

RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE

**HEBREWS TO REVELATIONS THROUGH
PARAPHRASE, POETRY, AND PRAYER**



BRAD MUNROE

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“Rhythms of the God-Life Series” in watercolor

To the Shemaniax, Rachel Srubas, Shirin McArthur, and Laura Munroe, who make writing a joy.

Acknowledgements

For this writer, good writing is a team sport. What follows was improved from its original offering because I have colleagues willing to speak the truth in love to me—truths to encourage, to guide, and to critique. I especially want to thank my writer’s group, the Shemaniax: Shirin McArthur, Laura Munroe, and Rachel Srubas. We took for our muse the Hebrew word *Shema*, which means to hear, and is the first word of Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.” (NIV) We listen to one another’s writing and then listen to one’s another’s encouragement, guidance, and critique. This work is not what it has become without the Shemaniax.

I am blessed with many colleagues willing to provide encouragement, guidance, and critique and would like to thank a few of them by name: Lawn Griffiths for periodic editing, Chris Munroe for initial editing of the Pauline portions, Michael Hegeman for his insights into Galatians, and Jen Fraser for her mentoring on writing poetry. Each of these colleagues supported particular aspects of the following work and their guidance has improved me as a writer and biblical interpreter.

I want to thank Jim Crelin, pastor of Desert Palms Presbyterian Church in Sun City West, Arizona, and Ann Conklin, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Santa Barbara, California, for inviting me to lead workshops on *Rhythms of the God-Life* to their congregations. Being able to see which word-experiments worked and which were “a bridge too far” was instrumental when revising the material, particularly as related to the use of the divine name and pronouns. The input from their congregations was insightful, though the final decisions were mine, for better or for worse.

I want to thank the commissions and committees of the presbyteries of Grand Canyon and de Cristo who tolerated early versions of *Rhythms* for use in “Word, Share, Prayer” exercises at the beginning of meetings. The encouragement I received from colleagues helped me persevere and continue writing from week to week and month to month.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Laura, for her patience and understanding as I hid away after work to write on our deck or in our Zoom room. She knows that writing is life-giving for me and a source of joy. I believe she knows, too, that she is a source of joy for me. In case she doesn’t: Shout out to the best wife in the world!

Brad Munroe
May 6, 2022

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Rhythms of the God-Life

General Introduction

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

Proust

Encountering the Word

The little boy tugged on his father’s pant leg. The father bent down and his son whispered in his ear, “Daddy, why does Mrs. Smith carry such a big Bible everywhere?”

The father whispered back, “Why don’t you ask her.”

Summoning his courage, the boy asked Mrs. Smith about her Bible. With an immediate smile that the boy did not expect, Mrs. Smith replied, “Well I like to read it!”

“But why?” the boy blurted out, much to his father’s embarrassment.

“Because it’s the only book that reads me back,” was her reply.¹

Rhythms of the God-Life is an invitation to dig deeper into God’s Word. *Rhythms* is an “interpretive paraphrase” (about which I will say more below) that invites readers to read with both head and heart, to ponder the ways the Word connects to who you are and whose you are, and to respond to God’s call with actions in both the private and public sphere. Both your interior life of spirit and your public living of truth will be challenged in these pages, for you will encounter Jesus in them.

It is not enough to read Scripture without engaging and encountering the Word. As John Calvin once wrote, “Let not the Word of God flit about in your mind alone but allow it to seep into the deep places, into the very marrow of your soul.” The aphorism that “the

Bible is the only book that we read that reads us back” is as true for an interpretive paraphrase as for a traditional translation.

I am a pastor who believes Scripture when it says the Holy Spirit lives within each one of us who calls upon the name of the Lord and has been baptized according to the Triune name. As such, each of us has living within us a theological seminary of sorts: the Scripture text we are reading or know by heart, the experiences of fidelity and failure with which we have sought to live the Gospel, as well as the great communion of saints we have known and know, whose voices are our companions along the Way of Jesus. And the Holy Spirit is our Counselor who takes all this source material and shapes, forms and transforms us more fully into the image of Christ Jesus.

The above paragraph sounds grandiose, so let me rephrase it in terms of educational theory. I do not believe in the “Banking Model” of education, in which an instructor opens up the student’s brain and deposits facts and information first to be memorized, then to be regurgitated, with the assumption that such can be called learning. What we know about the human brain tells us learning is not that linear. Instead of a one-way transmission of information, true learning happens as we engage one another in dialogue: back-and-forth, forth-and-back. True learning moves beyond the informational to the transformational.

Rhythms seeks transformation. It is comprised of three sections for each passage: an interpretive paraphrase, a poem that interprets and applies the text, and a prayer that applies the text to one’s living. Each of these sections intends to engage the reader with information that leads to dialogue. I do not ask you merely to receive my interpretation of the biblical text and its implications for our daily living and life together. I ask

¹ This story is of unknown origin. I first heard it told in the 1990’s at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in a continuing education seminar taught by Tom Long, who at the time was a professor of homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary.

you to engage the material with mind and heart and spirit as an active learner.

Interpretive Paraphrase

What will it look like to be an active learner with *Rhythms*? It starts with interpretive paraphrase, which balances scrupulosity to the Greek text and creativity to modern expressions. *Rhythms* remains rooted in the text and yet gives the text wings, to convey faithfully the Greek text of the New Testament yet do so in a way that invites the reader to see beyond the familiarity of beloved words of Scripture to experience the Word more deeply. This balancing act required choices about what words give precision and clarity for textual understanding, what words invite the reader's imagination to hear the music of Scripture, and when it is necessary to expand on the Greek text in order to convey culture and customs unseen by most modern readers. I will let you, Gentle Reader, be the judge as to whether I have made wise choices.

Early readers of the pages that follow often mistook them for Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, which I took as an extreme compliment. I have endeavored to apply the same scrupulosity to my paraphrase as Dr. Peterson famously applied to *The Message*. Where we differ is that I have taken the liberty to include contextual clues not found in the original, Greek manuscripts but which would have been obvious to the original, 1st century readers and hearers of the text. These contextual clues come from citing the Hebrew Scriptures, Roman laws, and both Roman and Jewish cultural practices. Sometimes the cultural clues are embedded in the paraphrase and other times they are in a footnote.

For instance, in Volume I of the *Rhythms* series I paraphrase the familiar passage "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer them the left also" (Matthew 5:39). I show how this passage assumes cultural practices between Roman soldiers and the oppressed, Jewish populace as follows:

If a Roman soldier backhands you, essentially treating you like a dog, turn your other cheek to him, inviting him to treat you as his equal.

In Volume II of the *Rhythms* series, I provide context in a footnote when Paul references being in prison:

Paul is in and out of prison frequently in his ministry. In the autocratic and oppressive rule of the Romans, Christian ethics were perceived as seditious. Roman culture was a caste system and like all dictatorships the Romans were suspicious when people from different castes gathered together. The Romans' presumption was that rebellion was being planned. The Romans did not care about Paul's preaching for its religious content (because he was Jewish or participated in a Jewish sect) but because his message led people to challenge the social and legal structures upon which Roman culture was built. Further, the early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contradiction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord.

The purpose of these interpretive insertions into the paraphrase is to illuminate the Word more fully; however, it is the responsibility of each reader, as one in whom the Holy Spirit lives, to engage my words as an active learner and dialogue partner: Why did I phrase this as I did? What did I see that you did not or missed that you see?

Poetry

To assist in the work of engaging and encountering the Word, each passage includes a poem and a prayer that reflects upon the passage. Emily Dickinson wrote that poetry helps us see something "slant"² and opens us to new perspectives. Dickinson invited her readers to look upon the familiar and see new creation, to move beyond our assumptions to encounter life's mysteries with wonder and awe. To tell something slant has become a metaphor that both connects with the concrete and then amplifies and moves beyond it. The poems in *Rhythms* seek to help readers see God's Word "slant" and use three poetic styles: Haiku, Cinquain, and free verse.

Haiku poems have three lines. The first line is five syllables. The second line is seven syllables. The third line is five syllables. Here is an example of a *Haiku* from Romans 8:1-4:

² c.f. Emily Dickinson, *Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant* (1886) and *There's a Certain Slant of Light* (1861).

Jesus on the Cross
Battle for eternity
His heart curved outward

Cinquain poems have five lines. The first line is one word, the second line two words, then three words, four words, but then the fifth line is one word. Here is an example of a *Cinquain* from 1 Corinthians 2:3-16:

Wisdom
 spiritual mystery
 wondering and wandering
 learning God-rhythms anew
 wholeness

Free verse will be a more familiar form for most readers. I use free verse for the majority of passages and seek both to invite insights into the meaning of the text as well as provoke questions about the text. If the poems do not connect for you, I invite you to craft your own poetic response to the Word!

Prayer

Praying the Word is an ancient spiritual practice combining Scripture and prayer, often called *lectio divina*, which is a Latin phrase meaning “divine reading.” Benedictine *lectio divina* invites a reader to notice where the Spirit draws one’s attention and to remain in that place in meditation on the word, phrase, or verse. Ignatian *lectio divina*, which works well for story passages, invites a reader to imagine yourself present in the event being described. For example, imagine yourself as a disciple watching four men lower their paralyzed friend down through a roof (Mark 2:3-4). What do you see, hear, smell, and notice through your Spirit-guided sacred imagination?

In Volume I, for the Gospels of Matthew and John, I pray using the format of the Prayer of St. Francis. Here is an example from Matthew 5:3:

Lord, make me poor in spirit,
 when too full, let me be poured out,
 when too proud, let me choose humility,
 when grasping for my own sake,
 let me be spent in compassion.
 O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
 to live for my own gain as to love with joyful generosity,

to trust in my strength as to accept my belovedness,
 to think I know best as to trust you know better.

For the act of *kenosis*³ - of emptying -
 is the model of Jesus,
 the giving of self the Way of the Cross
 that leads to eternal life.

In Mark, Luke, and Acts in Volume I, and continuing with Romans to Revelation in Volume II, the prayers begin, “God, it’s me....” Here is an example from Hebrews 8:1-13:

God, it’s me. I long for certainty: not the kind conveyed by power and privilege, nor that which comes from market success or insurance. No, I long for the certainty that my life is built on that which endures: character and hope and a love that will not let me go. I long for the certainty that my well-being depends not on human choices but upon Divine choosing: I belong to you—body and soul, in life and in death. I am humbled and grateful, that my longing is welcomed by Jesus.

The prayers are written from my personal perspective, as if I am praying. If you do not connect with my personal experience, I invite you to craft your own prayer that speaks from your heart to God.

God-Language

Writing (and reading) a paraphrase is an opportunity to challenge one’s faith or, at least, explore the spiritual life slant. Though I am absolutely committed to inclusive language when referring to humanity, when speaking of the divine I prefer personal pronouns rather than the repetition of God, as in, “God said that God would bring God’s deliverance.” For me, personal pronouns better communicate that God is relational—the Holy Trinity, Three-in-One! I am personally comfortable speaking of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as saying something like, “God said that he would bring his deliverance.” That’s me: my comfort zone, my customary way of speaking the faith. And that’s okay.

³ *Kenosis* is a Greek word that means “emptying.” It is used most famously in the New Testament in Philippians 2:7 (c.f. “made himself nothing” NIV) to describe Jesus’ emptying of his divine prerogatives to embrace the form of a servant.

However, as I have participated in small groups with female colleagues and listened to their sense of being excluded by the use of exclusively male expressions of God, I found myself wanting to experiment with the language I use. The Apostle Paul's ethical guidance in Romans 14 is germane: "charity before freedom." In *Rhythms* I chose to be cognizant that the way I speak of God may impact my beloved in Jesus in profound ways, for good or ill. Insisting on my personal comfort zone when others are negatively impacted is not okay.

I experimented with several ways to be inclusive with God-language (language about the divine) in early drafts. One experiment I found particularly meaningful personally was to speak of God as *Abba* and *Imma*, which are the Aramaic endearments for Daddy and Mommy. I wondered, as I wrote, how taking turns using *Abba* and *Imma* would affect my experience of the biblical text as Word of God. I wondered how my commitment to using personal pronouns while seeking to honor inclusive expressions of the One we worship as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier might affect me spiritually and ethically. What I discovered is a sense of community with female colleagues that felt sacred and unexpected (I am now chagrined to admit). I liked this fresh expression for speaking of God; therefore, you will find *Abba* and *Imma* but only used in one letter each.

Why only once?

In sharing *Rhythms* in written form and through teaching workshops, I discovered that some readers could not move past the prevalence of *Imma*. These readers, who were both male and female, appreciated my efforts to write a fresh expression of God's Word, but, for them, the use of *Imma* prevented them from embracing the interpretive paraphrase. Having already decided that "charity before freedom" is germane, I adapted my writing and tried another experiment in the following pages.

When using the divine name, I take the Hebrew Bible as inspiration, where God is called *El-Shaddai* (God Almighty) and *El-Elyon* (Lord of Heaven and Earth). In the pages that follow, I call Yahweh by a unique characteristic connected to the theology and spirituality of the particular book or letter.

Book/Letter	Divine Name
Matthew	The Truth
Mark	The Action

Book/Letter	Divine Name
Luke	The Compassion
John	I Am
Acts	The Sender
Romans	Abba
1 Corinthians	The Unity
2 Corinthians	The Reconciliation
Galatians	The Freedom
Ephesians	The Mystery
Philippians	The Joy
Colossians	Imma
1, 2 Thessalonians	The Hope
1, 2 Timothy & Titus	The Root
Philemon	The Liberator
Hebrews	The Name
James	Sophia
1, 2, 3 Peter	The Sovereign
1, 2, 3 John	The Love
Jude	The Holy
Revelation	The Glory

I am not the first to call Yahweh by a unique characteristic by the way. In Genesis 31:42, God is called "The Fear of Isaac" (Genesis 31:42). If God can be called "The Fear," why not "The Joy" or "The Glory"? Further, regarding the use of a pronoun for the divine name, I use "They," with a capital "T" both to convey God's trinitarian nature and to remain gender inclusive.

Religious Speech

Writing a paraphrase is an opportunity to explore fresh means of expressing faith and life. I use "God-rhythms" and "God-life" because I feel they convey a jazz-like sense of musical harmony appropriate to life with Jesus. I have made other linguistic changes in my attempt to create an environment in which readers might hear God's Word as a fresh expression and to receive it with insight, imagination, appreciation, and affirmation. For example, the word grace, a word that I dearly love, is paraphrased as "loving-kindness." Please be assured, O Gentle Reader, that I love the word grace. Not only is it integral to my story of giving my life to Jesus, but *Amazing Grace* is my absolute favorite hymn!

However, part of the difficulty of crafting an interpretive paraphrase is that the Bible is so well-known

(and so well-loved) the temptation is to use the most well-known and beloved phrases. A paraphrase, by definition, seeks to open new pathways into understanding the text by deliberately *not* using well-worn phrases, and this practice may cause readers confusion! To minimize confusion, I want to give you a head start on some of the vocabulary I use, especially of familiar terms:

Traditional Term	Fresh Expression
Christ	the Anointed
church	gathering or the Body
demon	unholy spirit
disciple (individual)	disciplined follower
faith	trust
grace	loving-kindness
healed	made whole
holy	set apart
kingdom of God	kin-dom, rule of God's sovereign love, or sovereign above Caesar, sovereign above the cosmos, or sovereign above the Body
Lord	
prophets	truth-tellers
righteousness	right relationship(s)
salvation	becoming whole and complete, becoming our true self
Satan/Devil	Accuser
spirit vs. flesh	true self vs. false self

Readers will note the names of all 1st century Jewish groups have also been modified. My intent is to describe them according to how they function within 1st century Jewish culture yet point to the truth these same characters function within every 21st century Christian church.

Traditional Term	Fresh Expression
antichrists	the Opposers
apostles	sent ones
chief priests	the Rulers
deacons	the Caring
disciples (group)	the Devoted

Traditional Term	Fresh Expression
elders	the Old Ones
false teachers	the Speculators
Herodians	the Collaborators
Pharisees	the Intense
Sadducees	the Elite
Scribes	the Scrupulous

Some of my verbal experiments will work; others will not. Please don't judge the entire manuscript if one or more of these experiments fall flat for you! Instead, continue reading in search of nourishment for your heart, mind, and spirit. I hope you will take a "water off a duck's back" approach to experiments that fall flat. Many of the footnotes compare my word choice to the choices made by English translations or suggest how the Greek text might allow for such an interpretation. (I highly recommend you read the footnotes, especially if you have a question about why I have phrased something in a particular way.)

Do you agree or disagree with the choices I have made? Why or why not? Let the dialogue begin.

The Enigma of Paul

The Apostle Paul is an enigma. Some see him as the champion of the Christian faith, while others view him as having distorted the Way of Jesus. Some see him as a radical social reformer of the 1st century, while others view him through the lens of centuries of misogyny and racial oppression that have used his words to justify human depravity. Some read Paul's letters and the logic leaps from the page, while others struggle to wade through what seem like deep waters of incomprehensibility.

True confession #1: I am the "some" in each of the above sentences. True confession #2: I also resonate with the "others" in each of the above sentences and have compassion for their struggles with Paul.

Take heart: Each of Paul's letters in Volume II that follows in the pages below begins with a non-traditional introduction. They do not cover the basics of outline, key themes, etc. Rather, the introductions provide insight to how I *as a writer* sought to approach the particular letter in order to assist you *as a reader* regarding what you are about to experience. These introductions were written in previous months as each letter was

completed. I chose to keep these introductions as originally constructed so readers can follow along with my journey through engaging and encountering Paul.

The Apostle Paul has always been an enigma. Paul dubbed himself “the Apostle to the Gentiles.” Paul took the faith that belonged to one people and invited others into it. With the invitation came the necessity to interpret the centuries-old traditions of the mother faith and articulate how the traditions might best be lived in a different culture. Through the act of interpretation came accommodations to these new people and their ways. Every accommodation was encountered with some ambivalence, and often open hostility, by those who felt the tradition belonged exclusively to them.

If this sounds like a familiar story, it should. Much of today’s culture wars and socio-political polarization is a dialogue between who we have been and who we are becoming, between how we have told our story and how we should be telling our story, between what must remain and what can be released. In his own day, Paul was the catalyst for creating a similar culture war between the ways one people had always told their story and a new interpretive lens for the narrative.

It is not my intention to ignite another culture war with *Rhythms*. That said, the social and theological dynamics that influenced Paul are present in this work. We live in an age in which churches seek to tell the “old, old story” traditionally, progressively, or as some form of traditional-progressive hybrid. Every church is doing its best to tell the story of Jesus, but we live in a culture in which many are either apathetic or hostile to its telling. The dilemma that we encounter is the same dilemma Paul encountered: How can churches tell the old story in a new way without betraying core principles? *Rhythms* seeks to be one example of how to answer this question.

I mined Google Translate for how the name Paul is translated by other languages. I hear the Gospel through western, educated, individualistic, rationalistic, and democratic ears. Using variations of the English name Paul reminded me that the Gospel is a global reality. As I moved from letter to letter, I used different versions of the name Paul: starting with other Romance languages (e.g., Pablo), I branched into what for me are more exotic sounding names (e.g. the Chinese: Baoluo). I discovered as I wrote that I “heard” Paul a bit differently when using a variant of the English name Paul. I invite you, therefore, to notice your own experience and become more fully

aware of how the Spirit engages you through your reading of the Word. What would the Spirit have you hear?

The Jewish-Christian Letters (also called the General or Catholic Letters)

Jesus was Jewish: born into a Jewish family in a Jewish province and raised to practice Jewish customs. He grew up to be called Rabbi, a Jewish teacher.

The religious movement Jesus ignited is too often identified as a North American and Euro-centric religion, whose depictions of Jesus are of a white, blond, blue-eyed man who bears little resemblance to the historic, Jewish Jesus.

