Chapter 3:

Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?

(Part 1)

In our last chapter, we looked at how Luke answers the question "Through whose eyes do we read the Scriptures?" He narrates Jesus's interaction with the disciples on the road to Emmaus and turns it into a living interpretative principle. We were shown a dead-and-living victim giving an entirely non-resentful account of what had really been going on all along since Creation itself. That said, let's jump straight in and look at one of the pieces of Scripture Jesus might have been interpreting. Let's get some sense of how this living interpretative principle can work, and what we can learn by allowing ourselves to read Scripture in this way.

The text we're going to look at is Joshua 7. We will read it twice: once exactly as it appears in a standard translation, and once as if it were in a modern newspaper. You will see that there is no real difference between the accounts.

Just a bit of background before we start: Joshua, who is Moses' appointed successor, is leading the people of Israel in an invasion of Canaan, the "promised land". He and his soldiers have just taken the city of Jericho. (You may remember the story: they march around the walls seven times, blowing trumpets; the walls fall, and the city is taken).

Before the siege of Jericho, God had told Joshua that everything his troops came across was to be put under a "ban" —meaning it was declared "devoted" to YHWH and was thus to be burned or destroyed. This means there was to be no looting. That might seem a rather implausible instruction for a bunch of military men nowadays, but for those involved in a "holy war", anything that might fracture their solidarity

and lead to soldiers squabbling among themselves over spoils really did need to be avoided.

So Jericho has just fallen, and our heroes are about to move on to the next step of their manifest destiny, occupying the land of milk and honey and driving out the inhabitants. And then we have this strange parenthesis:

> But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things; for Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things; and the anger of the LORD burned against the people of Israel.
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> Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Bethaven, east of Bethel, and said to them: "Go up and spy out the land." And the men went up and spied out Ai.
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> And they returned to Joshua, and said to him: "Let not all the people go up, but let about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai; do not make the whole people toil up there, for they are but few." So about three thousand went up there from the people; and they fled before the men of Ai, and the men of Ai killed about thirty-six men of them, and chased them before the gate as far as Shebarim, and slew them at the descent. And the hearts of the people melted, and became as water.
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> Then Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the evening, he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust upon their heads. And Joshua said: "Alas, O Lord GOD, why hast thou brought this people over the Jordan at all, to give us into the hands of the Amorites, to destroy us? Would that we had been content to dwell beyond the Jordan! O Lord, what can I say, when Israel has turned their backs before their enemies! For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and will surround us, and cut off our name from the earth; and what wilt thou do for thy great name?"
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> The LORD said to Joshua: "Arise, why have you thus fallen upon your face? Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant which I commanded them; they have taken some of the de-

voted things; they have stolen, and lied, and put them among their own stuff. Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies; they turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become a thing for destruction. I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you.

"Up, sanctify the people, and say, 'Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow; for thus says the LORD, God of Israel: «There are devoted things in the midst of you, O Israel; you cannot stand before your enemies, until you take away the devoted things from among you.»

"In the morning therefore you shall be brought near by your tribes; and the tribe which the LORD takes shall come near by families; and the family which the LORD takes shall come near by households; and the household which the LORD takes shall come near man by man. And he who is taken with the devoted things shall be burned with fire, he and all that he has, because he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he has done a shameful thing in Israel.'"

So Joshua rose early in the morning, and brought Israel near tribe by tribe, and the tribe of Judah was taken; and he brought near the families of Judah, and the family of the Zerahites was taken; and he brought near the family of the Zerahites man by man, and Zabdi was taken; and he brought near his household man by man, and Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.

Then Joshua said to Achan: "My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and render praise to him; and tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me."

And Achan answered Joshua: "Of a truth I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, then I coveted them, and took them; and behold, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath."

So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and behold, it was hidden in his tent with the silver underneath. And they

took them out of the tent and brought them to Joshua and all the people of Israel; and they laid them down before the LORD.

And Joshua and all Israel with him took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver and the mantle and the bar of gold, and his sons and daughters, and his oxen and asses and sheep, and his tent, and all that he had; and they brought them up to the Valley of Achor [which means trouble]. And Joshua said: "Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD brings trouble on you today."

And all Israel stoned him with stones; they burned them with fire, and stoned them with stones. And they raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day; then the LORD turned from his burning anger. Therefore to this day the name of that place is called the Valley of Achor.

Now, if we were in a liturgical setting, and I had just finished reading this out loud to you, we would add a congregational response—something like the reader pronouncing: "This is the word of the Lord" and the assembly replying: "Thanks be to God." And my guess is that many of you would feel somewhat queasy, as though there's something not quite right about saying "Thanks be to God" after this delightful little incident. I am going to ask you to hold on to your queasiness. It is, in itself, an important guide to the task of interpretation.

Now I'm going to re-tell the story, with very slight alterations. You'll see that it's exactly the same story, but we can imagine substituting a variety of different proper names. Let's start by imagining any country you can think of where a general is conducting a military operation. He's got manifest destiny on his side, and his troops are thoroughly fired up about being on the indisputably winning side in their conquest. They've just had a major victory and are looking forward to the next cakewalk, a small town in their path. The general, sensibly enough, sends out scouts to reconnoitre. The scouts do their thing and come back with a report which says there'll be no problem: "Give the troops a break, send in a platoon or two, nothing too heavy. They'll probably receive our guys as liberators, anyway, with carnations in their rifles". So the general follows the expert advice and sends in a modest contingent.

