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—Brent A. Strawn, associate professor of Old Testament,
Emory University

The
Back Door
Introduction
to the **Bible**

JOHN KALTNER AND STEVEN L. MCKENZIE



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INTRODUCTION

What Manner of Book Is This?

We finished writing this book at a time when English speakers and Anglophiles the world over were commemorating the four-hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible. In addition to being the largest repository of outdated pronouns and verb forms that thou ever didst lay thine eyes upon, the King James Version (KJV) is arguably the most influential book in the history of the English language. Even those who have never cracked it open are indebted to it for words and phrases that pepper their everyday speech. Expressions like “a fly in the ointment,” “the blind leading the blind,” “add fuel to the fire,” “shout it from the rooftops,” and countless others are found in the King James translation. Among the slew of recent books that celebrate the quatercentennial of the KJV is *Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language* by David Crystal, who claims that 257 phrases from the KJV are still with us today.

The hoopla surrounding the KJV’s birthday is a reminder of the central role the Bible plays in society and the profound effect it has on people’s lives whether they’re religious or not. Over the past few years we’ve been on the lookout for evidence of its cultural influence and have begun to compile a list that catalogs some of the interesting and strange ways the Bible pops up in news reports, entertainment, advertising, and other venues. We’ll save the details for some other time, but to give you a little sampling of what we’ve found we can tell you that the list includes politicians and celebrities quoting the Good Book, comic books based on biblical figures, re-creations of Bible scenes made of Legos, accusations that the Starbucks logo has a biblical connection, Bible rap videos, and online Bible games. That’s to say nothing of a rapidly growing cottage industry: boutique Bibles that are pitched to a particular audience. Did you know that there

are Bibles out there that target cowboys, truckers, bikers, athletes, firefighters, conservatives, homeless people, James Bond readers, and NASCAR fans?

The Bible is a cultural icon that's often used (and abused) in an unusual manner. But the unusual is not limited to the many ways the Bible is appropriated, exploited, and marketed. Often the text itself is unusual enough, and that's why we've written this book. As ancient literature, the Bible is the product of a world very different from our own. Therefore there's a cultural and chronological disconnect between it and the modern reader that can sometimes leave us feeling dazed and confused. Some of the practices, beliefs, and customs we read about in the pages of the Bible can strike us as downright weird. In addition it's written in a way that reflects the literary genres and conventions of its time, not ours, and that can add to the sense of distance and strangeness we sometimes experience when we enter the biblical world via its texts.

You're about to enter that unusual world in an unusual way. That's why we decided to title this book *The Back Door Introduction to the Bible*. It approaches the biblical literature from a different angle, or rather a set of different angles, by highlighting a number of aspects of the text that are either particularly vexing for modern readers or easily missed and ignored by them. We believe that having a solid understanding of these aspects can go a long way toward bridging the cultural divide between ourselves and the people of the Bible, leading to a better understanding of both how the Bible functioned in its original context and the role it might play in our time.

So if you've ever wondered about what some of the names in the Bible mean or you're curious about what's behind the sexual innuendo of certain passages, this book's for you. If you couldn't care less about such matters we're here to pique your interest and to encourage you to start thinking about this old text in new ways. Who knows what the five-hundredth anniversary of the KJV will be like? We're certain we won't be there. Perhaps by that time there will be Bibles designed for Human/Martian couples or, at the very least, same-sex spouses. But we'll never know. The future remains a mystery, so let's focus on what we have: a text written in the past that we read in the present.

Keepin' It Real

It's a question you see all the time—especially in surveys. The phrasing varies. Sometimes it's about people living or dead. Sometimes it asks only about people from the past. But it amounts to the same question: what one person would you most like to meet, to spend time with, to get to know personally? An online retailer with whom we do business even uses this as a security question for account holders. Our answer? Jesus. Not unique, but easy to remember. Other people are commonly named—religious figures (Muhammed, Buddha, Ghandi, M. L. King), but also world conquerors (Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Cleopatra, even Hitler) and politicians (Jefferson, Churchill, JFK, Teddy Roosevelt), artists (DaVinci, Michelangelo) and celebrities (Elvis, John Lennon). The responses vary according to time and place. In a recent British poll Jesus barely beat out Princess Di for the top spot.

People want to know—want to experience—what Jesus was really like so they can identify with him and feel that he identifies with them. (In a later chapter we'll see the lengths some people have gone to in order to have a Jesus experience.) It's like a study that one of our sociology colleagues here in Memphis did about Elvis. The people she interviewed preferred the old, fat Elvis to the young, flexible one. That's because they identified more closely with the overweight, addicted version. They felt that he was more like them and they more like him. It's often the same with Jesus. Not that he was chubby or a pill popper, but when thinking about spending the day with the flesh-and-blood Jesus people tend to imagine someone they can relate to, someone who understands what they're going through. Such thinking also puts before them a Jesus they could realistically emulate.

On the other hand, spending time with Jesus might be very disorienting. That was more or less the experience of people of Jesus' day. Some of them accused him of being “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34). They thought he partied too much and spent too much time with the unchurched. He didn't fit their image of a Messiah and a religious leader.

Meeting Jesus might shatter the mental image of him that people have today, an image that often shows up in art as well. You know the common depiction of Jesus in religious art: “a man of sorrows,”

skinny and sad, maybe with kindness in his eyes but still looking rather depressed and scrawny. And don't forget the halo over his head, the long hair, and the beard. What if Jesus wasn't really like that at all? We don't claim to know what Jesus was like any more than anyone else. But the Bible presents him as more of a whole person than people usually give him credit for. He was sometimes sad, yes, as the shortest verse in the Bible tells us: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35, just two words in Greek as indicated in the KJV). But he also got angry, cursing a fruitless fig tree (Matt. 21:18–19; Mark 11:12–14) and driving merchants from the temple (Matt. 21:12; Mark 11:15; John 2:14–16). He also apparently enjoyed a good party, and if his "camel through the eye of a needle" remark is any indication, he probably had a good sense of humor. He liked to laugh and maybe even tell jokes. In other words, he ran the full gamut of human emotions just like anyone else. In short, Jesus was a real person, and the Bible presents him that way.

Another way that meeting Jesus today could be disorienting relates to his wardrobe and grooming. What if he shaved, got a haircut, put on a suit and tie, or better yet, a pair of jeans and a knit shirt? What would that do to people's image of Jesus? Would it make him any less holy? Would it make him more real? Again we don't claim to know the answers to those questions. They would undoubtedly vary from individual to individual, but just posing the questions shows how our image of Jesus is formed by both the culture in which he lived and our own culture.