Jesus the Galilean prophet and teacher, whom his followers claimed was the Jewish Messiah, ignited a religious revival within 1st century Judaism. What came to be known as The Way, and later Christianity, began as a sect within Judaism. Scholars refer to 1st century Judaism using the plural: “Judaisms,” because there was not a single, monolithic belief system in 1st century Israel. Readers of the Gospels are familiar with some of the various strands: Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians, and Zealots. The people of The Way belonged to another strand.

That the early Christians moved beyond the ethnic, cultural, and religious traditions of multiple Judaisms is well-known—Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles and the controversies over “the Judaizers” in his letters and Acts 15 depict a national religious movement expanding into a global one. However, even while Paul was “the Apostle to the Gentiles,” some Israelites practiced Judaism as framed by their rabbi: Jesus, whom they called Messiah. In this present work, I attempt to share the story of these followers of Jesus so that readers might be blessed by their faith and wisdom.

Ironically, the letters contained in *Rhythms* are commonly called the Catholic or General letters. Catholic means universal, but even so, it’s hard not to hear “Roman Catholic.” The term “General” seems more appropriate because the works do not have an addressee, are addressed to individuals, or are addressed to the scattered twelve tribes of Israel rather than to specific Gentile communities.⁴ However, these letters center around Jewish people’s experiences of The Way, of

⁴ The one exception is the Book of Revelation. However, see below regarding its Jewish literary style.

following Jesus as Messiah (a Jewish term) and have a uniquely Jewish perspective.⁵ Consider:

- Hebrews describes Jesus' relationship to the Jewish sacrificial customs and how he fits into this system and transforms it.
- James is written in the style of Jewish wisdom literature, specifically The Book of Proverbs, to offer common-sense, practical ethics for 1st century Jews who follow The Way.
- First and Second Peter wrestle with what it means to live in the shadow of Empire, as Jews had so lived for centuries. Peter, whom the tradition calls "the Apostle to the Jews," uses the themes of exodus and exile to reflect upon what is required of those who live under the shadow of Roman law yet claim the sovereignty of one whose name is not Caesar.
- John's three letters reflect a style of Jewish faith common in intertestamental Judaism associated with the Jewish sect called the Qumran community, with themes of light vs. darkness and love vs. disobedience.
- Jude warns against immorality by evoking Jewish writings from the intertestamental period that emphasize strict moral and ethical teaching (known as *parenetic* literature).
- Revelation, finally, uses the Jewish literary style known as apocalyptic literature, particularly Ezekiel and portions of Daniel, to offer its pastoral word of hope. Further, as will be detailed in *Revelation*, the work is littered with references to the Hebrew Scriptures.

⁵ Each book or letter's Jewish perspective is summarized more fully in each work's introduction.

Hebrews

Introduction

The Holocaust casts an inescapable shadow over The Book of Hebrews. To read Hebrews without cognizance of the Holocaust (and, before it, centuries of pogroms, persecution, and prejudice by Christians against Jews) is both a moral and literary offense. It is a moral offense because it neglects the responsibility Christian theology, teaching, and practice has in creating the culture of hatred that led to the Holocaust. It is a literary offense because it neglects the reality that centuries of prejudice obscure our ability to comprehend what we read within Hebrews' pages. Reading Hebrews, therefore, requires both moral courage and a rigorous adherence to intellectual integrity.

The theological word for the above dilemma is called "supercessionism." Supercessionism is the belief that Christianity replaced, or superseded, Judaism. Many Christians assume this reality is fact and a rather harmless fact. Nothing could be further from the truth.

There are three, primary ways the relationship between Judaism and Christianity has been taught within Christian theology: punitive, functional, and structural supercessionism.

*Punitive supercessionism*⁵³⁷ teaches that Jews who refuse Jesus as Messiah are rejected by God and worthy of punishment, with God's promises to them revoked. The 3rd century theologian Hippolytus of Rome declared, "[The Jews] have been darkened in the eyes of your soul with a darkness utter and everlasting."

*Functional supercessionism*⁵³⁸ teaches that Israel's role in salvation-history is replaced by the Christian Church. The 2nd century theologian Justin Martyr wrote, "For the true spiritual Israel ... are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ."

Structural supercessionism recognizes that for many in the Christian Church, the norms and values of the Hebrew Scriptures related to God's work of redemption are often ignored by Christian thinking and practice, becoming irrelevant for many Christians.

The essential message of these three kinds of supercessionism is each offensive in its own way: (1) "I hate you," (2) "I don't hate you but am far superior to you," or (3) "It's not that I hate or feel superior to you but that I just don't think about you at all." Each of these messages cultivates antagonism and disdain rather than respect between Jews and Christians, and each can argue that support for the perspective is found in The Book of Hebrews.

Hebrews suggests a different way. Pope Francis, in a document called *Evangelii Gaudium*, pointed to this way beyond supercessionism when he wrote,

We hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked, for "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (*Rom* 11:29). The Church, which shares with Jews an important part of the sacred Scriptures, looks upon the people of the covenant and their faith as one of the sacred roots of her own Christian identity (c.f. *Rom* 11:16-18). As Christians, we cannot consider Judaism as a foreign religion; nor do we include the Jews among those called to turn from idols and to serve the true God (c.f. *1 Thes.* 1:9). With them, we believe in the one God who acts in history, and with them we accept his revealed word....⁵³⁹

God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasures of wisdom which flow from their encounter with his word. For this reason, the Church also is enriched when she receives the values of Judaism. While it is true that

⁵³⁷ Adherents include Hippolytus, Origen, and Luther.

⁵³⁸ Adherents include Justin Martyr, Augustine, and Barth. This is often called "economic supercessionism."

⁵³⁹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 247 and 249, (2013).

certain Christian beliefs are unacceptable to Judaism, and that the Church cannot refrain from proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Messiah, there exists as well a rich complementarity which allows us to read the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures together and to help one another to mine the riches of God's word. We can also share many ethical convictions and a common concern for justice and the development of peoples.

Out of respect for our Jewish siblings, the divine name used in *Hebrews* is taken from the Hebrew word many Jews use today to refer to the divine: *ha-shem*, which translates as The Name. What follows also draws upon Paul's metaphor in Romans 11:11-22 that declares the Christian Church lives only because it has been engrafted into Israel. Israel is not to be punished, disrespected, nor ignored but celebrated, honored, and engaged as a partner in God's work of bringing *shalom* into the world. This is *Hebrews'* perspective. When provided with the opportunity to uproot supercessionism, to prevent its roots from being planted, *Hebrews* will seek to interpret the Greek text in ways that convey genuine respect while acknowledging authentic differences of opinion, perspective, and purpose between Jews and Christians.⁵⁴⁰ It is past time for the hatred to stop.

⁵⁴⁰ c.f. notes 570, 571, 594, and 608 for specific examples of interpretive choices.

Hebrews 1:1–14

The Name⁵⁴¹ has always been about the business of restoring the creation: speaking to our ancestors through truth-tellers time and again and in ways too numerous to count. Recently The Name intensified Their speaking—almost shouted, as if from the rooftop—through Their Anointed One, the Son, whom They established as the One who will receive all things: heaven and earth, the creation and the cosmos, every atom, proton and quark. The Son will receive all these things because The Name created all things through him—all things came from the Son and will return to the Son.

The Son is the radiance that flashes in the night, illuminating all, making everything so that it can be seen for what it is—its true nature. The Son reflects The Name’s light and life into the creation, making it new creation. The Son whispers and The Name’s *dunamis*⁵⁴² is unleashed, new creation bursting forth in praise, galaxies singing The Hallelujah Chorus. The Son purged⁵⁴³ the dross from human abuse, betrayal, and corruption to give our fractured minds and splintered spirits hope for new beginnings, and then he went to heaven to chill with The Name, as Their right hand.

Lots of people are impressed with celestial messengers and rightly so, but the Son is so far superior to them that it’s unfair to compare. Of which messenger did The Name ever say,

You are my Son, my begotten,
now I have brought you forth to shine.⁵⁴⁴ Or,

I’ll be The Name to you,
You will be my Son.⁵⁴⁵ Or,
Hey, Messengers, come take a peek at my Son!⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴¹ Jewish adherents do not speak God’s name out of respect. Instead, they substitute *HaShem*, which in Hebrew means “The Name.”

⁵⁴² *Dunamis* is the word translated as “power” but from which we get “dynamite” and “dynamic.” I paraphrase the Greek with the Greek, for we become more dynamic when we release our power to allow The Name’s dynamite to unlock opportunities and overcome challenges.

⁵⁴³ HELPS Word Studies 2512: “*katharismos* (to purge) – purification resulting from God removing undesirable admixtures (eliminating impurities).”

⁵⁴⁴ c.f. Psalm 2:7.

⁵⁴⁵ c.f. 1 Samuel 7:14.

When The Name has spoken about celestial messengers, what did They say? They said nice things, yes, but nothing so lofty:

I created you messengers as spirits,
You are servants who help me purge the dross.⁵⁴⁷

Being one of The Name’s servants is a high honor, but it’s not in the Son’s league:

Come, sit on your throne!
Take your time: it will be here for all eternity.

Come, hold your scepter!
Hold it high, for it is a symbol of justice for all.

Come, you who adore right relationships!⁵⁴⁸
I have fixed you as the brightest light
in highest heaven.

Come, you who abhor
abuse, betrayal, and corruption!
My joy will refresh you—always and forever.⁵⁴⁹

The Name also says of the Son,

From the beginning, you are Sovereign,
laying earth’s foundation, setting heaven’s lights.

Though heaven and earth perish,
You will be and abide and be adored,
Though heaven and earth become a raggedy robe,
You will be clothed in glory and honor and majesty.

⁵⁴⁶ c.f. Deuteronomy 32:43 in the Septuagint (Greek) text.

⁵⁴⁷ c.f. Psalm 104:4.

⁵⁴⁸ The Greek word used is *dikaïosune*, which is usually translated as “righteousness.” In this work, *dikaïosune* will be paraphrased as “right relationship(s)” for two reasons: for its linguistic connections with the Hebrew words for justice (*tzedakah* and *mishpat*, both of which connote relational nuances). Righteousness in the English language has adopted an almost exclusively behavior focus that I want to redirect toward a more biblical perspective. For the record, though, I am not opposed to ethical behavior. 😊

⁵⁴⁹ c.f. Psalm 45:6-7.

Though heaven and earth suffer corruption,
You endure into all eternity—always who you are.⁵⁵⁰

Let's be honest with one another. The Name never said
to one of the angels,

Come, chill next to me!
Rest your feet upon my enemies' backs.⁵⁵¹

Celestial messengers are wonderful, yes, and they have a
sacred purpose: to serve, to encourage, to support the
becoming of our true self as we become whole and
complete in the Son.

*Above those who caused laughter.*⁵⁵²
*Above the one who silenced the tongue.*⁵⁵³
*Above the one who declared a maiden's exaltation.*⁵⁵⁴

Radiance.
Reflection.
Reality that exists in Creation's heart.

Alleluia!
Alleluia!
Amen.

*God, it's me. I celebrate Jesus! I honor his name
that is above all names. I rejoice that he is honored
above the angels. Yet in my rejoicing, teach me also
the ways of respect for those who do not or cannot
see Jesus as I see him. Give me humility to
acknowledge the many times and too numerous ways
to count I and my fellow Christians have brought
dishonor to his name. Reveal to me the moments
when my lips must remain shut even while my heart
bursts in praise. Show me the times when I must
walk the path of humility and confession for the sake
of my Lord, in whose name injustice was done.*

⁵⁵⁰ c.f. Psalm 102:25-27.

⁵⁵¹ c.f. Psalm 110:1.

⁵⁵² c.f. Genesis 18:10-15.

⁵⁵³ c.f. Luke 1:19-20.

⁵⁵⁴ c.f. Luke 1:35.

Hebrews 2:1–9

We must attune our ears to the acoustics⁵⁵⁵ of the
God-life, listening attentively to the God-harmonies that
help us to dance the God-rhythms. We certainly don't
want to stumble because we try to dance with two left feet!
Indeed, the word spoken by celestial messengers endures
and deviating from its truth leads us to grasp that which
destroys—why lay hold of that which harms us and so be
unable to embrace The Name's *agape*⁵⁵⁶ that seeks to
adopt us? Wholeness awaits us, our true self blossoming
into what The Name designed us to become. The Name
has sung this song for ages through actions that invite
wonder and evoke awe. The Name also makes us able to
join Their chorus through gifts of the Divine Spirit, freely
given through Their joy and determination.

The Name created the world not through the
mouths of messengers but in the word spoken by the Son,
of whom the Psalmist bears witness:

What is humanity that you care, O Name?
What is the Son of Mortality to occupy you?
You created humanity a stitch lower than angels.
You crowned mortals with honor not as high, yet
You place all things beneath their feet!⁵⁵⁷

In placing all things under humanity's feet, all
things are subordinate to humanity, all things are lesser.
Yet that is not what we observe! Humanity does not
appear superior to all things—certainly not superior to the
majesty of mountains nor the galaxies that hint of eternity.
What, then, are we to understand about the Psalmist's
words?

Though humanity is not ascendent, Jesus is.⁵⁵⁸
We see Jesus, who was human—made to be lower than

⁵⁵⁵ The Greek word used is *akousthesin*, which is often translated
as “hear” and is from where the English “acoustics” comes.

⁵⁵⁶ *Agape* is one of several Greek words for “love” and connotes
a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others. The
New Testament has different words for different kinds of love,
including: *agape*, *eros* which is “sexual love,” *phelos* which is “deep
friendship or brotherly/sisterly love,” (thus the reason
Philadelphia is The City of Brotherly Love), and *storge* which is
“empathy or a close bond.” There are seven Greek words for
love, of which the New Testament uses four.

⁵⁵⁷ c.f. Psalm 8:4-6.

the heavenly host—but only for a time. This Jesus is now crowned with honor and covered in The Name’s goodness, exalted above all names. Jesus was exalted through service, his goodness displayed in welcoming the disobedient, his power paraded through weakness, his glory ascending as high as his humiliation descended. In Jesus, who dined at Death’s table for everyone, The Name’s loving-kindness was uncovered for all to witness.

Who gets an invitation?

Is the Table large enough for everyone?

Is the Host prepared for the celebration?

You’ve received an invitation—how will you RSVP?

God, it’s me. The mystery of Jesus invites wonder and evokes awe. Jesus bears the image of our humanity while radiating the light of your deity. Help me to understand the mystery of Jesus not as an abstraction but through the embrace of my spirit. Lead me to meditation that centers my heart and mind. Open me to a prayer life of contemplation that deepens connection with the One who is lower than angels yet above all the heavenly host.

Hebrews 2:10–18

Now why am I comparing the Son to the celestial messengers? Because many assume the angels are superior to humanity and, therefore, the God-life cannot be repaired by mere humanity.⁵⁵⁹ However, in leading the beloved to reflect the divine image, The Name acted conspicuously,⁵⁶⁰ through a “mere human.” All heaven

⁵⁵⁸ Most interpreters would argue the Psalmist intends the words in Psalm 8 to refer to humanity, yet the author of Hebrews refers these verses to Jesus. This is an example of the ways New Testament authors use Scripture differently than modern commentators. It seems as if the author of Hebrews used the common literary device of speaking of an individual in corporate terms, as representative of all.

⁵⁵⁹ These two sentences are not in the Greek text and are added to provide cultural context. The passage transitions from arguing Jesus’ superiority to angels even though he was human (1:1—2:9) to begin to reason why it was necessary that a human be the agent of salvation.

⁵⁶⁰ The Greek word used is *eprepon*, often translated as “fitting” yet also connotes “conspicuous.”

and earth exist because of The Name and for The Name, and They chose a mere human as the Archetype⁵⁶¹ and Author of new creation! Indeed, so audacious was The Name that They lead the beloved to become new creation through the One who suffered! The Anointed One sets apart the beloved for a purpose: to join together as The Name’s family in the kin-dom. And Jesus is pleased to call by their true name those whom The Name wooed to Their bosom: beloved. He says,

I celebrate you, my beloved!

I sing thanksgiving and joy
among The Name’s gathered.⁵⁶²

I have full confidence in you all,
that you can be persuaded
by what is trustworthy.⁵⁶³

So here I stand with my beloved,
with all those whom The Name
has entrusted to me.⁵⁶⁴

Because those The Name entrusted to Jesus are flesh and blood, Jesus shared their humanity, becoming incarnate, God *en carne*.⁵⁶⁵ He embraced the form of mere humanity in order to give us eternal dignity. He immersed into human experience in order to absorb death itself into his person, and so be able to make null and void⁵⁶⁶ the power of the Accuser—Death is now idle and need not be feared. The angels don’t need this help—but humanity does!

The Anointed One was fashioned into human form—made fully human in every way—so that he could be the living exemplar of both The Name’s mercy and human trusting. As fully human, he could serve not just as a priest but as the High Priest, to bring together heaven and earth, to embrace humanity with his deity and usher

⁵⁶¹ The Greek word used is *archegon*, which may convey “author” or “originator,” and suggests the English “archetype.”

⁵⁶² c.f. Psalm 22:22.

⁵⁶³ c.f. Isaiah 8:17.

⁵⁶⁴ c.f. Isaiah 8:18.

⁵⁶⁵ Literally, in meat.

⁵⁶⁶ The Greek word used is *katargeo*, which Strong’s defines as “(a) I make idle (inactive), make of no effect, annul, abolish, bring to naught, (b) I discharge, sever, separate from.” (Strong’s: 2673)

humans into the divine presence. He gets how hard it is to be human! He entered into human suffering that he might transform it, embraced our brokenness that he might heal it, accepted being tested that he might help others pass their test. As the High Priest, he makes us whole and complete.

*Experience
when shared
creates intimacy,
a way of knowing and being known
that transcends cognition and
saturates the soul
with love.*

God, it's me. Wonder and awe fill my spirit as I contemplate the mystery of Jesus: the lowly One healing all creation, with suffering the balm used to mend broken hearts, embracing the human experience as the path back to the divine. Audacious, indeed!

Hebrews 3:1–6

Oh, my beloved, who are set apart for the God-life, you who share a holy communion with Jesus the Son: focus on Jesus—never let your gaze drift from the One whom The Name sent from heaven and made the mediator between the earthly and the divine. In holy contemplation, ponder the divine mystery: Jesus brings heaven to earth and earth to heaven!

As you gaze upon Jesus, notice how trustworthy he was to the calling The Name gave him—as faithful as Moses and yet even more essential to The Name's work of restoring all the cosmos. And Moses was faithful—The Name's instrument of blessing to Their family!⁵⁶⁷ But just as Moses received respect for his service to The Name's family, so Jesus receives honor for his service as The Name's Son. Moses was The Name's instrument of building a dwelling place for Their family, and Jesus is the dwelling place. Moses spoke The Name's promise for the future that was fulfilled and is being fulfilled in Jesus.

⁵⁶⁷ The author uses the Greek word *oikos* throughout this passage as an extended metaphor. *Oikos* can mean either “family” or “house” (but conveying the family more than the building).

Jesus the Anointed is also our dwelling place as⁵⁶⁸ trust embraces assurance. Dwelling in Jesus, our hope finds a home. Never look away. Never let go.

*Fidelity
is neither contest nor race
but opportunity:*

*Where will I look?
What challenge lies before me?
Who calls me forward?*

*Where are my sights set?
What choice will I make?
Whom shall I serve?*

God, it's me. I look to Jesus, but what visage do I see? Blonde Jesus or Baby Jesus? Laughing Jesus or Unflappable Jesus praying in the Garden? The Jesus that looks (and acts) like me? The Jesus that seems perfectly comfortable in our churches, communities, and culture? I hope not. Rather, when I look to Jesus, I see one who seems strange: as if from a distant era and unfamiliar culture, as one whom I cannot possess. I see one who both calls and commands, one whose rebuke is received as blessing. I need no artist's rendition to see the earthy Jesus who spit upon the ground to make healing mud or the lonely Jesus who sought out solitude. I feel trepidation in the presence of the angry Jesus who turned over tables or know sorrow as I kneel before the broken Jesus who hung from a Roman cross. I look to Jesus, fixing my eyes and heart upon this man whom I cannot possess but who occupies my soul. I

⁵⁶⁸ Here is a simple bit of translation with significant consequences. The Greek word here is *ean*, which often is translated as “if,” but also means “as.” “If” conveys a conditional deal and suggests something that we lose, or worse, will be taken away in a punitive manner if we do not live up to “our part of the bargain” (i.e. Hebrews 11:1 trust, etc.). However, “as” conveys a sense that Jesus will continue to be our dwelling place while we trust in him. When we stop trusting, etc., we will no longer experience Jesus as a dwelling place, but this is no longer something taken from us but something we have relinquished. By renewing trust, etc., we will once again experience Jesus as a dwelling place.

cannot bring myself to send him away and doubt he would listen if I tried.