Except the scouts were wrong. The opposition had more troops than they thought. What's more, they misread the morale of the locals, and so had given potentially fatal advice to their own side.

The result is a skirmish of sorts. The local forces emerge, performing somewhat better than anticipated, and the insufficient troops sent by the general are put to flight. A few of them are killed—not a huge number, but that is secondary. When manifest destiny is on your side, you are not supposed to lose in skirmishes. To do so is awfully bad for morale, since the whole point of manifest destiny is that you're supposed to win. If the news gets out about your losing in a skirmish, the people in the lands you were going to conquer, and who were going to give up without much of a struggle because your irresistible superiority had overawed them, might suddenly think it worth resisting.

Having lost this skirmish, the aura of manifest destiny is in trouble, and the general is left with a real problem on his hands: seriously demoralised troops. He has two options: the first is what I call the "Jimmy Carter option". In 1979, Jimmy Carter sent troops to rescue American hostages being held in Tehran. The expedition was poorly organised and the mission failed. Carter, being a decent, honourable man, came on television and said words to the effect of "The buck stops here. I'm the Commander in Chief. Even though the intelligence was not conducted by me personally, this is clearly something for which I am responsible, and I'm going to try to put it right". He immediately lost the 1980 US presidential election to a sort of adolescent cut-out hero, because people don't really want generals who take responsibility for their actions.

So our General could take the Jimmy Carter option, or he could take the more normal option, which is to say: "If I am to save face, I need to find someone to take the fall. So I will proclaim: 'Someone is at fault! Our army has been undermined by wicked people. We are going to do a thorough witch hunt to find out who is responsible'". The General then needs to organise said witch hunt—which is precisely what Joshua does.

In the ancient world, the most effective way of organising a witch hunt was through a lottery. You need to make quite sure that the whole thing seems impersonal. If you're in a tribal setting, with lots of tribes gathered together, any move that doesn't seem to come from an im-

personal source will be taken as intertribal rivalry. A modern General might organise a purge or a show trial, or unleash the media on a hunt for "the Reds under the beds", thus weeding out the dangerous whoever-it-is that is undermining group morale. In the ancient world, however, you get a god to organise a lottery.

Lottery organisation is, in fact, the only function of the word "God" in our passage. It is the only thing God does. God says to Joshua: "Yes, there is a mole, and I'm going to set up the means for you to find him".

Since the general is not going to take responsibility, he has to find someone else to take the blame. Simultaneously, he has to restore group morale. The lottery process achieves both results admirably. Imagine a bag with twelve pebbles, of which one is white and the other eleven are black. The leader of each tribe comes by and blind-picks a pebble from the bag. This is actually an excellent system for restoring morale, because for each black pebble that emerges, relief starts to break out. It is quite crucial that the lottery be conducted slowly and with decorum, which is why it's announced at the beginning that there's going to be a lottery, so all present should "sanctify themselves". This doesn't mean "You should all daub yourselves with holy water"—it means "Prepare yourselves, for the end of this process is a legitimised human sacrifice".

So as each pebble is pulled out, relief starts to build. Each group whose name is not called (the vast majority in each round of the lottery) experiences the feeling of being let off the hook for something terrible. And not only that: it is conceivable that, in contrast with the Glorious General's claim that some*one* has disobeyed sacred orders by looting, *many* of those standing around had in fact helped themselves. Each black pebble that comes out is a guarantee that no one will go rooting around under its holder's tents to see if they've been looting. So long as the white pebble doesn't fall to your tribe, your tribe is given a pass on whatever looting you might have engaged in. That means your tribe also has a vested interest in making sure the verdict of the lottery is respected.

So as tribe by tribe passes by, eleven tribes are relieved. Only one is in trouble. The "guilty" group, in turn, becomes smaller and smaller, while everyone else feels increasingly relieved and more and more convinced of the system's righteousness. In the end, there is only one

person who is not relieved (with, of course, his wife and children, who didn't count as real people).

You can see what has happened during this sacred time: a tremendous sense of relief has broken out, along with awe at the way everyone is coming together, and morale is being restored. Indeed, morale is being restored by the relief everyone else feels that somebody else is going to be "got"—not them.

Now, these lotteries are somewhat fragile, fallible processes. It's rather essential that the lot not accidentally fall on someone terribly significant. It needs to fall on somebody without too many people to stand up for them. The last thing a lottery system wants is the equivalent of a Florida recount, with a power broker like James Baker III being sent in to ensure his boy gets made president. That would destroy belief in the system's legitimacy. You have to make sure the finger points to someone who won't really be missed. And it is "amazing" how, in fact, these lotteries tend to have ways of avoiding potentially problematic targets.

In Joshua's case, the system has worked well. It has ground on, ever finer, and eventually the finger has pointed to someone no one has ever heard of, nor will he be heard of again: Achan, who, of course, knows exactly how this liturgy is going to end.

The general then says: "My son, give glory to the Lord, God of Israel"—which doesn't mean "Stand up and do a happy-clappy dance". Instead, it is the formal legal phrase for requiring someone to take an oath. As in any show trial, you want it to be clear to everyone that the accused is not only guilty, but that he recognises his guilt. He must be adjured to join in the unanimity of the group, even at his own expense. Someone who is under oath in a lottery or show trial is expected to give the official truth, fully confident that even if they don't, the record will be altered to show that they did. Famously, in Stalin's show trials of the 1930s, the accused were made to confess not to crimes that they had committed (since they had committed none) but to crimes which, had they been allowed to go on living, they would have committed. No further proof was needed than that their thinking contradicted that of Stalin, who represented the objective truth of history—a perfect totalitarian circle.