There's one more thing about Jesus as a real human that we hesitate to bring up, but it's an important point. Let's do it this way: We have a friend; we'll call him Jack. Jack is fond of pointing out that Jesus not only ate and drank, but also urinated, defecated, and otherwise had the same needs and bodily functions as any other human and took care of those needs as required according to the practices of his day. Now, we don't share Jack's penchant for perversity in pointing this out to people of religious persuasion, but he has a point. Jesus had the same urges and physical needs as any person. If we met him today for coffee, he would likely have to visit the men's room before we left. The Bible doesn't dwell on this aspect of Jesus' life, but it doesn't deny it either. It's part of what it means to be human, and therefore an implied element of the Gospels even though it isn't explicitly mentioned in them.

The Bible itself is a lot like Jesus and the Gospels in this regard. It sometimes addresses aspects of human nature and the world in all their earthiness and messiness. But that doesn't make it any less sacred or holy for some people. It covers the whole kit 'n' caboodle of life, and so it occasionally discusses matters that are usually not brought up in polite company. Another way of putting it is that the Bible can be simultaneously the Word of God and a word about people. Much of what we treat in this book describes the intersection where those two dimensions of the Bible meet.

What's Holy about the Bible?

For the faithful, the Bible is both holy and mundane, divine and human—like Jesus. *Bible* is just the Greek word for books. The Bible is a collection of books. So what makes them or the collection holy? First we should define *holy*. It refers to something sacred or consecrated, something set apart or dedicated for a special religious purpose. It's not the paper or ink or binding that makes the Bible holy for believers but the content.

The story of Jesus constitutes a relatively small part of the Bible. There are many other stories about many other characters: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samson, David, Solomon, Job, Daniel, Peter, and Paul, just to name a very few. And if the Bible acknowledges the humanity of Jesus, how much more does it underscore the humanity of all these other people. Of course, for the nonreligious the Bible is a collection of stories about ancient people, like the Greeks or Romans, who were fully human and did the things all humans do. Either way, there is a great deal in the Bible that has nothing to do with lofty themes of sacredness and morality but quite a bit to do with human beings in daily life situations.

Take, for instance, the law of Moses. The Bible describes Moses receiving the tablets of the law in a very holy setting. Moses goes up to the top of Mount Sinai alone where the presence of God has settled in the form of a thick cloud accompanied with smoke, fire, and earthquake (Exod. 20). The law he is given includes such riches as the Ten Commandments, a code of ethics that continues to be a

basis for Western civilization. But that's just a small portion of the whole thing. If you continue reading in Exodus and Leviticus you find quite a bit that seems much less lofty and much more down to earth—literally. There are laws about marriage and divorce, owning slaves, managing animals, lending money, and planting crops. When you get to Leviticus, there are laws about all sorts of earthy topics like urination, defecation, menstrual periods, and seminal emissions, as well as about diet, haircuts, touching dead bodies, and sexual relationships of all kinds.

While we wouldn't deny that in some sense all life is sacred, it's fair to say that most of these activities would not be called holy today. If we expand our reading to the stories about the saints (meaning “sanctified” or “holy” people) listed earlier, we find murder, adultery, lying, theft—in short, real people doing things that real people do, both beautiful and horrible. It's not like the movies and their stock characters of good guys and bad guys. It's real life with lots of shades of gray. And it's also not like Bible movies where everyone speaks in aphorisms. These were real people, or at least they were envisioned as such. They laughed, cried, told jokes, got angry, had their feelings hurt, schemed, and despaired. And the Bible, far from covering up any of it, sometimes goes into excruciating detail.

Things That Make You Go “Hmmm . . .”

But the Bible doesn't relate its details in English, or according to modern conventions and practices. This is another side of its human nature. The Bible wasn't written in some kind of universal language (Esperanto?) that everyone would be able to read. Nor was it written as some kind of magic text that would immediately transform itself into the reader's native tongue. It was written for ancient audiences using their languages and assuming their worldviews, mores, and social ideas. And the Bible comes without a user's guide, so that modern readers are often left to puzzle over what a particular expression meant or what lay behind a particular custom.

That's where Bible scholars and students come in. Bible scholars are handy because we study the languages and world of the Bible—the ancient Near East, ancient Israel, and the Greco-Roman

world—to try to understand the expressions as well as the culture behind its stories. Students (and other close readers) are handy because they aren't laden with the interpretations that have become authoritative among Bible scholars and ministers, so they often ask “ignorant” questions about oddities in the Bible's stories, questions that turn out on further consideration to be brilliant because they point to some dimension of the text that has not fully been explained. At the risk of showing our age, we'll borrow a line from former TV show host and comedian Arsenio Hall, and call the subjects of these questions “things that make you go ‘Hmmm. . . .’” (If Arsenio doesn't work for you, try *Seinfeld*: “What's the deal with . . . ?”)

The purpose of this book is to point out some of the things in the Bible that make readers say, “Hmmm . . .” and to try to explain them. Why does that character have multiple wives? What's the deal with that ritual? Who are those people? What does that expression mean? Why does the story keep mentioning that name? Where have I read this before? Who was this stuff written for? We're sure we don't anticipate all such questions, but part of our intent is to help readers pay attention to the details and raise their own questions of the biblical text. Learning the characters and plots of the stories in the Bible is important. But we think that trying to get to the bottom of the “Hmmm . . .” questions can be just as important—sometimes even more so—because those questions often lead to the threads that unravel the story and get at its real intent or significance.

We've arranged the topics in this book to be user-friendly. In addition to dealing with a specific topic, each chapter starts by focusing on a particular part of the Bible for which the topic is especially relevant. Those parts of the Bible are in rough canonical order so that the book can be used as one works through the Bible, for instance in an introductory course. We've adopted a light, informal writing style for this book, partly out of regard for students to lessen the impact of having yet another reading assignment. But we've also done this because we believe that learning about the Bible in its original setting should be fun. In fact, our code name for this book project as we were planning and writing it was the *Fun Bible*. We've had a lot of fun teaching the Bible to our students over the years, and we've had a lot of fun working on this book. We hope that you enjoy it too. And we hope you learn something from it.

What “Assume” Does

Genre

We all make assumptions about what we’re reading, even before we open the first page. Those assumptions have to do with the type or genre of literature we’re reading, and they shape our expectations about our reading material and the way we approach it.