Hebrews 3:7-18

The Name's Divine Spirit tells it like it is:

Hey now, right now:
Keep your ears open and your hearts soft.

Rebellion closes ears and hardens hearts—
Failure is inevitable!

Our ancestors failed their test—
The Wilderness was too much trial for them.

Even The Name grew weary at how easily they
deceived themselves and each other.

Distorted desire led to intention, then to choices,
then practices, then habits—habits that killed.

The Name spoke truth into their distorted lives,
“Chaos cannot know calm.”⁵⁶⁹

So, beloved, learn from our ancestors' example: chaos cannot lead to the God-rhythms. Distorted desire leads us away from the God-life. Instead, infuse courage into each other's hearts—do it today, right now! We need each other to dance the God-rhythms and live the God-life—we can't do it alone! As we are partners with one another in the God-life, so we are also partners with Jesus the Anointed. We hang on to our trust, our assurance, and our hope found in him. Never looking away. Never letting go. Not until the Day when our hope is made manifest and becomes fulfilment.

I remind you again of what the Psalmist said,

Hey now, right now:
Keep your ears open and your hearts soft.
Rebellion closes ears and hardens hearts—
Failure is inevitable!⁵⁷⁰

And who rebelled? Was it not our very own ancestors? Those we revere? Those who journeyed with Moses? Yes! And The Name, frustrated by their lack of trust, allowed distorted desire to lead them astray. The choices our ancestors made became practices and then habits—habits that killed. So, beloved, learn from their example the importance of trust, of assurance. Our hope must be placed in The Name's Son. Never look away. Never let go.

Resilience:
the common oyster creating a pearl,
a simple creek carving a canyon,

prayer shaping faith,
mercy forming character,
justice infusing love into the world.

Never looking away.
Never letting go.

Not now.
Not ever.

God, it's me. “Ears open and hearts soft” sounds so simple, yet I find it deceptively difficult! The author didn't say it, but I heard it: “Ears open (mouth closed) and hearts soft (spirit willing).” I find it easier to keep my ears open (to you and to others) when I'm not scripting my speech. My heart is softer when I allow your Spirit to whisper to my spirit. O Name, make me eager to desire what you desire. Grant me the courage to do what you desire. May your desire guide my intention, so that intention would become an act, and actions repeated would become my practice, and practice over time would become a habit that shapes and forms my character according to the image of Jesus. Today—right here and right now—may your will be done on earth, through me, to all those I will encounter.

⁵⁶⁹ c.f. Psalm 95:7-11.

⁵⁷⁰ c.f. Psalm 95:7-8.

Hebrews 4:1–11⁵⁷¹

Companionship with The Name is open to all. The solitude of a walk in the garden or a stroll on the beach is The Name’s invitation to us, and you don’t want to miss it. Sitting with The Name along the riverbanks, what an opportunity! Our ancestors missed the opportunity to accompany The Name into a land flowing with milk and honey. The invitation was delivered to them, and they rejected it because they could not trust the promise—that The Name would dwell in them, and they would dwell with Them.

We who trust The Name experience Their dwelling in us—the Divine Spirit inhabits us as Their home. Those who refuse to listen to The Name (because they do not trust) cannot experience Their indwelling of them. As the Psalmist writes,

I am passionate to proclaim,
 “Without trust you cannot
 dwell in me and I in you.”⁵⁷²

The Name’s rest is a gift written into the creation’s DNA. In Genesis, we read that The Name’s

⁵⁷¹ This passage suffers from an excess of theological accretion, like mussels attaching themselves to a boat or pier. Theologies of the afterlife have attached themselves to the word *katapansis*, which is usually translated as “rest.” Centuries of Christian interpretation have conflated rest in Hebrews 4 with our eternal rest in the resurrection. The effect of this conflation is to reinforce punitive supercessionism (see Introduction): the implied message being, “Jews who don’t believe won’t get to heaven.” I notice, however, that Hebrews 4 connects rest not to eternal destinies but to the historical example of entering Canaan. It is a misreading of Hebrews to amplify the rest the Israelites missed experiencing to all things, all times, and all places (especially eternal ones). Further, *katapansis* also translates as “dwelling or habitation.” Therefore, the opportunity the Israelites (and we today) miss experiencing through a lack of trust is the experience of dwelling or abiding in The Name.

⁵⁷² c.f. Psalm 95:11. The NIV translates this as “shall never enter my rest,” which is an example of the theological accretion and amplification noted above. The Greek word *ei* is usually translated as “if.” I translate *ei* as a simple negation, while the NIV amplifies this negation as “never.” Lack of trust is a prophylactic against connection and intimacy with our Creator, yet it does not mean the Israelites in the desert were for all times (and into eternity) prohibited from such communion.

creative energy culminated on the seventh day and dwelling with The Name became an invitation for all humankind. But some refuse the invitation through obstinate apathy⁵⁷³ and so cannot discover both the welcome They extend to enter Their home and the opportunity for us to become Their dwelling place.

Hey now, right now:
 Keep your ears open and your hearts soft.
 Rebellion closes ears and hardens hearts—
 Failure is inevitable!⁵⁷⁴

Joshua did not invite our ancestors to enter The Name’s promised land (for in their apathy they did not trust), but instead pointed them toward a future horizon, a day when they might discover the true purpose of The Name, when they might learn to dwell in The Name and have The Name dwell in them. Let’s not be like our ancestors and turn away from The Name’s offer to be with and within us. Our ancestors’ apathy—and its consequences—should warn us to walk the path of trust that leads to The Name’s indwelling.

*I remember the long drives from Illinois to Florida,
 the back of the station wagon
 cluttered with the bodies of my three siblings and me,
 the journey was arduous for a six-year-old.*

*The welcome of Granddaddy and Grandma,
 on their porch,
 surrounded by a pink, cinder-block bungalow,
 made the journey a hazy dream.*

*Welcome is home.
 Love is home.
 Home is a place
 I long to dwell.*

God, it’s me. I long to dwell with Jesus—abiding in the home with many rooms. Help me remember the simple, present joy of dwelling with Jesus today: solitude, contemplation, remembering I am beloved. O Name, as I dwell in you and you in me, may I open my

⁵⁷³ The Greek word used is *apatheian*, usually translated as “disobedience” or “obstinate” but also is a cognate of “apathy.”

⁵⁷⁴ c.f. Psalm 95:7-8.

heart to others in whom you also dwell. May I remember in my daily hustle-bustle the presence of their struggles. May I recognize amidst my scurrying about that these others also are in need of the simple joy of being with you. And may I love accordingly.

Hebrews 4:12–16

The Name's Word brings God-life; indeed, it infuses the God-life with divine energy—constantly creating, always calling, guiding and directing according to the God-rhythms upon which the cosmos is founded. Like the tip of a sword that forces a decision, The Name's Word penetrates the soul and pervades the spirit, down to the very marrow of our being. We cannot fool the Word, for it is able to discern our thoughts and even our intentions. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden, we cannot hide. Like our spiritual ancestors, we walk naked before the Word and must answer when called upon to tell the story of our lives.

*There are times I read the Bible—
mere ink upon a page,
and times when the Bible reads me—*

*whispers encouragement,
punctures ego,
draws me into wonder.*

*The dividing line between good and evil
intersects my heart
causing me to doubt the story I might tell.*

*And then I remember The Story will be told,
not as a monologue but as a chorus—
Jesus himself with and within me.*

God, it's me. I crave the God-life—constantly creating, always calling, guiding and directing me. When this comes, I discover the path that helps me craft a narrative infused with the God-rhythms. May my story be a part of your Story, my life infused with divine energy as I walk the Way of Jesus and live with him and for him.

Hebrews 4:14–5:10

Do not lose heart! Jesus, The Name's own Son, stands between us and this divine requirement to justify all we are and all we have done—a great High Priest who brings heaven to earth and lifts us in our mortality into the heavenly realms. Jesus brings The Name to us and us to The Name.

Hold fast to this word of our hope! For Jesus has both traversed the expanse of the heavens and the dusty paths of human suffering. Jesus experienced the trials, tests, and temptations that cause us to fall yet did so as one able to stand. Therefore, we can be bold. We need not fear to give account of our lives. Rather we amble into The Name's very throne room with confidence, as those who have already been granted the gift of his loving-kindness. We approach The Name with confidence, assured help is on the way.

High Priest is not a job one applies for but one for which you must be chosen and chosen by The Name, as Aaron, Moses' brother, was chosen.⁵⁷⁵ The High Priest in the Jerusalem Temple stands⁵⁷⁶ before The Name's throne and brings the people to The Name and brings The Name to the people. The High Priest represents the people—is the people's stand-in to offer gifts of gratitude and acts of apology. The High Priest comes from among the people and shares in human obliviousness to the God-rhythms; the High Priest, like everyone else, sometimes fails the God-life (which is why he offers sacrifices for his own sins, too).

In a similar way, The Name chose the Anointed One for the honor of becoming the last High Priest. The Name said to him,

You are the One to whom all authority is given,
for you spring from the womb of my heart.⁵⁷⁷

And,

⁵⁷⁵ c.f. Exodus 28.

⁵⁷⁶ Scholars dispute the dating of the composition of Hebrews. If written before 70 C.E., the Jerusalem Temple would still have been standing and the Temple priests would have been standing to offer sacrifices. If Hebrews was written after 70 C.E., the Temple would have been destroyed by Rome and this verb would need to be past tense.

⁵⁷⁷ c.f. Psalm 2:7.

The Last High Priest you are, Eternal and Sovereign—justice and right relationships will result from your reign.⁵⁷⁸

Throughout Jesus' life as he walked among us, he lived the life of a faithful priest: offering prayers, feeling anguish for our suffering and his own, yet always with a spirit that honored The Name. Jesus was drawn ever deeper into human obedience through what he suffered. Although everything that belonged to The Name had been given over to Jesus, yet he gave himself over to the work of attentive listening⁵⁷⁹—to The Name and to the experience of suffering. Always learning, forever immersing into the human experience, Jesus became the consummate vessel for The Name's restoration—perfect form for the function of making people their true selves. Through Jesus, all who listen attentively to the whispers of The Name's heart are made whole and complete: today, tomorrow, and into eternity. This is why The Name anointed Jesus to be the Last High Priest, the Eternal and Sovereign One, with justice and right relationships the result of his reign.

*To stand in the gap
holding the hand of the dying
walking beside the grieving
listening attentively to another's flooded emotions
while acknowledging one's own loss and pain
is the work of a priest—
ushering others into the divine presence
then stepping aside to allow The Name to heal.*

God, it's me. I am thankful Jesus did the heavy lifting of his priestly calling: bringing earth to heaven and heaven to earth, creating (and becoming) the path for wholeness, even rewinding Death itself! Wow!

⁵⁷⁸ c.f. Psalm 110:4. The Greek text says Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek, which is a Hebrew compound word of king (*melek*) and justice / right relationships (*tzedeck*).

⁵⁷⁹ The phrase translated as “listen attentively” here and below is from the Greek word *hupakoe*, which is often translated as “obedience.” *Hupakoe* has as its root *akouo*, “to hear,” and so has nuances that focus not just on following a rule (our ordinary sense of being obedient) but of submission to what is heard or listening attentively to the word that must be followed, the word that compels.

All that yet never turning away from suffering—not his, not ours. How did he do it? I am not a priest, merely a “Minister of Word and Sacrament,” yet I find it difficult to lean into human suffering (and would prefer to avoid or ignore it). I am thankful Jesus is my High Priest, who did the heavy lifting for me. I am grateful that when I cannot bear to suffer alongside those whom I am called to love, Jesus is there with them. He always is and always will be.

Hebrews 5:11–6:3

There is much for us to say about all this, but it may be more than you can handle right now. If you do not open your ears, you cannot listen to The Name's whispers. If you are not attentive, you will never perceive The Name's wisdom. Indeed, you ought to be able to teach Their poetry by now but are still learning your A-B-Cs. Instead of feasting at The Name's banquet table you remain suckling at Their breast. Their milk will keep you alive but only solid food will help you grow more fully into right relationships. Discerning good from evil is no work for children but work for the mature. You're not ready—not yet. You need to grow up.

Therefore, let's move beyond the ABCs of the God-life and toward maturity in Jesus the Anointed. Move beyond saying, “I'm sorry” and trusting The Name to act on our behalf; beyond avoiding the things of death and trusting The Name for life; beyond rites and rituals and even beyond things like believing in resurrection and heaven. All these are good! But they are basic—like suckling mere milk when you should be learning to dance the God-rhythms every moment of every day as the Way to live. May The Name allow us the wonder and awe and joy of learning to dance.

*Beyond...
my now
my failure
my being tired
my being stubborn.*

*Beyond
implies something more
invites a journey
entices with hope
encourages a step.*

*A step beyond
where I am
is all
that is needed for
today.*

God, it's me. Help me take the next step—the step beyond where I am. The step toward you. The step toward becoming my true self. The step toward loving neighbor and stranger, friend and enemy. The step I need this day. And only that step.

Hebrews 6:4-12

Those who have heard the Heavenly music and danced to the God-rhythms, those who have tasted the sweet fruit of the God-life, those who have shared intimacy with The Name's Divine Spirit, if they then turn away from Them cannot be coerced into returning.⁵⁸⁰ To reject the Word after one has feasted upon it is like sitting with Jesus at his Last Supper and then shouting for him to be crucified—truly disgraceful behavior. Such people are not like land that receives The Name's blessing of rain and produces fruit with which to bless others. Rather such people are like land that receives rain and then produces thorns and thistles—the kind of land you don't want to go near—which is restored only when it is purged. The prophet Malachi spoke of such people when he said,

The fires of purgation reveal The Name's glory;
dross is taken away, only the precious remains.⁵⁸¹

While dross covers their eyes, they will not see. While dross fills their ears, they will not hear. Their only hope is the Refiner's fire.

Beloved, please do not fear such warnings but be confident The Name holds you firm and sure. The Name is just and remembers that you love not with mere feelings but as actions, showing love to The Name by how you serve Their people and help all. We set our hearts on the hope you will persevere on your journey—walk toward the horizon of your wholeness! Don't give in, never give up, for there are no slackers in The Name's kin-dom but only those who mirror the trust and forbearance of those who have already received Their promised blessing.

*Will I be defined by my worst moment?
Will I be judged by my worst decision?
Or...*

*Is there a Balm in Gilead?⁵⁸²
Is there deliverance beyond what the mind can imagine?
Perhaps...*

*The journey really is the destination!
The destination rests not with us but with
The Name!*

God, it's me. Lead me beyond green pastures to the places where I am confronted by the Cross: challenged to let go of childish ways, invited to trust what I cannot see (but for which I hope), emboldened to choose love. Lead me beyond the ABCs of the faith to the high and holy calling of the God-life: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with you, my God.

⁵⁸⁰ Commentators debate the meaning of 6:4-6. At issue is the question of "assurance of salvation." Hebrews appears to be saying that once grasped by The Name and drawn into Their embrace, one can turn away and leave—lose one's salvation. Other commentators point to the fact the Greek verbs are all present tense, with none being future oriented, and argue that believers' turning away is provincial and temporary and that after The Name's "purging fire" (a reference to Malachi 3:2-3) they will be restored. The paraphrase leans into the former interpretation.

⁵⁸¹ c.f. Malachi 3:2-3, which is not in the Greek text. However, 6:6 speaks of "fire that burns" and appears to reference Malachi 3, although, admittedly, the reference is somewhat obscure.

⁵⁸² The "Balm in Gilead" is a reference from the Old Testament, but the lyrics of the well-known spiritual refer to the New Testament concept of salvation through Jesus Christ. The Balm of Gilead is interpreted as a spiritual medicine that is able to heal Israel (and sinners in general) in spite of their worst sin.

Hebrews 6:13–20

We need never doubt the assurance of The Name’s embrace, for it endures from moment to moment, generation to generation, and into eternity. The Name’s embrace is rooted in Their promise to our ancestors and grounded in the soil of Their character—Their own name the basis of the promise to Abraham,

I will bless you and keep you.
My face will shine upon you.
I will make you the father of many.
You will be a blessing to the Nations.
My promise to you will endure forever.⁵⁸³

After many years, Abraham was blessed to receive what The Name had promised. Here is how we can be confident The Name’s embrace will never leave us: People are restrained by those who are stronger than themselves. Similarly, people are compelled to live a certain way by sacred values honored by all. This is why people take an oath in a courtroom or pledge allegiance to the ideals of a nation—to promise publicly to speak truth, act with honor, and seek justice. But who is great enough to restrain The Name or compel Their behavior?

Only The Name. And so The Name promised by Their own name—that is, Their unchanging character of loving-kindness—to be the foundation of our hope, the assurance that brings courage to those who trust in Them. This hope is like an anchor for our soul and keeps us from drifting even while tossed about by wind and waves. With this hope we dare enter into intimacy with The Name. There, in The Name’s presence, we find Jesus, who like an advanced scout discovered the trail to The Name’s embrace, created the path, and became the Way. Jesus brings The Name to us and us to The Name—forever a High Priest,⁵⁸⁴ eternally the King, with right relationships always the gift he gives to all.

⁵⁸³ c.f. Genesis 22:17.

⁵⁸⁴ Chapters 7-9 are an extended discussion comparing Jesus’ priesthood and Jesus as High Priest with the Levitical priesthood and the lineage of Aaronic High Priests. As a reminder, the High Priesthood descended from Aaron while the Levitical priesthood descended from Levi (c.f. Numbers 1:53; 3:6, 9). By the 1st century C.E., the High Priest had become an appointed position and detached from Aaron’s lineage. The author of Hebrews’ focus bounces between discussion of the functions of the High

Embrace
giving, receiving
assurance of affection
physical manifestation of care
connection

God, it’s me. I need to be embraced—by your love, by your care, by your presence felt as a heavy blanket on a winter’s night. In your embrace I can sit and be still. In your embrace I peek through the darkness to eye the first glimmer of dawn. In your embrace I remember who I am and to whom I belong.

Hebrews 7:1–10⁵⁸⁵

Melchizedek of the Hebrew Scriptures was king of Salem and a priest of The Name Most High. He encountered Abraham when our patriarch returned from defeating his enemies. Melchizedek blessed Abraham and Abraham gave a tenth of all he possessed to this king-priest.⁵⁸⁶ This Melchizedek was a foreshadowing of the eternal priesthood of Jesus.

Melchizedek’s name literally means “king of right relationships” and *Salem* is a variant of *shalom*—meaning the robust peace of a community’s wellness. Further, the Hebrew Scriptures recount no genealogy for Melchizedek—without mother or father, without beginning of days or end of life. In this way, Melchizedek resembles The Name’s Son and remains a priest forever!

Melchizedek was so great that even our patriarch Abraham gave to him a tithe—a tenth of his very best possessions. Now, we know that in the Torah, the Levitical priests—that is, those who are descended from Abraham’s son Levi, whom The Name appointed to be

Priest and the Levitical priesthood in a somewhat arbitrary manner (or, at least, it is difficult for this interpreter to follow).

