



CATHEDRAL *of the* INCARNATION

The Fifth Sunday of Lent—March 18, 2018

A Book on the Shelf / A Shelf of Books

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Imagine, for a moment, that you have in your living room a bookcase or a book shelf, and on that shelf, you have a Bible. This bible is not a single volume, such as most bibles you see, for the Bible itself is a collection of books, not a single book. Some of the books are fairly long, some just seem long when you read them, and some as short as a single page. In the OT section there are thirty-nine books (in the Christian way of counting them) plus seven other books that have a slightly lesser status called the Apocrypha or the deuterocanonical books; the New Testament contains twenty-seven books. Altogether, then, seventy-three books, more or less. So, on your shelf, between the bookends, there are seventy-three books of widely varying length.

Now I would like you to imagine yourself taking the first book (it is called “origins” or Genesis) and ripping out the first two chapters, the two creation stories/myths, carefully setting them aside but outside the bookends that hold up your biblical library. After that, I’d like you to go to the other end of the shelf, remove the last book, often called the Revelation to John but its real title is Apocalypse, and ripping out the last chapter, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, carefully setting it aside just beyond the bookend that holds up the concluding volumes in your biblical library.

Then, and finally, I would like you to remove the book called The Letter to the Hebrews and just hold on to it for the moment. If you are having a little trouble finding it, you will locate it as the ninth book from the end. Now that you have removed the first

and last bits, what you have is a very selective narrative of humankind beginning with the first murder, the knifing of Abel by his brother Cain, and concluding with all history ending in the destruction of all that remains in a lake of fire. It is a very serious story and a very contemporary story.

Remember, now, that you are holding the book known as A Letter to the Hebrews in your hand. Our second reading this morning comes from that book. We don't know as much about this anonymous letter as we do about most of the other letters in the New Testament. There have been many theories about its authorship and its intended audience; the one that seems to me the most plausible is that it is a letter of consolation to the tiny minority of emerging Christians who came from the Hebrew Jerusalem temple tradition, probably written around 80 C.E., certainly written after 70 C.E.

Just before the birth of Jesus the Roman Emperor, Augustus, felt that things would be better kept in right order if he were to have not only a Governor for the province of Judea but a King as well, a King of Hebrew leanings if not orthodox faith, a King who could reside in Jerusalem. He knew just the person, Herod (later known as Herod the Great). His family was Nabatean, a place on the east side of the Dead Sea, and south towards the Gulf of Aquaba. Herod also had the advantage of being rich, controlling as he did a major trade route. Herod was a builder and a man of some importance (self-importance, as well). He determined to rebuild the temple constructed 450 years before by Ezra and Nehemiah. He would build the biggest temple, indeed the biggest ever, temple to the Hebrew God. And he did so.

But about forty years later, shortly after the execution of Jesus, things began to go badly between the Romans and the Nabateans, and the Hebrews were again becoming difficult. The King, now Herod Antipas, was a good friend of the Emperor Tiberius, but Caligula became Emperor and you had best be very careful if you were a friend of Caligula. Caligula decided that as he was a God, there should be a great statue of him in the Hebrew temple in Jerusalem. A great uproar was raised in Jerusalem;

nonetheless Caligula is thought to have caused the statue to be made and transported overland to Jerusalem. The statue broke in transit, and before a new one could be completed, so did Caligula, by assassination.*

But the relationship was permanently soured, the Herods had lost their grip on the people, and by 70 C.E., under the Emperor Vespasian, the Romans did what they often did with difficult and troubling places, they leveled the city, even pursuing (so it is thought) the last rebels to Masada in the wilderness and killing them there.* The people of Jerusalem were devastated, and their economy destroyed; their temple torn down. It was to the Christian / Jewish people of this time, place, and event that we believe the Letter to the Hebrews was written.

For these people what had taken place in 70 C.E. was nothing less than an apocalypse. Their city was mostly gone; their holiest site destroyed; their economy ruined; their neighbors, friends and family often killed or enslaved; their future destroyed. When we hear the word apocalypse, we think mostly of cataclysmic world-wide if not universal, violent destruction, a violent end to all that is, a lake of fire into which all and everything are cast. We are actually more familiar in our time with such a notion than many would ever have been. It is brought to us in the form of film most often. A great final battle, a cataclysmic end, a war fought between the forces of good and evil. We have apocalypse in mind when we hear of the revival of nuclear warfare. Every society in every age has had such myths, just not a way of portraying them in the manner allowed by contemporary art married to technology or effecting them through modern science.

We can trace such apocalyptic moments in our Christian tradition. We need not look only to the last book of our biblical library. Luke's Gospel provides us with an image of Jesus as apocalypticist: "I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled. . .Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" [Lk. 12:49-52] "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God,

and you yourselves thrown out.” [Lk. 13:28] It seems but one step before the lake of fire. The people of the Christian Temple community may well have been thinking ‘indeed, it is coming to pass’.

We have now lived in an apocalyptic age for a hundred years. Two massive world conflicts, the second ending with the first uses of weaponry literally capable of destroying the earth and its inhabitants. Waves of terrorism have billowed across much of the oldest places of civilization bringing an end to civility and culture. Now the specter of nuclear confrontation haunts us once again. I remember well that as a child I watched the hydrogen bomb tests on black and white TV and dreamt of them in nightmares; as a college student venturing into the residence basements and finding there great stockpiles of food and water “in case of nuclear attack”; of living for a while in a house built with a bomb shelter in its basement, a great, thick-walled concrete room with bunks attached to the walls.

The great apocalyptic myths of the ancient world, be they Zoroastrian, Jewish (Qumran community) Christian, the Apocalypse at the end of scripture, or whatever, were conceived to be world-ending events, the end of history, the death of all that was not savable. This is surely how that little community of Jerusalem based, Jewish/Christian faithful Temple worshippers must have understood the destruction of Jerusalem. It was an Apocalypse or as near to one as they would ever know. It cannot but remind us of those souls who died in a moment in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Life as they knew it had ended. Their city rubble and their lives at best empty shells for containing great pain and sorrow. Listen then to what the consoler of the Jerusalem community wrote to them:

Instead you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; to the myriad angels, to the gathering together of the first born who are inscribed in heaven; to God, judge of all and the spirits of the just who have arrived at their goal; to the mediator of a new covenant, Jesus, and to the blood of

aspersion which speaks more strongly than the blood of Abel. [Heb. 12: 20-24]

In the midst of their personal apocalypse, such words would have lifted them beyond their loss and brought their minds home to the one who had died and risen that they might never be so much as singed by the lake of fire.

So, knit back into the binding those first two chapters of Genesis and the last chapter of the Apocalypse; bring them inside the bookends even though they do not belong to human history, even though they stand outside of the flow of events. They are myth, and as myth they can communicate truth beyond fact to us, truth that lets us know that the first murder and the lake of fire are not the beginning and the end. God, and God's Garden, and God's new Jerusalem are the beginning and the end. Whatever may be the failed course of human history, it is enveloped by the never-failing love of the one who creates and saves and sanctifies, and in whose eternal city we may abide forever without fear.

**Both these "events" have at one time or another been thought to be historically accurate and at other times to be legendary.*