Unanimity is good, but unanimity minus one is even better, since the "one" is about to disappear, and the unanimity of the survivors will have been proven in a process and will have come to seem a foundational achievement. However, if it is at all possible, it's good that the victim should agree to be sacrificed. This is why, in the ancient Greek world, a chorus was present to sing loudly during sacrificial rites. When a human was to be sacrificed, the crowd of wailers would wail especially loudly, just in case the victim forgot their appointed role. It might just be that, rather than going nobly, singing songs about how honoured they were to be offered to the gods, they were dragged kicking and screaming to the altar, protesting the injustice of their murder. Thus the screen of noise put up by the choir protected the necessary unanimity from any danger that an "unofficial" story might break through.

This is why the General puts under an oath the person pointed out by the apparently objective, impersonal finger of the lottery. Achan knows there's no point in resisting. Whether he stole anything or not, commissars will be sent, and stuff will be found under his tent. He might as well tell them what they want to hear. It's rather similar to districts where, if the police need to arrest someone for whatever reason, then a packet of cocaine will predictably be found in his or her pocket. Achan "fesses up"—or so the record shows—the loot is found, and the case is complete. Everyone has been brought together in agreement, the traitor has been dragged out into the open, and justice has been seen to have been done. There is just one final act of the rite before the whole process can deliver its intended result: The General takes Achan to a special place and pronounces a suitably grave sentence: "You brought trouble on us, so the Lord brings trouble on you." This is the equivalent of nodding to the firing squad. The entire group, buoyed up by its own righteousness (and the relief of a lucky escape) joins in, and stones Achan to death.

It is crucial that everyone participates unanimously in this human sacrifice. Everyone needs to be implicated. There must be no one standing to one side saying: "This is wrong, I won't be part of this", because that would threaten the unanimity of the story and thus the unanimity of the group. The entire exercise would fail, since its purpose is to foster a united morale. That is one of the reasons why you must not only

get rid of the one on whom the lot has fallen; you must get rid of all his relatives as well. There must be no inconvenient brats or wives hanging around who might challenge the official version, saying: "They got my Dad, but I don't really know why, because I saw three statues and four bars of gold under my Uncle Phineas' tent, but they didn't go for him". Not only must you get rid of his family, but you must get rid of all his animals and property as well, since there must be nothing left over for people to squabble about.

The whole point of avoiding looting in the first place is not because of some principled objection to your soldiers being enriched by war. It is because looting leads to your soldiers squabbling among themselves, and this is what ultimately leads to a loss of morale among the troops, making them a less effective fighting force. So the last thing you want, once you've stoned your victim, is for the rest of the group to squabble about who gets his property. So everything has to go, everything is destroyed, nothing is left to fight about, and now we have the situation where everyone is implicated in the execution. Everyone is responsible, and so no one is responsible. The lottery organiser has delivered an effective, completely impersonal procedure for building morale.

It is then no surprise when, as soon as the victim is covered with stones, the text says: "The Lord turned from his burning anger." Of course he did! If you remember, the Lord's burning anger started at precisely the same time as the loss of morale, the moment that the people's hearts "became like water". In fact, the loss of morale and the burning anger were the same thing. It's no wonder that it stops at the moment of the sacrifice, because morale has been restored: everyone is together, unanimously, at peace with each other, in agreement with each other that they got their bad guy. Now they can go on their way, fully keyed up for effective military action.

Do you see now how it is possible to tell exactly the same story twice, once as a biblical text, and once as a modern newspaper account, without any mystical bits? The only function the word "God" has in this passage is as an organiser of the lottery. In the structure of this passage, the word "God" guarantees the impersonality of the morale-building lottery and its concluding human sacrifice. The guarantor enables the general to organise the lottery. That's it. Furthermore, this kind of sto-

ry—a story with this structure, with or without the word "God"—is entirely familiar to you from any century in any country that you know. It is something that any of us can understand without an advanced degree in theology, anthropology, philosophy, or history. It just requires a basic acquaintance with the daily news. Every single element of this story is perfectly comprehensible to us at a simple human level.

Summing up, we heard an account of God and Joshua, and then an account of the General and the Lottery. Both are exactly the same. Now here's the question: why does that leave us slightly queasy? Earlier, I pointed out that, in a liturgical context, we would have responded to this text with "Thanks be to God" or a similar phrase. But it sticks in the craw to be giving praise to a person who set up a lottery and authorised a lynch mob.

I would like to suggest that we are *justified* in feeling uneasy about such a response. Our queasiness is not a sign that we are hopelessly secularised and incapable of taking religion seriously. Our queasiness suggests there is something about this story which prods us in the back of our mind. We could focus on that prodding by asking "Who in this story is the figure of Christ?"

There are several candidates. The obvious one might be Joshua, since after all, the names Jesus and Joshua were originally the same name. Then again, throughout the New Testament, we see Jesus referred to as "The Lord", so the references to the Lord in this passage might prefigure Jesus. But we instinctively know that neither of these is quite right. The obvious figure of Christ in this passage is Achan: the one who was put to death. And this suggests that our unrest does not come from our being secular moderns who don't know how to read ancient texts. On the contrary, we are moderns who have picked up on a particular reading of ancient texts, which we perform without even thinking about it: we've been taught to associate the word "Lord" with the one being sacrificed.