⁵⁸⁵ This paragraph is an admittedly obscure argument the author of Hebrews makes and which references the ancient belief that a human father’s sperm carried 100% of the DNA required to create human life (in ancient belief, the mother was the receptacle for the father’s seed). I am less concerned about whether the biology is correct (it isn’t) but am fascinated by the way Hebrews’ author seeks to convey the “logic” of ancient beliefs about procreation to demonstrate Melchizedek’s primacy over Abraham (first), Levi (second), and by extension the Levitical priesthood (third).

⁵⁸⁶ c.f. Genesis 14:18-21.

the tribe of the priesthood⁵⁸⁷—collect a tithe from their fellow Israelites, even though they too are Abraham’s descendants. Melchizedek, however, wasn’t a part of Abraham’s family and wasn’t a part of the Levitical priesthood, yet he collected a tithe—not from Abraham’s descendants but from Abraham himself!

We know (and this is beyond any dispute) the lesser is blessed by the greater. And what happened between Melchizedek and Abraham? Abraham (the lesser) was blessed by Melchizedek (the greater).

We must compare Melchizedek to the Levitical priests in this way: priests collect tithes and eventually die, whereas Melchizedek collected a tithe and, by the witness of the Scriptures, lives on. Think about this, too: as Levi was still yet to be born, there is a sense in which Levi was still “in” Abraham, so when Abraham offered up a tithe to Melchizedek, it is as if Levi also gave the tithe.

*How far
we go to “prove”
a conviction that rests in faith*

*How high
our own opinion
that disregards others’ beliefs*

*How wide
God’s vision
that observes our hijinks*

*How much
God’s heart breaks
at the lengths we travel to judge*

God, it’s me. I love Jesus. I really do. And I believe that the Christian faith, my faith, rests on a firm foundation of truth and logic, of experience and conviction. Must I work so hard to convince others (and myself) that Jesus is superior? What happens if I merely trust Jesus is enough? Enough love. Enough light. Enough life.

Hebrews 7:11–19

So here is the question we must answer: If wholeness and completeness exist through the Levitical priests, why was there need for any other kind of priest? If Aaron’s lineage of priests was sufficient to make people whole and complete, why did we need a priest like Melchizedek—the king of right relationships?

The answer is: When the premise changes,⁵⁸⁸ so does the argument. When the “facts on the ground” change, so the response that is proper must change. When the old ways needed to pass away (for they could not accomplish all that was needed), a new Way was given. The new priesthood was revealed—unveiled in the person of Melchizedek—and the God-life itself was transformed according to new rhythms, a new beat. A new Way was born.

Melchizedek belonged to no tribe; he was not one of Abraham’s sons. He never served at an altar—nothing died by his hand. Death never entered the world through his life. We know the Anointed One descended from Judah, not Levi. Beyond dispute, then, is this: when a priest like Melchizedek is unveiled in the world, he enters the vocation not through tribal lineage as the Levitical priests did, but on the basis of his rising⁵⁸⁹ into life anew and life eternal. Therefore, the Psalmist declared:

You are a priest into eternity;
as Melchizedek, so you;
he the foreshadowing, you the fulfillment.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁸ In this passage, the author of Hebrews plays with variations of the Greek word *metathesis* which is a compound word of *meta* (meaning “change”) and *thesis* (meaning, well, “thesis”) and often translated as “change, transform, or transpose.” I lean into interpretation in this passage to highlight the dynamic comparison between Melchizedek and the Levitical priesthood and the transformative impact of the former over the latter that Hebrews seeks to convey.

⁵⁸⁹ The Greek word used is *anistemi*, which the NIV and NRSV translate as “appears” but which is translated as “rise” or “be raised” in Gospel passages (c.f. Mark 16:9, Luke 24:46). The author of Hebrews clearly wants to associate Melchizedek with Jesus and references Jesus’ resurrection to elevate the priesthood of Melchizedek over the Levitical priesthood. Therefore, to translate *anistemi* merely as “appears” seems rather anemic, lacking the power of the original Greek.

⁵⁹⁰ c.f. Psalm 110:4.

⁵⁸⁷ c.f. Numbers 1:53; 3:6, 9.

The premise changed because the old ways were unable to make us whole and complete. The Name sent the Anointed One to change the “facts on the ground” and create new rhythms for the God-life, through which intimacy with The Name is received as a gift.

*As Autumn gives way to Winter
so change my patterns
of sleep and companionship
and what brings joy and health.
“Facts on the ground,” like shifting sand,
cannot endure until enters the eternal Spring
of resurrection.*

God, it's me. I participate in well-intentioned rituals: Sunday liturgy, morning prayers, dinner with my family, Netflix before bed. Show me which of these rituals are life-giving, spirit-deepening, friendship-enriching. Show me, too, what new patterns for making meaning and doing justice you would have me embrace, and then teach me not only to embrace but to practice them; not only to practice but to allow them to become habits of my heart, that the habits of my heart may shape my character and form the image of Jesus within me.

Hebrews 7:20-28

There is yet another difference, too, between Melchizedek and the Levitical priests, who do not take an oath, for they are born into their vocation. Melchizedek, however, became a priest based on an oath—not his own but The Name's Word to him:

The Name's conviction is rooted in character.
Their conviction will not change:
“You are a priest into eternity.”⁵⁹¹

The Name's Word, rooted in unchanging conviction, assigned Jesus a holy calling: to ensure the sanctity of The Name's sacred promise, offering assurance that Their promise is real.

The Levitical priests come and go, for they are born and die. Jesus, however, lives into eternity and so his

priesthood is eternal. He will always bring The Name to the people and the people to The Name. He will always bring people's brokenness to The Name. He is the One through whom the people's cry is given Voice. Therefore, Jesus is able to make all people whole and complete—thoroughly and absolutely their true selves.

Jesus is the real deal—has the skills to do whatever is needed in this work of healing and transforming people into the divine image: beloved of The Name and without guile; pure in mind, body, and spirit amidst the contaminants of the world; heaven's emergence on earth.

Jesus is not like the High Priests elected annually. These High Priests must kill and kill and kill—continually—for their own sins and the sins of the people. Their sacrifices are temporary; needed again when sins are repeated. Jesus, however, ended the need for sacrifice to forgive sins when he offered himself. The Torah appointed the Levitical priests, but The Name's conviction, rooted in Their character, named the Son according to Their intention. The Name's oath consummated Their purpose:⁵⁹² to transform both people and creation toward becoming whole and complete.

*Subtle the difference between
conviction rooted in character
and rigidity.*

*Faint the distinction between
temporary blessing
and eternal assurance.*

*One leads to a good place
while the other leads to the only place
I will be in you and you in me—forever.*

God, it's me. So much of my life is built on ethical foundations. My habits express that which is good

⁵⁹² Throughout this passage the Greek word *horkomosias*, translated as “oath,” has been used without adjectival modification. However, in Hebrews 7:28, the author modifies oath with the Greek word *logos* (*ho logos de tes horkomosias*). *Logos* is most famously used in John 1:1 (In the beginning was the Word/*Logos* and the Word/*Logos* was with God and was God) and famously has rich, varied, and philosophical connotations. *Logos* conveys purpose, meaning, logic of the universe, first principles, and word.

⁵⁹¹ c.f. Psalm 110:4.

and just and true. And yet the still, small voice of your Spirit whispers and invites and (sometimes) cajoles: The Name's intention is a character that reflects Jesus. The Name's design is the transformation of all things. The Name's invitation is for me to participate in all of it to the fullest. Whoa! May my choices today say, "Amen!" to the fullness of The Name's invitation.

Hebrews 8:1–13

Now, here's the point: Jesus is just such a High Priest (of the order of Melchizedek—king of right relationships). Jesus is The Name's "right hand person" and hears when The Name whispers Their desire, delight, or determination. Jesus serves in the midst of The Name's eternal dwelling place, the heavenly home that no human hands can build. Every High Priest, being mortal, is assigned special gifts to offer and ordinary sacrifices to make. But not so with Jesus. (If Jesus was merely mortal and of the family of Aaron or Levi, he too would offer such sacrifices, as Torah commands. But as Jesus is eternal, he serves not for a lifetime but for eternity.) The Temple in which the High Priest offers sacrifice is the shadow of The Name's heavenly home, a glorious replica of the eternal, but still only a replica. This is why Moses was warned while speaking with The Name on Mount Sinai to build the Tabernacle—also known as the Tent of Meeting—to precise standards, so that it would convey the spiritual truths that it represented.⁵⁹³ Thus, Jesus' ministry of creating right relationships is more dependable, for it is built on a more certain foundation.⁵⁹⁴ Cracks exist in the foundation of the Levitical priesthood that Jesus' priesthood repairs and makes whole.

⁵⁹³ c.f. Exodus 26ff.

⁵⁹⁴ This verse is an excellent example of the temptation to read supercessionism (see introduction) into the text. The key Greek words are *diaphoros* and *kreittosin*, which the NRSV translates as "more excellent" and "better." However, *diaphoros* and *kreittosin* can also be translated as "differing or varied" and "stronger or more certain." The NRSV's choice of the former creates an unnecessary hierarchy of form. Obviously, the author seeks to argue for the validity of Jesus' priesthood but negating the Levitical priesthood is not necessary for a faithful translation of the text.

*The Saguario in my backyard beckons:
"Can you wait with me?
Can your prayers and praise remain lifted
as long and as high,
enduring beyond your mortal existence?"*

*The Saguario scoffs at my temporal concerns:
I flit about like a gnat,
waxing hot and cold,
refusing to endure,
failing the test of steadfastness.*

*I must learn from my friend the Saguario:
Patience is a gift.
Endurance is a virtue.
Praise and prayer intended not for the moment but
to sculpt a soul worthy of eternity.*

God, it's me. I long for certainty: not conveyed by power and privilege, nor what comes from market success or insurance. No, I long for the certainty that my life is built on that which endures: character and hope and a love that will not let me go. I long for the certainty that my well-being depends not on human choices but upon Divine choosing: I belong to you—body and soul, in life and in death. I am humbled and grateful, that my longing is welcomed by Jesus.

Hebrews 8:8–13

We see The Name's desire to repair right relationships and make whole again the human family in the words They spoke through the truth-teller Jeremiah:⁵⁹⁵

"Look to the horizon!" says The Name.
"I will fulfill all goodness for the divided and exiled;⁵⁹⁶
sacred promise I will accomplish.

"This promise—my promise—is fresh:
an open window through which the Wind blows,
a wide-open door that welcomes and invites.

⁵⁹⁵ c.f. Jeremiah 31:31-34.

⁵⁹⁶ The Greek text names the House of Israel and the House of Judah. The interpretive paraphrase seeks to reflect that at the time Jeremiah wrote Israel and Judah had been divided from one another by civil war and both nations ("Houses") were in exile.

“This promise depends only on my Word:
neither the distracted trust of our ancestors
nor their detoured steps define what shall be.

“This sacred promise I make to my people:
I will inscribe justice upon their hearts and minds;
I will embrace them as a mother with her infant.

“Through intimacy and experience
they shall know me.
Through perception and intuition
I shall be known.⁵⁹⁷

“I will envelop them in mercy that astonishes—
cause their brokenness to become like a dream.
I will restore them to their true purpose.”

In declaring this sacred promise, The Name reminds us that transformation only comes as we relinquish that which is tired and weary.

*Tired and weary,
Covid continues to oppress
yet new every morning
the dew of God's mercy—
the yellow finch upon my fountain,
the encouraging word from my friend,
the gentle touch of Divine Spirit reminding me,
“I am known, and I am loved.”*

God, its' me. Help me to hear your covenant as if you spoke it this morning, as fresh word. Help me to receive it not merely with my mind but also in the depths of my soul. This promise—your promise—was spoken to those desperate for hope and longing to believe they were still your beloved people. Help me to hear it just as they heard it.

Hebrews 9:1–10

When The Name crafted the sacred promise between Them and Their people Israel, it included rules and rituals to show the way people are to live in mutual love with The Name and one another. Israel's ritual life is enacted in a grand and glorious Temple, whose every furnishing foreshadowed The Name's perfect plan for his people.

There is a curtain separating the people from a room called Sacred Space. The Levitical priests each serve in this room, which contains a lampstand and bread, symbols of The Name's power and provision. A second curtain separates Sacred Space from a room called Divine Dwelling, for it leads the High Priest into The Name's direct presence. The symbols in this room are all covered in gold, calling people to prayer, and reminding the people of The Name's power. Ancient artifacts are contained in the ark of the covenant—manna, Aaron's staff, and the stone tablets upon which the commandments are inscribed. Above the ark hang representations of heavenly beings, which overlook an elaborate seat, known as the Seat of Mercy, upon which the High Priest offers sacrifices. So sacred is the Divine Dwelling that only the High Priest enters it and only once a year, and always with sacrificial blood to be offered for his own sins of commission and the people's sins of omission. (There is more to these sacred rooms, but this is enough detail for now.)

The Name intends for these rooms and the rituals commanded for them to be a foreshadowing of that which was fulfilled in Jesus the Anointed. The Divine Spirit works in these places and through them, upon these priests and through them, both to enact The Name's mercy and to point to the culmination of The Name's mysterious plan: that in Jesus foreshadowing becomes fulfillment. That which foreshadows lacks the power to form the moral conscience⁵⁹⁸ of the worshiper, but that which is fulfillment transforms the worshiper into their

⁵⁹⁷ This couplet reflects Hebrews 8:11 where the Greek words *ginosko* and *eido* are used. Both words translate as “know” but *ginosko* conveys the nuance of personal experience (e.g. to know another “in the biblical sense”) and *eido* conveys perception and intuition. Jeremiah invites his hearers beyond mere cognitive knowledge into perception and intuition.

⁵⁹⁸ The Greek words used, *teleios synedesin*, literally mean “to complete (or fulfill, accomplish) the moral conscience.” It is disappointing that some English versions translate this phrase as “cleanse” or “clear the conscience,” which focus exclusively on what is taken away. However, *teleios* has a positive, formative connotation of what is created or that which becomes. The NRSV comes closest to the Greek nuance when it translates this phrase as “perfect the conscience.”

true self. Rules and rituals, as valuable as they are (especially as they are given by The Name), are but heralds awaiting the *kairos*,⁵⁹⁹ the holy time when The Name sets things straight.

*Shadows expose light. I
see God's face in the other,
see Jesus in the least of his brothers and sisters.*

*Foreshadows point to light not yet dawning. I
trust beyond experience,
hope beyond vision.*

*Shadows and foreshadows—though glorious—
revealed as sacred imitation
when consummation comes.*

God, it's me. I confess I read this passage through the lens of my competitive spirit—"My team is better than your team!" I repent, for both "teams" belong to you. I seek your mercy, so that I may see how you choose us all to craft your Story—the good news narrative told not in a single lifetime but from generation to generation and age to age. I seek to be formed and transformed, that I might see not merely what is but perceive what can be. May I look not merely at what I am but behold what you would have me become. May I step from shadows into light and beyond foreshadowing into fulfillment.

Hebrews 9:11-15

When the Anointed One was revealed as High Priest of all the good foreshadowed in the Temple (and now fulfilled in his person), he drew near the Divine Dwelling of The Name's presence in heaven and not merely the room found in the Jerusalem Temple. He drew near not by means of animal sacrifice but through the offering of his own self. He drew near to reclaim all creation from the grip of the Accuser, to repurchase our lives for The Name's purpose. He drew near not merely to make us outwardly clean but to form our moral conscience. He drew near that we might turn away from

marching into death and begin to serve The Name as the path for our life.

The Anointed One is The Name's ultimate and final "go between," bringing us to The Name and The Name to us. Through the Anointed One we receive The Name's invitation to lay claim to our divine birthright. Through the Anointed One we hear The Name's summons to live as Their beloved children. Through the Anointed One we are liberated from looking back upon our falls and failures that we might live into the lovingkindness in which we now find ourselves.

*Intimacy is a wondrous gift
seductive and scary
inviting discovery while requiring revelation.*

*Jesus said it best,
"that they may all be one. As you, Father,
are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us."⁶⁰⁰*

*Patrick said it well, too:
"May the Christ in me speak to the Christ in thee,
that we may be one in him."⁶⁰¹*

*Draw near...
Draw near...
Draw near!*

God, it's me. As Jesus drew near to you, may I follow in drawing near. As Jesus drew near to me, may I draw near to him. As Jesus drew near, not just to tidy my outward person but to transform my inward being, may I accept his influence, welcome his comfort, receive his challenge, and walk boldly into his lovingkindness. Liberated from looking back upon my failures, may I walk forward with him toward my best, true self.

Hebrews 9:16-28

"Why is it," you ask, "that the Anointed One had to die? Wasn't the Anointed One chosen and beloved of The Name?" It's complicated.⁶⁰²

⁵⁹⁹ *Kairos* is one of two Greek words for "time" and conveys the transformative moment when change occurs.

⁶⁰⁰ c.f. John 17:21. (NIV)

⁶⁰¹ c.f. The Prayer of St. Patrick.

First, let's remind ourselves how covenants—as sacred promises—work. They are like a person's will. When one makes a will, their intentions are made public to all—convictions and commitments extending beyond life and into death. The covenant, like a will, requires death before it is enacted, for it was made to endure for all time.

So it was with the first covenant made with Israel—The Name's promise spoken through Moses. When Moses explained to the Israelites both the gifts and responsibilities of being The Name's beloved, he expressed the solemnity of both The Name's blessing and the people's obligation.⁶⁰³ Moses used symbols of commitment and cleansing to honor the sacredness of the moment: the sacrifice of calves, the sprinkling of blood and water to consecrate both Word and people. He said, "The calves' blood is both sign and seal of The Name's sacred promise and our holy commitment to live as Their beloved."⁶⁰⁴ Indeed, Moses sprinkled blood in the Tent of Meeting and in many other rituals: each a sign to remind the people to let go of their old lives and their false selves.⁶⁰⁵ Only by releasing our brokenness can we embrace The Name's healing lovingkindness.

So it is with the new covenant made through Israel and extended to all humankind—it was enacted through death not using those things that were mere

copies: signs that pointed to the heavenly reality, symbols that signified a purpose greater than themselves. The Anointed One entered not the human copy—the Temple—but the Divine Dwelling in The Name's direct presence! The Jerusalem Temple, with its unending need of sacrifice—priests drenched in the blood of bulls and calves, sheep and doves—was not sufficient to transform all things into new creation. Therefore, the Anointed One entered the Divine Dwelling to present himself as the perfect gift, which he needed to do only once for all eternity rather than over and over, for his sacrifice was not mere calves and goats and doves but his eternal person. The Anointed One did not suffer again and again from the beginning of creation, but once for all *chronos* to bring about the *kairos*⁶⁰⁶ of new creation. In the Anointed One is the consummation of creation's purpose—its fulfilment discovered in his self-emptying love. Everyone dies and looks into the mirror of their own brokenness, which is a weight we cannot carry, a truth we cannot endure. But the Anointed One carries what we cannot and brings to us a truth deeper than ourselves—the truth that we are beloved, embraced, and held near to The Name's bosom. When the Day comes and the Anointed One is revealed in his full radiance, he will bring to us the culmination of this truth, and we will be made whole and complete, our true selves.

⁶⁰² These sentences are not in the Greek text but provide context for what is found in 9:16-28. These are the questions being answered in the verses that follow.

⁶⁰³ Some English translations focus on Moses' giving of the Law (e.g., Ten Commandments) but the section to which this passage refers (c.f. Exodus 19ff.) describes the giving of the covenant. A covenant requires obligations upon both parties (i.e., The Name's blessing and the people's obligation). Commandments were part of an ancient covenant, what scholars call a Suzerain-vassal treaty, of which Exodus 19ff. is a form, but the emphasis in any covenant is the relationship that is established rather than mere obedience to a proscribed list of behaviors.

⁶⁰⁴ c.f. Exodus 24:8.

⁶⁰⁵ The Greek word used in this verse is *aphesis*, which is usually translated as "forgiveness." Thus, many English translations say something like, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness," (English Study Bible) which seems to suggest a punitive *quid pro quo*: something must die for us to live. However, *aphesis* also conveys "releasing, letting go, and sending away," which I interpret as pointing to the spiritual rhythm of emptying to be filled, letting go to embrace, losing our life that we may find it (c.f. Matthew 5:3-10; 10:39; and Philipians 2:6-11).