Take science fiction for example. You don’t approach science fiction the same way as you would, say, a newspaper article. You assume the newspaper article is more or less fact. But you don’t expect to find fact in science fiction. This is based on your recognition of different genres. If someone did read science fiction as a news report, they would be very confused or frightened or both. In fact, that’s exactly what happened on October 30, 1938, during a radio broadcast presentation of H. G. Wells’ science fiction novel *The War of the Worlds*.

Reading the broadcast was Orson Welles, later to become a famous actor and director but a relative unknown at the time. When Welles did Wells he didn’t just read the book over the radio, he presented it like a live news report, complete with news flashes and updates. While the broadcast was part of a weekly radio show called *The Mercury Theater on the Air*, and an announcement at the beginning of the program stated that it was an adaptation of the novel, many listeners missed the announcement and panicked, thinking it was the end of the world. Orson Welles was playing with genre, broadcasting science fiction as a news report.

The Bible can be similarly misunderstood. When it comes to the Bible, readers tend to read the whole thing as a history book. In

actuality, the Bible is much more varied in genre. Sure there's history. But there's also fiction, poetry, biography, and a host of other genres, some of which differ significantly from those same genres today. That's because the Bible is really a collection of different works of literature rather than a single book. And most of the time, the works in the Bible don't identify their genres. There are exceptions, like some of Jesus' parables. But by and large ancient writers assumed that their readers would recognize the genres without having to spell them out. Modern writers make the same assumption. So J. K. Rowling doesn't feel it necessary to say, “Hey folks, this is fiction” at the start of every Harry Potter novel. She assumes her readers know that.

In this chapter we'll discuss the importance of discerning genre for reading the Bible. We'll begin at the beginning, with the creation stories in Genesis 1–3. Then we'll move on to another famous story: Jonah. And we'll end up by taking a look at the books that tell the story of Jesus in the New Testament: the Gospels. In all three cases we'll suggest that the literary genre is typically misconstrued. We'll show how attention to the contents of these works indicates genres other than straightforward historical narrative, and how perception of these genres reveals these works to be much richer than usually recognized.

Genre and Genesis

The problems that have come from taking Genesis 1 as history are well known. They include the fight over teaching creationism as science in public schools, and museums featuring Adam riding on a brachiosaurus. This isn't science. And it isn't good biblical interpretation either. It's an assumption, one that's not supported by careful reading of the text.

There are quite a few indications that Genesis 1 is not a scientific document. It describes the existence of light and of day and night before sun and moon are created, a scientific impossibility. There is also the presence of vegetation before the creation of the sun, which again is scientifically impossible. Genesis 1:6 refers to the sky as a “dome,” implying that the earth is flat. Verse 21 mentions “great sea monsters,” a term used elsewhere in the Bible to refer to

mythological beings like dragons. When was the last time you saw one of those in a science textbook?

Careful reading of Genesis 1 suggests that it had a very different purpose than a scientific description of the universe's beginning. In fact, the text uses a formula for telling about each day's creation. It goes like this:

God said, "Let there be X."

And there was X / So God made X / And it was so.

God saw that X was good.

God called X "X."

There was evening and morning, day Y.

The formula isn't rigid. There is some flexibility in the individual elements. But there is enough repetition to make clear that the author uses a basic formula for each category of things created.

It is striking, therefore, that on days three and six, the formula is broken. Day three begins with God gathering the waters, thus creating seas and dry land (1:9–10). Verse 10 ends with the notice that "God saw that it was good." Here we expect the "evening and morning" line and the notice that it was the third day. Instead, the pattern begins all over again with "God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation . . .'" (1:11). Only after the description of vegetation and another "God saw that it was good" (1:11–12) does the expression "there was evening and there was morning, the third day" occur (1:13).

The same thing happens on day six. God creates the animals and pronounces them "good" (1:24–25). Again we expect the text to declare "evening and morning, the sixth day." But instead God begins a new creation: human beings. And the "evening and morning" refrain doesn't come until after that.

A day-by-day outline of Genesis 1 looks like this:

Day 1: light

Day 4: sun, moon, stars

Day 2: dome (sky)

Day 5: birds, fish

Day 3: seas and dry land,
vegetation

Day 6: land animals,
humans

Eight categories or installments of creation have been condensed into six days.

The obvious reason for this condensation appears in the first three verses of the next chapter where God, on day seven, rests. These verses belong to the creation account in chapter 1, as is evident from their continuation of the scheme of days. The author has related creation in six days in order to provide an explanation or legitimization for the Sabbath.

This concern to support the keeping of the Sabbath suggests that the creation account in Genesis 1:1–2:3 was probably written by a priest or priests. It provides a powerful theological argument for the Sabbath. Not only is Sabbath engrained in the origin and essence of the universe but even God observed Sabbath at the beginning of the world and integrated it into the order of the universe. To try to read this material as a scientific account is to misconstrue its genre and intent. It is also to rob it of its theological richness.

Another good indication that Genesis 1 isn't a scientific document is the fact that it is followed immediately by another creation story. The second story is the one about Adam and Eve. It begins in the second half of Genesis 2:4 and extends through chapter 3. This account contains a very different order of creation. According to it, the first thing God made was a man (2:7). Then God planted a garden to put the man in (2:8). That's when God made vegetation. Next came animals, made by God in an effort to find a suitable companion for the man (2:18–20). Since no companion was found among the animals, God made a woman (2:21–23).

This second story is completely different from the first one. The difference in creation order can be charted as follows:

Genesis 1:1–2:3	Genesis 2:4–3:24
Day 1 – light	First – the man
Day 2 – dome (sky)	Second – the garden
Day 3 – seas and dry land + vegetation	Third – the animals
Day 4 – sun, moon, stars	Fourth – the woman
Day 5 – birds, fish	
Day 6 – land animals + humans	
Day 7 – Sabbath	

There are also differences in vocabulary and setting. God in Genesis 1 is called “God,” while in the second story the name used is “Yahweh God.”¹ The first creation account takes place in heaven when God begins to create “the heavens and the earth.” The second takes place on earth when Yahweh God makes “the earth and heavens.” In Genesis 1 everything is watery at the beginning; in Genesis 2–3 everything is dry. In Genesis 1 God is omniscient and speaks or wills everything into existence, while in Genesis 2–3 God forms things like a potter and creates by trial and error in the search for a companion for the man. In Genesis 2–3 there is a single human pair, while Genesis 1 refers to humankind as a whole.