In the story as we have it, Achan is held to be guilty. The story is, after all, told by the survivors, whose survival was guaranteed by their unanimous participation in his execution. This is the account of a lynching, as told by the persecutors. We could easily imagine the General—call him Joshua or whoever—in the buildup to the lottery, saying

to any doubters "Do you not know that it is convenient that one man should die and the nation not perish?" (John 11:50). The voice we don't hear in this story at all is Achan's, other than as the persecutors report it. His voice, his version of events, perished with him, leaving no possible breach in the official story. We can imagine Achan, were he able to say anything at all, saying: "I don't know why the lot fell on me, since many of us were doing the same thing", or "I wish I could have got some loot, but others were faster and stronger". We can imagine him saying different things, but all of them are a variant on "They hated me without cause"—words applied to Jesus at his Passion (Ps 69:4; Jn 15:25). Except here, we have no independent record of what he thought or felt or said—only the perspective of his lynchers.

In the previous chapter, when we looked at the Emmaus story, we saw the reverse of this. In the Joshua passage, the voice of the victimised one could not be heard. But in the Emmaus story, we found ourselves in the presence of one who is telling the account of a lynching from the perspective of the person who was lynched. This was a voice that had not been heard before, as indeed it is not heard in the Achan story. It is as though, at last, Achan's version of events is beginning to pour out through the cracks between the stones which had covered him.

What I want to suggest is that, when it says of Jesus on the road to Emmaus: "…He opened up to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself," what we are getting is the crucified victim telling the story from Achan's point of view. The story of how a gang of people needed to find an enemy within, and set it up so that one was found, and that this was what happened to him. The dead man talking would be Achan giving Achan's account of his lynching. And indeed, you can imagine many other similar stories where someone who is hated without cause can begin to tell their version of events.

What I wanted to bring out is that the two stories—the Achan story and the Emmaus story—are structurally identical, but told from opposite perspectives. There is the top-down version—the version told by the successful organisers of group togetherness, the persecutors' account—and then there is the bottom-up version of the same story, told by the victim from under the stones, on the cross, or in the pit. All the elements of both accounts are the same: rivalry leading to a collapse

of morale and structure, leaders trying to find a way to recreate morale, managing to do so by getting everyone together against someone else, and when this finally works and the "someone else" is got rid of, unanimity—peace—is restored. The order is reborn, and everyone is telling the same story.

The trouble is, the moment the victim's story can be heard, it reveals the other story as untrue. It is a lie. Its perpetrators need to believe it for it to work. They need to believe they've really gotten the bad guy. (After all, in their account, the bad guy even agrees with them!) The survivors needed to believe the lie because they thought it would bring them together—it won't. In fact, they'll soon be at each other's throats about something else, and will soon need to go through this all over again and get someone else in the neck.

There are two entirely different perspectives on exactly the same story. One version of the story, which is a lie, is told from the perspective of the survivors, those who have benefited from the lynching. The other—the perspective which is never commonly heard, which starts to emerge into our world thanks to the crucified and risen Lord—is the perspective which tells the truth and reveals the official perspective to be a lie.

I hope you now see why I referred to the Emmaus story as not just a story but as a paradigm, or model, of interpretation. The New Testament operates by bringing to life the same old story, but told from underneath. This is what is meant by the fulfilment of Scripture (see Luke 4:21). I plunged in with the Joshua story because it is such a clear text. We read it, and as we read it, our first reaction was queasy. The root of the queasiness is that we know too much! Even as we were reading it, we found it giving itself away, being a little too transparently like things we know only too well, things which we are right not to associate with God.

It is because of texts like this that people say things like "Oh, the Bible is a really violent book. The Old Testament is full of really nasty stories in which terrible things happen to people in the name of God. Wouldn't it be much better if we could just start with the New Testament and leave all those awful texts behind? Greek myths are so much

nicer, don't you know; the gods are playful, sip ambrosia, and have peccadillos. It's all much more fun than these nasty stories".

To which I say: Wrong! Mistake! In the Hebrew Scriptures, even passages like this are an enormous advance on the world of mythology. I will show this by describing two equal and opposite mistakes regarding the reading of Scripture. One, I'm going to label the Marcionite error, in honour of an early Christian interpreter called Marcion.

In a nutshell, Marcion, faced with texts like the one we've just seen from the Hebrew Scriptures, said something to the effect of "These are awful stories; it cannot be the same god as the God of Jesus that is at work in them. It's got to be another god altogether". So he proposed ditching the Hebrew Scriptures as something to do with another god. In fact, he found himself pruning much of the New Testament as well and ended up making a sort of compendium of the Gospels based on Luke, which he found to be nicer than the rest, forcing other elements to fit into it. Church authority, on the other hand, said: "No! The Scriptures are one, and we receive both Testaments as making sense of each other". So Marcion's view was rejected. Typically, in the modern world, it is Catholics who remain tempted by his mistake.

The reverse of this, which is the mistake Protestants are more inclined to make in the modern world, is a fundamentalist reading of Scripture. The fundamentalist position would be that, far from there being two different gods in the different Testaments, there is one God, and this God is the same at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. So, where the Old Testament says "God" or "The Lord", it means exactly the same as the God of Jesus Christ. Well, if you think this, then when you are faced with a text like our Joshua text, you are going to have to come up with a complicated account of how God did in fact organise the sacrifice of Achan, but only so as to show in advance how he planned to undo the whole sacrificial system later, through the sacrifice of his Son.