*Forgiveness as letting go
releasing past hurt
sending painful memories away
embracing a new future.*

*God no longer punitive,
not finding glee,
neither inflicting suffering,
nor cosmic child abuse.*

*Forgiveness, then, begins
with emptiness
seeking fullness in what
brings justice and joy.*

⁶⁰⁶ *Chronos* and *kairos* are the Greek words for "time." *Chronos* conveys "chronological time," and *kairos* conveys the "key moment" when transformation happens.

God, it's me. I shudder at the thought of how barbaric rituals were in centuries past: the blood of calves required for reconciliation. I mock the ancients, who believed such barbarous things could represent the God-rhythms. Far more sophisticated is our generation, who decimates thousands from the air— If we cannot see them, did they really die? Far more urbane is our culture, whose urban landscapes overmatch ancient Jerusalem in the shedding of blood. O Name, I am so glad I have moved beyond my silly, ancient forebearers, who thought forgiveness was somehow painful. I am so, so glad to have adopted a more modern perspective that says forgiveness is easy, abundant, and, above all, cheap.⁶⁰⁷

Hebrews 10:1–18

The Torah is an outline⁶⁰⁸ of The Name's good, to be revealed in fullness, but is not the full reality. Like a shadow that presents one's silhouette but cannot display one's heart and soul, so the Temple's sacrifices guide us in the direction of the God-rhythms and signify the God-life without being able to transform one's true self. The sacrifices remind us annually, from year to year and age to age, of our need—and also that bulls and goats cannot make us whole and complete.

The Anointed One pointed beyond the sacrifices of bulls and goats to a deeper truth. He quoted the Psalmist:

⁶⁰⁷ I pray, Gentle Reader, that you hear this prayer as satire. I seek, Friend, to convey the hubris of modern readers in our judgment of the ancients while remaining blissfully in denial that our era is far more barbaric (though we pretend otherwise). I am reminded, Sibling in Jesus, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's distinction between "cheap grace" and "costly grace" in his *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York: Macmillan, 1980).

⁶⁰⁸ Many English translations insert "only" into their translation (c.f. NIV, NRSV, ESB) without justification from the Greek text. The resulting translations reads, "The Law is only a shadow." That the Greek *skia* means "shadow" is correct, yet it can also translate as "outline." Given the word "only" is absent from the Greek text, rather than denigrate the Law (called Torah in the paraphrase), I hear the author making a "yes, and..." comment: "Yes, Torah is wonderful—it outlines the ways of The Name—yet is not the fullness of what The Name is doing."

O Name, you do not yearn
for what I give beyond me;
your desire is for what I give from within me—
not the riches of calves and coins,
but the treasures of my heart.⁶⁰⁹

What is given from beyond oneself is good and The Name's command in accordance with Torah to point toward the God-rhythms and to signify the God-life. Yet giving from within oneself, the treasures of one's heart, is the Way of discovery of one's full humanity. The Anointed One let go of the former to embrace the latter. The Anointed One established the Way of the God-life: to stand for The Name not through bulls but through the offering of his own body, given once for all eternity. The Anointed One established that it is not through the sacrifice of calves but through the offering of the Christ⁶¹⁰ that we are made whole and complete.

Day after endless day, the Levitical priests slaughter livestock—turning Jerusalem's streams red during the Passover—only to return to slaughter again, for guiltless and goodness are not the same thing. Those who offer sacrifice take away guilt for a time, but without goodness one must return—again and again and again.

But since the Anointed One, as a priest like Melchizedek—the king of right relationships—offered his own body rather than a bull, his goodness affects all who encounter his lovingkindness. The Anointed One needed not to return again and again to slaughter but instead returned to his home in The Name's presence. He was commissioned with The Name's authority and awaits the culmination of the age to come. By his one act of self-giving, the Anointed One makes whole and complete all whom The Name has set apart for salvation and for service.⁶¹¹

The Divine Spirit bears witness to this new reality through the truth-teller Jeremiah:

⁶⁰⁹ c.f. Psalm 40:6-8.

⁶¹⁰ Ordinarily I would paraphrase as "the Anointed" but could not pass up the opportunity for the alliteration of "calves...Christ."

⁶¹¹ I break my own rule about avoiding traditionally religious language by using "salvation." The phrase "for salvation and for service" is the way Reformed (Presbyterian) faith conceives of The Name's gift: not just for our own well-being but to enlist us in service to The Name, to others, and to all creation.

Thus says The Name:
 “This is the sacred promise I make:
 I will inscribe my poetry upon their hearts,
 my prose upon their minds.
 Broken they are, yet I will forget it;
 Ornerly they are, yet I will remember it no more.”

When The Name heals our brokenness, bulls need not be slaughtered. When The Name releases us from our own orneriness, calves rest easy and give thanks for the Christ.

*I spoke kind words
 (with rage in my heart):
 Was I just and good?*

*I wrote the check
 (begrudging every stroke of the pen):
 Did it draw me closer to The Name?*

*I stopped pretending
 (honesty and authenticity are surprisingly difficult):
 Is this the Way of Jesus?*

God, it's me. May I grow toward becoming good even as I seek to look good. May my inward growing toward the image of Jesus be reflected in actions and attitudes toward those I encounter each day. May I both give you the treasures of my heart and express outwardly the truth you are forming inwardly. Help me, O Name, to realize your call upon me is both/and rather than either/or.

Hebrews 10:19–25

Because we have been released from our own brokenness by Jesus' healing balm, we are confident—assured that we belong to The Name's family. Because we have been liberated from our own orneriness, we walk forward with conviction that Jesus escorts us into The Name's Divine Dwelling—assured Jesus offered his service freely; indeed, it brought him joy to serve in this way.

Therefore, we draw near, resting ourselves upon The Name's bosom with confidence, conviction, and trust that we are both declared innocent and immersed into the

renewing waters of the God-life. We grab hold of The Name's hand knowing They will never let us go. We walk beside The Name rejoicing in Their faithfulness, rejoicing that Their promise is our hope.

Therefore, we plan day and night how to encourage each other toward *agape* and inspire each other toward goodness. We gather together because we know it builds a strong foundation for our being “In-Courage-Minted.” We continue to gather because we know we are “In-Sprit-led” when we are together instead of isolated, alone, and without the support that only our family in Jesus can provide. This is important! And we need each other all the more as we await the Day of Jesus to be revealed.

*COVID cases rise,
 my temptation to hunker down rises, too.
 My head lies to my heart,
 “I don't need other people around.”*

*COVID cases rise,
 my determination rising faster.
 My heart responds,
 “Separate doesn't have to mean isolation.”*

*COVID cases continue,
 my affection for the Body of Jesus grows.
 “Christian” is always plural, never singular:
 “me” and “we” intertwined in love.*

God, it's me. Though an individual, grant unto me the gift of community. Though I have my own thoughts, grant unto me the joy of learning from others. Though I enjoy a little “alone time,” grant unto me the joy of knowing your fellowship of love. Though I like “me,” grant unto me an even greater appreciation for “we.”

Hebrews 10:20–39

If we knowingly walk in the wrong direction, we will not get to our destination. If we deliberately choose isolation, we will not share community. If we purposefully aim for a lesser good, we will miss the mark of The

Name's perfect desire for our wholeness.⁶¹² The only thing we should expect is for our choices to be delivered into The Name's purging fire.⁶¹³ Indeed, it is better that our choices be consumed as The Name's enemies than for us to be consumed!

To treat Moses' teachings as unimportant is to miss their ability to bless us. Playing hide-and-seek with The Name's mercy is foolishness. Anyone who treats the sacred as profane obscures our vision of the God-life and compromises our ability to dance the God-rhythms. When we treat the profane as sacred, we obscure the beauty and blessing of The Name's beloved, the Anointed One. His giving himself as an offering invites us to join him in a life-long journey of discovering our best and true self. Why would we treat The Name's lovingkindness so contemptuously by rejecting Their invitation to dance?

Have a healthy awe of and reverence for The Name's judgment. As the Torah and the Psalms speak:⁶¹⁴

"I live by my values," says The Name.
"Decisions of right and wrong
affirm my character."

Or again,

The Name will separate wheat from chaff,
Dividing precious metal from dross.

Being held in The Name's hands inspires awe and invites right action, especially for those wise enough to heed the opportunity to draw near!

Remember the early days of your journey with the Anointed One, when you accepted the light shining upon and within you. Remember that even great suffering could not dissuade you from trusting The Name: insult

⁶¹² The English text seems to suggest continual sinning negates the effects of Jesus' sacrifice ("no sacrifice for sins is left," ESB). However, this directly contradicts the previous verses specifically (c.f. 10:19ff.) and the entire book generally. Therefore, I have paraphrased 10:26-27 as targeting our choices that miss the mark (Greek *harmatia*) and which The Name gives over to judgment so that only our true self remains (c.f. next note).

⁶¹³ c.f. Malachi 3:2, which uses the image of a metal smith separating the precious metal from the dross—only that which is precious remains.

⁶¹⁴ c.f. Deuteronomy 32:36 and Psalm 135:14.

and intimidation were no match for your conviction. You walked with siblings in their suffering and surrendered earthly possessions to snatch up heavenly ones, in the certainty that only heavenly possessions endure.

Don't lose confidence now! Instead of losing confidence, persist, persevere, and proceed ever deeper into The Name's heart and mind. Dive into Their waters. Immerse yourselves in Their lovingkindness. Bathe in the hope of the promise that The Name is near.

The *kairos* is near!
The One who comes is coming!
The *chronos* approaches
when all shall be unveiled.⁶¹⁵

Or again,

Trust is the path to right relationship!
Joy cannot be found by those who hide from love.⁶¹⁶

We are not those who hide from love, shriveling in fear that we might be seen as we are. Instead, we trust that even as we are seen, so we are loved. We trust that though we are broken, so shall The Name make us whole and complete—our best and true selves.

*Woke up this morning to
possibilities, opportunities, challenges
to be shaped, formed, and transformed
or twisted, distorted, and warped,
taking another step
with your lovingkindness as companion,
on a journey toward becoming
my best and true self.*

God, it's me. Help me be present in the moments I live today: aware and noticing myself and others, recognizing hurts and listening to your Spirit's nudge. Help me live where my feet happen to be rather than repeating an unforgiven past or rehearsing an uncertain future. Help me to claim your lovingkindness for me in this moment and then share it with the one and the many whom I will encounter today. Help me

⁶¹⁵ c.f. Isaiah 26:20, Habakkuk 2:3.

⁶¹⁶ c.f. Habakkuk 2:4.

make choices that become habits and practice habits that will shape me in your image.

Hebrews 11:1–16

Trust is the mortar that holds the walls of our spiritual home in place. Trust is the guarantor that our conviction is sufficient foundation upon which to build our spiritual home. Trust creates our conviction that even though our physical vision is limited, yet our spiritual discernment rightly perceives The Name's goodness and the many gifts that come from Their lovingkindness.

The ancients lived and died singing the wonders of The Name's goodness and gifts. Our spiritual fathers and mothers discovered the blessings that can be received only through trust. Trust conceives in us wonder and awe that The Name spoke all creation into existence—from nothing to abundance as a single Word.

Consider the lived and living witness of our spiritual fathers and mothers—all of whom received The Name's blessing through trust.

Abel, who trusted The Name that his gift would be welcomed and who, also through trust, was welcomed into right relationship. Abel's trust speaks to each new generation even though he is long dead.

Enoch, who trusted The Name and whose life was taken into the heavenly dwelling. Enoch made The Name's heart happy, which is impossible to do without trust. But through trusting that The Name is and loves, we are compelled to seek Their face, which always shines upon those who seek Them.

Noah, who trusted The Name enough to build a HUGE boat on nothing more than Their warning. Noah's trust led him to save his family. His trust declared with conviction the brokenness of the world; his trust led him to inherit right relationship with The Name.

Abraham, who trusted The Name when called to go to a foreign land, a land not his own, among a people not his own. He obeyed, taking a journey into the unknown. What Abraham knew (but only because he trusted The Name) was that The Name had made him a promise. That promise was enough for Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob to wander forward, in search of the dwelling place not constructed by human hands but grown from the seeds of trust planted by The Name's promise.

Sarah also trusted The Name's promise. Though she was well past the ideal age for childbearing, Sarah trusted The Name would be faithful to her and to Their promise that she would bear a son through whom all nations would be blessed. From Abraham and Sarah, well-elderly though they were, came great nations—offspring as plentiful as the stars in the night sky or as abundant as the sand on the seashore. Sarah's trust has led generations to trust.⁶¹⁷

All these ancients were still living by trust when they died. The Name's promises were still in front of them, still their horizon. They were strangers to the experience of receiving The Name's blessings fulfilled, foreigners to the full benefits of being citizens of The Name's beloved community. They understood their true citizenship is not on earth but is discovered wherever The Name dwells. They weren't looking for a country to call their own but searching for their true home in The Name's presence, wherever it would be discovered. They weren't looking backward, homesick for their past, but forward toward a future in which they would walk alongside The Name. And The Name welcomed them into the beloved community, for they made Their heart happy.

*Life shatters, sometimes,
like a broken mirror,
distorting the image I see before me—*

*my brother and father died the same week,
the Capitol invaded and officers died,
a friend without insurance needs a hip replacement.*

*What is trust when the mirror breaks?
What image do I see—
what reflection as I look into its fractured shards?*

⁶¹⁷ English translations say Sarah “considered God faithful.” The Greek word used that is usually translated as “considered” or “of the opinion,” is *hegomai*, which can mean these English phrases but links linguistically to *hegemon* which conveys one who is a thought leader or who leads the opinions of others (often used of government officials). It seems to me the author of Hebrews isn't merely conveying the notion that Sarah had a particular opinion but that her trusting The Name was particularly powerful and has led others to trust as well.

*Trust sees the hurting child within another.
Trust hears the plaintive cry in the harsh barking.
Trust feels civility's heartbeat—not quite dead, yet.*

*Trust extends an olive branch in spite of the evidence.
Trust looks in the shattered mirror
and sees the one becoming like Jesus.*

God, it's me. It's hard to trust when your brother attacks—did Cain compromise Abel's trust? It's simple to trust on Easy Street—Ah, to be escorted to heaven like Enoch! It's scary to trust in the face of cataclysm—“foxhole faith” that endures, like Noah possessed, is easier said than done. I like the experience of Abraham and Sarah, for mutual support and encouragement make trusting much easier. O Name, however it happens, help me to trust that you are and you love, now and for always.

Hebrews 11:17–31

The story of “salvation history” cannot be told without trust. Trusting The Name, Abraham passed his test. Though Abraham had embraced The Name's promise that he would be the father of a great nation, he was asked to offer up his son, as if—quite suddenly—The Name had embraced the practices of the pagan gods to demand child sacrifice (of course, we know this was not the case). Abraham did not understand how The Name's seeming demand conformed to the promise, but trusted that They could raise the dead, if need be. Indeed, through Abraham's trust in The Name's goodness, Isaac was not sacrificed, and Abraham received his son—his one and only son—into his embrace.

Trusting The Name, Isaac blessed his two sons, Jacob and Esau, toward the fulfillment of their journeys.

Trusting The Name, Jacob blessed all of his sons, even as he approached his death and had to lean on his staff to do it.

Trusting The Name, Joseph inspired hope in his family that they would be led out of Egypt to return to the land of promise, and even gave them instructions to take his bones with them when they left!

The story of “salvation history” cannot be told without trust. Trusting The Name, Moses' mother hid him for three months, in civil disobedience of Pharaoh's

decree that the Hebrews' male babies were to be slaughtered. Trusting The Name, Moses' mother was unafraid of Pharaoh.

Trusting The Name, Moses refused to be known as son to Pharaoh's daughter (even though she raised him) but instead joined himself to The Name's family (even though they were rejected and relegated to abuse, oppression, and suffering). Moses' trust foreshadowed a devotion to the Anointed One—the emptiness of Jesus being preferred over the fullness of Egypt, ephemeral indulgence rejected for the sake of eternal extravagance.

Trusting The Name, Moses provoked Pharaoh's anger, yet persevered because he perceived The Name's presence was behind, beside, and before him.

Trusting The Name, Moses enacted the Passover, applying the blood of goats upon the door frame to preserve the firstborn children of Israel from the Destroyer.

The story of “salvation history” cannot be told without trust.

Trusting The Name, the Hebrew people passed through the Sea just as the Destroyer had passed over them as a people. The Egyptian armies, however, were not so fortunate and became the Destroyer's feast.

Trusting The Name, the armies of Israel marched around the walls of Jericho for seven days—The Name's victory their rest.

Trusting The Name, Rahab the Canaanite welcomed the Hebrew spies, and she and her family and all who belonged to her were saved from destruction.

The story of “salvation history” cannot be told without trust.

*Trusting The Name
human assent
to divine yes.*

*Trusting The Name
courage and humility
in conjugal union.*

*Trusting The Name
Their Story
becoming our story.*

God, it's me. The river of history meanders, its path changing course because of single acts of courage.

History, like that river, deepens during seasons of humility and becomes perilous when arrogance is ascendent. Teach me, therefore, to intertwine courage and humility so that, when called upon to act, I might choose wisely. Teach me to choose your justice and your joy. May the waters of your history flow through me.

Hebrews 11:32-40

Oh my! I don't have time to tell all the stories of The Name being at work through truth-tellers and rulers, through both the mighty and the humble—Gideon and Barak, Samson and Jephthah, David and Samuel, and so many others. With The Name at work through their trusting, kingdoms fell and justice rose, the mouths of lions were shut and the fury of flames quenched. With The Name at work through their trusting, soldiers escaped the sword and the weak were filled with strength, enemy armies were routed and mothers saw their children return home alive, as if raised from the dead!

Still others⁶¹⁸ showed The Name's strength through their willingness and ability to endure opposition. With The Name at work through their trusting, they faced angry mobs, unfair punishment, and even imprisonment. With The Name at work through their trusting, they were executed—stones thrown and swords swung, some even sawed in two! With The Name at work through their trusting, they were clothed in poverty and adorned with persecution. The world found no place for them, so they wandered the deserts and camped in the mountains, caves their boudoir and crevices their parlor. Yet even these made The Name's heart happy because they trusted Them. Though these others did not see the promise fulfilled within their own lifetimes, they trusted that The Name's inexorable plan and inescapable vision, would bring them to us, and we will be made whole and complete together.

*Trusting The Name—
at times a ballet of blessing
at times a samba of suffering*

*Trusting The Name—
path diverging in the woods
choosing the narrow way leading to wholeness*

*Trusting The Name—
not always easy
always best*

God, it's me. I am aware of the temptation to define my faith in terms of blessing, the Tempter at work not only through the heresy of the Prosperity Gospel but even more through my own privilege. I do not want to see suffering in others and cannot welcome it in myself. Yet life comes to me as it does to all, and when it does, will I affirm you are with me even then? When confronted by opposition, will I seek ways to have you at work through my trusting, or will I choose to show the bastards what I'm made of? Which is the path that makes your heart happy?

Hebrews 12:1-3

Look around at all the people who have lived trusting The Name—a throng of sacred testimony to The Name's work among them and through them, a chorus of witness from every century, singing songs of praise to The Name's justice and joy. With mentors like this, be inspired! Be encouraged! Take your broken ways of living, stuff them in a box, and set the box out front to be collected with the trash. Persevere toward the goal of becoming your true self. Turn the agony⁶¹⁹ of sin into the triumph of transformation through daily practices that become holy habits.

Here is a good place to start this work of transformation: Look at Jesus—don't turn away and don't take your eyes from him. Jesus started us on the path of trusting and will accompany us every step of our journey. He will make our trusting whole and complete so that we will become our true selves, which will be his great joy to see. For the sake of this joy Jesus endured the Cross, didn't care a whit that others thought it shameful, for he

⁶¹⁸ The passage shifts in focus from stories of success, faithfulness, and blessing to stories of trust in the midst of hardship.