Careful readers who have observed these differences have long proposed that these two accounts of creation originated from different authors. While tradition assigns the authorship of Genesis to Moses, there is nothing in the book itself that supports this assumption. In fact, careful reading suggests that the book as a whole, just like the first three chapters, is actually a composite of different sources and writers. The same “priestly” work behind Genesis 1 continues to appear sporadically throughout the rest of the book of Genesis. But the different versions have been combined in different ways. In the flood story (Gen. 6–9), for instance, two accounts have been interwoven rather than placed side by side. Thus the instruction to Noah to take one pair of every kind of animal (6:19–20) is followed almost immediately by the command to take seven pairs of (ritually) clean and one pair of unclean animals (7:2–3). There are also different chronologies for the lengths of the flood and the times aboard the ark.

There are different theories about the exact process of composition behind Genesis. One holds that documents that were originally independent were edited together. Another takes the view that a priestly author subsumed and supplemented one or more earlier sources. The point is that Genesis is a complex document, with different theologies and traditions from ancient Israel. Trying to read it as a scientific document or as a straightforward historical report imposes a modern assumption upon it and robs it of its literary and theological wealth.

¹ Israel’s God had the proper name YHWH. Out of reverence, the vowels were omitted in writing. Scholars reconstruct the name as “Yahweh,” probably a form of the verb “to be.”

Genre and Jonah

Every now and then a tabloid newspaper runs a report about some fisherman in Norway being swallowed by a whale and living to tell about it. The Norwegian’s survival is taken as proof of the story of Jonah in the Bible. The assumption, of course, is that you have to interpret Jonah as history, as opposed to, say, a parable or something like it. There’s nothing in the book, however, that states that it has to be read as history. And in fact, there are quite a few indications in the story itself that Jonah was written and intended as something quite different. We suggest—in company with many other scholars—that Jonah is a satire or parody. That is, it’s a work that tries to teach a lesson by making fun of something. In this case, the object of ridicule is Jonah and his bigoted attitude.

To begin with, there is a lot of hyperbole or exaggeration in Jonah. The book of Jonah is like Texas: everything’s big there. The Hebrew word for *great* or *big* occurs repeatedly, even though this is not so obvious in our English translations, which find a variety of ways of translating this term. There is a great city, Nineveh (1:2; 3:3; 4:11), a great wind (1:4) and a great storm (1:4, 12), great fear (1:16), a great evil (4:1), great joy (4:6), and of course a great fish (1:17). The city of Nineveh is so big that it takes three days to walk straight through it (3:3). Unfortunately, this is a big problem for literalist interpreters of Jonah because the wall of ancient Nineveh was discovered long ago, and it’s only about 7.5 miles in circumference, an easy walk of less than half a day. So literalists struggle with this one, proposing that Jonah has in mind the larger environs of the city. Maybe. Or maybe it’s just exaggeration. Let’s read on.

Jonah reaches Nineveh. He goes a third of the way into the city. He stops and shouts out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overturned” (3:4). How Jonah breached the language barrier (the Ninevites spoke Assyrian and not Hebrew) isn’t explained. Even if they could understand what he was saying, it is not clear why they paid any attention to him, why they believed him, or how they knew what to do. In fact, Jonah’s message is pretty cryptic. It might mean that in forty days Nineveh would be destroyed or that it would be “overturned,” i.e., changed. The beauty of this kind of ambiguity is that either way Jonah would be right. Add to this that the Ninevites

had their own set of gods. They'd probably never heard of Yahweh, much less believed in him. Why should they listen to some guy who happened to get lost in the middle of their city and started shouting? And even if they did believe, how were they supposed to know how to respond? No further instructions are supplied.

The book glosses over all these questions and just proceeds with its story. The Ninevites all repent. Every last one of them. (Exaggeration.) And not just the people. The animals too, by order of the king, repent, dress in sackcloth, fast, and pray (3:7–8). OK, the Pinocchio tale maybe we can swallow, but cats and dogs repenting of their wrongdoings, fasting, and praying? It's a silly idea—and our point is that it was intended to be silly to teach a lesson.

In fact, the silliest part of the story is the way Jonah himself is portrayed. He gets the kind of response that most Israelite prophets only dreamed about: people actually listen and turn to God. Your typical prophet would have been thrilled with this response. Not Jonah. Instead, he is angry at God. Turns out, he wants Nineveh destroyed. That's the reason he ran away in the first place: he knew God was merciful and wouldn't go through with the destruction (4:2). He's so upset he wants God to kill him (4:3). Basically, "If you're going to be nice to these people I hate, life's not worth living; just kill me now."

God, ever patient, tries to use this as a teaching moment. God plants a bush that gives Jonah shade, and Jonah really loves the bush (4:6). Did you get that? The people of the huge city of Nineveh he could care less about. In fact, he wants them destroyed. But this plant he loves. Mixed up priorities, perhaps? When God kills the plant, Jonah is so upset that he again asks God to take his life (4:8–9). "You killed my plant. Life's just not worth living anymore." God tries to reason with Jonah, and the question that ends the book encapsulates its point. Jonah cares about his plant; shouldn't God care about all the people and animals of Nineveh?

The book of Jonah is about prejudice and God's love for all people. It's a ridiculous story, deliberately so. Jonah is a ridiculous character, a man so blinded by his hatred of the Ninevites that he tries to run from God, a man whose priorities are so confused that he values the life of a plant over the lives of thousands of people and animals. The book of Jonah was probably written long after

Nineveh had been destroyed (612 BCE). But it was remembered as the capital of the Assyrians, who had decimated Israel. Perhaps for that reason, the Ninevites are used in the book to represent foreigners. In any case, the story is not really about Nineveh; it’s about Jonah. The author uses Jonah as a cartoonish figure in order to show the absurdity of his biases and his xenophobia (hatred of foreigners) in contrast to God’s concern for all people, not just Jews. In effect, the story is an elaborate parable.

Trying to read Jonah as history confuses its genre. It’s like trying to reading science fiction as news. One risks missing the story’s richness and true message because one makes it all about whether a man could really survive in a whale for three days. It’s like missing the forest for the trees. Or as God points out to Jonah, like worrying more about a plant than a “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 many animals” (Jon. 4:11).