You can imagine the sort of rigorous mental gymnastics by which people seek to justify the word "God" in the Joshua text, where it manifestly refers to the organiser of a lottery. How do you disentangle the sort of God who does that from doing nasty things to his Son in the crucifixion? You can see why a particular reading of Jesus' death as being

demanded by his Father, with the Father punishing the Son for the sins of others, is so popular. It fits in precisely with the need to look at all the violence across Scriptures, and say "It's the same God".

What is difficult for both parties to understand is how the New Testament works as an interpretative key, opening up the Hebrew Scriptures. The New Testament allows us to see how, slowly and inexorably, the one true God—who was always making Godself known in and through the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures—was always coming into the world. And to the degree that God comes into the world, to the degree that God's revelation of Godself as simultaneously God and Victim comes into clearer and clearer focus, what we humans do as victimisers gets clearer and more transparent, harder not to see as obvious before our very eyes. It is the growing clarity from the self-revealing victim coming into the world that leads our stories of lynching and victimisation to appear nastier and nastier, and so less and less successful at "covering things up" and "making things nice" for the survivors and perpetrators.

The Joshua text we've examined is a particularly good example of this, simply because it seems *so* nasty. It would be easy for us to say: "But this text is the exact opposite of the New Testament. Marcion could scarcely have asked for a better example of what he's talking about!" And that, as I see it, is the mistake: if the living interpretative principle demonstrated at Emmaus is true, then you would also expect that, just as it becomes clear that the victim is telling the true story, so it also becomes clearer and clearer to us what is really going on in the texts which move towards lynching. Therefore, the texts will look nastier.

Now, back to the nice Greek gods sipping their ambrosia: we have, in fact, plenty of texts in mythic literature in which the gods organise things, gather people together, and produce expulsions or sacrifices while the people take no responsibility at all. In the story from Joshua, meanwhile, the word "God" is very easily switched on or off, and what remains absolutely clear whether it's on or off is the human dimension of what's going on. Everything is set out in anthropological terms, without responsibility being displaced onto God or the gods. You can tell exactly what's going on; the text is teetering on the brink of giving itself away. So when we read it, our Gospel-inspired scepticism, itself

part of the gift of faith, takes us over the brink. If you believe that Jesus, the crucified victim, is God, you stop believing in "the gods"; you stop believing in weird forces revealing who is "really" to blame, and you get closer and closer to seeing things as they really (humanly) are.

What I'm bringing out here is an understanding of progressive revelation: as the truth emerges more and more richly in our midst, we cannot expect the textual effects of that emergence to get nicer and nicer. You would expect them to get clearer and more transparent—but also nastier and nastier. Finally, you see precisely the same story being told from exactly the inverse perspective, so that there are no longer even the remains of any mythical bits at work. It requires no great imagination to think either "The Old Testament is bad and the New Testament is good" or "All word values are the same in both Testaments". It requires rather more subtlety to imagine a process by which, as the self-manifestation of the innocent victim becomes clearer, so our understanding of human inclinations becomes darker and darker—but also, more and more realistic.

Compare this with, say, the story of *Oedipus Rex*, as told by the Greek poet Sophocles. It is essentially the same story as the one we saw in Joshua. There is a plague, and social problems in Thebes, and a slightly deformed outsider—who has provoked jealousy by marrying a prominent heiress—is conveniently forced to confess to killing his father, the king, and marrying his mother, albeit unaware of what he was doing. (He almost certainly didn't do any of this, and even if he had, that wouldn't have caused a plague). He is then expelled, sent into exile so that the city can return to peace.

Now, on the surface, this story is much nicer than the Hebrew story. The townsfolk were not responsible for a violent expulsion; they were victims of a horrible plague and were confirmed in their horrible suspicions regarding their interloper, while the guilty one got his just reward! But the Greek version remains mired in self-delusion: the townsfolk forced an innocent man into exile for something he couldn't control, but they've left no cracks in their story by which they—or we—might recognise their complicity.

The Hebrew version of the same dynamic, meanwhile, is radically more truthful. Even the editor of the text in the book of Joshua clearly

has doubts about this story; the little hints of scepticism are among the wonders of the Hebrew Scriptures. The editor starts by saying: "But the people of Israel broke faith regarding the devoted things". It begins with a plural and then moves to a singular: "For Achan, son of Carmi (…)" and so on. And then you have the oddity of God's behaviour: Although he might be expected to know everything, he appears to need a lottery to help find out "who done it". And in fact, God tells Joshua that it is the people of Israel, in the plural, who have disobeyed him, before giving the instructions for the lottery that will find a singular victim. (As you can imagine, an ancient rabbinical storyteller telling this story in a liturgical context, using this text as his Expositor's Notes—which is very probably how such texts were handled in the ancient world—would have a good deal of fun wondering aloud about these things with his audience).

Prophecy and Hermeneutic Key

The point of spending time with a relatively unknown scriptural passage is that I want you to be able to handle the Bible without being frightened. I want you to receive the texts of Scripture not as a scary trap that you must somehow accept if you are to be a "good person", but as something much richer and more freeing: as the ancient texts through which the living God enables us to gradually learn who God really is—and who we really are. When read well, they equip us to avoid projecting our scary violence onto God, but instead realistically to accept responsibility for what we are inclined to do ourselves. If we dare allow ourselves to be freed from our violent forms of behaviour, we will find God encouraging us and enlivening us into new ways of being together. And this through the very same Scriptures that first taught us to recognize who we are.

