, for with him at my right hand nothing can shake me. So my heart exults, my very soul rejoices, my body, too, will rest securely, for you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, nor allow the one you love to see the Pit; you will reveal the path of life to me, give me unbounded joy in your presence, and at your right hand everlasting pleasures. (JB)

Notice that here, in the Hebrew version, the word "corruption" is missing. Where the LXX version of the psalm says "corruption", the Hebrew says "pit".

The Jerusalem Bible comments on this as follows:

Quoted according to LXX. In the Hebr. text the psalmist prays only for deliverance from imminent death 'You will not allow your faithful one to see the pit'. Hence, the argument presupposes the Greek version which, by translating 'pit' (=grave) as 'corruption', introduces a new idea.

The "argument" being referred to here is the one quoted above (Acts 2:29-36), where Luke has Peter saying that Jesus was "the one whose body did not experience corruption". And, as the Jerusalem Bible quite rightly points out, this argument obviously presupposes, or depends on, the existence of the Greek word "corruption". However, the word "corruption" existed only in the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. And thus, "a new idea" has indeed been added to the psalm, which, in the original Hebrew, speaks only of the psalmist's prayer "for deliverance from imminent death"--not of the incorruptibility of anyone's body.

In other words, Luke has Peter arguing on the basis of a "prophecy" that exists only in the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures--not in the Hebrew scriptures themselves.

The Septuagint was used widely by Greek-speaking Jews.

But what do you think Hebrew-speaking Jews would have thought of Peter's argument?

What do **you** think of an argument based on a Greek translation of the original Hebrew?

IV. *Seeing and Believing*

Is seeing believing?

Is believing seeing?

A) *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe*

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you". Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

We could certainly interpret this passage literally, like an eye-witness account at a court hearing. If we feel that we can square this reading with the other gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances, and with other things the Bible "says", then fine--we need look no further. We could say, in other words, that Jesus showed his risen physical body to Thomas--and that Thomas believed because he saw Jesus in the flesh.

And yet, the *point* of the passage seems to be "blessed are those who have *not seen*"

We could interpret this to mean simply that it would have been *even better* if Thomas had believed the reports of the other disciples, who had themselves seen Jesus alive, instead of insisting on seeing him for himself. That is, maybe Jesus is saying that those who believe that he rose physically from the grave *on the basis of first or second-hand reports* --i.e. without seeing his body for themselves--are "blessed".

According to the gospels, however, the other disciples did not "believe" until they "saw". They too doubted the first-hand reports of other disciples who *had* seen the Lord. Some even doubted after having seen.

Should Thomas have been any different?

Should *we* be any different?

B)*"Do not be faithless, but believing"*

In what sense, exactly, was Thomas supposed to "be believing"?
How do **you** interpret?

Was he supposed to believe that a physical resurrection had occurred, even though he himself hadn't seen it? Why or why not?

Was he supposed to be in a miracle-readiness sort of mind--a predisposition to believe that even death could be defeated? Why or why not?

Was he supposed to "open" his spiritual "eyes" and "see" the Life and Light still shining beyond the illusory physical world of sin and decay and death? Why or why not?

What do **you** think?

What is the point of the Resurrection? What is the lesson?

In what sense are *we* supposed to "be believing"?

C)*"It is I myself...flesh and bones"*

-- Luke 24

Some of us say that the risen Christ is "seen" in our flesh and blood neighbor, and that, as we have done unto our neighbor, so we have done unto him--literally. Some of us say that this is what the scripture means when it says that Christ said "it is I myself...flesh and bones..."; and, "as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, so you have done it unto me". That is, love is known and demonstrated not by saying "Lord! Lord!" (Matt 7:21) or by any devotional attitude to Jesus of Nazareth, but by the light we offer to our flesh and blood brother: "no man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:7).

However, some of us say that seeing and touching Christ in our flesh and blood brothers and sisters is not the same thing as seeing or touching Christ in the way that Thomas did when he placed his finger "on the mark of the nails", or placed his hand "in Jesus side". Some of us say that, in order for words like "it is I myself...flesh and bones" to be taken seriously and not "twisted" out of context or "spiritualized" away into meaninglessness--that is, in order to avoid "picking and choosing" and "making the scripture say what we want it to say"--we have to believe that the appearances of Jesus to his disciples were not only of spiritual significance but "of the body" too.

And some of us say other things.....

What do **you** say?

V. *Beyond the words of The Word*

A) *Think twice*

"He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay" (Matt 28); they gave...money to the soldiers and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep'" (Matt 28); "It is I myself, handle me, and see, for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have...have you anything to eat?" (Luke 24) "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing" (John 20).

These words cry out to be taken literally, do they not? The risen Jesus tells people to touch him, to look at him. And he eats food. And all four gospels say the tomb was found empty--where else, then, could the physical body have been, if not "risen" (i.e. up and out of the grave)? And Matthew tells us that the religious leaders of the day planned a cover-up (i.e. "Tell people..."). Would they have tried to spread the story that the disciples stole the body if the body were, in fact, still in the tomb?

Again, these words about the empty tomb, the eating, the being touched and being seen all "cry out" to be taken literally, do they not? However, as usual, there are other words in the Bible as well--words which *could* make us think twice about the validity of a literal reading of these things.

We read, for example: *their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight* (Luke 24). Now, we could interpret this literally, i.e. physically, to mean that the disciples finally recognized him physically, as flesh and blood, and then, as soon as they did so, he "vanished"--almost like a schoolboy playing tricks. We can imagine the disciples rubbing their eyes and asking each other, "did you see that?" Normally, however, it is when our physical eyes are opened that we see bodies, and when our physical eyes are closed that the bodies disappear. But in Luke we read that just the opposite appears to have happened: it was when the disciples *eyes* were *opened* that the body *disappeared*.

What "eyes" are being referred to here?

What does Luke mean by "eyes" being "opened"?

What did the disciples *see* ?

B) *"physical"...."spiritual"*

Did the disciples see a physical body that "drew near" and then "vanished" suddenly; that "came" and "stood among them", though "the doors were shut" (John 20); that was "lifted up" into the sky and hidden by a "cloud" (Acts)? Perhaps they did.

However, if we believe that the resurrection was "physical", or "of the body", then mustn't we also admit that the very notion of "physical" has come to mean something we could, in fact, call "non-physical", or "spiritual"? For we do not normally think of physical bodies as appearing and disappearing, after all.

What does "physical" mean?

What does "spiritual" mean?

What might "spiritual body" mean?

C) *paradox and contradiction as a "sign" ?*

Remember steps 5 and 6, in which you attempted to harmonize the gospel accounts of the birth and resurrection of Jesus. Did you find that the gospel writers always matched up on all the physical, space-time details? If so--and if you are satisfied with your harmonization--then no problem.

But if not, perhaps the contradictions on the level of physical detail could be taken as a "sign" for us to look beyond space-time considerations, beyond literal interpretation. Yes, the gospels seem to be written like a story, with one event happening after another, as if to suggest that this is what happened--physically, literally--on such and such a day in such and such a place at such and such a time. But, again, *if* we found that the gospels did not agree on the where's and when's and who's and what's, might not this be "a sign" for us to look beyond the literal appearances of the stories and to seek out another level of interpretation--to look beyond the *words* to the *Word* , so to speak?

D) *the Word in words/ Christ in our neighbors/Unity in diversity*

Yes, the gospels sometimes confront us with vivid narrative images--images that "cry out" to be taken literally, physically, according to "obvious" appearances. However, our neighbor does too! That is, our neighbor sometimes presents us with very vivid images indeed of his alienation from us, images of separation, sin, sickness, and death which "cry out" to be recognized and accepted as final, as fact, as impossible to heal, as being beyond forgiveness--does he not?

And yet, wherever they stand on the literal-to-non-literal interpretive spectrum, most people would probably agree that the Resurrection *means* that these very appearances of suffering and destruction are not the whole story, that the "obviousness" of death is not the final word, is not the final judge of the meaning of human life--that truth, in other words, is somehow *beyond appearances*.²³

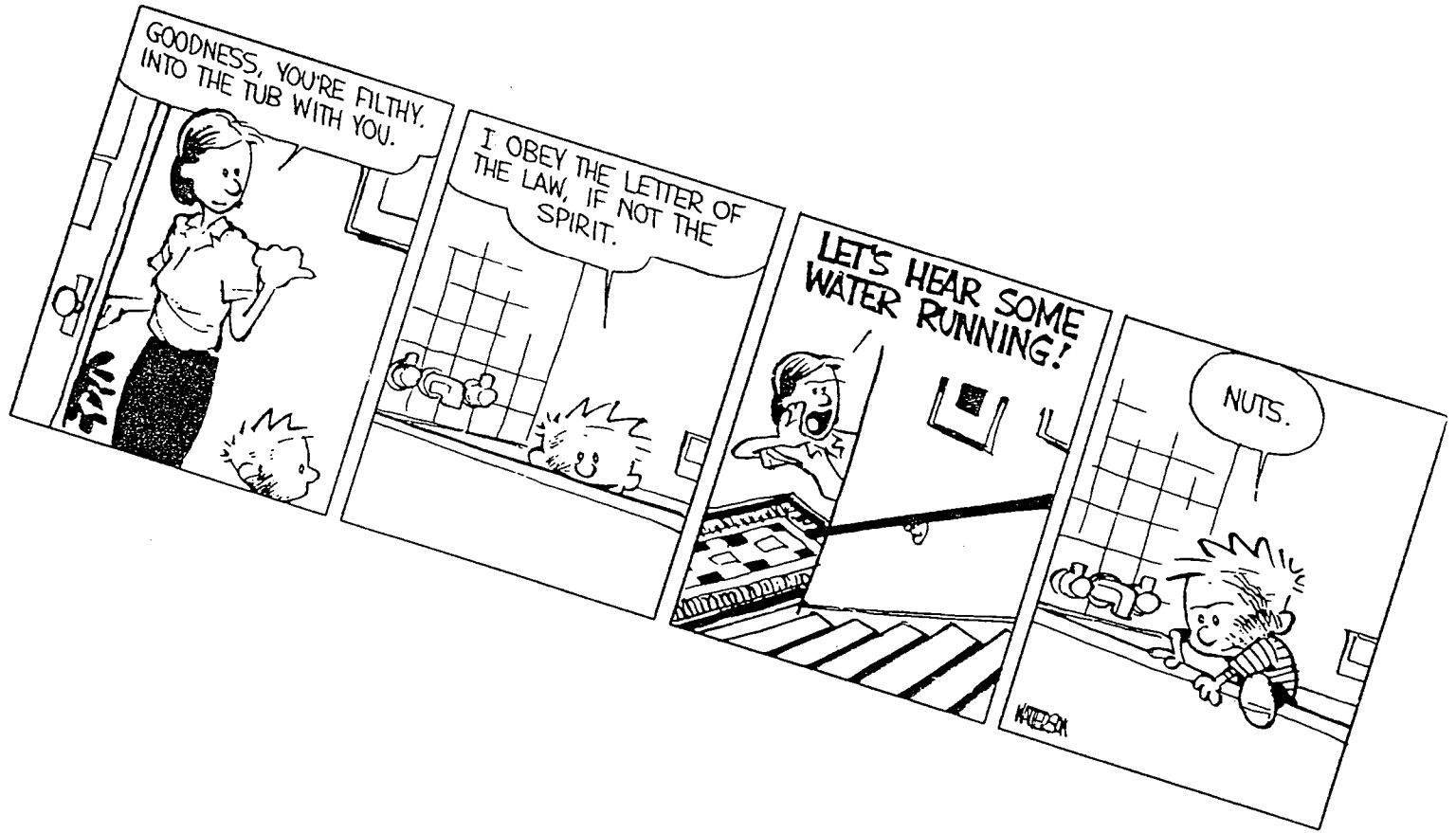
Is looking beyond the *words* to the *Word*, then, really any more difficult than seeing *Christ* in this irritating, irritable, unfaithful, abandoned, accusing, accused, pitiful, pitying, ravishing, ravished, seductive, seduced, blasphemous, deceiving, deceived, ignorant, angry, weak, overpowering, mean, arrogant, self-righteous, heretical, sickly, ugly, embarrassing, murderous, mortal, evil *neighbor* of ours? Is it any more difficult than seeing Christ in our own *selves*?

Paul says that in Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Greek nor Jew--for all are one in Christ. Is this truth what we would call "obvious"? Do the *appearances* of the world seem to confirm, or to deny, it?

Do our physical eyes see oneness?

Do our physical eyes see truth?