Genre and Jesus

Just as there are different versions of creation in the book of Genesis, so there are different versions of Jesus’ life in the New Testament. In fact, there are four of them: the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The last one, John, is so different that it has long been recognized as being of a quality distinct from the other three, a “spiritual” Gospel whose goal isn’t to recount the details of Jesus’ life exactly as they happened but to explain the deeper meaning of what he said and did.

But if John is more a theologian than a reporter, why can’t the same thing be true of the other three? Again, this is a matter of genre. The New Testament Gospels tell the story of Jesus’ life not as historical reporting—intent on recounting the facts as accurately as possible—but to persuade their audiences about the nature of Jesus and Christianity. Even the Gospel of Luke, which begins by telling about the research its author conducted to assure the accuracy of his account (Luke 1:1–4), isn’t a historical investigation by modern standards, because Luke relied exclusively on Christian sources, some of which were secondhand. He also states that he wants his

reader(s) to know “the truth,” which is not exactly the same as saying “the facts” (Luke 1:4).

A nice way to get an introduction to the different perspectives of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke is with the Christmas story that kids in churches around the world play out every December. Guess what? The Christmas story isn’t actually in any of these so-called Synoptic Gospels. (*Synoptic* comes from two Greek words meaning “with” or “together” and “seeing.”) Rather, the churches piece together their pageant from these three Gospels, which actually have surprisingly little in common. The wise men following the star and bringing their gifts are in Matthew. The shepherds, manger scene, and singing angels come from Luke. Matthew doesn’t mention an inn at all and even has Jesus born in a house rather than a stable (Matt. 2:11).

The Gospel of Mark has no account of Jesus’ birth at all but begins with his baptism. Mark’s audience is the hardest to discern. Mark may also be the hardest Gospel to read due to its terse writing style, which typically consists of sentences placed together without connectors. The fancy term for this style is *parataxis*, and it reminds us a little of the stream-of-consciousness of *Catcher in the Rye*. Mark is also probably the earliest of the New Testament Gospels, and it provided the basic outline followed by Matthew and Luke. That’s why Matthew’s and Luke’s birth narratives differ so much. There was no birth narrative in Mark for them to follow, so they each put together their own account from other sources.

We don’t really know who wrote any of the Gospels. Most English Bibles entitle them “The Gospel according to Matthew/Mark/Luke/John.” But these names and attributions are traditional. The works themselves do not identify their authors. We’ll use the traditional names to refer both to the Gospels and their authors, whoever they may have been. The audiences the Gospel authors were trying to persuade were also each unique. Again, the authors don’t announce up front who their target audience is or what particular ideas they want to promote. We can only discern those through close reading by noticing the different things they emphasize about Jesus.

Matthew was evidently written for Jews—either Jews who had converted to Christianity or whom Matthew was hoping to convert, or both. A number of textual clues make this evident. Matthew

describes Jesus in terms that would appeal to people who were familiar with the Hebrew Bible. The starting point for Matthew is a genealogy that shows Jesus' impeccable Jewish roots, traced all the way back to Abraham. The genealogy also traces Jesus' line through David and his dynasty of kings ruling Judah. This makes the point that Jesus was fit to be the Messiah, since *messiah*, which means "anointed," was a royal title.

Matthew quotes a lot from the Hebrew Bible, trying to connect events in Jesus' life with texts from the Hebrew Bible in order to show Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecies and expectations for his Jewish audience. While this style of interpretation has always been popular (compare Nostradamus), it has had some serious downsides in the history of Christianity. It has contributed to the tendency of Christians to reduce the Hebrew Bible to a mere set of prophecies to be fulfilled in Jesus. It also has fostered an anti-Semitic attitude toward Jews as stubbornly blind to the true meaning of their own scriptures.

We're not blaming all that on Matthew. He didn't invent this kind of interpretation; it was common among rabbis of his day. But sometimes the connections he draws require quite a stretch in what is meant by "fulfillment." For instance, Matthew 2:15 explains that the flight of Joseph and Mary with baby Jesus to Egypt was to fulfill the prophecy: "Out of Egypt I have called my son." This is a quote from Hosea 11:1, but a quick glance at that verse in its original context reveals that it refers to the Exodus from Egypt in the past and is not a prophecy about the future at all. What is more, the reason Joseph takes his family to Egypt is to escape Herod's slaughter of the baby boys in Bethlehem, according to Matthew 2:16. There are no historical records confirming an atrocity of this nature. Matthew deserves the benefit of the doubt. He may be doing something more sophisticated literarily than simple prophecy-fulfillment. This story may be a theological device by which he likens Jesus to Israel or interprets Jesus as the embodiment of ancient Israel's experience as a people—again, something that would appeal to Jewish readers.

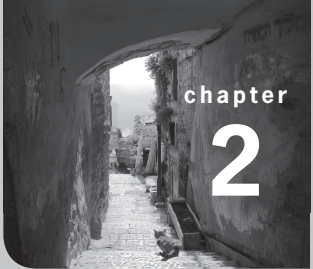
Luke's Gospel is the opposite of Matthew's in that Luke's interest is in showing Jesus' appeal to all people and not just to Jews. Like Matthew, Luke supplies a genealogy for Jesus (3:23–38), but Luke's is very different. A few of the names match those in Matthew, but

most don't. More significantly, Luke's universal interest is patent in that he begins with Jesus and works backwards all the way to Adam, thus emphasizing Jesus' humanity rather than his Jewishness.

Luke's universal interest has to do not only with race but also with social class and gender. Poor people and women play a special role in Luke. It's no accident that Elizabeth and Mary are the main characters in Luke 1, and Luke lets the reader in on what Mary is thinking and feeling about her special son. Joseph and Mary are among the poor, and Jesus' birth is celebrated by common shepherds in the field.

Another interest of Luke's is suggested in the report that Joseph takes his pregnant wife to Bethlehem to register for the census (Luke 2:1). Like Matthew's reference to Herod's killing of the children in Bethlehem, this census is not confirmed in historical sources. Luke may not have made it up completely. Rather, he misdated a local census that occurred after Jesus' birth and turned it into a worldwide event. Luke's motive may have been ideological. Especially in the companion volume to Luke's Gospel, Acts, there is an effort to show that Christianity is not opposed to the Roman Empire and poses no threat to it. Here, therefore, Joseph is shown obeying a decree from the emperor.