⁶¹⁹ The Greek word used in this verse is *agon*, from which we derive the English "agony." The author is exhorting listeners to accept discomfort and embrace difficulty for the sake of growing into our true self.

knew it was the Way that would lead us back to The Name. At The Name's side is where we can find Jesus now, running the family business of *agape*.

More than just glancing at Jesus, keep looking, then ponder and wonder: How deep was his love for us that he would endure such hostility and hatred? As you ponder and wonder, turn your thoughts toward meditation—give it a good think. Then you will be inspired and encouraged. You will neither fade nor falter from the sacred work of keeping your gaze on Jesus.

*The saguaro beckons
its arms lifted vertically in praise
inviting me to join in silent admiration.*

*The dove dips its beak into the fountain
thirsty for The Name's provision
inviting me to relish creation's goodness.*

*The Cross, a multi-colored Talavera, hangs
like Jesus to whom it points
reminding me to celebrate because
I am not alone on this journey.*

*Seeing, looking, pondering until I perceive
the cloud of witnesses
in creation and community,
with Jesus, my Savior, my beatific vision.*

God, it's me. Fix my eyes on Jesus. Let me not look away—when social media roars or church gossip whispers. Let my gaze remain steadfast—when family troubles erupt or obligations burden. Let me perceive the One who entered into human suffering to bear it and break its power. Let me ponder the truth that only that which is endured can be transformed. Fix my eyes on Jesus. Let me not look away.

Hebrews 12:4–17⁶²⁰

Becoming your true self is a difficult journey, and you all still have far to travel. You believe yourselves to be constantly fighting against your addictions, your temptations to betray your values, and your desire for personal control over people and circumstances. Yet in your struggles, you have not yet given your lives but have neglected the truth found in Proverbs:⁶²¹

My child,
esteem the struggles The Name
allows you to endure.
Through them you draw near to The Name,
and are trained in right relationships.

As The Name's beloved children,
your lives' struggles forge your identity—
adoption the journey's beginning,
inheritance the journey's end.

Struggles and even suffering tutor us in the Way of Jesus, which is a cruciform life. Without adversity, there is no learning, no growth, no formation nor transformation into the image of Jesus within you. Without adversity, it is as if you aren't even The Name's children!

As we respected our earthly parents' discipline, their imperfect attempts to train us to be good and kind and faithful, so we must accept, receive, and submit to The Name's tutelage, which leads us toward right relationships and being made whole and complete. Through struggles, the image of Jesus is formed within us. Through suffering, our character begins to mirror his.

⁶²⁰ Seven times in this passage the author uses a form of *paideia*, translated by the NIV as “discipline.” However, *paideia* is also the word from which we get the noun *paidagogos* (c.f. Galatians 3:24). In Greek culture, a *paidagogos* refers to a tutor or mentor for the children of a 1st century Hellenistic family. Technically, the *paidagogos* was responsible for moral and educational training. The author is wrestling with the issue that has often perplexed people of faith: What is the purpose of suffering and why does God allow it? I have chosen to frame my interpretive paraphrase using the context of the cruciform ethics and spirituality of Jesus as the example of The Name's *paidagogos*.

⁶²¹ c.f. Proverbs 3:11-12.

Adversity, then, can be our *paidagogos*,⁶²² the path our journey takes to lead us toward right relationships and The Name's *shalom*.

If all this sounds overwhelming, take heart. Be of good courage! Be strong in The Name, remembering these words from the Proverbs:⁶²³

The Name walks with us on our path:
the lame walk and the broken are healed.

Therefore, search The Name's *shalom* for yourself and seek it for your community—being set apart from the values of the world and set apart for The Name's purposes. Being set apart enables us to see The Name clearly, whereas being mired in the muddy waters of the world obscures our vision and our visage. Cultivate loving-kindness in one another because its absence even in one will cause trouble for many and is the root of bitterness within the gathering. Warn those who pervert their desires, exploiting people and things. They reason with their loins and think with their stomachs, like Esau who sold his blessing for a pittance. What did it get him? Only heartache and tears.

*The road less traveled:
I don't want to travel it!
Yet it leads to me.*

God, it's me. Discipline is not something we like in our culture. We prefer rights to responsibilities. If we choose discipline because we are a scholar or an athlete, it is "our" choice, not something imposed upon us by another. Yet life does not cooperate. Choices are taken away by illness or accident, by circumstances and choices (our own and others'). Rather than rage at the unfairness of life, help me learn this truth in every given moment: You are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me, and you are forming the image of Jesus within me. Open my heart that I may accept, receive, and submit myself to you, even when life's troubles confront me.

Hebrews 12:18–29

Though your struggles are great, you need not fear. Consider what confronted our ancestors: a mountain that could not be touched, enveloped in flames, shrouded in darkness, gloom, and storm. They heard a trumpet blast from above and a voice that caused those who heard the voice to beg that it would speak no more, for it overwhelmed them with fear: "If an animal touches this mountain, kill it!" Even Moses was afraid.⁶²⁴

Your path is different, for you were invited to journey with Jesus to Mount Zion—and not just the earthly city of Jerusalem but the Jerusalem that comes from above, the heavenly city of The Name. You accepted the invitation to join tens of thousands of The Name's messengers gathered in celebration and song. You are among those whose names are inscribed in the halls of heaven, who have become members of an inclusive gathering: those who belong to Jesus—elder brother of us all. With Jesus leading the Way, you stood before The Name without fear—trusting Their judgment would lead to you being made whole and complete. You trusted that the sprinkled blood of Jesus, who lived fully human yet without sin, spoke more powerfully even than Abel's innocent blood (which is saying quite a lot).

Therefore, do not avoid the word spoken by Jesus, and the Way his life directs you to walk. You cannot escape the message his sprinkled blood whispers to us all: "I gave my life for you, for you are precious to me. Do not reject my love!" If our ancestors did not escape consequence when they rejected Moses, who is of the Earth, how will we escape consequence when we shun the gracious invitation and loving-kindness of the One who comes from heaven?

In the days of Moses, the Earth shook. In the days to come, both Earth and heaven will shake. All creation will have its reckoning, and only those who abide in The Name will remain.⁶²⁵ Those who do not reject but who receive The Name cannot be shaken and will remain. Therefore, let us be thankful and worship The Name with the goal of pleasing Them—showing Them

⁶²⁴ c.f. Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 9.

⁶²⁵ This passage and the next repeatedly use the Greek word *meine*, and its variants. *Meine* can be translated as "abide, remain, or stay with," (compare similar usage in John 4:40 and 15:4ff.).

⁶²² c.f. note 620 regarding the author of Hebrews' use of *paideia*.

⁶²³ c.f. Proverbs 4:26.

reverence as we are filled with awe. That which cannot be shaken will endure, for,

The Name is a fire that consumes.⁶²⁶

Reject or receive?

Heart closing or opening?

Fear overwhelming or reverence blossoming?

What shall I choose?

Choosing to abide

I lean into the love

of the One who fills

me with trust.

Receiving

Opening

Blossoming

I am chosen for love.

God, it's me. It is easy to fear these days. Heck, it's always been easy to fear. As I grow older (and, hopefully, more mature), I recognize the temptations to be afraid are accompanied by a growing, maturing assurance of your love. I choose to abide in your love, to remain in your embrace, to stay with you "though the waters roar and the Earth quakes, for you, O Name, are my refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble."⁶²⁷

Hebrews 13:1–6

Here is a hodgepodge of wisdom and counsel. Abide in love⁶²⁸ as siblings called to travel together on a sacred journey.

⁶²⁶ c.f. Deuteronomy 4:24 for the direct quote. However, c.f. also Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the "Redeemer's Fire." Rather than Dante's "fire as punishment," the biblical metaphor for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious.

⁶²⁷ c.f. Psalm 46:1, 3, with slight revisions.

⁶²⁸ The Greek word used is *philos*, meaning "brotherly or sisterly love," and from which we get Philadelphia, the "City of Brotherly Love."

There are consequences when we neglect to welcome strangers, not the least being that we might turn away those whom The Name sends to us as messengers!

Suffer with those who are in prison as if you are the one who suffers and suffer also with those who are tortured⁶²⁹ as if you are the ones being mistreated.

Marriage is a trust to be honored by all who make promises before The Name and to each other. Don't vandalize the promises you made but remain conscientious, connected, and caring to your beloved. The Name's refining fire consumes the behavior of all who choose to stray.

The Way of Jesus is like the love of family—accepting one's situation and circumstances as best as we are able, embracing both joy and sorrow, free to choose to be our best, true self. The Way of Jesus does not replace people with things but trusts The Name who said,

I got you! Every step, every breath.

'Til long journey's end.

Short step or giant leap, I'll be there.⁶³⁰

And so, with robust hope, we confess,

The Name's got my back!

I have nothing to worry about.

Live or die, I'm on The Name's side.⁶³¹

Hodgepodge of wisdom

Sharing in community

All are beloved

God, it's me. The Church, YOUR Church, is called many things: the Body of Christ, the Beloved Community, a gathering of saints and sinners. It is also the place where we discover how delightful and how difficult it is to do life together in Jesus' name. Like our human families, our church families are places where we learn to love (and find the lessons trying at times). Help me both to learn the lessons I need to learn and

⁶²⁹ Interestingly, the Greek work *kakucheio* is used twice in this sentence and can be translated as "tortured" or "mistreated," which seems like a fairly large gap in terms of how one suffers. I have chosen to use both in the paraphrase.

⁶³⁰ c.f. Deuteronomy 31:6.

⁶³¹ c.f. Psalm 118:6-7.

support others in learning the lessons you have set for them.

Hebrews 13:7–19

Remember the way your leaders live; recount their words and emulate their behavior. Look closely and see how their behaviors become practices. Look closer still and perceive how their practices become habits. Mimic them that the image of Jesus the Anointed may express itself in you. His character and fidelity remain unwavering yesterday, today and into all tomorrows.

Don't stumble over weird teachings whose focus is fringe concerns. Focus instead on what matters: The Name's loving-kindness that strengthens our hearts. Debates about rituals and ceremonies or what foods make one more likable to The Name don't benefit you. (They don't really benefit anyone.) The animal sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple need not concern us. The High Priest carries the blood of animals into the Divine Dwelling as an offering, but the other priests burn the animal's flesh outside the city. This is all symbolic of what happened to Jesus, who suffered outside the city gate to lead people into right relationship with The Name. Likewise, we follow him outside the city, to follow in his footsteps, to walk the Way of Jesus, even if it leads us to be reviled and repudiated as unworthy of The Name. We know where our true home is—not Jerusalem but the place that remains,⁶³² the abiding place The Name intended from before the beginning of time, intends today, and will bring to fulfillment in the Day of Jesus.

Through Jesus let us offer sacrifices—of praise! Praise Jesus morning, noon, and night! Talk openly about him and then match your walk with your talk—doing good in partnership⁶³³ with others. This is the sacrifice that truly matters and makes The Name's heart happy.

⁶³² The author returns to the Greek word *meine* ("remain, stay, or abide," see note 625) to convey the sense of permanence of the city to which The Name sends us.

⁶³³ The NIV translates this passage as "doing good and sharing with others." However, the Greek word used here is *koinonias*. The Greek word *koinonia* translates as "fellowship" and conveys a deep sense of spiritual and social kinship. *Koinonia* was a hallmark of early Christian communities and a cause for Roman suspicion of their motives—the Romans assuming something political must be the source of the Christian community. The author, therefore, expresses a sense of what today we call

Be willing to yield to the leaders who keep watch over you as those responsible for others' well-being. Help them help you grow toward your true self. Make their work among you a source of joy not grief, for leaders who experience their jobs as drudgery are rarely able to maintain cohesion in the Body.

Finally, pray for us, for we seek the beauty and wholeness that comes from living as The Name's beloved. Especially pray that I may find my way back to you soon, restored to my place in your beloved community.

*Easy to confuse
symbols for substance,
appearances for deeper truth.*

*Simple to see
what matters:
partnership and praise.*

*Trust your belovedness.
Walk ever deeper into
him whose character and fidelity remain unwavering.*

God, it's me. I seek your face in others: friends and mentors and spiritual guides. When I see you in them, I am encouraged and inspired to walk deeper into my belovedness. Do others see you in me? Are others encouraged and inspired? O Name, help me to walk the way of Jesus that I may reflect his image to those whom I encounter today.

Hebrews 13:20-25

The Name's peace rest upon you. The Name's power work through you. The Name's purpose inspire your vision and direct your service—the same One who spoke a sacred promise, who raised Jesus from the dead, and who designated Jesus to be the Good Shepherd of Their sheep. May The Name equip you for all you will do, empower all your doing, and be pleased by all you

missional theology in that the author calls for us not merely to do good for people but to do it in partnership and spiritual fellowship with those whom we seek to serve.

have done, through Jesus the Anointed, to whom all doxology is sung today and into all tomorrows. Amen.⁶³⁴

Beloved, endure with patience my words of encouragement and exhortation, which I have written briefly. I want you to know Timothy is no longer in prison! If he comes soon, I'll bring him with me when I visit. Greet all your leaders and laypeople alike. The beloved in Italy send greetings. May The Name's loving-kindness surround and embrace you all.

Peace, limp without purpose.

Purpose, lifeless without promise.

Promise, pointing to the plan.

Plan fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

Equipped and empowered—both are needed to please the One to whom all doxology is sung.

God, it's me. May this become my daily prayer: May I know your peace, purpose, and promise. May I be equipped and empowered to serve you through loving all whom I meet, ever pleased and ever pleasing in your sight.

⁶³⁴ This paragraph has a homiletic quality to it, so I have crafted a version for use when speaking the text publicly. As I imagine the text as spoken Word, I hear the phrases within each paragraph expand upon what comes before to build toward a crescendo.

The Name's peace rest upon you.
The Name's power work through you.
The Name's purpose
inspire your vision and direct your service.

The same The Name who spoke a sacred promise.
The same The Name who raised Jesus from the dead.
The same The Name who designated Jesus
to be the Good Shepherd of Their sheep.

May The Name equip you for all you will do.
May The Name empower all your doing.
May The Name be pleased by all you have done,
through Jesus the Anointed,

to whom all doxology is sung
today and into all tomorrows.
Amen.

James

Introduction

The Book of James gets a bad rap in some Christian circles. Martin Luther, founder of the Protestant Reformation, famously called James “a strawy Gospel.” Luther felt that reading James tasted like straw compared to the succulent filet that is Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Luther especially took issue with James’ emphasis upon “works” in contrast to “faith.” Others have followed in Luther’s footsteps.

It is true that Paul and James contrast each other. Both cite the Genesis passage that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” with James emphasizing Abraham’s actions while Paul emphasizes Abraham’s belief.⁶³⁵

More is made of this contrast than is warranted. James did not reject faith; nor did Paul reject good works. Both writers advocated for faith that leads to ethical actions and ethical actions that express one’s faith. To argue that one theological construction of this Gospel truth is “better” than the other is like arguing for heads over tails on a coin—both sides are needed.

The Book of James was written by James, but which James? Many readers assume the book’s author is the James who was the brother of John, one of the twelve disciples encountered in the Gospels. However, a comparison of Acts 12:2 and 12:17 shows there were at least two leaders in the early Christian community named James and that King Herod had James the brother of John put to death by the sword. Scholars agree that the author of The Book of James was James the brother of Jesus.

What we know about James the brother of Jesus is that he, like his older brother, was raised in a devout Jewish home. James observed the Sabbath with his family and traveled to Jerusalem to attend the Jewish festivals. It is unsurprising that the Book of James expresses a

thoroughly Jewish character. It cites the moral examples of a host of Old Testament figures: Abraham, Isaac, Rahab, Job, and Elijah. Indeed, the Book of James reads like Jewish wisdom literature (Psalms, Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes).

The Book of James reads, specifically, like the Book of Proverbs. The wisdom literature is unlike other Jewish literature. It does not convey the historical narrative of God’s “mighty acts” (e.g. Genesis and Exodus). Nor does wisdom literature offer social critique as do the prophets (e.g. Amos and Jeremiah). Rather, wisdom literature describes the lived experience of relationship with God (e.g. Psalms), wrestles with the eternal questions of human experience (e.g. Job), and guides God’s people with focused, ethical counsel (e.g. Proverbs). Like Proverbs, James reads as a series of short, pithy sayings that convey practical advice and common-sense truths about the God-life. The difference between Proverbs and James is that the latter offers practical, ethical guidance for Jewish followers who claim Jesus is Messiah.

Another example of Jewish wisdom literature in the New Testament is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). This sermon contains Jesus’ most focused and extensive ethical teaching. James is similar in both form and content to the Sermon on the Mount. James references his brother’s teaching throughout the book⁶³⁶

The name of God in *James* is one I have taken from Proverbs 8, where wisdom is personified and even participates in creation. I use the Greek word for “wisdom” when speaking of God: thus, the divine name

⁶³⁶ Compare the following:

James 1:26-27 with Matthew 12:6-8;
 James 2:5 with Matthew 5:3;
 James 3:10-12 with Matthew 7:15-20;
 James 3:18 with Matthew 5:9;
 James 5:2-3 with Matthew 6:19-20; and
 James 5:12 with Matthew 5:33-37.

⁶³⁵ Compare James 2:21-24 with Romans 4:1-3.

in the following pages is *Sophia*. Further, because James is so thoroughly a Jewish book written for early, Jewish followers of Jesus as Messiah, I chose “Sovereign of Israel” rather than “Sovereign above Caesar,” et. al. as in other portions of *Rhythms*.

I interpret the Scripture paraphrases using Haiku poetry, which observes a strict format of five-seven-five syllables. Haiku’s abbreviated form lends itself to the pithy, staccato pace of the ethical admonitions in James.

If any of the Haiku don’t “work” for you, I invite you to craft your own response to the Word. After all, most important are not the words I write but that God’s Word dwell richly in us and be written upon our hearts. A personal response to the Word is always appropriate, so long as we don’t just say we believe but act upon that belief. May our lives express what we believe and may our beliefs be enacted in our lives.

James 1:1–4

James, servant of Sophia and of Jesus the Anointed, who is the Sovereign of Israel. To the Migration—the families dispersed throughout the Nations: Greetings.

All is gift, beloved, as you are led into various tests and trials, for your testing leads to a trust that endures, perseveres, and ultimately prevails. Embrace the struggle these tests invite you to encounter. Every encounter with struggle is an opportunity for Sophia to shape and form your inner person. The horizon of your testing is your true self—whole and complete, lacking no good gift of Sophia's Spirit.

*Global pandemic
Months of trial and testing
What are we to learn?*

God, it's me. As I move from season to season in my life's journey, the tragedies are more poignant, and the joys refresh more deeply. Are these joys and sorrows a part of your plan, or are they accidental opportunities you use to shape and form my character? Regardless of the answer, the image of Jesus within me is not yet complete. I pray I might continue to journey toward my full, mature, and true self. Help me, Sophia, take a single step today.

James 1:5–8

The wise seek wisdom, while the fool hides from her.⁶³⁷ The wise discover Sophia's generosity when they ask for wisdom, while the fool hides in shame. What are you waiting for?

When you ask Sophia for wisdom, trust it will be given to you. Sense Their nudge and follow where it leads. The key to Sophia's wisdom is trusting—not doubting. The one who doubts is like a kite let loose in the wind, blowing hither and yon until finally it crashes. Doubting what Sophia's Spirit whispers to you is like

having two souls.⁶³⁸ People stand on two feet, but no one is stable if they are uncertain about which soul belongs to them.

*Generous wisdom
Given through Spirit whisper
Let your soul listen*

God, it's me. Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah—may I both sense and heed your Spirit's nudge today. Grant me courage for the facing of this hour—to protest a war and the propaganda that feeds its ravenous maw. Grant me wisdom for the facing of this hour—to pray for others as if my heart aches and the world depends upon the prayers of all your saints.