²³Even scientific truth, based on observation of the physical world--based on looking honestly, reasonably, *at appearances*, so to speak--shows us that honesty leads us *through* and *beyond* our first impressions, ultimately revealing a vision of the world which is usually vigorously at odds with our subjective impressions of the world and our common notions of what is "possible": the earth which is steady under our feet turns into a whirling globe circling the sun which appears to remain still; the speed of light is constant no matter what frame of reference you measure it from; stars collapse leaving black holes out of which even light cannot escape; metal boxes with metal poles connected to what is apparently nothing draw music and voices out of the air; a voice bounces out into space and back to earth, travels along a wire, and speaks to us words of comfort from a loved one who lives on the other side of what turns out to be a round planet...



E) *underestimating the leap of faith required to pass over into a new understanding of scripture*

Remember: *"any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (Gen 17). This does not exactly agree--on a literal level--with "real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal" (Rom 2:29)--does it?*

Look closely at the words: *"God said to Abraham, "* and, *"this is my covenant ,"* and, *"in the flesh of his foreskin ,"* and, *"throughout your generations,"* and, *"in your flesh an everlasting covenant "*. Read literally, this is about as unambiguous as language gets, isn't it? That is, the God-given commandment to literally, physically circumcise all males who wished to participate in the life of God's people is quite clear. Indeed, it is as clear and unambiguous as Paul's rejection of the binding, literal nature of this very same commandment: *real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal*. Is it not? Indeed, Paul sometimes even gets vicious when he attacks the people who advocate circumcision: *"Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you....I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine....I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves!" (Gal 5:2-12)* ²⁴

Those early Christians who felt that this God-given "sign of the covenant" should not be discontinued--i.e. the "circumcision party" (Acts 11)-- are almost like the "bad guys" of the movie, at least according to the script written by the "good guys" (Luke, Paul, John, etc.).

According to the "good guys", the circumcision party are the ones who couldn't understand how the grace of God could first obliterate a time-honored literal reading of scripture--a reading which divided people into "the circumcision" and "the uncircumcision" (Eph 2)--and then replace it with a wholly non-literal reading that allowed the gap between Jew and Gentile to be bridged by love and fellowship.

Today, a couple thousand years later, there are Christians who shake their heads in wonder at the circumcision party for their inability to see what may seem "obvious" to them. But perhaps time has deceived us in this matter. Perhaps time, and emotional distance, and soothing Tradition have smoothed over the jagged edges of that revolution which Peter's and Paul's personal experiences of grace brought about: that is, things which, in scripture, *cried out*

²⁴ This passage is hard to reconcile with what we are told in Acts: *"Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews that were in those places, for they all knew that his father was Greek "* (Acts 16:3).

to be taken literally were no longer taken literally. Love, unity, and the experience of grace were made the litmus test of orthodoxy--*not* what scripture *seemed to say* ! That is, what scripture "said" was reconsidered, and the words of scripture reinterpreted, in the light of present, personal experience (Acts 15).

To the circumcision party, Paul and Peter must have seemed literally hell-bent on undermining the authority of scripture. They must have wondered how Peter and Paul could dare to say that the Gentiles need not be "burdened" with getting circumcised. After all, "the scriptures say" that any male who is not circumcised has broken God's covenant--it's all there in black and white! We can imagine the circumcision party asking Peter or Paul if they thought God would change his mind about something so important, something He said was "in your flesh an *everlasting* covenant". We can imagine them accusing Peter and Paul of "picking and choosing" which laws and commandments to follow and which to disregard--according to their own desires, or "subjective" experiences of grace, instead of the explicit, "objective" word of God. We can imagine them condemning Peter and Paul for "spiritualizing" the law away and making it irrelevant. We can see them telling Peter and Paul that even though the scriptures do speak to the spiritual aspect of circumcision--"circumcise the foreskin of your heart" (Deut. 10:16)--they nevertheless make the binding nature of the command to be physically circumcised quite clear as well. And who are we to "pick and choose", after all?

For people accustomed to reverencing the words of scripture as being the very words of God, the shift from "*in your flesh an everlasting covenant*" to "*real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal*" would naturally have come as quite a shock, would it not? What must they have thought when they heard Paul speak of the glorious Law as a "dispensation of death" (2 Cor 3) or argue that "a new Covenant" has replaced the old "everlasting" one?

It would, I think, be wrong of us to underestimate the leap of faith which Peter and Paul were asking of their Jewish-Christian brothers. Their interpretation, or re-interpretation, of scripture was revolutionary, to say the least. And most people are not comfortable with revolutions, are they?

Were **you** an early Christian--that is, a Jew--might not *you* have belonged to the circumcision party too?

Does any modern equivalent of the circumcision party exist today?

Are you a member of it?

F) *the revolutionary nature of Christian interpretation of scripture :
paradigm shift as a "sign"*

The central paradoxes and beliefs of the Christian faith involve a spiritual reinterpretation of many things which, in the Hebrew scriptures, "cry out" to be taken literally. The "kingdom" of the Messiah turns out to be "not of this world" (John 18). The long-awaited Jewish Messiah finally comes, but he turns out to be "the end of the law"--the Jewish law (Rom 10). The resurrection body is "spiritual" (1Cor15). Circumcision is "spiritual" (Rom 2). Adam is a "type of the one who was to come" (Rom 5). The Law, given by God that the people might "live and multiply", and with the understanding that it was possible to fulfill (Deut 30:11,16), turns out to be a "dispensation of death" (2 Cor 3). The two wives of Abraham are "an allegory" (Gal. 4). The "outer tent" is "symbolic for the present age" (Heb. 5). Etc. etc.

And so, if--in the name of that "one new man in place of the two" (i.e. in the name of unity and peace among "what is called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision", Eph. 2)--the Apostles were willing to fundamentally re-interpret "circumcision" and the binding nature of the Law--***something which, in the Hebrew scriptures, "cries out" to be taken literally*** -- can we be so sure that we should interpret literally (i.e. physically) everything we find in *their* writings and the writings of the early church? Might not this fundamental shift in interpretation regarding the law--this awesome shift in paradigm--itself be "a sign"? a sign to step back from interpretive judgmentalness, to step through the multiplicity of words, and to move into living and practicing that ultimate paradox, that ultimate mystery, namely, oneness?

Perhaps not . But then again...

G) *parables , paradoxes , and meaning*

What is "life" and what is "death" according to Jesus? He speaks of people living, yet dead, and people dead, yet living; people seeing, yet blind, blind, yet seeing:

"for this my son was dead, and is alive again...for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15); "he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11); "for judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind" (John 9); "the eye is the lamp of the body.." (Matt 6)

He is not speaking (at least not primarily) of their physical bodies, or their physical eyes, is he?

Why do you think Jesus speaks metaphorically, in parables,
and in paradox?

Maybe he is trying to confuse us?

Or maybe he is trying to get us to look beyond the literal, apparent
meaning of words?

Or....?

When we look "beyond" the literal, beyond the words, "where" do we look?

"Where" is truth and meaning to be found?

--in words?

--in our life experiences?

--in each other?

--in the Holy Spirit speaking to us through the words of scripture and
life experiences?

--in the Holy Spirit speaking directly to us in our minds, our hearts?

--???

Is the meaning we "see in" written words literally *in* them?

Or do we project meaning *onto* them?

Or do they *remind* us of meaning?

Or does the meaning "come" *to* us *from* the Holy Spirit, *through* the
words?

Or....?

When we say the words of scripture "speak" to us, what do we
mean, exactly?

Is it possible for the Holy Spirit to "say" different things to
different people *through the same written words* ?

What do **you** think?

H) *the Kingdom of God*

"The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed...for
behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of (or, within) you".

--Luke 17

What is the kingdom of God?

"Where" and "when", exactly, is the kingdom of God?

What do you think "in the midst of you" or "within you" means?

I) " what Paul says"

Whatever the gospels are actually "saying" about the Resurrection, it must somehow be squared with what *Paul* "says", too, mustn't it?

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his....The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God.

--Romans 6:4-11

Notice that Paul equates, or at least compares, *baptism* with Jesus' *death* . And *newness of life* with Jesus' *resurrection*..²⁵ Paul is leaping and bounding with his interpretations--he is opening words up, not dogmatically closing them down. Might it not be to the literal-minded among us, then, who think physically and not spiritually, that he says (in his characteristically bold--perhaps even abrasive--way):

"But someone will ask, "how are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be... It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body...flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." (1 Cor 15).

25" ..pointless philosophical discussions...as in the case of Hymenaeus and Philetus, the men who have gone right away from the truth and claim that the resurrection has already taken place. Some people's faith cannot stand up to them " (2 Tim 14-18). The Jerusalem Bible comments on this as follows: "*The Greek mind found the resurrection particularly hard to accept...H and P may well have given it a purely spiritual interpretation by analogy with the mystical resurrection that occurs in baptism.*" If , by "purely spiritual" the JB means "non-literal", or "non-physical", then, to argue that a non-physical interpretation of the resurrection is at least *possible* , as I have done, would be, according to the JB's interpretation of scripture, to "go right away from the truth", and, worse still, to shake the faith of some people. But perhaps H and P meant that this life was the only life, that resurrection is of benefit in this life only, and that death was the end of it (a view that Paul elsewhere, e.g. in 1 Cor 15:32, argues against, implying that it was in fact a view familiar to the early Christians). In that case, Paul would not be condemning arguments for the spiritual nature of the resurrection at all, would he? He would, rather, be condemning the notion that "this life" was all there is to "Life", and that the spiritual resurrection was good for "this life" only, wouldn't he? After all, he himself seems to be in favor of a non-physical interpretation of the resurrection "body" (1 Cor 15:35-50). And wouldn't it be equally--and for the same reason--"pointless" to try to *convince* someone whose faith was in a non-literal interpretation of the resurrection, that the resurrection *really was* " of the *physical* body? For is the resurrection a matter of "interpretation"--of each person "teaching his neighbor and saying 'Know the LORD' " (Jer 31:34)--or is it, rather, a matter of that which "never ends" (1 Cor 13)? Is the resurrection a matter of particular words--or of "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6)?

What do you think? How do you read? How do you judge?

Whom do you judge?

And,

For the Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. --1 Cor 1:22

What greater "sign" could there have been than a literal, physical resurrection from the dead to "wow" the Jews (or what greater example of "wisdom" could there be than the Athanasian creed to impress the Greeks)? *"But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews..."*: no worldly "kingdom", no literal "throne", no triumph of "statutes and laws" which their scripture said were *from God* and "everlasting", no *physically apparent* triumph or "sign" at all! *"And folly to Gentiles..."*: no *apparent* practical utility or esoteric wisdom to be found in a criminal's death on Rome's equivalent of the electric chair! *"But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God..."*: that is, the conviction that Jesus, "put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (1 Peter 3), now "lives to God" (Romans 6).

How do **you** read what Paul says?

J) "the sign of Jonah"

Christ says "no sign" would be given that "evil" generation which was always looking for signs--no sign, that is, but the "sign of Jonah" (Matt 16). Did Jonah die, physically, and then rise, physically? What was the sign of Jonah? What does "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" mean? ²⁶ Interpretation...interpretation...interpretation.... But, again--what greater "sign" could there have been than tombs literally emptied of their contents and the body of a presumed criminal suddenly starting to appear to certain, select people?

²⁶Notice that if we believe that Jesus was physically killed and buried and raised after three days, and if we interpret the "sign of Jonah" to be not Jonah's "preaching" but rather his having literally spent three days (alive) in the belly of a whale, then we must admit that Jesus himself is being anything but literal in his interpretation of what happened to Jonah, or of how Jonah's experience would apply to him!

K) *"the world will see me no more "*

Christ says, *"the world will see me no more, but you will see me...he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him"* (John 14). "The world will see me no more, but you will see me": is he saying that he will show his risen physical body (which physical eyes of "the world" could surely see) only to his followers and not to other people--being careful to appear only when no one else was around--or is he saying that only his followers will "see" him when they look beyond the physical world, when they break bread together, when they love each other, when their minds are "opened to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24)?

And Christ says, *"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead"* (Luke 16). Convinced of what? That a physical resurrection is possible? Or that loving their neighbor is the fulfillment of the law? that the body is not Life? that *"the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"* (Romans 14)? that *"flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God "* (1 Cor 15)?

What do you think?

Could someone else think otherwise?

Could someone else think otherwise and still be saved?

VI. *Epistles, Gospels, and the Gospel*

The Good News--the Gospel--is told somewhat differently by each person. In the writings called "the epistles", we find that Paul has his own style, as does Peter. John and James and Jude also write about Jesus from their own point of view. In "the gospels" (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) we also find distinct points of view. Matthew and John, for example, sometimes seem to be worlds apart in their understanding of Jesus--or at least in the way they choose to express that understanding.