To help this settle in, I'd like to remind you of some key points regarding the Bible. For one, there is no such thing as a "natural" way to read the Bible. There is not even a natural order in which to read the texts. The texts were not originally in one book. They were not compiled in the same order in which we typically present them in our

modern Bibles. There were texts known in ancient times, but which we no longer have. There were texts that significant groups of Hebrews in the ancient world didn't have, but which we do. And across time, there were editors collecting texts together, comparing them, using them, transmitting and transcribing them, attempting to make sense out of all that they had, working out which books should be included in the collection, and which shouldn't. On quite a literal level, there is no such thing as an "original text" of the Bible.

Our case in the twenty-first century is just the same as it has been for close to two and a half millennia: depending on how you hold these texts together, what order you read them in and in what circumstances you use them, the meanings that you give them and derive from them will change. In other words, there is no such thing as reading these texts without an interpretative key. You will always tell the story from where you start, more or less self-awarely, self-critically, and motivated by different feelings.

The reason I want to emphasise this is that people sometimes treat the New Testament, the Christian texts, as if they were an extra set of stories added on to a pre-existing set of stories. No! The Christian account is of deeds and words which together provide an interpretative key to the Hebrew Scriptures. You may, of course, choose not to accept them as an interpretative key to those texts. You might say: "There is no single story at work in the ancient Hebrew texts, only a multiplicity of different stories subject to individual interpretations"—which would be the equivalent of saying that God doesn't speak through them in a single act of communication. Or you might say: "The real interpretative principle in the Hebrew Scriptures is the Temple of Jerusalem, its initial building and destruction, its later rebuilding and destruction, and how the Hebrew people relate to all that as they imagine a future Holy Land and Temple". Nevertheless, there is no account of the Scriptures that is not already an interpretation.

I want to remind you of this, since from time to time people appeal to Scripture by saying "But it says this" or "It says that". However, Scripture doesn't "say" anything. There isn't an interpretation-free place from which we can stand outside and say: "Oh, what he's said is just a Christian (or a Jewish, or a secular) add-on, but in reality the texts

have an interpretation-free meaning of their own". They don't! We are dealing with incredibly flexible, malleable texts which can be read hundreds of different ways. What the text says will depend on how you, the interpreter, reconstruct it from where you are starting, and in the light of the order you tell it, in the context of the things you put alongside it. As any storyteller can tell you, you can take the same narrative building blocks and rearrange them in slightly different ways and come out with markedly different stories. That will be true of the texts of Scripture as well.

What we've just done—putting together the accounts of Achan and the Road to Emmaus—is thus not in principle an "unnatural" reading of the texts. This is not a weird exercise. Anyone who chooses to read the Achan story will likely explain it as part of something that comes from somewhere and tends to point to somewhere else. What I want to claim is that the historical and cultural textual trajectory shaped by the Hebrew texts, the trajectory which ultimately gives us the Emmaus story, is in fact *predicated upon* the Emmaus story, is always a movement backwards from it. It is possible to see the Achan story as prophetic of Christ, in the way I've described, only in the light of what is taken to be the fulfilment of the prophecy. As is your hermeneutical key, so is your prophecy. Whatever guides your reading is going to nudge you into seeing certain words and deeds of the past as pointing towards a certain fulfilment beyond themselves, and sometimes towards a certain fulfilment *despite* themselves. Reading through the eyes of the crucified and risen Messiah is a particular option—and I hope, in what comes, to convince you of its power and truthfulness.

If we are going to read with these eyes, however, we will have to imagine the Bible as something other than a long book which has a beginning, a middle, and an end, with a sort of appendix added on. Instead, I suggest you think of it in this way: there is a single interpretative centre—the dead and risen Christ. All these texts from different periods are thrown up into the air and come down at different angles to the centre. Then, remember that Christ, the interpretative centre, is *contemporary to us.* As he was for Cleopas and N, so he is, for us, a *living hermeneutic principle*. And so, all these accounts, which hang from him and flow to him, will always be read by us contemporarily. Rather than

having an "Old" Testament and a "New" Testament, I think of us as having a "Building-up-to-Now" Testament, and its interpretative key is the "Opening-up-the-Now" Testament.

I say all this because many people feel weighed down by the Scriptures, as though God made us less free through them. I want to highlight something that Jewish readers often know much better than we do: reading Scripture is a much freer, richer, and more interesting exercise than we think. However, it is one for which we interpreters become increasingly aware of our responsibility, because *how* you tell the story *is* the story that you tell.

Interpretation in the Scriptures

Having established that the struggle around interpretation we've been looking at is perfectly natural and appropriate for the Scriptures, I'd like to demonstrate further that this struggle is not something that only happens "outside" or "after" them. It also happens within them. As you may recall, I set out for you two Christian temptations when reading Scripture: the Marcionite and the Fundamentalist. One says: "Nasty story, different god", and the other says: "Nasty story, same God", but offers lots of mental gymnastics to get around the unpalatable things these nasty stories imply about God.

I want to show you how the authors and editors of the Sacred texts themselves faced exactly these same temptations. To do this, we're going to look at one of the central discussions underlying several chunks of the Hebrew Scriptures: the issue of child sacrifice, or specifically the sacrifice of the firstborn.