James 1:9-11

Those of lowly status (in the eyes of the culture) often must be God-reliant rather than self-reliant. This is a matter for rejoicing—exult that you are learning lessons in trusting Sophia. Those of high status (in the eyes of the culture) are often only self-reliant, which is a cause for lament. Be forewarned: Those riches last for a moment, like a spring flower scorched by the summer heat. Riches fade but God-reliance lasts forever.

*Trusting wealth—fool's game.
Becoming God-reliant -
Path of the Wise Ones*

God, it's me. I am a middle-class, white-collar professional with a full-time job. How easy it is to delude myself into thinking I am self-reliant. Remind me, Sophia, of my need for you. Instruct me, Spirit, to be ever more God-reliant. Teach me, Jesus, compassion for those without the option of believing themselves to be self-reliant.

James 1:12-15

Those who persevere through trial discover the ability to stand. Such people will receive the crown of life

⁶³⁷ The Greek word for “wisdom” is *sophia*, which is a name in western cultures. As well, wisdom is personified as a woman in Proverbs 8.

⁶³⁸ The Greek word used is *dipsychos*, which literally means “two souls” though it is often translated as “double-minded.”

as a gift Sophia gives to honor their love. So, when enduring one of life's many tests, don't say, "Sophia sent this to get me to falter!" (That's not how They work.) When we falter, it's on us, not Sophia. Our false self gives birth to the addictions, brokenness, and corruption that lead to the true self's death.

*Trials come in life
Blaming is a temptation
Endure with God's help*

God, it's me. Trials will come; help me persevere. Temptations will come; help me overcome. My faith, my character, my integrity are tested all the time! Help me grow—choice by choice, opportunity by opportunity, day by day—ever closer to you, that I might more clearly show forth the image of Jesus today and into all tomorrows.

James 1:16–18

Don't chase shadows down a dark alley, my beloved. Every good thing you have is a gift that originates in Sophia, who intends⁶³⁹ to make you whole and complete. Sophia's light shines upon us always—never fickle, never flickering on and off⁶⁴⁰—and shines with a

⁶³⁹ The Greek word *anōthen* is used and is usually translated as "above" but can also refer to "origin" or "anew." When combined with two words in 1:18, *bouletheis* and *logo* (see note 641), there is a sense of purposefulness and intentionality that is conveyed in this passage.

⁶⁴⁰ The Greek word used is *parallage*, which is usually translated as "change." Thus, *ouk parallage* means "no change." This is problematic in that it conveys the message "Sophia never changes" and leads some theological traditions to paint Sophia as static, intractable, and rigid (c.f. The Westminster Confession of Faith). Yet we see Sophia changing Their mind in Exodus and other places, so faithful interpretation must account for those passages that convey the permanence of Sophia's character and fidelity with moments of impermanence of Their emotions, choices and, seemingly, means of connecting with Their people. A modern theological perspective known as process theology suggests a solution: Sophia's character and faithfulness are unchanging while They allow the unfolding of Their relationship with the creation to influence Them, yet always moving toward the horizon of Sophia's love. (For an orthodox introduction of process theology, see Anna Case-Winters, *God Will Be All in All*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2021.)

purpose:⁶⁴¹ that we might live as Sophia intends and be the first to express Their desire, which is to love one another.

*Creator's desire
Love, love, love, love, love, love, love
My true self become*

God, it's me. Thank you for life and light and love. Thank you that I am becoming who I am in your eternal purpose. Thank you that in life and in death, in body and in soul, I belong to you. May I express your grace, mercy, and peace to all whom I meet—the firstfruits of your realm breaking into our lives, our world, all creation.

James 1:19–20

Listen up, my beloved! Are you listening? My counsel to you is this: Listen as if your lives depended on it. Listen both to the words spoken and the underlying emotions. Listen to hear another's soul-speech.

My second bit of counsel to you is this: Pause a moment before speaking. It's okay to take your time before speaking. Measured and thoughtful speech usually avoids igniting in yourselves and others anger that often leads to violence and contradicts Sophia's intentions. Anger destroys right relationships.

*"Listen to me first!"
"Only then will I listen!"
Not the path to love.*

God, it's me. Make me an instrument of your grace—through holding space for another. Make me an instrument of your mercy—through acceptance that embraces even their brokenness. Make me an instrument of your peace—through listening deeply to another's lament. May I be quick to listen and slow to speak, assured you know my thoughts already (and not everyone needs to know my every opinion).

⁶⁴¹ Compare with note 639: *bouletheis* is translated as "chose" while *logos* is translated as "word" by the NIV. Both of these words, however, convey a sense of intentionality—*bouletheis* can also mean "intend" while *logos* can also mean "purpose" or "foundational principle."

James 1:21–25

Be intentional about how you feed your minds, hearts, and spirits. Stop polluting your minds with malignant voices. Instead, humbly accept Sophia’s Word planted in you, for it will nourish and heal you.

Don’t just hear the Word—actually listen to it and do as it says. The Word’s transformative power is found in action, obedience, and embodiment. Mere hearing without doing is like having “bed head” when looking in the mirror in the morning and then neglecting to comb your hair.

Deep, intentional meditation on Sophia’s desires, as revealed in the Word, brings freedom and fulfillment. Being oblivious gets you nowhere. Listen deeply to the poetry⁶⁴² of the Word to discover sacred rhythms that enable us to dance the God-life.

*Doer of the Word
Living in God’s sacred peace
Act embracing trust*

God, it’s me. It’s difficult to hear your Word amidst the clutter, chaos, and cacophony of the culture. Even more difficult is to do your Word because... because... because... perhaps because I just don’t want to? This sounds like a lame excuse to me, too, Sophia. Forgive me and free me to live what I believe and to follow your Word that I may embrace joy. Show me today at least one thing I can do to embody your Word. I promise I’ll do it!

James 1:26–27

Appearances can deceive. It is worthless to seem to obey Torah⁶⁴³ yet loose one’s tongue to wound others. It is not the observance of rituals commanded by Torah

but caring for orphans, widows, and those in distress⁶⁴⁴ that protects one from the culture’s contamination.

*Deceptive goodness
Observance over mercy
Worthless religion!*

God, it’s me. More than seeming to be your child, may I embrace that I am beloved. More than seeming to follow Jesus, may I walk the Way of the Cross. More than seeming to be spiritual, may I listen and obey the Spirit’s nudge. More than seeming, may I be.

James 2:1–7

My beloved, those who follow the Reflector of Sophia’s perfect brilliance—Jesus the Anointed, who is the Sovereign of Israel—embrace equality and reject discrimination, whether of race or riches. Here is a practical example: If someone enters your gathering looking like a million dollars—wearing a Rolex watch and a Brooks Brothers suit—and a ratty looking guy wearing a holey t-shirt comes in behind him, to whom will you give the seat of honor? If you honor the rich looking man but are dismissive to the shabby guy, you demonstrate your belief in society’s wealth-based hierarchy of value. Such thinking is evil.

Listen up, my beloved: Sophia turned society’s hierarchy of value upside-down when They chose those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in trust.⁶⁴⁵ Even more, Sophia promised that through loving Them, the poor would possess the realm of Their sovereign purpose.

Get a clue, beloved. You insult the poor and daily show you despise them. The rich tyrannize⁶⁴⁶ you and seek to dominate you from generation to generation—a dynasty of tyranny! The rich drag you into court, where you are powerless, and the rules of engagement are stacked against you. Is it not the rich who blaspheme the

⁶⁴² The Greek word *poiētas* is usually translated as “doer” or “maker” but also translates as “poet.”

⁶⁴³ The emphasis in these two verses is placed on the Greek word *threskos*, which is translated as “religious” or “religion” in the NIV. However, *threskos* in its Jewish context connotes “ritual or ceremonial observance.” James 1:26-27 echoes Jesus’ words in Matthew 12:6-8ff.

⁶⁴⁴ The Greek actually translates as “widows in their distress.” I have refocused the object of the call to care to connect the ethical obligation of care to all those in distress rather than limit the obligation only to widows.

⁶⁴⁵ c.f. Matthew 5:3.

⁶⁴⁶ The Greek word used is *katadunasteno*, which is a compound word meaning “according to tyranny” or “according to dynasty.”

name of Jesus by using it to justify what he clearly denounced?

*Poverty unwound
The world turning upside-down
Equality now!*

God, it's me. Help me not trust in wealth and property, my 401K and investments. Help me see how to start this journey into your upside-down vision for the world. With your Spirit as instructor and guide, may I recognize the ethics of the messages I see and hear every day. With your Spirit's encouragement and holy chastisement, may I begin to listen and look to words that conform to the realm of your sovereign purpose. Help me to love you with all I have, all I am, and all I am becoming. May I embrace the humanity of all whom I encounter today and treat them as sister or brother or friend.

James 2:8-13

If you fulfill the purpose⁶⁴⁷ of the royal law revealed in Sophia's Word, "Love⁶⁴⁸ and keep loving; love stranger as neighbor and neighbor as yourself,"⁶⁴⁹ you will show honor and demonstrate your nobility. If, however, you submit to society's hierarchy of wealth-based value, that same law exposes the corruption of your thinking, believing, and behaving.

The law is not intended for your personal convenience! You don't get to pick and choose which parts you like and to which you will be obedient. Consider this example. Sophia said we are to be faithful to our spouse ("You shall not commit adultery") and protect life as sacred ("You shall not commit murder").⁶⁵⁰ If you murder your neighbor but are faithful to your spouse, you're still a lawbreaker.

Let your talk and your walk agree. Let there be no distinction between what you say and what you do.

⁶⁴⁷ The Greek word used is a cognate of *teleos*, which conveys "fulfillment, accomplishment, perfection, or wholeness."

⁶⁴⁸ The Greek word used is a cognate of *agape*, which conveys a holistic sense of perfect, unconditional love.

⁶⁴⁹ c.f. Leviticus 19:18.

⁶⁵⁰ c.f. Exodus 20:13, 14.

Live in the freedom⁶⁵¹ to which the law invites you and by which it will judge you. You are free to love your neighbor as yourself, so do it! You are free to embrace equality and reject discrimination, so do it! According to the freedom given you by the law, turn upside-down society's hierarchy of wealth-based value, remembering Sophia honors every act of mercy. Sophia's intention is mercy. Mercy beats judgment in Sophia's eyes!

*Loving my neighbor
Seeking God-life's horizon
Freedom's true intent*

God, it's me. Renew in me a holy desire to serve, to love, and to forgive all whom I encounter this day. Restore to me the love of stranger and neighbor as I embrace them equally. Reclaim for me the sacred intention to talk and walk the way of Jesus. May mercy exult over judgment⁶⁵² in all I do.

James 2:14-17

Beloved, trust divorced from action is a mirage— is it really trust if there is no action? Such alleged trust does no one any good. Imagine someone you claim to love is naked and starving. You walk by, stop, and say, "Hello! How's it going?" Then you keep walking before they have time to answer, and you don't even notice they are naked and starving! Is that what you call trust that is

⁶⁵¹ This passage presents a choice for translators. The Greek word *mellontes* can be translated either as "to be about to" or "to intend." The Greek has an interesting intersection of *mellontes* with the words for freedom and judgment (*elutherias* and *krinesthai*). Greek syntax allows *mellontes* to be connected to either "freedom" or "judgment" (but not both). The NIV and ESV translate *mellontes* as "about to" and connect it to judgment: "...those who are going to be judged." (ESV) However, I connect *mellontes* to freedom to translate *mellontes* as intends: i.e. "freedom is the intention for which the law is given." Thus, in my paraphrase I reject the insinuation that the motivation for obedience is a fear of judgment and seek to convey the Jewish perspective of the Torah (law) that sees it not as a list of obligations but as a path toward personal, communal, and national liberation—this is who Sophia intends for us to be and what They intend for us to do.

⁶⁵² "Mercy exults over judgment" is a literal translation of the Greek of 2:13.

worthy of Sophia? Or maybe you give them a pep talk, “Buck up, little buckeroo. It’ll be okay! Sophia’s going to take care of you. Don’t you worry.” True trust is compelled to act. Action is trust exhaling.

*Sophia at work
In and through faith, hope, and love
Divine dance through us!*

God, it’s me. May my words mirror my deeds. May the height of words in Sunday worship be matched by the depths to which I will kneel in service to others Monday through Saturday, for your name’s sake and for my own healing and wholeness. Teach me to exhale my faith.

James 2:18-25

Now some folks spout nonsense such as, “Trust, works, to-may-to, to-mah-to. What does it matter so long as you have one or the other?” What does trusting Sophia without works even look like? Trust that only tries to hold its breath, that never exhales, will sooner or later pass out. Actions express your trust—people do what they truly believe. You say you believe in Sophia: great! But caring for your neighbor, naked and starving, tells me who you are and what you believe better than words ever will.

Here is something to consider. The Accuser’s minions know the truth about Sophia, and it terrifies them! Does their knowledge constitute belief? Hardly. Mere intellectual assent, such as they possess, is a mirage of trust.

*Words, words, words, words, words.
Or feeding the world’s hungry
Faith expressed through love*

God, it’s me. As a preacher, I love, love, love me some words of faith, words of hope, even wonky words of theological disputation. I don’t care, just give me some words. I’ll dine upon words for three meals a day and a bedtime snack. And when I am fully gorged, I realize words alone are not enough. I need to be put on a diet of doing justice, inspired to fast by loving mercy, placed on a hunger strike that I may

walk humbly with you. O Sophia, may I feast upon your Word as I also discover the God-rhythms of walking the Way of Jesus.

James 2:20-25

Fools! Can you not perceive that trust without action injures⁶⁵³ your true self? Abraham received credit for his right relationship with Sophia when he obeyed and offered his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham trusted that Sophia would be merciful and just. His actions brought his trust full circle and Sophia’s Word was fulfilled:

Abraham trusted Sophia.
Sophia claimed Abraham as a friend!
Relationships built on trust
are the only way to do it.⁶⁵⁴

Do you see now? In right relationships trust embraces action and actions express trust. Another example of this spiritual truth is revealed in the story of Rahab the prostitute.⁶⁵⁵ She was deemed right with Sophia because she expressed her trust about justice and truth when she protected Sophia’s spies, showing strangers hospitality and then directing them away from danger. Again I say, in right relationships trust embraces action and actions express trust. Without action, trust is a mirage.

*Faith and works embrace
Expressing pervasive truth
They need each other*

God, it’s me. As I age, I find myself pretending less and less. What people see is what they get. What I say I believe is what they see lived out. At least this is true with outward things. With inward things—like hope amidst tribulation and love of the acquaintance who irritates the crap out of me—well, I have a way to go. O Sophia, continue your work of growing me ever more clearly into the image of Jesus! Help me

⁶⁵³ The Greek word *arge* translates as “useless, worthless, or injurious.”

⁶⁵⁴ c.f. Genesis 15:6.

⁶⁵⁵ c.f. Joshua 2:1-16.

live, both outwardly and inwardly, as one whose trust embraces action and whose actions express trust.

James 3:1–2

Don't be too quick to elevate yourself to the status of "Minister of Word and Sacrament,"⁶⁵⁶ for those who teach others Sophia's Word are held to a higher standard. Of course, we all trip up at times and in a variety of ways. Anyone who neither stumbles nor falls is amazing. Sophia's bridle has tethered them to Their truth so they can live it fully.

*Sophia's bridle
Guiding toward belovedness
Uncommon restraint*

God, it's me. I resist influence (sometimes). I may be a bit too independent for my own good (sometimes). I certainly trip, stumble and fall through being too self-reliant (sometimes). So, please, grant unto me the grace of accepting your bridle and bit that I may be guided to live fully into your truth (always).

James 3:3–6

When we bridle a horse, it obeys us, and we can guide the entire animal. Large ships are steered by a small rudder, so even strong winds do not prevent the ship's captain from steering it to its destination. Likewise, the tongue, though small, influences the whole person. It makes great boasts and sets an entire forest on fire. The tongue is a fire-starter, in our body and in our life, and is itself consumed by the fires of Gehenna.⁶⁵⁷

*Choosing words with care
Bridle and bit directing
God's wholeness living*

⁶⁵⁶ The Greek word used is *didaskaloi*, which means "teachers." The Presbyterian Church (USA) calls its clergy "Ministers of Word and Sacrament."

⁶⁵⁷ *Gehenna* was the name of the valley outside of Jerusalem where garbage was burned.

God, it's me. Help me live what I believe. Help me walk what I talk. May the words of my mouth, the meditations of my heart, and the actions of my hands and feet honor you and be worthy of my being called your disciple. Braid them into a three-fold strand that endures and cannot be broken.

James 3:7–12

Humanity has tamed beasts and bugs, fish and fowl, all manner of animals. The only thing we cannot tame is our own tongue! Our tongue brings injury and death—treason and poison germinate from it, disease and death its decomposing fruit.

Consider the tongue's hypocrisy: praising Sophia and cursing Their children who bear Their likeness. How can it be that from the same tongue come praise and cursing? No more than fresh water and salt water can flow from the same spring, nor a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs. It makes no sense and should not be.⁶⁵⁸

*What you say matters
Injuring others with words
Betrayal of faith*

God, it's me. Help my "yes" mean agreement, affirmation, and accountability. Help my "no" mean negation—not to do, not to say, not to pretend. May I learn the ways of praise—bit by bit, step by step, year by year. May I unlearn cursing and never again look down at another.

James 3:13–18

The wise and experienced among you show their wisdom through how they live: embracing humility while they do the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, for the right reason. Fools, however, sink their teeth into bitterness, envy, and selfish ambition, then boast about it! They deny Sophia's truth by the way they live.

The "wisdom" of fools cannot dance the God-rhythms of Sophia's Way because it belongs to the world of "dog eat dog" and "survival of the fittest." The beasts of

⁶⁵⁸ c.f. Matthew 7:15-20.

the field cooperate with each other better than three fools trying to one-up one another.

Sophia's wisdom teaches us how to dance the God-rhythms with modesty and gentleness, as those inclined to seek peace, offer mercy, and bear good fruit. Sophia's wisdom is the heart undivided, totally committed, the real deal. Living according to Sophia's wisdom inevitably leads to becoming a peacemaker who plants seeds of peace to harvest right relationships.⁶⁵⁹

Shalom, salam, peace
Welcoming friends and stranger
Enemies embracing

God, it's me. Make me an instrument of your peace—like Francis and Clare, like Rosa and Martin, like the grandmother who never misses a day of prayer. Teach me, Sophia, to strive less and embrace more, to let go of bitterness that I may embrace modesty and gentleness. Unclench my fists to welcome stranger and enemy as beloved brother or sister. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

James 4:1–3

Polemics⁶⁶⁰ dominate you—fussing, fighting, and fraud a way of life—because hedonism dominates your false self.⁶⁶¹ What you covet you cannot have, so you murder to get it—your hedonism spilling over the rim like boiling water.⁶⁶² And when you pray to Sophia, you demand, as if you dictate to Them and They must do your bidding. Narcissism and self-defeat control you even when you pray.

⁶⁵⁹ c.f. Matthew 5:9.

⁶⁶⁰ The Greek word used is *polemai*, which can be translated also as “conflicts, argues, or fights.”

⁶⁶¹ The Greek word *hedonon* (or a conjugated variant) are used twice. The ESV translates the Greek as “passions” and “pleasures,” which is technically appropriate but seems to miss the nuance implied by *hedonon*.

⁶⁶² The Greek word used is *zeloo*, ordinarily translated as “jealous” or “covet,” but which HELPS Word Studies defines as “(an onomatopoeic word, imitating the sound of boiling water) – properly, to bubble over because *so hot (boiling)*.”

“The dividing line between good and evil runs down the middle of the human heart.”⁶⁶³

“There is a labyrinth of emotions in every human heart.”⁶⁶⁴

Calvin was correct: Ain't nobody squeaky clean. You, me, nobody

God, it's me. Am I as broken as James suggests? Or am I just better at hiding my false self—softening my polemical thoughts and not allowing the roiling waters of hedonism to boil over? And I have another question: Why am I so opposed to acknowledging my false self exists? Everyone has one. Everyone knows I have one, too. Sophia, help me live—open and transparent. Help me be honest about my false self, that I may be forgiven, redeemed, renewed, and restored to my true self, through the ministry of Jesus for me and the ministry of your Divine Spirit within me.