However, it may be worth considering the possibility that there is an even more fundamental difference between the "epistles", taken as a group, and the "gospels", taken as a group. That is, perhaps the gospels differ from the epistles in terms of how they were written, and perhaps even in terms of how they should be interpreted.

According to many scholars, the gospels are the end product of a process which involved editing, reworking, and directly borrowing from various sources of both oral and written tradition. This theory helps to explain the overlap, the (apparent?) inconsistencies, and the varying narrative sequences that we find in the gospels. It may, however, also shed some light on what appears to be a difference between the way the resurrection is expressed in the gospels and the way the writers of the epistles spoke of it:

From the Epistles:

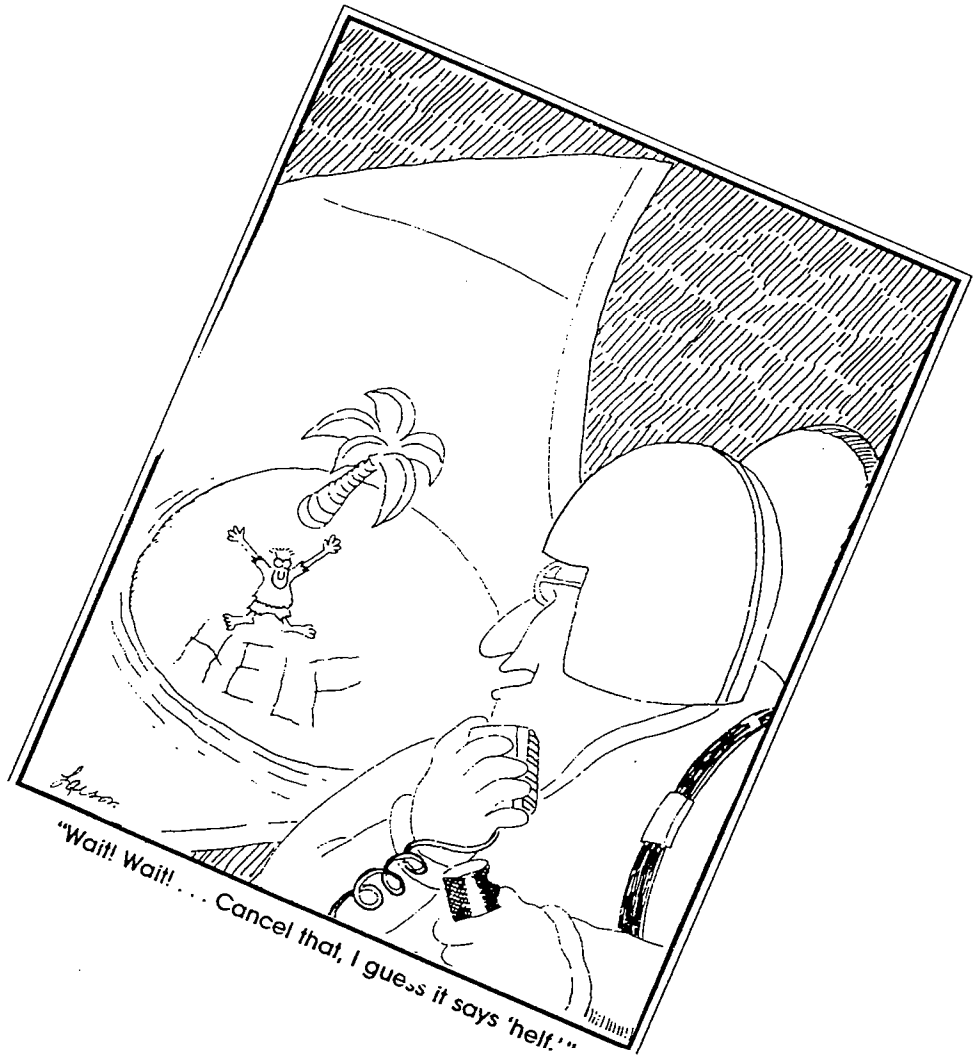
"It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body" (Paul)
"flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (Paul)
"For Christ also died...being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (Peter)

From the Gospels:

"when they went in they did not find the body"
"I have seen the Lord"
"he showed them his hands and his side"
"a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have"
"Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away'"

Do the epistles contradict the gospels, or do we simply have a paradox here?

If, on the one hand, the epistles were written by Peter and Paul to convey personal, first-hand experience or opinion, and, on the other hand, the gospels were written to conserve the community's oral tradition as a whole, could this affect our interpretation of either the epistles or the gospels? Explain.



Spencer

"Wait! Wait! . . . Cancel that, I guess it says 'hell.'"

VII. "Thus it is written..." "

Luke says that the risen Lord "opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, 'thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead' " (Luke 24). The Revised Standard Version of the Bible references this verse to Hosea 6:2:

After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

Notice that the *words* "the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead" are not found in Hosea.

What, then, do you think Christ *meant* by "thus it is written"?

If it was necessary to first "open their minds" so that the disciples could understand the scriptures, what does that say about attempts to read the Bible literally, that is, to read the Bible as if its meaning were obvious, straightforward, apparent?

The Jerusalem Bible says that "two days" or "on the third day" means "before long". If Christ's resurrection was a demonstration of the resurrection awaiting "us" ("on the third day he will raise *us* up"), then we might interpret Hosea 6:2 to mean that God will free us from spiritual bondage "soon". Or that *the Christ in us* will "soon" be made manifest, will soon "appear".

How else might we interpret Hosea 6:2?

Is there any other way to interpret "day", for example? or "raise us up"?

Step 14) The Son of God: Inter-faith Contradiction or Paradox?

I. "We stone you for blasphemy..."

"I and the Father are one," [Jesus said]. The Jews took up stones again to stone him...."We stone you...for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God." Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came...do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

--John 10:31-38

A) "the Son of God": What does this mean?

B) What do *you* think Jesus is "saying" about the accusation of blasphemy?

does he accept it?

does he deny it?

does he neither accept nor deny it?

C) What is Jesus saying i.e. what **words** has he actually spoken?
What is Jesus saying i.e. what does he **mean** by those words?

D) Note that it is "the Jews" (i.e. those who do not "hear" the "voice" of "the truth"--*not the Hebrew race as such, obviously*) who accuse Jesus of claiming to be God. Remember that it was "the Jews" who took Jesus too literally and so reviled him for saying they had to "eat" his "flesh" and "drink" his "blood". Similarly, when Jesus says, "if any one keeps my word, he will never see death," (John 8:51) the Jews, interpreting him literally, reply, "Abraham died...and [yet] you say...".

Yes, Jesus "*says....*" But do "the Jews" *hear* what Jesus *means* by the *words* he speaks? Do you think John wants the readers of his gospel to believe what "the Jews" say? In other words, do you think John wants us to believe the interpretation which "the Jews" give to the words of Jesus? Perhaps the interpretations of "the Jews" serve instead as a kind of foil--a kind of example of the *wrong* way to interpret the words of Jesus.

What do you think?

II. "They say: 'Allah has begotten a son.' Allah forbid! "

In the Koran we find the following words (or rather, the following words are an English interpretation of some Arabic words found in the Koran):

...the Christians say the Messiah is the son of Allah. Such are their assertions, by which they imitate the infidels of old...They worship their rabbis and their monks, and the Messiah the son of Mary, as gods besides Allah; though they were ordered to serve one God only. 9:30-32

They say: 'Allah has begotten a son.' Allah forbid! 2:116

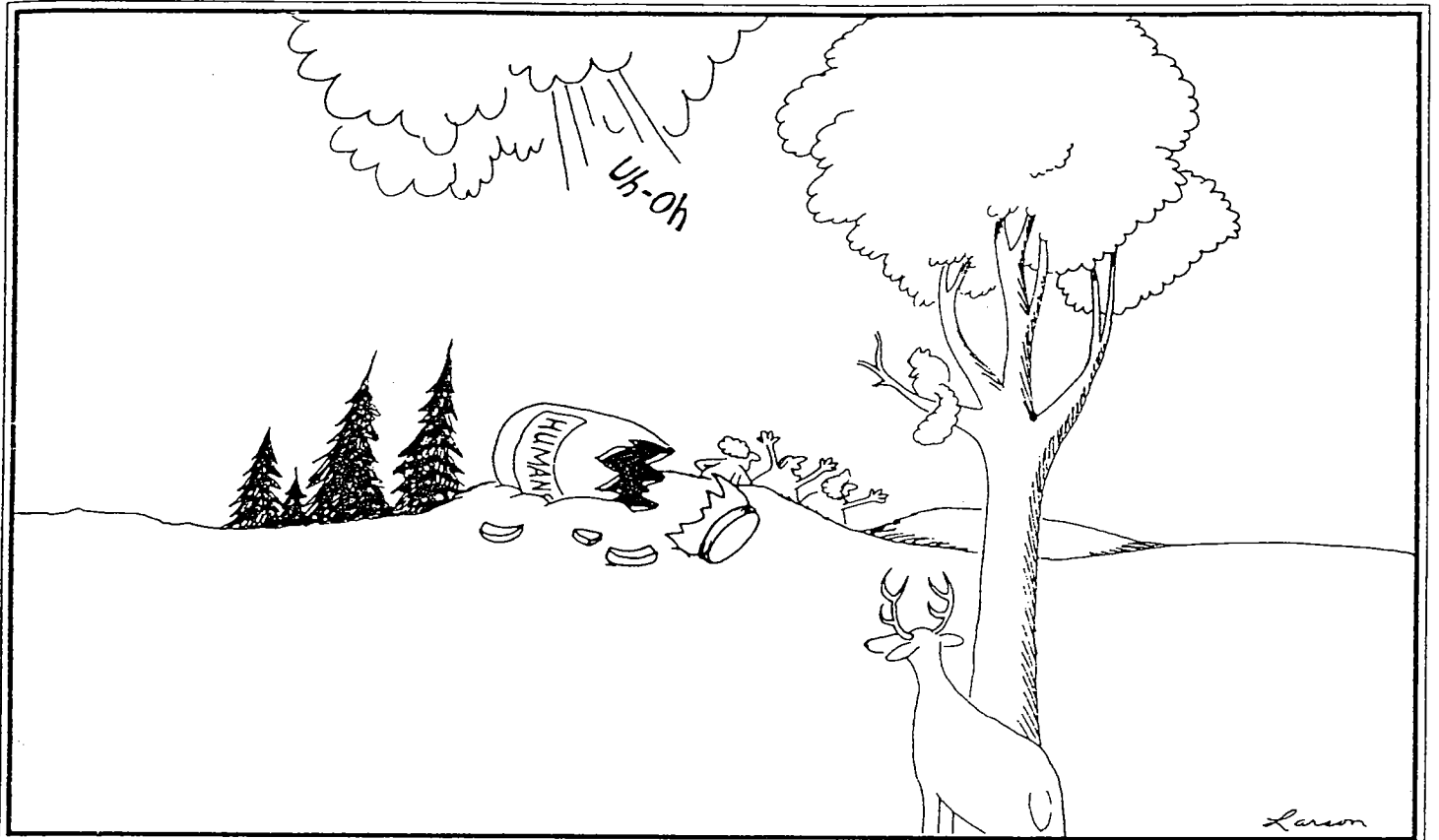
Jesus is like Adam in the sight of Allah. He created him of dust and then said to him: 'Be'; and he was. 3:60

The Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, was no more than Allah's apostle and His Word which He cast to Mary: a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His apostles and do not say: 'Three'. Forbear, and it shall be better for you. Allah is but one God. Allah forbid that He should have a son! 4:171

Do the words of the **Bible** and the **Koran** contradict each other?
Or could they be seen as a paradox?

Do the words of the **Athanasian creed** and the **Koran** contradict each other?
Or could they be seen as a paradox? ²⁷

²⁷ The Gospels and Letters were written around the 1st century A.D.; the trinitarian creeds (interpretations of scripture) were voted on, with considerable dissent, in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D.; and the Koran was written down at the beginning of the 7th century. Do you think it matters when these things were written?



Step 15) Contradiction or Paradox?

The Inter - *and* Intra - faith challenge ²⁸

Jesus said, "Seek and ye shall find".

How might these words of Jesus apply to our view of each other as we compare and contrast our different faiths?

Many inter-faith disputes involve arguments about what *appear* to be contradictions between the scriptures of the different religions. The Bible appears to contradict the Koran in many instances, and many Christians and Muslims argue endlessly about those apparent contradictions. That Koran appears to contradict the Vedas in many instances, and many Muslims and Hindus argue endlessly about those apparent contradictions. The Vedas appear to contradict the Buddhist scriptures in many instances.... And so on, and so on.