Let's have a look at Exodus 22:29b. Surrounding it, you will find a list of instructions concerning a wide variety of things, but this particular instruction reads:

> You shall not revile God nor curse the ruler of your people. You shall not delay to offer from the fulness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do likewise with your oxen and with your

sheep. Seven days it will be with its dam. On the eighth day you shall give it to me.

The phrase might pass us by as we read it, since we automatically assume that it must mean something like a naming ceremony, or a baptism, or a Bar-mitzvah. But it becomes slightly more challenging to pass by when we notice the same instruction is given concerning sheep and cattle. They are not, typically, bar-mitzvahed.

It is increasingly clear that for a very long part of their history, the people we now call the people of Israel had, as a regular part of their basic culture, the sacrifice of firstborn children. And the straightforward command to do this, put into the mouth of God, would have been the standard conservative position within that society. There is considerable archaeological evidence to support this claim: the custom was popular among the people sometimes referred to as the Phoenicians, the trading people whose sphere of influence extended from Carthage to Tyre and Sidon. In the Scriptures, they are called "Canaanites", and a good deal of Israel's cultural baggage comes from them. Part of their religion was the sacrifice of children (through fire) to a god whom they called Moloch. (The name might sound, to our modern ears, like a byword for evil, but the consonants in the name "Moloch" usually meant king or angel. This was a rather ordinary word for someone very important).

To show that child sacrifice wasn't something that only happened in the remote, Bronze Age past, long before the people of Israel began to treat themselves as a people, we'll now look at two Hebrew prophets engaged in a polemic about this issue. Interestingly, our two prophets are almost contemporaries of each other: Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jeremiah, a northerner who tended to be critical of the Jerusalem establishment, was treated as a traitor. He turned out to be right, was sent into exile and eventually killed. Ezekiel, a fairly conservative Temple priest from Jerusalem, was sent into exile in Babylon. The ministries of the two prophets were not so far apart in years—we're talking about the period between about 600 and 580 BCE. Yet when faced with the child sacrifice issue, they take rather different stances.

In Jeremiah 19:3-6, the prophet is obviously faced with a widespread presumption that God wants people to sacrifice their children. This is what he says:

> You shall say: Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known; and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent, and gone on building the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind. Therefore the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter.

A couple of points are in order. The first is that the word "Baal" was simply an ordinary word at the time for "Lord". So Jeremiah is making a significant distinction, not between two individuals with different names, but between two different bearers of a potentially identical name. The second is that anyone who has to repeat their denial of something three times—"I did not command, nor decree, nor did it enter my mind"—makes it sound as though he is dissociating himself strongly from something his listeners generally thought he had always been fully signed up to.

Jeremiah's attitude is "This child sacrifice business is awful. Such commands did not come from YHWH, they came from another god". In other words, Jeremiah is a sort of Marcionite *avant la lettre*. He's telling his listeners: "You've confused these two deities over the last several hundred years, and now I'm trying to sort out which is which to get you back to worshipping the Real Deal".

Ezekiel, on the other hand, has the following to say (20:23-26):

> Moreover, I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the countries, because they had not executed my ordinances, but had rejected my statutes and profaned my sabbaths, and their eyes were set on their ancestors' idols. Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the LORD.

Ezekiel seems to have the fundamentalist temptation. He's saying: "Yes, it was YHWH", where Jeremiah was saying: "No, it was Baal". Ezekiel recognises that the passage we now call Exodus 22:29b was considered an authentic word from YHWH, and so he has to find a way to circumvent the problem that God ordered something repulsive. His solution is to claim that God did command this, but only so that people would find it so awful that they would give it up. In other words: "Because I want you to give up chocolate, I'm going to command you to eat chocolate, to gorge yourselves on chocolate until it makes you sick, and then you'll give it up of your own accord".

Well, this sounds pretty capricious. It makes one wonder about all of God's commandments. If they might turn out to be commanding the very reverse of what they seem to be commanding, why pay attention to any of them at all?

My point here is to compare the mental logic in both cases. Both prophets are faced with the same problem: the presence of child sacrifice, understood as obedience to a sacred decree. Both want the same solution: that child sacrifice should stop, and that God should no longer be associated with such things. Yet both have recourse to entirely different strategies of interpretation to achieve the same result: one adopts a proto-Marcionite "wrong god" solution, while the other employs a proto-fundamentalist "same God, serious mental gymnastics" solution.

Yet had you been an ordinary, traditional, observant Israelite or Judaean of the period, you would have assumed that God wanted child

sacrifice, and that both Ezekiel and Jeremiah were, each in their own sweet way, the ancient equivalents of the leader writers at the Guardian Newspaper: dangerously secularising proto-atheists who are not God-fearing people at all. Good, straight-forward, God-fearing people will have known right away that religion is a serious business, and it involves sacrificing children: "If you don't go along with sacrificing children, then you can't really be serious about respecting God".

Let's remember that, over time, it turned out the word of God was being spoken by these very prophets who would have appeared as insufficiently religious to their contemporaries. In other words, in the Bible, it is the dangerous secularizers who win out in the end. Weird or what?

Child sacrifice was a difficult issue, both because of what was done to the innocents and because of the re-interpretation required to move beyond it. There are all sorts of signs in the Hebrew Scriptures of stories which have something to do with child sacrifice being edited in such a way as to reveal a fundamental shift in the perceived relationship between God and humans. A fundamental shift against sacrifice.