As is apparent even from these brief examples, the Gospels ought not to be confused with the modern genre of biography. What biography would give so little background about the main character? Luke tells one anecdote about when Jesus was 12 (Luke 2:41-52). Apart from that, Luke and Matthew both skip from Jesus' birth to his adulthood, thirty years later (according to Luke 3:23). Neither Mark nor John tells us anything about Jesus' life prior to the beginning of his ministry. So there's no attempt to be comprehensive. Also, as we've seen, the Gospel writers are motivated more by ideological interest than by a desire to be historically precise. As with Genesis and Jonah, it's important to recognize what the writers are doing and what they're not doing so as not to misunderstand them. To expect from them a modern concern for accuracy of historical details or to harmonize them so that they all agree would, once more, rob them of their theological richness both individually and collectively.



chapter

2

Family Values

Tube Families

Let's stroll down Memory Lane with the help of Nick at Night, where family has always been a staple. With the advent of TV in the 1950s came such shows as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best*, gentle sitcoms about idealized white, middle-class suburbanites. In the 1960s, as divorce rates rose in the United States, a spate of programs featured single parents (always due to death rather than divorce, thanks to the censors): *My Three Sons*, *Family Affair*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and *Bonanza*, to name a few. In the 1970s shows such as *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*, *Maude*, *Good Times*, *Family*, and *Eight Is Enough* dealt increasingly with real social issues such as race, class, and gender, and also tackled controversial topics like divorce, abortion, and homosexuality. In the 1980s and 1990s parody took over the airwaves in series like *Married . . . with Children* and *Roseanne*. Parody has continued into the new millennium, with increased emphasis on dysfunctionality in cartoon families such as *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*.

There's a continuing debate about the extent to which TV programs actually influence American society as opposed to simply reflecting it. In 1992, Vice President Dan Quayle famously criticized *Murphy Brown* for its favorable portrayal of a single mother. Quayle alleged that the program reflected what was wrong with America and asserted the need for fathers in families. His remarks generated a great deal of discussion about what "family values" meant. The phrase was coined in the early 1980s by advocates of a conservative social

and political agenda that opposed abortion and homosexuality and promoted things like corporal punishment and the teaching of creationism in public schools.

The 1980s “family values” advocates based their understanding of the term on their reading of the Bible. On one level this makes sense, because it is easy to see how the Bible, or many passages in it, can be interpreted to support this sort of conservative agenda. On another level, though, it is highly ironic, because some of the best-known families in the Bible seem to be much more dysfunctional than any sitcom family TV has ever offered. The reasons for the dysfunctionality in these biblical families differ. Sometimes a behavior we might label dysfunctional is simply due to social practices relating to marriage and family that are very different from our own. At other times, it may stem from the nature or genre of the story and the point the biblical author(s) is trying to make. In this chapter, we’ll focus on the book of Genesis, especially the stories of the “patriarchs” (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his sons), for their portraits of marriage and family. We will also look at a few examples from elsewhere in the Bible that deal in different ways with family and where recognizing social practices very different from today’s is crucial for understanding the stories.

Threesome and Beyond

A guy’s wife asks him to have sex with her maid: probably not a plot line you expect to find in the Bible, but it’s there. And the guy is Abraham, one of the biggest biblical heroes of all. The story is in Genesis 16. Abraham is known as Abram here and his wife Sarah is called Sarai. She concocts a plan for him to have sex with her handmaid, Hagar. The reason is to produce a child. This makes the idea a little less crazy than it first sounds. Surrogate motherhood happens in lots of societies, ours included. But then, when the plan works and Hagar gets pregnant, Sarai isn’t happy as we might expect. Instead, she’s angry. She blames Abram (16:5) and then gets really catty, abusing Hagar to the point that she runs away. What’s going on here?

First of all, in the words of James Brown, it’s a man’s world. (Sorry, ladies.) Abram and Sarai lived in a patriarchal culture in

which a woman's primary function and value was to produce children. (Sorry, ladies.) Marriages were contractual arrangements between the fathers of the bride and groom. (Sorry, ladies.) Marriage contracts specified the wife's responsibility to produce an heir. In some cases, they even stated that the wife who cannot produce an heir is required to provide a surrogate who will do so.

While we don't have Abram's and Sarai's marriage contract, we do have contracts from the second millennium BCE (2000–1000) that give us a good idea of the social background of this story and indicate the sort of marriage arrangement such contracts presume. In fact, the whole story of Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah in the Bible is pretty much about the quest for an heir. When Sarai can't bear children, following the custom of her day, she provides a surrogate in the form of her handmaid. When Hagar becomes pregnant, she treats Sarai disdainfully, because by the standard of the day Hagar has proven to be a more valuable woman than Sarai. Sarai blames Abram, because Hagar is now in his possession. Hagar's status, after all, is that of a slave. Abram gives Sarai permission to treat Hagar as she will, resulting in Hagar's abuse and flight.

Not kinky enough for you? Let's try another story in Genesis where this same social background is operative although in quite a different way. After Jacob has defrauded his brother Esau of his father's blessing, Esau's threats against Jacob's life compel him to flee to his mother's brother (Gen. 27:41–45). Uncle Laban hosts Jacob for a month and then proposes that his nephew start earning his keep. Luckily, a job has opened up, working for Laban. The salary negotiation gets interesting. Jacob is young and in love with Cousin Rachel. He agrees to work for Laban for seven years in exchange for Rachel's hand—and the rest of her as well to judge from Genesis 29:21. On his wedding night, though, Laban pulls the old switcheroo, replacing Rachel with her sister Leah, claiming that it is the custom there to marry the older daughter first. Back to the bargaining table. Jacob is forced to work another seven years for Rachel, although the good news is that he marries her a week after Leah (29:21–30).

Now God steps in to even things out. To balance the favoritism that Jacob shows for Rachel, God allows Leah to bear children—four sons—while Rachel has none (29:31–35). Then the story takes off like an Old Testament reality show. Rachel responds by giving her

handmaid, Bilhah, to Jacob, just as Sarai did with Hagar. Bilhah has two sons (30:1–8). Leah then reciprocates with her handmaid, Zilpah, who also bears two sons (30:9–13). Leah herself bears two more sons and a daughter with the help of mandrakes, an ancient aphrodisiac and fertility aid (30:14–21). Rachel will ultimately add two more sons for a grand total of twelve sons and one daughter. (The reference to the daughter, Dinah, in 30:21 was probably added in anticipation of the story about her in Genesis 34.)