What is overlooked in many such disputes, however, is the fact that there are also many *apparent* contradictions to be found *within* the scriptures of each faith. The Bible contains many apparent contradictions. The Koran contains many apparent contradictions. The Vedas contain many apparent contradictions.....

Each faith has, over the centuries, gone to great lengths and spent considerable intellectual energy in the attempt to find meaning in the apparent contradictions found in their own scriptures and to resolve them into "mere paradoxes". Very little energy, however, is spent on attempting to resolve the apparent contradictions between the scriptures of *different* faiths. Rather, the opposite is generally true: more time and energy is spent on clarifying and emphasizing inter-faith contradictions than on looking for ways to resolve them into inter-faith paradoxes.

This may seem quite natural to most of us.

However, you are now being asked to question the validity of this tradition of emphasizing the differences between faiths, especially the tradition which focuses on what appears to be contradictions *between* the various scriptures of the world at the same time that it minimizes the apparent contradictions found *within* the scriptures of each individual faith.

Note that you are being asked to *question* the validity of this tradition. You are not being asked to *conclude* that the tradition should be abandoned. You may indeed conclude that. Or you may not....

²⁸ Inter-faith: "between two or more different faiths".
Intra-faith: "within a single faith."

I. Intra-faith challenges.

A) *Intra-faith: Jewish*

1. "my name the LORD "

So Abraham called the name of that place The LORD (YHWH) will provide; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD (YHWH) it shall be provided".

--Gen. 22: 14

And God said to Moses, "I am the LORD (YHWH). I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty (El Shaddai), but by my name the LORD (YHWH) I did not make myself known to them." --Exod. 6:2,3

Contradiction or Paradox?

2. "the iniquity of the fathers "

I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me.

--Deuteronomy 5 : 9

The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father.

--Ezekiel 18 : 20

Contradiction or Paradox?

B) *Intra-faith: Christian*

1. *"Are you Elijah? "*

And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"

He [John the Baptist] said, "I am not."

--John 1 : 21

"...Elijah has already come, and they did not know him..."

Then the disciples understood that he [Jesus] was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

--Matthew 17 : 12-13

Contradiction or Paradox?

2. *"My teaching is not mine "*

The Father and I are one. --John 10:30

My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me; if any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.

--John 7 :16

Contradiction or Paradox?

3. *"with what kind of body "*

As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them. But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have."

--Luke 24:36-40

But some one will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be....It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body....I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God...

--1 Cor 15 : 35-50

Contradiction or Paradox?

4. *"You are Peter...You are a stumbling block "*

"you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church"

--Matt 16:18

He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, because the way you think is not God's way but man's."

--Matt 16:23

Contradiction or Paradox?

[Notice that Peter is addressed as "Satan" only five verses after he is called "rock". Is this significant?]

5. *judgment*

The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son...

--John 5:22

And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear....

--1 Peter 1:17

Contradiction or Paradox?

C) *Intra-faith: Muslim*

1. "they did not kill him "

They declared: 'We have put to death the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah.' They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did (or: he was made to resemble another for them; or: only a likeness of that was shown unto them).

--Koran 4 : 157

They plotted, and Allah plotted. Allah is the supreme Plotter. He said: 'Jesus, I am about to cause you to die and lift you up to Me. I shall take you away from the unbelievers and exalt your followers above them till the Day of Resurrection. Then to Me you shall all return and I shall judge your disputes.

--Koran 3:55

Contradiction or Paradox?

D) *Intra-faith: Bahá'í*

1. "in the balance of reason and science "

Say: O leaders of religion! Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it. --Bahá'u'lláh

Consider what it is that singles man out from among created beings, and makes of him a creature apart. Is it not his reasoning power, his intelligence? Shall he not make use of these in his study of religion? I say unto you: weigh carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as religion. If it passes this test, then accept it, for it is truth! If, however, it does not so conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance! --'Abdu'l-Bahá

Contradiction or Paradox?

E) *Intra-faith: New Age*

1. "you need not believe ..."

Remember only this; you need not believe the ideas, you need not accept them, and you need not even welcome them. Some of them you may actively resist. None of this will matter, or decrease their efficacy. But do not allow yourself to make exceptions in applying the ideas the workbook contains, and whatever your reactions to the ideas may be, use them. Nothing more than that is required.

--A Course in Miracles, Workbook for Students, Introduction

Today...set aside ten to fifteen minutes for a more sustained practice period, in which you try to understand and accept what the idea for the day really means....

...You need not use these exact words, but try to get the sense of being willing to have your illusions of purpose be replaced by truth.

--A Course in Miracles, Workbook for Students, Lesson 65

Contradiction or Paradox?

F) *Intra-faith: Hindu*

1. "the fruit of action "

When a man is liberated and when the individuality has merged into cosmic existence, then the influence of the karma done by him in the past will be received by his son or grandson or by those who have blood affinity with him. But the reaction will never become nil, it will be carried on. And if there is no one left in his family, then the influence will reach those who are nearest to his blood relations--their friends and connections.....

The karma, the reaction, or the fruit of action, unfailingly reaches the doer just as a calf reaches its own mother in a herd of cows..."As ye sow, so shall ye reap.".....This philosophy of karma explains that whatever a man is, it is the result of his own past...None other than himself is responsible for a man's happiness or suffering. If a man enjoys, he enjoys out of his own doings; if a man suffers, he suffers out of his own doings.

--Transcendental Meditation (The Science of Being and Art of Living),

by His Holiness Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, pg. 130.

Contradiction or Paradox?

II. Inter-faith challenges.

A) *Inter-faith: Jewish and Christian*

(Note: these could also be considered intra-faith for the Christians, since they consider both "Old" and "New" Testaments to be holy scripture.)

1. *in the flesh of his foreskin*

Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

--Genesis 17 : 14

*

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And when Paul and Barnabas had no small discussion and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question...Some of the believers...rose up, and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.".... James replied....."my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God..." Thenthe apostles and the elders....sent...the following letter: "...it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity...."

--Acts 15: 1-2, 5, 13-19, 22-29

So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?...He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal.

--Romans 2 : 26-29

Contradiction or Paradox?

2. a statute forever

These are the appointed feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim as times of holy convocation, for presenting to the LORD offerings...each on its proper day; besides the sabbaths of the LORD...
--Lev 23:37-38

...it is a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings

--Lev 23:14, 21, 31, 41

Everything that I command you you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to it or take from it.

--Deut 12:32

Observe the sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.

--Deut 5:12

The camel...rock badger...the hare...the swine...of their flesh you shall not eat...they are unclean to you.....Everything in the waters that has not fins and scales is an abomination to you.....And these...are an abomination: the eagle, the vulture, the falcon..... All winged insects that go upon all fours are an abomination to you.... And by these you shall become unclean....I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.....this is the law...to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten...
--Lev 11:46-47

You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and do them...You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean beast and the unclean; you shall not make yourselves abominable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.

--Lev 20:22-26

*

Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified...The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all...
--Romans 10:4, 11-12

One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind.....I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean.

--Romans 14: 5,14

But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit
--Romans 7: 6

he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law...Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law
--Romans 13:8

Contradiction or Paradox?

B) *Inter-faith: Christian and Muslim*

1. *"the son of Allah "*

Allah forbid that He should have a son! --Koran, 4:171

I am the Son of God. --John 10: 36

Contradiction or Paradox?

C) *Inter-faith: Muslim and Bahá'í*

1. *"the Seal of the Prophets "*

In the Koran, Muhammed is referred to as "the Seal of the Prophets". In the Bahá'í Faith, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh (from the 19th century) are considered the most recent Prophets.

Contradiction or Paradox?

D) *Inter-faith: Bahá'í and New Age*

1. "Revelation"

Whoso layeth claim to a Revelation direct from God, ere the expiration of a full thousand years, such a man is assuredly a lying imposter... Whosoever interpreteth this verse otherwise than its obvious meaning is deprived of the Spirit of God and of His mercy...

- Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, pg. 124

He Who is everlastingly hidden from the eyes of men can never be known except through His Manifestation [Moses, Christ, Bahá'u'lláh, etc.]...

- Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, pg. 15

...the reality of the spirit of Peter, however far it may progress, will not reach to the condition of the Reality of Christ.... However far the disciples might progress, they could never become Christ.

- Some Answered Questions, chpt. 63

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Revelation induces complete but temporary suspension of doubt and fear. It reflects the original form of communication between God and His creations... Revelation unites you directly with God....

There is nothing about me [Jesus Christ?] that you cannot attain...."No man cometh unto the Father but by me" does not mean that I am in any way separate or different from you except in time, and time does not really exist....without me the distance between God and man would be too great for you to encompass. I bridge the distance as an elder brother to you on the one hand, and as a Son of God on the other. My devotion to my brothers has placed me in charge of the Sonship, which I render complete because I share it. This may appear to contradict the statement "I and my Father are one," but there are two parts to the statement in recognition that the Father is greater. Revelations are indirectly inspired by me because I am close to the Holy Spirit.... Revelation is not reciprocal. It proceeds from God to you, but not from you to God.

- Course in Miracles, Text, pgs. 4-6

The Son of God is you.

- Course in Miracles, Workbook for Students, Lesson 64

Contradiction or Paradox?

E) *Inter-faith: Bahá'í and Hindu*

1. *"like the waves of the sea "*

Briefly, the believers in pantheism think that Real Existence can be compared to the sea, and that beings are like the waves of the sea. These waves, which signify the beings, are innumerable forms of that Real Existence....

...the question of the Real Existence by which all things exist...is admitted by everyone. The difference resides in that which the Súfís say, "The reality of the things is the manifestation of the Real Unity." But the Prophets say, "it emanates from the Real Unity"; and great is the difference between manifestation and emanation. The appearance in manifestation means that a single thing appears in infinite forms. For example, the seed, which is a single thing...manifests in infinite forms...; whereas in the appearance through emanation this Real Unity remains and continues in the exaltation of Its sanctity, but the existence of creatures emanates from It and is not manifested by It. It can be compared to the sun from which emanates the light which pours forth on all the creatures; but the sun remains in the exaltation of its sanctity. It does not descend, and it does not resolve itself into luminous forms; it does not appear in the substance of things through the specification and the individualization of things...

To recapitulate: the Súfís admit God and the creature, and say that God resolves Himself into the infinite forms of the creatures, and manifests like the sea, which appears in the infinite forms of the waves. These phenomenal and imperfect waves are the same thing as the Preexistent Sea...But the affirmations of the Súfís requires that the Independent Wealth should descend to the degree of poverty, that the Preexistent should confine itself to phenomenal forms... And this is evident error.... This is a pure imagination which one cannot conceive.

--'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, chpt. 82.

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The existence, life, or Being is the unmanifested reality of all that exists, lives, or is. The Being is the ultimate reality.....the all-pervading eternal field of the almighty creative intelligence. I am That eternal Being, thou art That and all this is That eternal Being in its essential nature.....Being is the living presence of God, the reality of life. It is eternal truth. It is the absolute in eternal freedom.

The unity of Beingness, without undergoing any change in Itself, assumes the role of the multiplicity of creation, the diversity of the Being. The absolute assuming the role of relativity, or unity appearing as multiplicity is nothing else but the very nature of the absolute Being appearing in different manifestations.

The unity of the unmanifested absolute Being is the diversity and variety of manifested creation in all its relative phases of existence.....It should be born in mind that the manifested creation and the unmanifested Being, although appearing to be different, in reality are one and the same.....The reality of duality is unity.

Mind is a wave of the ocean of Being. The unmanifested absolute Being, stimulated by Its own nature...appears as mind, as an ocean stimulated by the wind appears as a wave.

--Transcendental Meditation (The Science of Being and Art of Living), by His Holiness Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, p. 21,22,36.

Contradiction or Paradox?

2. "reincarnation "

...The return of the soul after death is contrary to the natural movement, and opposed to the divine system. Therefore, by returning, it is absolutely impossible to obtain existence; it is as if man, after being freed from the womb, should return to it a second time. Consider what a puerile imagination this is which is implied by the belief in reincarnation and transmigration. Believers in it consider the body as a vessel in which the spirit is contained, as water is contained in a cup; this water has been taken from one cup and poured into another. This is child's play.

Such were the limited minds of the former philosophers, like Ptolemy and the others... Consider how greatly their thoughts were limited and how weak their minds. Those who believe in reincarnation think that the spiritual worlds are restricted to the worlds of human imagination...