Let's look at Exodus 4, 22-26. God is talking to Moses:

> Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you: 'Let my son go that he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.'" On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said: "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" So he let him alone. It was then she said: "A bridegroom of blood by circumcision."

This is a very odd story as it stands. Here we have Moses being told by the Lord to go to Pharaoh and say to him: "Let my people go. Israel is my firstborn, so I want Israel to come out and worship me." Here we have a benign account of what it might mean that firstborn sons are being "separated out" for the Lord. Then we get the other side of the story: the message to Pharaoh continues: "but if you don't let my people go, I'll kill your firstborn sons."

You can see how this might suggest a new direction of interpretation: God is especially interested in firstborn sons, but when they are part of Israel, this is so they may be set free to worship. When they are part of Egypt, their being killed is associated with not letting the people of Israel go free. You can see, perhaps, a variant on Jeremiah's "two god" solution to the problem.

Let's look at the next verses. Moses is now on his way back to Egypt to give his lovely message to Pharaoh. And then the text says: "On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him." Curiouser and curiouser. If you've just given someone a message to carry for you, why should you then want to kill them? But that's what it says, at least in our current version. The next verse tells us more:

> But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said: "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" So he let him alone. It was then she said: "A bridegroom of blood by circumcision."

Zipporah is Mrs Moses. Her reaction in taking a flint, cutting off her (and Moses') son's foreskin, and touching the foreskin to Moses' genitals (for the word "feet" here, as in some other places in the Hebrew Scriptures, is a euphemism for genitals) makes no sense at all if, as would seem to be the case from the previous verse, it is the Lord who is trying to kill Moses. It would make a great deal more sense if, in the earlier verse, it had been Moses who was trying to kill his firstborn son. Mrs Moses would then be offering a substitute sacrifice—the foreskin instead of the whole child—and quickly making a covenant of peace by means of the gesture to the genitals. (The placing of the suppliant's hand in the thigh of the other party was a customary way of making a covenant).

If that is the case, then what we have here is a story about the invention of circumcision as a substitute for child sacrifice. It is inserted into a narrative about Egypt, where twin valences of the relationship between God and the firstborn emerge—setting apart for worship on one hand, and setting apart to be killed on the other.

I am no expert in the study of the Hebrew Scriptures, but it doesn't seem entirely implausible—however you end up interpreting it—that this passage, with its grammatical oddities, is the site of considerable editing. In principle at least, it doesn't seem silly to suggest that this editing is part of a history of interpretation which deals with and ultimately moves on from child sacrifice.

Let's finish by looking at the most famous passage where this interpretative editing seems to be going on—the passage called the Akedah, or the Binding of Isaac, which is found in Genesis 22. Here is the text:

> After these things God tested Abraham. God said to him: "Abraham!" And he said: "Here I am." God 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 on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men: "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham: "Father!" And he said: "Here I am, my son." He said: "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said: "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.
>
> Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.
>
> But the angel of the LORD called to him from Heaven, and said: "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said: "Here I am." He said: "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I

know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day: "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided." The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from Heaven, and said: "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of Heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the Earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

So, Abraham is instructed to take his son and sacrifice him. But when he gets to the appointed place, the whole thing is countermanded. A fundamentalist reading might interpret this as a test, as God having a bit of a dark joke at Abraham's expense, but what we have here is actually a very good, clear example of texts being edited. As in the previous passage we looked at, the words become odd. They haven't been cleaned up properly. This is part of the genius of the Hebrew writers and editors: their respect for their text is so great that they won't remove the traces of earlier versions, or whitewash the story completely.

One of the oddities of this text is clear in Hebrew but much less so in English: God, under one of God's many names, orders Abraham up the hill; God, under quite another name, does the countermanding. *Elohim* orders Abraham up the hill, and either *YHWH* or the *Angel of YHWH* does the countermanding. In most surviving Hebrew texts, the distinction is really quite rigorous.

So, you start with Abraham, who begins with a story that he clearly understood and accepted: sacrificing his son. And then, partway through, a story with which Abraham doesn't seem familiar—a substitute animal sacrifice instead of a human sacrifice—takes over. The over-

arching narrative becomes one about Abraham's trust and obedience as he transitions from one understanding of God to another, and his subsequent blessing as a result of this movement.

The interesting thing about this is what happens when it's all over, after the ram has been caught and sacrificed instead of Isaac, and the Lord has pronounced the great blessing over Abraham. The final verse (19) says: "So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba." Well, what is odd about this verse? It's amazingly easy to pass over without noticing it: there is no mention of Isaac. Abraham comes down from Mount Moriah on his own. In fact, Isaac doesn't put in any further appearance in this story cycle at all. He comes back several chapters later in a different story—which is why many commentators have assumed that we have here a story of a human sacrifice which was doctored. Verse 19 would then be a trace of the earlier story, in which Abraham actually sacrificed Isaac. The current version of the story, as it appears in our Bibles, reflects the transition, the moving on from a God who demanded the sacrifice of the firstborn. In short, it bears witness to the same struggle evidenced by our comments from Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

So, I have plunged you into the question of interpretation, sacrifice, and the Scriptures. And I have done so by example, so that you can see how much more interesting the Scriptures are and how much more is going on in them than is often assumed to be the case. In the next chapter, I'll try to provide you with some basic outlines on how to approach the "book" as it stands, outlines that I hope will be received as a relief—and as permission to take your own study of such things much further for yourselves.