If you think about it for a minute, it's pretty clear that Rachel's and Leah's use of their handmaids here is very different from Sarai's. The main difference is the rationale behind what they do. Sarai and Abram are motivated by the desire for an heir. Since Sarai cannot provide one, she lends her handmaid. As noted, there are good parallels in marriage contracts from the ancient Near East. Rachel and Leah, however, are motivated by completely different considerations. There is no need for them to use their handmaids to produce an heir. By the time Rachel gives her handmaid to Jacob (Gen. 30:3), Leah has already borne four sons. Rachel is motivated by envy. She uses her handmaid to compete with Leah, who reciprocates by following suit. There are no parallels in extra-biblical sources for the use of handmaids in this kind of competition. That's because this behavior was just as unusual in its ancient setting as it would be today. The rationale for the story, in fact, is to be found not in the real world in some odd social practice of antiquity, but on the literary level in what the story explains etiologically—namely, the origin of the twelve tribes of Israel, each with a son of Jacob as its eponymous ancestor.

In these two episodes, then, we have a genuine practice of ancient society that is used in two very different ways. In the case of Sarai and Abram, the practice appears as it was employed in the ancient world and in the purpose for which it was intended: the production of an heir. In the story of Rachel and Leah, in contrast, the writer in Genesis has borrowed the practice and adapted it for a literary purpose: the etiological explanation of the tribes of Israel. Besides explaining where the tribes of Israel came from and perhaps intertribal relationships, the story also illustrates the importance of family and of understanding your roots, matters that were of special significance to ancient Israelites.

Putting on Heirs

As the story about Abram and Sarai continues, Hagar returns to her mistress at God's instruction (16:7–14). Then, Sarah (her name and Abraham's have been changed in the meantime) herself has a son, Isaac (21:1–7). At a celebration of Isaac's weaning, Sarah sees Ishmael playing (a pun on Isaac's name, which comes from the Hebrew verb meaning “laugh” or “play”) and is reminded that Ishmael is the heir. She demands that Abraham cast out Hagar and her son (21:8–10). Being alone in the wilderness would be hazardous if not fatal for Hagar and Ishmael, and Abraham complies only after God assures him that they won't die.

The story raises the question of practices relating to heirs and inheritance. In other words, once you have an heir what do you do with him? What's the big deal about having an heir? What's so great about being one? What if you have more than one? If Sarah is willing to condemn Hagar and Ishmael to exile and potential death just to prevent Ishmael from inheriting, being an heir must be a pretty big deal. As a matter of fact, it's a very big deal in quite a few stories in the Bible. A little later on in Genesis, for example, Jacob will convince his older brother, Esau, to sell his birthright (Gen. 25:29–34) and will cheat him out of his blessing (ch. 27). Then, toward the end of the book, Jacob (renamed “Israel”) blesses the sons of Joseph on his deathbed, but crosses his arms so that his right hand is on the head of the younger son, Ephraim, rather than his brother Manasseh. Obviously, there was something pretty important about being the oldest son or being designated heir in that culture.

Like the stories about the handmaids, these stories about inheritance reflect the interplay of both social background and literary creativity. The typical practice of the day was to divide the inheritance among the sons, awarding the oldest son a double portion. Thus, if a man had three sons, at his death his property would be divided into four parts so that the oldest son could receive a double portion. For a wealthy man like Abraham with only two sons, the double portion would be considerable. This may be what troubled Sarah, whose way of dealing with it was to get rid of Ishmael entirely, leaving everything to Isaac. Abraham was troubled by her demand not only because Ishmael was his son as much as Isaac but also because of the

injustice in that culture of arbitrarily denying inheritance to one son, and the oldest one at that.

Abraham's reservations notwithstanding, the theme of God's preference for the younger sibling is a literary theme throughout the Bible and the book of Genesis in particular. Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, Joseph, and Ephraim are all examples. This theme also carries theological significance as it is one example of God's concern for the underdogs and disadvantaged in any society. It is often asserted that these stories reflect the ancient belief that the patriarchal blessing carried real power and therefore was crucial for determining a son's future. That may be so, although there is also a literary device associated with the blessing in Genesis. The Hebrew words for birthright (*b'korah*) and blessing (*b'rekah*) are very similar, so that blessing may be a way of punning on and representing the birthright. That is especially the case in the story of Jacob and Esau.

There is yet another literary dimension to the story of the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh by Jacob (here called Israel). It is again etiological. Ephraim turns out to be a much more important tribe in the history of Israel than Manasseh. Ephraim is the largest of the tribes of Israel and is used in some places in the Bible as a name for the entire country. When Israel blesses the boys, he crosses his arms so that his right hand is on top of Ephraim's head, although Ephraim is the younger son. This explains why Ephraim would become the more important of the two. When Israel explains this (48:19) he refers to Ephraim as a nation, i.e., Israel. The author, therefore, continues the theme of God's favor of the younger sibling by casting Ephraim as the younger brother to Manasseh. But since Ephraim is the more significant tribe in Israel's history, Ephraim is the recipient of the patriarchal blessing in place of his brother. Every underdog has his day; even though he's the runt of the litter, Ephraim is favored by Jacob and God.

All in the Family

What about a man who dies without an heir? There are stories in the Bible that deal with this question. Again, they presuppose a patriarchal society. (Sorry, ladies.) They also presuppose an endogamous society in which marriage takes place within a social unit (tribe,

clan, etc.) in order to keep property—especially land—in that unit. These stories reflect the practice of “levirate marriage” (from the Latin word *levir* for “husband’s brother”). The practice is detailed in Deuteronomy 25:5–10. It specifies that when a man dies without a son, his brother should marry the widow. The firstborn of their union is to inherit the dead man’s property and carry on his line. The practice has a dual purpose. It keeps the property within the clan or tribe, and it makes provision for the widow, who would otherwise be destitute following her husband’s death.

The custom of levirate marriage lies behind another of the Bible’s colorful stories, this one in Genesis 38. Hang on to your seat; this one’s a doozy. It all centers on Judah, the founder of one of the most important tribes: the one David and Jesus will come from. Judah’s oldest son, Er, is killed by God because he was evil. Following levirate practice, Er’s brother, Onan, marries his widow, Tamar. Onan pretends publicly to carry out his levirate duty, but privately he refuses to father a son that will not legally be his. That is, he has sex with Tamar up to the point of climax and then withdraws, “spilling his semen on the ground” (38:9). God is unhappy with what he does (or doesn’t do) and kills him as well. Keep in mind these are the ancestors of the nation of Israel, the good guys. This leaves the levirate duty to the third son, Shelah, who is too young for marriage at the time. As Shelah grows up Judah shows no intention of allowing his son to honor the levirate custom, so Tamar decides to act on her own. Posing as a prostitute, she hooks up with her father-in-law and gets pregnant by him. When her pregnancy is discovered, Judah orders her execution by stoning. But then she produces evidence proving that he is the father. Judah cancels the execution order and confesses, “She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah” (38:26).