...In the Divine Scriptures and Holy Books "return" is spoken of, but the ignorant have not understood the meaning, and those who believed in reincarnation have made conjectures on the subject...In the Gospel it says that John, the son of Zacharias, is Elias. These words do not mean the return of the rational soul and personality of Elias in the body of John, but rather that the perfections and qualities of Elias were manifested and appeared in John.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, chpt. 81

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The eternal unmanifested absolute nature of the spirit, or self, is ever unaffected by happenings in the relative field...Without beginning or end, it knows no birth or death. Whether in this or that body, the self continues to be. The immutable eternal life remains through the ever-changing phases of the bodies which it takes.

--Bhagavad Gita, A New Translation and Commentary, by
Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, 2:20, commentary (MMY).

As a man casting off worn-out garments takes other new ones, so the dweller in the body casting off worn-out bodies takes others that are new.

--MMY, 2:22.

When righteous people who have not been able to gain cosmic consciousness die, they enter one or other of...[the worlds of the righteous]....The worlds of the righteous are...where beings enjoy much greater harmony and freedom than man enjoys on earth. But they no longer engage in the practice of Yoga. For that they have to come back to earth. Coming back here they are born 'in the house of the pure and illustrious,' which provides a congenial atmosphere for Yoga. They resume their practice and attain final liberation.

--MMY, 6:41, commentary.

We may interpret 'many births' in the superficial sense of the expression as many lives, but it is clear that this meaning will apply only to those who are 'not perfected in Yoga' in this life through 'lacking effort' and because their 'mind strayed from Yoga'. Even they, the Lord says, attain the transcendent goal by gradually purifying themselves through practice in many lives."

-- MMY, 6:45, commentary.

Contradiction or Paradox?

F) Inter-faith: Christian and Bahá'í

1. "flesh and bones"

As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them. But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have."

--Luke 24:36-40

*

The resurrections of the Divine Manifestations are not of the body....His [Christ's] resurrection from the interior of the earth is also symbolical; it is a spiritual and divine fact, and not material.

--Some Answered Questions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá
(Bahá'í Faith)

Contradiction or Paradox?

III. Inter-faith inconsistencies: Contradiction or Paradox?

When comparing words from the Bible with words from, say, the Koran, we find (apparent?) contradictions. However, when comparing words from one part of the Bible with another part of the Bible we *also* find (apparent?) contradictions.

- A) When faced with apparent contradictions either within a single faith or between different faiths, how do we know when we are dealing with real contradictions and when we are merely dealing with some kind of paradox?
- B) Are the contradictions to be found between different faiths more difficult to resolve into paradox than the contradictions to be found within a single faith? Explain. Give examples.
- C) Do we treat intra-faith contradictions the same as we do inter-faith contradictions? Why or why not?

Do we give one kind of apparent contradiction more benefit of the doubt than the other?

Are we more willing to open our hearts to the attempt to resolve one kind of apparent contradiction than we are to the attempt to resolve the other kind of contradiction?

Is our state of consciousness the same when we approach both kinds of apparent contradictions?

Is it devotional? critical? skeptical? angry? peaceful?
detached? attached? ...??

Do we pray about both? do we pray the same things about both?
do we pray for truth? for resolution? for triumph? defeat? for
comfort? for...??

Step 16) Father Abraham and Paradigm Shift, Shift, Shift...

I. *Tradition of Blasphemy/Tradition of Heaven*

You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me....Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; it is Moses who accuses you... --John 5:39-45

The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached....But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one dot of the law to become void. --Luke 16:16-17

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. --Luke 21:33

Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? --Mark 8:17

None of Our revelations do we abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but we substitute something better or similar: knowest thou not that God hath power over all things? --Koran, 2:106

They declare: 'None but Jews and Christians shall be admitted to Paradise.' Such are their wishful fancies...The Jews say the Christians are misguided, and the Christians say it is the Jews who are misguided. Yet they both read the Scriptures. And the pagans say the same of both. Allah will judge their disputes on the Day of Resurrection. --Koran, 2:111-113

Is it that whenever there comes to you an Apostle with what ye yourselves desire not, ye are puffed up with pride? Some ye called imposters, and others ye slay! --Koran 2:87

This is the Day whereon it is incumbent upon every one that seeth to behold, and every ear that hearkeneth to hear, and every heart that understandeth to perceive, and every tongue that speaketh to proclaim unto all who are in heaven and on earth, this holy, this exalted, and all-highest Name. --Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 7

Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believest that the Word of God...endureth forever, thou must, likewise, believe...that its meaning can never be exhausted. They who are its appointed interpreters...are, however, the only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom. Whoso, while reading the Sacred Scriptures, is tempted to choose therefrom whatever may suit him with which to challenge the authority of the Representative of God among men, is, indeed as one dead... --Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 25

Whenever My laws appear like the sun in the heaven of Mine utterance, they must be faithfully obeyed by all, though My decree be such as to cause the heaven of every religion to be cleft asunder. --Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 46

Let's consider, for a moment, those world religions born in the Middle East: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith.

The prophet-founders of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith are said to be descendents of Abraham, the father of Ishmael (whose descendents included Mohammed and Bahá'u'lláh) and Isaac (whose descendents included Jacob--or Israel--and, later, Jesus of Nazareth). Thus, if these geneological claims are correct, Abraham is, in a quite literal, physical sense, the father of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith. Spiritually, too, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith all claim to worship the very same God which Abraham worshipped: YHWH (I AM WHO I AM).

Like the layers of an onion, each dispensation (or "covenant", or "book", or "revelation", or "day") claims to affirm, expand (and usually re-interpret) the truth contained in the previous "layer's" scriptures--Jesus claims to fulfill the law and the prophets; Mohammed claims to confirm and "seal" the teachings and missions of Moses and Jesus; and Bahá'u'lláh claims to be the fulfillment of all the scriptures of the world: "the son of man come in the glory of his Father" ("Bahá'u'lláh" means "the glory of God").

It should be noted that each new dispensation usually takes issue with the established doctrines (i.e. interpretations of scripture) of the day--and tends to "go back" to the words of scripture, re-interpreting them: Jesus often challenges established religious authorities with words from the Torah, the Writings, and the Prophets, and the literalness of circumcision (and most of the law) is entirely abandoned by the early Christians; Mohammed condemns both the established idol worshippers of Arabia and the Jewish and Christian divines of the day, denying the validity of the trinitarian interpretations of scripture among other things; and Bahá'u'lláh challenges the finality of the Koran by re-interpreting "seal of the Prophets" to mean that Mohammed was the last prophet, or "seal" of the age of prophecy, or "prophetic cycle", while the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh were the first prophets of the age of fulfillment (the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth).

As we can see, the paradigm shift, or altered interpretation of scripture, which each new dispensation brings about, is generally radical, revolutionary. Nevertheless, throughout history, there have always been some people who have (rightly or wrongly) "converted" i.e. who have taken that leap of faith and made that paradigm shift, transmuting one understanding of scripture into another: the first Christians were Jews; many of the first Muslims were Christians and Jews; and many Bahá'ís were once Jews, Christians, or Muslims. Each leap of faith has meant leaving behind one view of scripture and the world, and entering into another universe of thought and experience. Earth shakes and a new Heaven opens, so to speak.

Naturally, the established religious authorities of the day have tended to resent any challenge to their interpretation of scripture, and the new prophet--who claims to come in the name of Heaven--is generally accused of blasphemy. Such a response is not surprising, for indeed, established doctrine (interpretation) is often a target of the new prophets' most scathing attacks.

So, one prophet comes, and a religion is built upon his words, the words of God--and idols fall and temples rise. Then another prophet comes, and a religion is built upon his words, the words of God--and temples fall, and churches rise. Then another prophet comes, and a religion is built upon his words, the words of God--and churches fall, and mosques rise....

What, in God's name, is going on here?
What did I AM start when He called Abraham out
from the land of his father's house?

II. *"The Bible says"...."The Koran says"...."The Vedas say"....*

Religious authorities have often fought against other religions--both older and newer than their own--by pointing out alleged contradictions between the scriptures: Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Bahá'ís point to each other's scriptures and say, "B says S about J, but K says Z about J"--therefore B is right and K is wrong (e.g. the Bible says "Son of God" about Jesus, but the Koran says "Allah has no son" about Jesus, therefore the Bible is right and the Koran is wrong, or vice versa).

"The Bible says...." "The Koran says...."
What is missing in this type of argument?

Once the element of interpretation is recognized,
how might the argument change?

III. *Doctrines, Scriptures, and Experience*

A) Is there a way to resolve the apparently contradictory religious *doctrines* of the world into paradox, or do the established interpretations of scripture really contradict each other?

B) Is there a way to resolve the apparently contradictory *scriptures* of the world into paradox, or do the words of the different scriptures themselves really contradict each other?

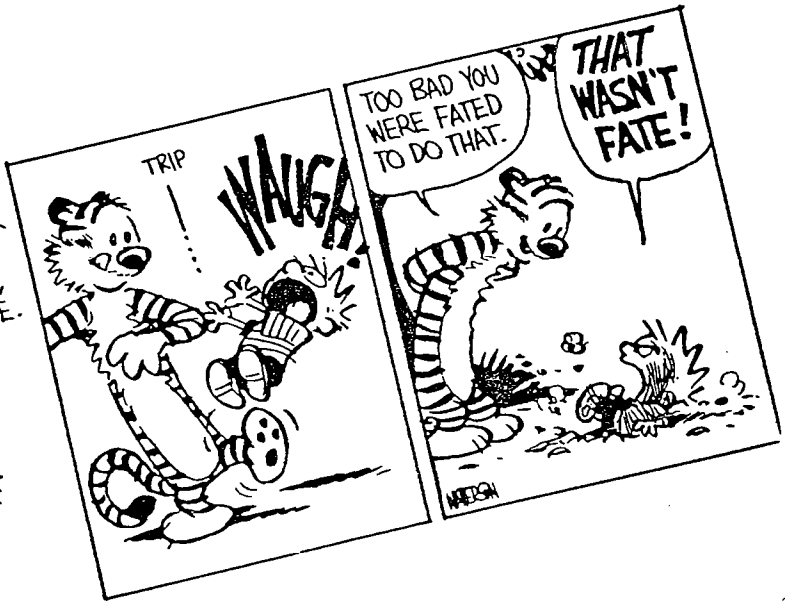
C) Is there a way to resolve the apparently contradictory religious *experiences* of the world into paradox, or are there experiences which, in some sense, really point to different and mutually incompatible realities?

D) Are these three questions (A-C) different forms of the same question or are they in fact different questions? Explain how they are either the same, or different, or both.

E) Does it matter whether or not these "inconsistencies" can be resolved?



ALL EVENTS ARE PREORDAINED AND UNALTERABLE. WHATEVER WILL BE WILL BE. THAT WAY, IF ANYTHING BAD HAPPENS, IT'S NOT MY FAULT. IT'S FATE.



Step 17) Truth and Consequences

I. *Truth*

What is Truth?

What is truth?

What is The Truth?

What is the truth?

What is "a truth"?

II. "The truth is that there is no truth": Is this statement true?

III. *Paradox, Contradiction, and Truth*

A) *paradox and truth*

Two sets of words may only *appear* to contradict each other, forming what we have called a "paradox" [e.g. Juliet is a girl/Juliet is the sun, or, Hitler is a man/Hitler is the sun].

The common meaning, or meanings, to which both sets of words point, may, however, be either right or wrong, true [Juliet is a girl whose love illuminates Romeo's life] or false [Hitler is a man whose words give life].

That is, the fact that a paradox has meaning does not imply that the paradox is therefore necessarily true. Rather, the meaning to which a paradox points may be either true *or* false.

B) *contradiction and truth*

Two sets of words may *really* contradict each other, and both be wrong [e.g. My name is George; My name is John]; or one may be right, and the other wrong [My name is Arthur; My name is John.]

Can statements which *really* contradict each other
ever *both* be right?

IV. *Consequences*

For the sake of argument, let's take the following dictionary definition(s) of truth: "true or actual state of a matter; conformity with fact or reality." Let us also assume, for the time being at least, that the interpretation of those definitions is in fact pretty much the same for all of us. "The chair I am sitting on has four legs", would be "in conformity with fact or reality", for example. And, again for the purposes of discussion, let's say that "knowing truth" means having the right opinion, the right belief, the right idea, the right understanding.

Given all that, does knowing the truth matter?

As you answer the following questions, think about the consequences both of its **matter**ing *and* of its **not** mattering... (And don't forget: you will, as always, be *interpreting* the *words* of the questions.)

--Does it matter whether or not $E=mc^2$ is the right mathematical understanding of the relationship between energy, mass, and the speed of light?

--Does it matter whether the world is round like a ball or flat like a piece of paper?

--Does it matter whether all people have certain inalienable rights?

--Does it matter whether or not violence is, in truth, an ineradicable part of human nature?

--Does it matter whether karma is absolute or whether it is possible to suffer and/or enjoy as the result of someone else's action?

--Does it matter whether or not the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was in fact a "union" of "socialist" "republics" based on "soviets" (or "workers councils")? or whether the People's Republic of China is in fact a "People's" "Republic"?

--Does it matter what capitalism actually is or is not? or whether capitalism is or is not in fact compatible with democracy?

--Does it matter whether or not the foreign policy of the United States of America is in fact ethically or morally motivated?

--Does it matter whether or not the United States of America was founded as a Christian nation by Christians, or as a religiously neutral nation by Deists?

--Does it matter whether or not Jesus is the Son of God? And, if so, does it matter whether or not we have the correct interpretation of the words "the Son of God"?

--Does it matter whether or not there is a God? And, if so, does it matter whether or not we have the correct understanding of this Being?

--Does it matter whether the Bible contradicts itself or not?

--Does it matter whether we are "one" or not? Does it matter what "to be one" means?

--Does it matter whether or not there exists a correct understanding of the meaning of "justice" and "mercy"?

--Does it matter whether or not your husband/wife/boyfriend/girlfriend/boss really meant what you think they meant when they said what they said to you last time you argued with them?

Step 18) Orthodoxy: Words, Infallibility, and Interpretation

In attempting to understand the Writings, therefore, one must first realize that there is and can be no real contradiction in them, and in the light of this we can confidently seek the unity of meaning which they contain.

--The Universal House of Justice ²⁹

Real deepening occurs when the believer reads the Writings with the eyes of faith knowing that he is reading the Word of God, not the words of men...

- The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, Vol. 3, pp. 324-6, Adib Taherzadeh

I. What does "orthodox" mean?

II. *Always right.....*

The words and statements we have looked at so far in this course have generally been taken from what is normally considered "orthodox" scripture, or from the writings or reported sayings of people or institutions considered infallible or enlightened or otherwise "in the know" by their disciples, followers, and admirers (e.g. Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, the Universal House of Justice, Maharishi, Jesus Christ, John, Paul, Mohammed, etc.; even Pablo Picasso, Timothy Leary, etc.).

Nearly all of these people have inspired movements, churches, schools, etc., which claim one form or another of the attribute "orthodox" for themselves, and "heterodox" (or sometimes "heretical", "unfaithful", "ignorant", etc.) for those whose words are perceived to contradict their own words. If "orthodox" is taken to mean "right in opinion" and "heterodox" is taken to mean "of another opinion", then it is, of course, quite natural that the orthodox would consider their heterodox neighbors to be mistaken. And, of course, those who claim to be orthodox *may* in fact be right about being right!

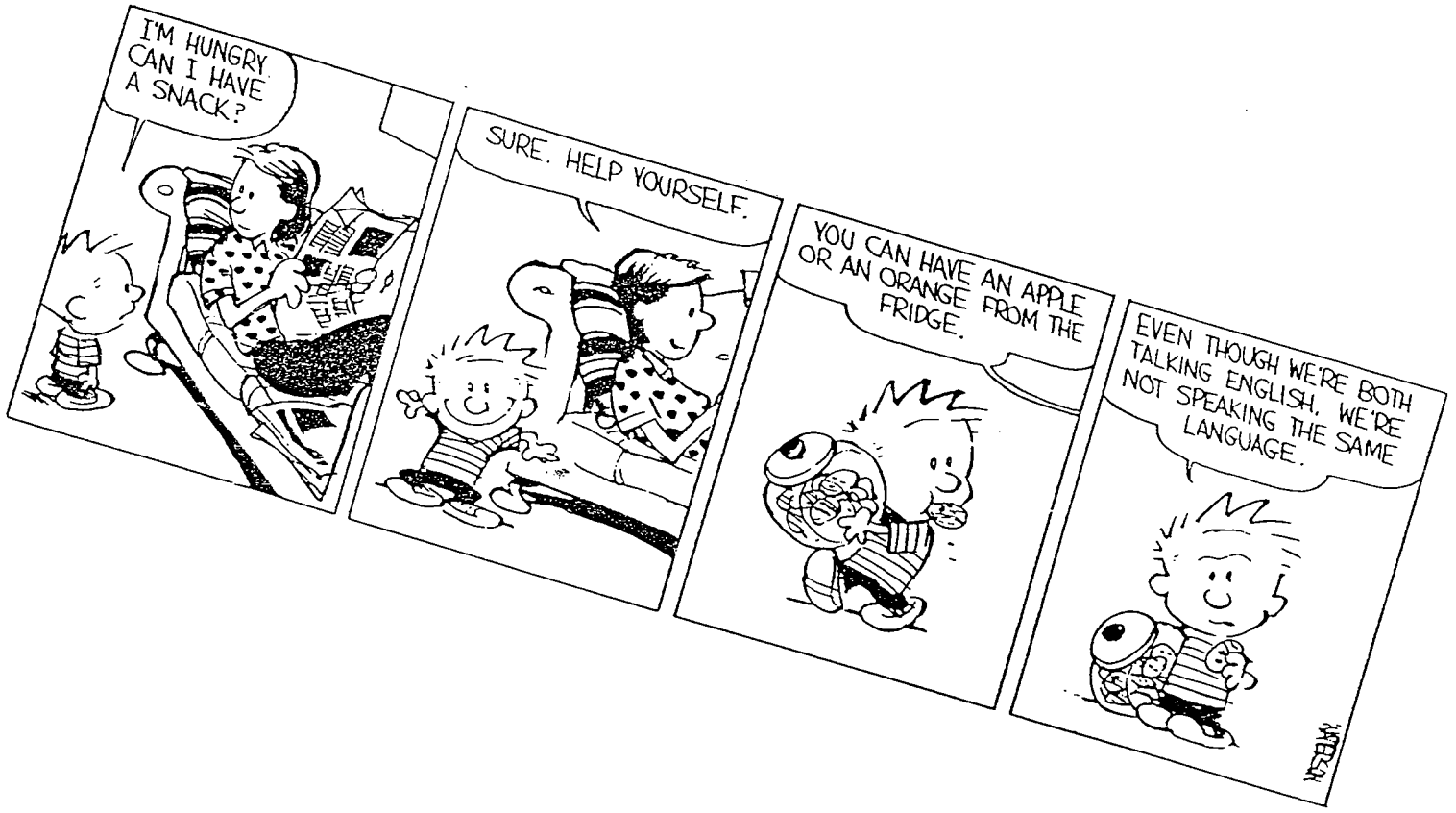
III. *Never wrong...*

As we have seen, the heart of orthodoxy is the belief that one's beliefs, or one's scriptures, are "right"--or that one's spiritual leader is "right".

However, orthodoxy sometimes even claims some sort of "infallibility" i.e. not only "right", but also "unable to be wrong".

How would *you* interpret the word "infallible"?

²⁹"The Establishment of the Universal House of Justice," A Compilation by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre, p. 54



I'M HUNGRY
CAN I HAVE
A SNACK?

SURE. HELP YOURSELF.

YOU CAN HAVE AN APPLE
OR AN ORANGE FROM THE
FRIDGE.

EVEN THOUGH WE'RE BOTH
TALKING ENGLISH, WE'RE
NOT SPEAKING THE SAME
LANGUAGE.

KATZ

IV. *Interpreting infallible words*

Assume that the words "I am the Son of God" are the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and that the person being quoted (Jesus of Nazareth) is "infallible".

Is there only one possible interpretation of these words?

If so, does everyone agree?

If not, is it possible to know which interpretation is, or which interpretations are, the right one(s)?

Explain.

Likewise, assume that the Athanasian creed is "orthodox" in the sense of being "right":

...the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance....So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. And they are not three Gods, but one God....the unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped....the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man...

Is there only one possible interpretation of these words?

If so, does everyone agree?

If not, is it possible to know which interpretation is, or which interpretations are, the right one(s)?

Explain.

V. *In the absence of the Guardian...*

The Bahá'í Faith is an exceptionally clear example of a religion which explicitly claims the status of "infallible" not only for the words of its scriptures, and the people who founded and established the religion, but also for some of its institutions: Bahá'u'lláh (the "Prophet," or "Manifestation of God"), 'Abdu'l-Bahá (the prophet's eldest son and "Center of the covenant"), Shoghi Effendi (the prophet's great-grandson, the "Guardian"), the Guardianship (the hereditary line of Guardians), and the Universal House of Justice (the supreme legislative body, democratically elected, with the Guardian as head and voting member).

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

...the Most Great Infallibility is confined to the One Whose Station is immeasurably exalted beyond ordinances or prohibitions and is sanctified from errors and omissions....Were He to pronounce water to be wine or heaven to be earth or light to be fire, He speaketh the truth and no doubt would there be about it; and unto no one is given the right to question His authority or to say why or wherefore....He is come from the invisible heaven, bearing the banner 'He doeth whatsoever He willeth'....It is incumbent upon everyone to obey Him in whatsoever God hath ordained; and whosoever denieth Him hath disbelieved God, in His verses, in His Messengers and in His Books. Were he to pronounce right to be wrong or denial to be belief, He speaketh the truth as bidden by God.

--Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 108-110, Bahá'u'lláh

'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

In short, the meaning of "He doeth whatsoever He willeth" is that if the Manifestation says something, or gives a command, or performs an action, and believers do not understand its wisdom, they still ought not to oppose it by a single thought, seeking to know why he spoke so, or why he did such a thing.

--Some Answered Questions, pp. 171-174, 'Abdu'l-Bahá

...essential infallibility belongs especially to the supreme Manifestations, and acquired infallibility is granted to every holy soul. For instance, the Universal House of Justice, if it be established under the necessary conditions--with members elected from all the people--that House of Justice will be under the protection and the unerring guidance of God. If that House of Justice shall decide unanimously, or by a majority, upon any question not mentioned in the Book, that decision and command will be guarded from mistake. Now the members of the House of Justice have not, individually, essential infallibility; but the body of the House of Justice is under the protection and unerring guidance of God: this is called conferred infallibility. --Ibid., pp. 171-174, 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Shoghi Effendi writes:

"I am," He ['Abdu'l-Bahá], in this same connection, affirms, "according to the explicit texts of the Kitab-i-Aqdas and Kitab-i-'Ahd the manifest Interpreter of the Word of God...Whoso deviates from my interpretation is a victim of his own fancy."

- The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 138.

He ['Abdu'l-Bahá] is, and should for all time be regarded, first and foremost, as the Center and Pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's peerless and all-enfolding covenant, His most exalted handiwork, the stainless Mirror of His light, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word... --Ibid pp. 134-135.

"He is the Interpreter of the Word of God," 'Abd'ul-Bahá, referring to the function of the Guardian of the Faith [Shoghi Effendi], asserts, using in His Will the very term which He Himself had chosen when refuting the argument of the Covenant-breakers who had challenged His right to interpret the utterance of Bahá'u'lláh. --Ibid pp. 148-149.

The infallibility of the Guardian is confined to matters which are related strictly to the Cause and interpretation of the teachings; he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc.

- Lights of Guidance, p. 231, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

The Universal House of Justice writes:

The Guardian reveals what the Scripture means; his interpretation is a statement of truth which cannot be varied. --Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968, pp. 52

Nowhere is it stated that the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice is by virtue of the Guardian's membership or presence in that body. --Compilation, p. 55

In the Bahá'í Faith we thus find what is claimed to be a chain of infallible authority, starting from the "essential infallibility" of Bahá'u'lláh, to the appointed authority and "conferred" infallibility of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardianship, and the Universal House of Justice.

There is, however, a problem.

Bahá'u'lláh had spoken of a "new World Order" and a "wondrous System" through which, he claimed, "mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized". Shoghi Effendi interpreted this "new World Order" to refer to a very particular kind of "Administrative Order which the Will of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was...destined to proclaim and formally establish." This Administrative Order, according to Shoghi Effendi's interpretation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's will and testament, would have a very definite structure, consisting fundamentally of two institutions, or "twin pillars"--the hereditary "Guardianship" and the democratically elected "Universal House of Justice". These "pillars" would "sustain [the Administrative Order's] authority and buttress its structure". Furthermore, this Administrative Order was to be the "nucleus" and "the very pattern of the New World Order destined to embrace in the fulness of time the whole of mankind."

However, as it turned out, Shoghi Effendi was the first and the last Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. He died in 1957, leaving no successor, thus ending the institution of the Guardianship before it even began--at least in so far as it was intended to be a *hereditary* institution--thus throwing into question not only Shoghi Effendi's vision of the future of the faith, but also his interpretation of the very nature of the "World Order of Bahá'u'lláh". And with the unexpected demise of the Guardian also died authoritative interpretation of the scriptures: in other words, no one within the Bahá'í Faith could now legitimately claim the right to authoritatively interpret the scriptures, since that was considered the sole prerogative of a Guardian.