Not exactly the sort of story you expect to find about the family line that will produce David and all the kings of Judah, not to mention Jesus. Its ending is remarkable. Judah thus acknowledges that his failure to follow the levirate custom was at fault for everything that happened. As unsavory as Tamar’s actions might seem, the story indicates that she was justified because she was driven to act in this way: she did so in an effort to retain her dignity and purpose as a woman in that society. Score one for the single ladies.

Another story in which levirate marriage figures large is that of Ruth. It begins when a family from Bethlehem moves to the country of Moab to escape famine in Judah. The family consists of a man, Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons. The sons both marry Moabite women: Ruth and Orpah. Over the course of ten years, all three of the men die, leaving their wives behind. Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, and Ruth chooses to accompany her, while Orpah remains behind.

The situation is pretty desperate for the two women who return, Naomi and Ruth. There is no brother-in-law for either of them to marry, so Ruth goes to glean in the fields, foraging for food by picking up grain that reapers have missed. Ruth ends up working in the field of a man named Boaz, who is a relative of Naomi's dead husband. Boaz is kind to Ruth, and gives her special privileges in his field. When she learns of this, Naomi turns matchmaker. She sends Ruth to Boaz with instructions to uncover his feet (care to guess what that means?) while he sleeps it off after a night of celebrating the harvest. Ruth follows Naomi's instructions and tells Boaz, "Spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin" (Ruth 3:9).

It is not clear how the levirate marriage practice is being conceived of here. Perhaps the custom changed, and Ruth reflects a time when it had been broadened to include not just brothers-in-law but the closest relative. Or maybe the author of Ruth is exercising creative license in expanding the practice to fit the story. The book also contains some other differences with the law in Deuteronomy. For instance, in Ruth 4:5–8 there does not seem to be the same sense of shame associated with refusing to marry the widow as there is in Deuteronomy. Moreover, the genealogy at the end of the book is traced through Boaz rather than through the dead husbands of Naomi and Ruth, which is in contrast to the entire rationale for levirate marriage. Again, the explanation may be literary—an effort on the author's part to connect the story of Ruth to the line of David. Even if we don't fully comprehend the details, it's clear that the custom of levirate marriage is crucial background information for understanding Ruth, at least to the extent that it highlights Ruth's sense of family loyalty and love for Naomi in seeing to it that she (Naomi) would be provided for.

Travelers and Daughters

If it's dysfunctionality you seek, you need look no further than Genesis 19 and Judges 19. The two stories in these chapters are obviously related. They share the same basic plot. In each case, visitors come to a city and are taken in by one of its residents and offered a place to spend the night. In Genesis 19 the visitors are angels, the host is Lot, and the city is Sodom; in Judges 19 a nameless Levite comes with his concubine to the Benjaminite city of Gibeon, and they are befriended by an elderly man. Later on, the men of the city surround the house and demand that the host surrender his male guest(s) to be gang raped. The host refuses but offers the women inside the house instead (Lot's daughters in one story, the old man's daughter and the Levite's concubine in the other). The men of the city refuse. In Genesis 19, the angels blind them, allowing Lot and his family to escape before the entire city is destroyed. In Judges 19, one of the men—it's not clear which—seizes the concubine and throws her to the men outside, who rape and abuse her all night long. Her death, which the Levite presents as an outrage against him, sparks civil war between Benjamin and the other Israelite tribes.

Of all the disturbing facets to this story, perhaps the most troubling is the way the fathers offer to turn their own daughters over to a crowd of men to be ravaged. While there is no way that this can or should be made acceptable to modern readers, perhaps explaining the social and cultural background can at least help us to understand the point behind such an outrageous offer. We are dealing, first of all, with a time and place that has no Holiday Inns or B & Bs. Travel was a risky proposition, and travelers were dependent on the hospitality of others. This kind of story line may have arisen as a sort of cautionary tale or urban legend about the dangers of travel and especially of urban stopping places. It might also have been intended to illustrate the importance of hospitality as a virtue. As remains the case in the Middle East today, especially among the Bedouin population, being a good host to strangers is a sacred obligation. Then again, as we've already mentioned, this is a patriarchal society. That means not only that men were regarded as more important than women but that men were the owners and guardians of the women in their households—wives and daughters—including their sexuality.

To properly understand the text, the reader also ought to be aware that women were considered proper sexual objects at that time, so that sexual penetration in itself was not a dishonor for them, while for a man to be penetrated was demeaning and humiliating because it meant the loss of his superior status as a man—thus the refusal to surrender the male guest(s) to the mob.

Keeping these social/cultural ingredients in mind, let's take another look at the plot shared by these two chapters. Travelers come into a city. One resident is a good host, who offers them refuge for the night. The host is taking upon himself the responsibility of protecting his guest(s) at all costs—even if it means offering his daughters as a last resort to save the (male) guest. The other citizens, however, are wary of the travelers and want to subjugate them. This is not about sex; the men of the city are not gay. It is about domination, the same kind found in prisons today. It's really about xenophobia, fear of the stranger. The way of dealing with that fear is to subjugate the strangers, to demonstrate dominion over them. A powerful way of doing this to a man is to turn him into a sexual object, a role typically reserved for women in patriarchal societies. When the crowd is denied access to the man in Judges 19, however, they do the next “best” thing: they rape his woman, thereby dishonoring and dominating him by proxy.

The clarification doesn't make this story, in either of its versions, any easier to take. It's still one of—if not the most—disturbing tales in the Bible. Perhaps the most important thing to take away from our treatment of it is that it is a tale that is intimately bound up with the societal values of its time. Therefore, the story cannot be naively picked up and thrown into the modern debate about homosexuality, as it so often is.

So what are these stories doing in the Bible? Modern people would generally agree that the Good Book would be even better without them. The quick answer is that they've been handed down to us, like it or not, like an older brother's winter coat that just doesn't fit right. When the Bible was canonized centuries ago, the view of women that underlies these stories was shared by those who made the call on which writings were worthy of inclusion in the scriptures. They're offensive to our eyes and ears, but such tales serve as an important reminder of the chronological and cultural gap that separates us from their original audiences.