The institution presently governing the Bahá'í Faith, the Universal House of Justice, which was established some years after the death of Shoghi Effendi, claims to be authoritative not only in the sense of being "right" but also in the sense of being "unable to be wrong". That is, this legislative body claims to be the same Universal House of Justice referred to in the writings of Shoghi Effendi, and furthermore claims that these same writings affirm that this legislative body is the recipient of "conferred infallibility".

In other words, the UHJ says that the Writings say that it is in fact "The" UHJ, and that it is infallible. But what happens to such an authoritative institution when the authoritative connection between words and meaning--the Interpreter--is lost?

In other words, who is to say, now, what the Writings say?

A) *"the very pattern of the New World Order "*:

Shoghi Effendi writes (emphasis mine):

"[**This Administrative Order**] will...be regarded not only as the **nucleus** but the very **pattern** of the **New World Order**....

An attempt...should...be made to explain the character and functions of the **twin pillars** that support this mighty Administrative Structure--**the institutions of the Guardianship** and of the **Universal House of Justice**....My present intention is to elaborate certain **salient features** of this scheme which, however close we may stand to its colossal structure, are already so **clearly defined** that we find it **inexcusable to either misconceive or ignore**.

It should be stated, at the very outset, in **clear and unambiguous language**, that these **twin institutions** of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh should be regarded as divine in origin, **essential** in their functions and complementary in their aim and purpose....**Acting in conjunction** with each other these two **inseparable** institutions administer its affairs....

-- The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, by Shoghi Effendi.

The Universal House of Justice writes (emphasis mine):

"There being no successor to Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Cause of God, the **Universal House of Justice is the Head of the Faith** and its supreme institution....

The Universal House of Justice is **the supreme institution** of an **Administrative Order** whose **salient features**...are clearly **enunciated in the Sacred Writings** of the Bahá'í Faith **and their authorized interpretations**. This Administrative Order consists, on the one hand, of a series of **elected councils**...in which are vested legislative, executive and judicial powers over the Bahá'í community and, on the other, of eminent and devoted **believers appointed** for the specific purposes of protecting and propagating the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh under the guidance of the Head of that Faith. **This Administrative Order is the nucleus and pattern of the World Order adumbrated by Bahá'u'lláh.**"

--from the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice

Contradiction or Paradox?

B) "the principle of inseparability "

The Universal House of Justice writes:

As you point out with many quotations, Shoghi Effendi repeatedly stressed the inseparability of these two institutions [the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice]. Whereas he obviously envisaged their functioning together, it cannot logically be deduced from this that one is unable to function in the absence of the other. During the whole thirty-six years of his Guardianship Shoghi Effendi functioned without the Universal House of Justice. Now the Universal House of Justice must function without the Guardian,³⁰ but the principle of inseparability remains. The Guardianship does not lose its significance nor position in the Order of Bahá'u'lláh merely because there is no living Guardian.

--the Universal House of Justice, Comp, pg. 49

Shoghi Effendi writes:

Divorced from the institution of the Guardianship the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh would be mutilated and permanently deprived of that hereditary principle which...has been invariably upheld by the Law of God...Its prestige would suffer, the means required to enable it to take a long, an uninterrupted view over a series of generations would be completely lacking, and the necessary guidance to define the sphere of the legislative action of its elected representatives would be totally withdrawn....

--from "The Administrative Order," The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, by Shoghi Effendi.

Contradiction or Paradox?

³⁰The UHJ appears to be implying that the Guardian and the UHJ are both dependent upon, or independent of, each other in the same way and to the same degree. However, I think it is rather unclear whether or not the relationship between the Guardian and the UHJ can in fact be understood in this way.

Shoghi Effendi, acting as Guardian, helped to *define* the UHJ and to set in motion the process of *founding* the UHJ, though he died some years before it was actually established. Obviously, he was able to function "without the UHJ", since he himself was involved in *creating* the UHJ (much as the founding fathers of the USA obviously existed and functioned before the US was established). He was, of course, an *individual* as well as an "institution", and so he could perform those functions which pertained to himself *as an individual* (e.g. interpret scripture). Obviously, those functions which pertained to his role in the *Guardianship as institution*, and which involved his participation in the UHJ as voting member, were necessarily impossible to perform, given that the UHJ did not even exist at the time he was alive (much as Washington could promote the conditions upon which the USA would be established but obviously could not function as that government's president if that government never came into being, or if he had died before it came into being).

In contrast, the UHJ, being not an individual but an *institution*, is in part *structurally defined* in terms of its relation to a living Guardian, who, among other things, was to be head and voting member of that legislative body, to expell disobedient members, to decide what the UHJ could and could not vote upon, and to insist upon reconsideration of any law he considered not in accord with the spirit of the Writings. Whether or not the UHJ can indeed function "without the Guardian" (i.e. without its designated head and its sole *appointed* voting member) is, I would suggest, entirely open to question. Also open to question, surely, is whether or not *this* UHJ would in fact be the *same* UHJ as the one described by Shoghi Effendi. (Would we consider a constitutional monarchy to be the same form of government as a purely democratic system, for example?)

C) *"to define the sphere of legislative action "*

The Universal House of Justice writes:

"Unto the Most Holy Book" (the Kitáb-i-Aqdas), 'Abdu'l-Bahá states in His Will and Testament, "every one must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body...doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself."

--from the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice

...apart from his function as a member and sacred head for life of the Universal House of Justice, the Guardian...had the right and duty "to define the sphere of the legislative action" of the Universal House of Justice. In other words, he had the authority to state whether a matter was or was not already covered by the Sacred Texts and therefore whether it was within the authority of the Universal House of Justice to legislate upon it. No other person, apart from the Guardian, has the right or authority to make such definitions....

--Comp., pg. 47

...the Universal House of Justice, itself assured of Divine guidance, is well aware of the absence of the Guardian and will approach all matters of legislation only when certain of its sphere of jurisdiction....

-- Comp., pg. 47

Contradiction or Paradox?

D) *The Writings say.....*

Do written words interpret themselves?

Who is to say, now, what the Writings say?

VI. *sola scriptura*

The Protestant denominations of the Christian faith tend to adhere to the doctrine of "sola scriptura", or "the Bible alone". Many protestants thus think of the Bible as "the authority" on matters of faith. Luther, for example, having been asked to take back his attacks on the authority of the Roman Catholic church, is quoted as saying, "If any man can show me from Scripture where I am wrong, I will recant. Here I stand."

But, there is a problem with this stand, is there not? Is not this another form of "the Bible says..."? A Roman Catholic could "show" Luther "from the Bible" where it says "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church", and then proceed to tell Luther that "the Bible says" Peter was the first Pope. Luther might respond, "No, the Bible here is saying that the church would be built upon faith in Christ, which Peter demonstrated and thus symbolized."

But, of course, the truth is that the Bible doesn't "say" anything--"say", in the sense of "tell us what its words *mean*". Rather, we must read the words ourselves, and then interpret them ourselves.

This is the truth.
Is it not?

Surely meaning is the important thing about words. After all, what are words without meaning but scratches on paper, or unintelligible babbling noises?

Yet human interpretation is the unavoidable intermediary between words and meaning.

Right? Wrong?

The endless splintering of all of the major faiths of the world (including even the relatively recent Bahá'í faith) into differing sects and denominations confirms that interpretation is human (i.e. variable).

Does it not?

Even those people who follow a particular sect which claims to be infallible must first, themselves, decide to follow it--must first, themselves, decide whether they, themselves, believe the sect is infallible. And then they must interpret the sect's teachings for themselves, or at least decide, themselves, that they actually believe the interpretations offered by the sect's leader. But, even then, they must interpret the interpretations of their chosen leader for themselves.

Mustn't they?

This is the truth, is it not?

Step 19) The Purpose of "Infallibility"

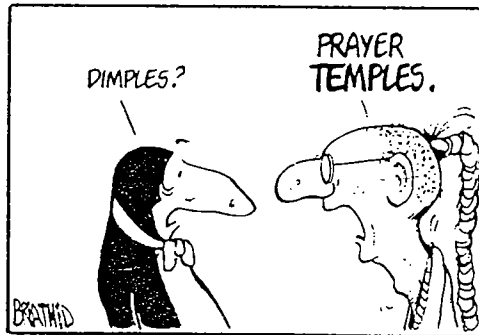
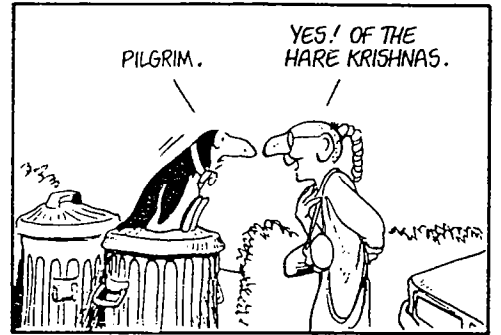
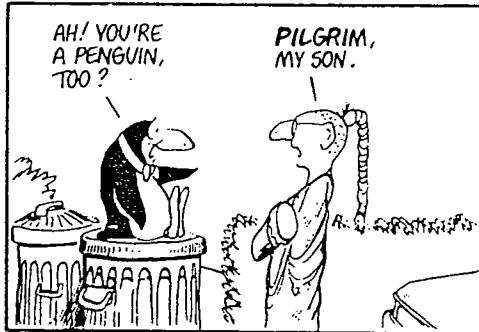
When faced with words, there are at least two questions we need to ask:

First: "What are these words 'saying'?"
i.e. "How might we interpret them?"

Second: "Is what the words 'say' the truth?"
i.e. "Is the meaning we attribute to them in fact true?"

Do we ever need to ask, or is it ever useful to ask,
"Are these words, or is this person, infallible"?

Explain.



Step 20) I said, You said

I. What does "you said..." (or "I said", or "he said", or "she said") mean?

II. We say, "the Bible says...", or "she said...", or "you said...", or "I said...". Too often, however, we forget that the words "X said" can be interpreted in more than one way.

By "I said" we might mean "the **words** I spoke"; or, we might in fact mean "what I *meant*". By "you said", we might mean "the **words** you spoke" (the actual sounds that came out of your mouth); or, we might mean "what **I** think **you meant**". Likewise, when we say "the Bible says", we might mean "the actual **words in translation** found in the Bible" (the actual ink marks on the page); or, we might mean "what **I think** those words **mean**".

Words and meaning are not the same thing.

Interpretation comes in between.

We come in between.

True or False?

III. When we hear someone say something that bothers us, how often do we stop to ask ourselves what they actually **meant** by what they said?

When we hear someone say something that we like, how often do we stop to wonder what **they** actually meant by what they said?

IV. **What** do you mean?

What **do** you mean?

What do **you** mean?

What do you **mean**?

Step 21) God tested Abraham...

I. Contradiction or Paradox....?

Slay your son, Slay not your son....

God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you. So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass...and arose and went to the place of which God had told him...And Isaac...said, "Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son"....Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram...and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place The LORD will provide; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

--Genesis 22:1-2

Go. Stop. Go.

And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them...." So Balaam rose in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab. But God's anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary....Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "...if it is evil in thy sight, I will go back again." And the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men...." So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak. --
Numbers 22 : 20 - 22

Jesus says...., but Jesus *means*

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you..." --John 6 : 53

Peter turned and saw following them the disciple [John] whom Jesus loved.... When Peter saw him he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about this man?' Jesus said to him 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!' The saying spread abroad among the brethren that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?' "

--John 21: 20-23

Remember, Remember not...

Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing...
--Isaiah 43:18-19

...remember the former things of old.... --Isaiah 46: 8

**"everlasting...in the flesh",
and then, "spiritual...not literal"**

...you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant...: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you...So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

--Genesis 17 : 9-14

So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?...He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal.

--Romans 2 : 26-29

The Son of God, God has no son

Allah forbid that He should have a son! --Koran, 4:171

I am the Son of God.--John 10: 36

**God and creation are absolutely identical,
God and creation are absolutely distinct**

The unity of the unmanifested absolute Being is the diversity and variety of manifested creation in all its relative phases of existence.

Mind is a wave of the ocean of Being. The unmanifested absolute Being, stimulated by Its own nature...appears as mind, as an ocean stimulated by the wind appears as a wave.

--Transcendental Meditation (The Science of Being and Art of Living), by His Holiness Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, p. 21,22,36.

Briefly, the believers in pantheism think that Real Existence can be compared to the sea, and that beings are like the waves of the sea. These waves, which signify the beings, are innumerable forms of that Real Existence....God resolves Himself into the infinite forms of the creatures, and manifests like the sea, which appears in the infinite forms of the waves. These phenomenal and imperfect waves are the same thing as the Preexistent Sea... this is evident error.... This is a pure imagination which one cannot conceive.

--'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, chpt. 82.

II. *"you have made sport of me"*

Then the LORD opened the mouth of the ass, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" And Balaam said to the ass, "Because you have made sport of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." And the ass said to Balaam, "Am I not your ass, upon which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Was I ever accustomed to do so to you?" And he said, "No."

--Numbers 22

Has anyone made sport of Balaam?

Has anyone made sport of us?

Are we angry?

Who do we hit?

III. *"Shall I fall down before a block of wood?"*

No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire, I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted flesh and have eaten; and shall I make the residue of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?"

--Isaiah 44:19

Papyrus. Paper. Print outs. All of these may be burned in the fire. If all the sacred books and written words in the world were burned, would the meaning of their words disappear?

Where does the meaning of these words reside?

IV. *"I will forgive their iniquity"*

But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. --Jeremiah 31:33-34

forgive us our debts as we have forgiven those who are in debt to us

--Matthew 6:12

What is forgiveness?

Who forgives first?

Step 22) In the name of God

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM" [or, I AM WHAT I AM, or, I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE]....Say this to the people of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you." --Exodus 3:13-14

I will raise up for them a prophet like you [you = Moses] from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him....in my name.

--Deut. 18:18-19

The word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.

--John 14:24

Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

--John 17:11

"Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad." The Jews then said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

--John 8:58

O that today you would hearken to his voice!

--Psalm 95 7-9

But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today"....

--Hebrews 3:13

Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

--2 Corinthians 6:2

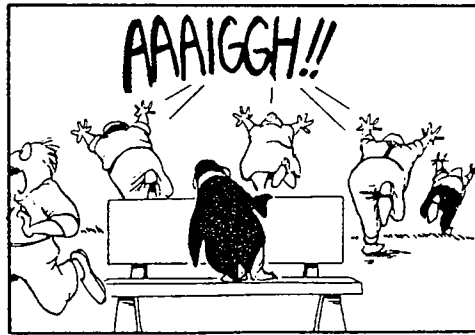
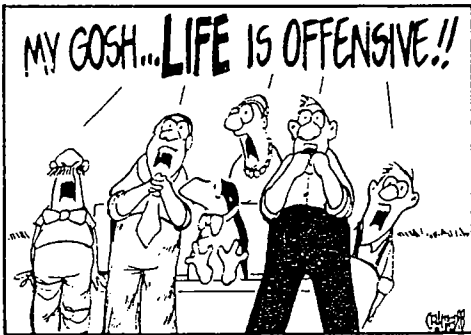
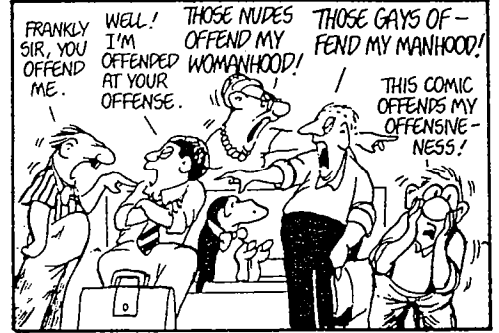
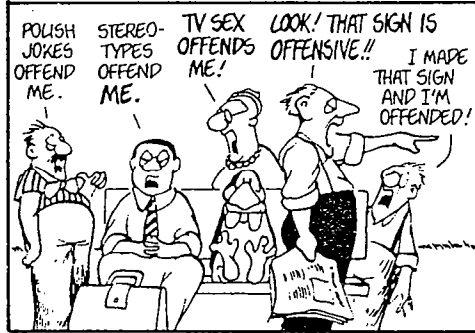
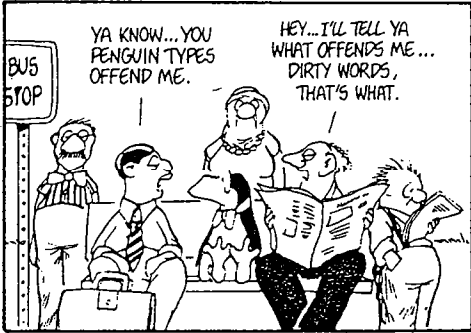
When Jesus speaks, whose words do we hear?

What *is* in a name?

What does "in the name of God" mean?

When is Today?

What really matters, right here, right now, *today* ?



**Step 23) Therefore come out from among them,
 and be ye separate, saith the Lord,
 and touch not the unclean thing.**

----2 Cor 6:17-18

I. *To gather in or to cast out?*

A) *clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile*

...this is the law...to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten...

--Lev 11:46-47

...you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant...: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you...So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. --Genesis 17 : 9-14

*

Peter...fell into a trance and saw the heaven opened, and something descending, like a great sheet.... In it were all kind of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." This happened three times....And Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."....Now the apostles..heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" But Peter...explained to them..."...in a trance I saw a vision..."

--Acts 10:9-16, 34-35; 11:1-5

For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility...that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two.

--Eph. 2:14

Contradiction or Paradox?

B) *for all peoples*

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.
--Isaiah 56:7

*

You are the sons of the LORD your God...the LORD has chosen you ...out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth.--Deut 14:1-2

When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you....then you must utterly destroy them....little by little; you must not make an end of them at once, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you. --Deut 7: 1-2, 22

Contradiction or Paradox?

C) *eunuchs, bastards, foreigners*

He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the LORD. No bastard shall enter the assembly of the LORD....No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD.... --Deut. 23:1-3

*

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree."

--Isaiah 56 :3

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. --Matthew 1:18-19

Contradiction or Paradox?

II. *a gathering in through him who was cast out*

We see, then, that the Bible seems to record the evolution of a tension between separation and unity--with unity winning out at the end. The Jews are separated out from all the peoples of the world, and yet the house of the Lord "shall be for all peoples". Eunuchs, bastards, and foreigners are "cut off" by the law--only to be welcomed in by the prophets. In Christ--born out of wedlock and with no human father (i.e. a legal "bastard")--the wall between "the circumcision" and "the uncircumcision", that is, between Jew and Gentile ("foreigners"), comes tumbling down, and the unity of East and West, male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile is proclaimed instead. Jesus extolls the virtue of being a eunuch "for the kingdom of God", and in Acts we are told of Philip baptizing a eunuch. And questions of "clean" and "unclean" become matters of individual conscience, to be decided according to whether or not the eating of a certain food would "cause a brother to fall" (Rom 14), that is, according to universal love--not Jewish law.

And, of course, let's not forget the central Biblical paradox: through Jesus, who was *cast out* and killed, everyone is said to be *brought in* and given life. Through Jesus--a Jew, a member of the chosen race--the universal Fatherhood of God is preached.

A) What do you make of all this initial separating and final bringing together of what was separated? all this casting out and gathering in? all this dying and being born to eternal life?

What is going on here? What does it all mean?

B) Are there walls, today, that should be broken down?

Is there a modern equivalent of "Jew" and "Gentile", "clean" and "unclean", "circumcision" and "uncircumcision"?

What divisions in our lives, today, do you think Jesus and the prophets would attempt to heal?

C) Here are some more examples of what appears to be a plan for unity through temporary stages of separation, or a plan for re-uniting what was once "one":

And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him.

--Acts 17:26-27

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him....But of Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people'....I ask, has God rejected his own people?.....have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous....I want you [Gentiles] to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved....Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.

--Romans 10:12, 21 and 11: 1, 11, 25-26, 30-32

Again, what do you think is going on here?

How would splitting humanity into separate nations encourage people to "feel after God and find him"?

How might our differences lead us to the truth?

What does having all men "consigned to disobedience" have to do with "mercy"? Assuming "God knows best", why would this be to our advantage? How could we consider this a blessing?

Step 24) One

I. Are we all one?

If not, explain in what sense we are not one.

What are the consequences of this opinion?

If so, explain in what sense we are one.

What are the consequences of this opinion?

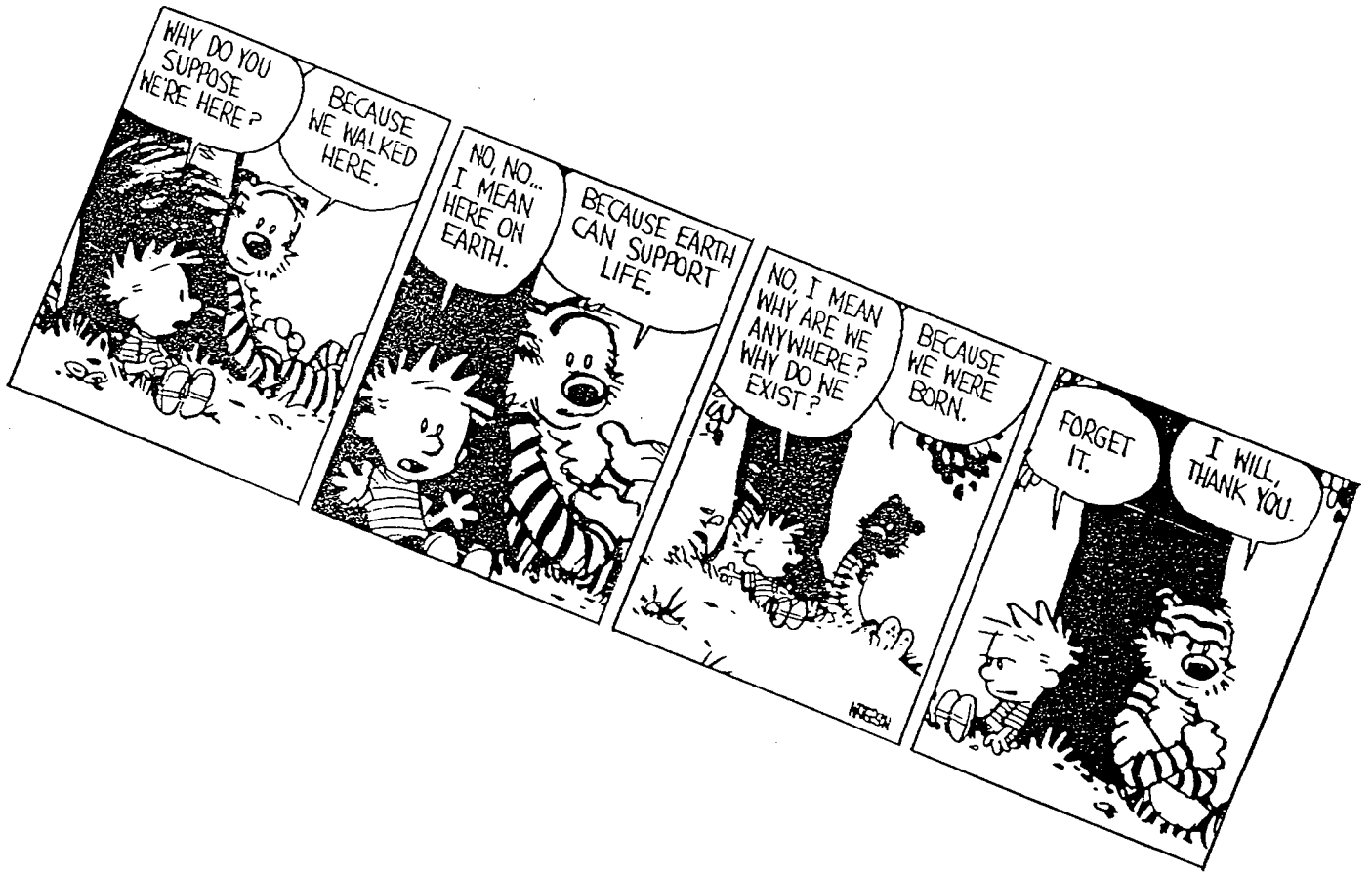
Might our answer to this question affect our interpretation of
scripture?

If so, in what way?

**II. How can "man", male and female, be made in the "image of God",
who is One?**

How can humankind--all 5 billion of us--be made in the image of
God, who is One?

III. Can "you" and "I" be "one"?



WHY DO YOU SUPPOSE WE'RE HERE?

BECAUSE WE WALKED HERE.

NO, NO... I MEAN HERE ON EARTH.

BECAUSE EARTH CAN SUPPORT LIFE.

NO, I MEAN WHY ARE WE ANYWHERE? WHY DO WE EXIST?

BECAUSE WE WERE BORN.

FORGET IT.

I WILL, THANK YOU.

HESKA

Step 25) I AM WHO I AM

Behold, I have refined you, but not like silver;
I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.
--Isaiah 48:10

From a God with a name like "I AM WHO I AM" you expected it to be easy?

If we are indeed being tried, are we passing the test?

What *is* the test?

Epilogue:

In the beginning was the Word.

Not words.