James 4:4–6

Don't be double-hearted! You must choose: Sophia's justice and joy or the world's broken ways that lead to heartbreak—hostility⁶⁶⁵ toward Sophia boiling over. Sophia's Word says the Divine Spirit yearns to dwell within our hearts, to become part of our household.⁶⁶⁶ And so Sophia lavishes us with gifts as Their Word says,⁶⁶⁷

Sophia dulls the brilliance
of those who over-shine,⁶⁶⁸

⁶⁶³ A quote attributed to Russian philosopher and anti-Soviet activist Alexander Solzhenitsyn, source not known.

⁶⁶⁴ A quote attributed to theologian and Christian Educator H. Richard Niehbur, source not known.

⁶⁶⁵ For those who are Madeline L'Engle fans: the antagonists in *A Wrinkle in Time* were called *eckthrois*, which is the Greek word used here meaning “hostility.”

⁶⁶⁶ The Greek word used is a variant of *oikeo*, which refers to the Greco-Roman household or family.

⁶⁶⁷ c.f. Proverbs 3:34.

⁶⁶⁸ The Greek word *hyperephanos* is a compound word ordinarily translated as “proud,” but literally means “over-shine” (*hyper/over + phanos/shine*).

but magnifies the light
of those who depend upon her.⁶⁶⁹

*My over-shining
Seeking to compete with God
What am I thinking?*

God, it's me. I surrender. I lay down all the armaments I have used against you in an unwinnable war: my pride, ego, and certainty. I have sought to over-shine, but also, at times, have resisted trying, doing, and risking. Sophia, teach me silence when I shout my name too loudly, and teach me to speak when I am too timid. May I learn to depend upon you, through you, and with you, for I really love it when your Spirit is a part of my household.

James 4:7–10

Don't be double-minded! Sit under Sophia's tutelage—arranging your life according to Their sacred rhythms. Stand against evil and it will disappear like morning mist. Snuggle up to Sophia and feel Their warm embrace. Wail about all the ways you welcome evil to visit.⁶⁷⁰ Grieve the times you invited evil to stay for an extended visit. Then turn your mourning into laughter⁶⁷¹ and transform your sorrow into joy as you allow chagrin to seep into your consciousness. Welcome regret to dance in your spirit and seek Sophia's forgiveness. Humility before Sophia is the ultimate exaltation.

*Sitting, listening
Clarity coming within
Spirit rhythms teach*

⁶⁶⁹ This is the literal meaning of the Greek word *tapeinoo* which is usually translated as “humble.”

⁶⁷⁰ The Greek text does not give a reason for the admonition to grieve, mourn and wail. Under the rubric of “interpretive paraphrase” I added the reason to grieve, as the context seems to imply these are the concerns James has for his readers.

⁶⁷¹ Fun fact unrelated to Scripture: the Greek word for laughter is *gelos*, which sounds like it could be the etymological source for the Italian gelato. While most linguists connect gelato with the Latin word for cold, I am intrigued and love to imagine that gelato really means laughter 😊

God, it's me. Humble me! Set my confidence in its proper perspective, giving it clear focus, creating boundaries that give life. You are the source of that life. Focusing on you and what you have done rather than what I am doing gives life. Your eternal perspective rather than my temporal one gives life. May I reach highest heaven by lying prostrate before you, O Sophia.⁶⁷²

James 4:11–12

Beloved, don't disparage each other! Slander is a form of cancer. Judgment is malignant, too. When you mock and malign one another, you place yourself above the Torah (where you cannot abide). There is One who is Judge—not you. There is One who both draws near and cuts off—not you. There is One who stands above the heights and glory of Torah—not you. It is not your place to judge your neighbor.

*Judgment malignant
Slander a slippery slope
Knowing my place: priceless*

God, it's me. I ask that my confidence would not become judgment and my belief in my own gifts not diminish my openness to others' giftedness. I ask that I have the humility to stand aside and allow you to be Judge, for only your judgment is seasoned with divine gift that can be experienced as love that will not let us go. I know, Sophia, that being Judge is not my job (help me let it go).

James 4:13–17

Be careful about your plans. You say, “Today I'll be here and tomorrow there. Next year I'm going to travel, maybe start a business. Check me out: I've got big plans!” Yet you cannot predict tomorrow, let alone next year. What is life? You are but mist that evaporates. Rather than boast of your big plans, you should say, “*En*

⁶⁷² St. Benedict listed 12 steps of descent as necessary to journey the “upward way.”

*shallah.*⁶⁷³ If Sophia intends, I will live and move and have my being.” Arrogance is evil; self-glory does not reflect light. Therefore, know the beautiful and do the beautiful.⁶⁷⁴ To know it and not do it brings a just judgment.

*See the beautiful
In the moment of seeing
Live in the beauty*

God, it’s me. I love to plan! Help me not to presume while planning. Help me to understand that I am not ultimately in control of my own life, let alone the universe. Help me even more to seek your plans, to discern the paths you have carved out for me. May my journey be guided by your Spirit, for what wonder that will bring. Oh, the places I shall go...en shallah.

James 5:1–6

Listen up, one-percenters! Cry aloud with lament and then cry even louder. Wailing and weeping are your only options, for your riches have corroded your hearts and minds. Fine clothes rot, eaten by moths, and even gold and silver tarnish. On the Day of Jesus, all these will testify against you that you stored up treasures on earth rather than treasures in heaven.⁶⁷⁵

Look at the truth, one-percenters! Like Abel⁶⁷⁶ before them, the howls of your workers—those who serve your interests and make you great wealth—cry out against you for your failure to pay them. As in the days of Moses,⁶⁷⁷ Sophia has heard their cries. You live in luxury and cultivate indulgence—your self-absorption a right and every extravagance excused. Your actions condemn the innocent and murder those who do not resist you.

⁶⁷³ *En shallah* is an Arabic expression common in the Middle East, which means “If God wills....”

⁶⁷⁴ The Greek word *kalon* can also mean “good.” In my first draft, I paraphrased this verse as “See the good and do the good.” Though the wider context of James 4 suggests “good” may be a better choice for translation, I chose “beautiful” as a means to stimulate wonder about the passage’s meaning.

⁶⁷⁵ c.f. Matthew 6:19-20.

⁶⁷⁶ c.f. Genesis 4:10.

⁶⁷⁷ c.f. Exodus 3:7.

*Listen to their cries
See the destruction rendered
Repent now to live*

God, it’s me. I want to take the edge from James’ words—make them less declarative and more nuanced, more open to interpretation (and my comfort). I want to believe his declarations against the rich apply to Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos—the 1% in the U.S.—and not middle-class people like me—the global 1%. These words shake my smug self-assurance and call me to renewed honesty: Am I being a good steward of what you have entrusted to me? Sophia, in your mercy, inspire me to live generously—blessed to be a blessing.

James 5:7–11

Now to the rest of us I say: Endure until the Day of Jesus when Sophia’s kin-dom will be revealed in full. For inspiration, look to the farmer as an example of patience. Day and night the farmer toils without evidence of a crop, planting and plowing, seeding and searching until the day when the crop sprouts, grows, and, finally, is ready to harvest. Endure with patience and trust, for the Day of Jesus is nearer today than it has ever been. Neither murmur nor grumble against one another, as our ancestors did in the desert.⁶⁷⁸ Frustration grows during trying times, yet we are not to judge one another. There is one who is Judge (and it’s not any of us), and the Judge will speak when the time is right.

Until that time, beloved, endure with patience. For more inspiration, look also to the truth-tellers from ages past who suffered for speaking Sophia’s truth. They named broken systems and corrupt practices. They called out the powerful and privileged, even kings! And they suffered because of their words. Yet we consider these truth-tellers blessed because they endured, their resilience a sign of their trust in Sophia. Job also endured and look what happened: He was restored to honor. Sophia’s compassion is abundant, Their mercy never-ending; therefore, I urge you again to endure.

⁶⁷⁸ c.f. Exodus 15:23-24 and 16:2-3ff.

Enduring in hope
Resilience as active trust
Patient faithfulness

God, it's me. Teach me to endure hardship when it comes. Not seeking it but standing true to who I am as your beloved. Not hiding from it when called to stand in solidarity with others. Neither hiding nor seeking but walking in faith, hope, and love, trusting we journey together.

James 5:12

When you confront hardship,⁶⁷⁹ speak truth—simple, straight-forward, without hesitation. Don't make flowery promises. Don't say, "I swear on a stack of Bibles," nor, "I swear on my mother's grave." Rather than prevaricate to avoid trouble, just say "Yes" or "No."⁶⁸⁰ To do otherwise will trip you up and cause you to fall, according to the broken practices of your false self.

Truth as yes and no
Not as a commodity
Something to ponder

God, it's me. Help me to speak what is in my heart and on my mind. May I speak with courage and kindness. May I speak as a fellow pilgrim on life's journey. May my words invite loving discourse rather than bludgeoning debate. May others receive my words as I intend them: your voice speaking through mine. Even more, may my words actually be you speaking through me.

James 5:13-18

When suffering, pray. When rejoicing, praise. When sick, call wise mentors from the gathering to pray and anoint you with oil in Sophia's name.

⁶⁷⁹ This phrase is not in the Greek text but is added as an interpretive frame for 5:12. Given the context of chapter 5, James' instruction to speak a simple yes or no is a response to the hardships his readers encountered as followers of Jesus in Roman culture.

⁶⁸⁰ c.f. Matthew 5:33-37.

Trust-full prayers bring wholeness and wake us up⁶⁸¹ to the God-life. Honest prayers that acknowledge acts of brokenness and the false self bring forgiveness. Indeed, when we admit our wrongs to one another and pray for each other, we bring healing to the Body—restoration and reconciliation result from our sharing prayer together.⁶⁸²

Prayer spoken by those who live in right relationship with Sophia, others, and their true self is forceful, even when gently uttered. Elijah spoke in such a way. He prayed that it would not rain, and for three and a half years, it didn't. He prayed the rain would come, and it did, heaven itself watering the earth's crops.⁶⁸³

Praying in all things
Prayer as a form of breathing
Discovering God

God, it's me. Teach me to pray as Jesus prayed. Teach me the way of the saints before me—the Desert Fathers and Mothers, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, Miss Virginia who taught third-grade Sunday School for more years than I can count. Teach me the gift of meditation—thinking on the Scriptures. Teach me the gift of contemplation—releasing my thoughts to dwell in your presence. Teach me to pray with and for others that, together, we may find your healing touch upon our life together.

⁶⁸¹ The Greek word *egerei* can mean "awake, arouse, or raise." In the context of being sick, it makes sense that most English translations choose to translate *egerei* as "raise." My paraphrase wonders what this verse suggests if a different, yet linguistically acceptable, definition is chosen.

⁶⁸² The Greek words in this sentence all use the middle voice. In Greek, there are three voices: active (I do), passive (I have done to me), and middle (I and you do together). In using the middle voice for the words translated as pray and heal, James suggests the healing that occurs is between and among the participants; that is, praying for and with each other heals the "us" that is our relationship, our being community in Jesus.

⁶⁸³ c.f. 1 Kings 17-18.

James 5:19–20

Beloved, sheep get lost. If you are the shepherd who brings them back, ponder this: You saved their life. Likewise, people do stupid things, walk down the wrong path, and get lost, too—sometimes mentally, sometimes socially, sometimes spiritually. If you are the one who leads them back—back into the wide and generous love of Jesus, back into right relationship with Sophia, back to the God-life—you will have saved them from death. Loving-kindness overwhelms all the breakage we cause and heals all the brokenness in us.

*Love wins every time
Broken choices cannot win
When love is at work*

God, it's me. Make me an instrument of your loving-kindness, always prepared to lead one stray sheep back into the fold of your pasture. Open me, also, to others doing the same work. As they lead me home, may I not resist the gifts of love they offer in your name.

1 and 2 Peter

Introduction

It is debatable whether Peter's letters should be considered Jewish-Christian letters. Not only is 1 Peter a "circular" letter (that is, to be circulated from one church to the next) addressed to locations in northern Turkey, but certain verses⁶⁸⁴ seem to refer to Gentiles rather than Jewish followers of Jesus. Including 1 and 2 Peter among Jewish-Christian letters may be too much rhetorical flourish on my part.

However, the tradition calls Peter "the Apostle to the Jews" in the same way that Paul is called "the Apostle to the Gentiles." Though addressed to churches located in northern Turkey, Peter also addressed his first letter to "exiles" (c.f. 1 Peter 1:1); that is, to the Jewish believers in the Diaspora. Though certain verses refer to Gentile believers (unsurprising given the geography of northern Turkey), the theological perspective of both letters leaps from the pages of the Hebrew Bible.

The central theme of both letters focuses on how a faith community can live under the rule of an oppressive Empire. Peter connects Israel's experiences of exodus and exile to his readers' lives. References to great themes of the Hebrew Bible litter 1 Peter's five, brief paragraphs:

- Being a chosen and covenant people,
- Passover and wandering the wilderness,
- Being a kin-dom of priests and a holy nation,
- Temple, Holy of Holies, mercy seat and scapegoat,
- Citation of the prophets, especially Isaiah, as well as the Psalms and Proverbs,
- Malachi's purifying fire (c.f. Malachi 3:3).

It is unsurprising, then, to notice that a pastoral emphasis on suffering weaves through both letters, as the

flocks to whom Peter wrote suffered and experienced an Imperial oppression similar to Israel's throughout much of its history and for the entirety of Peter's life. The pastoral and ethical focus on the suffering of faith communities is perhaps the greatest sign of the Jewish character of these letters. Peter *assumes* his community is oppressed and powerless, and his pastoral and ethical counsel *accommodates* this reality, as I footnote at 1 Peter 2:18:

Some translations seem to suggest suffering is a command. Such translations do not acknowledge the realities of Roman culture and the necessity for Peter to address the reality of suffering among those who were usually poor and always a religious minority.

1 Peter is interpreted as acceding to Empire and often cited by those advocating acceptance of provisional, civil laws as God's will (c.f. 2:13-17). However, the acceptance of provisional, civil laws advocated in 2:13 is toward the goal of protecting a vulnerable community. In contrast to 2:13, we read in 2:17 that faith communities should prioritize the eternal principles of being a faith community, with Caesar being last in the order of priority. Israel did the same for centuries.

2 Peter extends the counsel for suffering faith communities. Peter encourages faithful living in the midst of both Roman oppression as well as the challenge of "false prophets" or "false teachers." The specific challenge addressed in Peter's second letter is unique, but his counsel remains the same: live the faith and be the faith community God has called you to be. Thus, in 1 and 2 Peter, I use "The Sovereign" for the divine name. Peter's context was that of an oppressed faith community who yet proclaimed God in Jesus as the actual and true sovereign above Caesar.⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸⁴ c.f. 1:10 and 14, 2:10, and 4:3.

⁶⁸⁵ Here is my confession. I noticed throughout the writing process a peculiar phenomenon: 1 Peter uses the title of Christ

Taken together, 1 and 2 Peter remind us of the temptations and danger of what some call “Disney Princess” theology, which occurs when people of power and privilege read Scripture and always associate with the oppressed and never the oppressor—always the Israelites, never Egypt; always the disciples, never the Pharisees, always the Jews of Jesus’ day, never the Romans. Such thinking by people of cultural and economic privilege (such as myself) misses Peter’s message that conveys savvy tactics for living in a broken, unjust, and oppressive culture while maintaining the integrity of one’s trust in The Sovereign. Such thinking prioritizes the provisional statutes of transitory governments over the eternal principles of The Sovereign’s kin-dom. Such thinking hides from the challenge of healing the injustices and oppression for those without voice in society.

(23 times) more often than he uses Jesus’ name (8 times). (2 Peter uses the names and titles in approximately equal number.) I was mildly uncomfortable with this imbalance as I wrote this interpretive paraphrase. Having concluded the work on 1 Peter, I counted my own usage of “Anointed” and “Jesus” and discovered I used them in roughly equal numbers when paraphrasing 1 Peter. What does it say about my spirituality and faith perspective that I lift up the name of Jesus even when the Greek text does not? Knowing a writer’s bias is important. You now know mine.

1 Peter 1:1-2

Peter, a sent one⁶⁸⁶ of Jesus the Anointed, to The Sovereign's⁶⁸⁷ hand-picked, the refugees⁶⁸⁸ scattered all over north central Turkey,⁶⁸⁹ those The Sovereign was determined to know. The Sovereign set you apart from the world by the Divine Spirit and set you apart for the work of hearing, heeding, and holding true to Jesus, whose blood, sprinkled like the offering made on the mercy seat in the Jerusalem Temple (in the Holy of Holies),⁶⁹⁰ was offered for you also. May The Sovereign's gift and *shalom* overwhelm you with joy.

*Years ago
watching Charlton Heston lead
exiles*

*Mom thought him so handsome
Dad thought him "a man's man" for the way he led
exiles*

*I wonder now
about the difference between exiles and
refugees*

*And I conclude:
the people to whom Peter wrote his letter were
refugees*

*God, it's me. I am not one of those exiles and
refugees to whom Peter wrote. Yet your Good News
came to me from one who knew Jesus. Your Good*

⁶⁸⁶ The Greek word *apostolos* literally means "one who is sent," from which we get the word "apostle."

⁶⁸⁷ As mentioned in the introduction, the title that will be used for God is The Sovereign, which conveys that a significant message in Peter's letters is Peter's insistence that Jesus is Lord (or sovereign) and not Caesar.

⁶⁸⁸ The Greek word *parepidemos* is usually translated as "exile" and links linguistically to the English word "peripatetic," which means "walk about."

⁶⁸⁹ The five locations identified in the Greek text are, in order, Pontus, Galatia, Asia, Cappadocia, and Bithynia. Scholars agree this is likely the route 1 Peter was transmitted as a "circular letter."

⁶⁹⁰ The allusion to the Temple is implied in the reference to blood sprinkled.

News came to my Scottish ancestors from Roman Catholic priests. Your Good News came to them from those of Jewish heritage who claimed Jesus as Messiah. We all come from somewhere and most of us sojourn on this earth. Wherever I go, whomever I encounter, may I greet my fellow travelers as one set apart from the values of this world and set apart for the work of hearing, heeding, and holding true to Jesus.

1 Peter 1:3–9

Sing joyous songs to The Sovereign of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. The Sovereign's mercy overshadowed us, and we have been born into a hope that lives among us and moves through us. Our hope sprung to life when The Sovereign raised Jesus the Anointed from the dead, making us a part of the family. Now we have an inheritance that can never die, never degrade, and never diminish, for it is preserved and protected in heaven for us—just waiting for us to get there! Until then, The Sovereign's power preserves and protects us in the here and now and prepares us to be revealed as whole and complete, our true selves, when the fullness of The Sovereign's kin-dom arrives for all to see.

Joy dances with grief for those who belong to The Sovereign (as you know well), for the hope which is our inheritance is commingled with trials that test us. We rejoice though, do we not, because our trusting is genuine, authentic, the real deal. We're not playing games as we seek to honor Jesus the Anointed. Instead, we are demonstrating our trust in the midst of difficulties, being refined by fire,⁶⁹¹ which is better than gold. The authenticity of our trust helps us discover the full blessings of the God-life. Genuine trust reveals Jesus.

You have not seen Jesus with your eyes, yet you love him without condition. Though Jesus is not seen, yet you trust him, which fills you with joy no words can convey. The culmination of your trust is The Sovereign's gift: your true self as you are intended to be.

⁶⁹¹ c.f. Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the "Redeemer's Fire." Rather than Dante's "fire as punishment," the biblical metaphor for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious.

*The assurance of being beloved
side-by-side with moments of doubt*

*Times of sorrow
accompanied by courage permeating the heart*

*Pain in loving when
joy dances with grief*

*The God-life is not either-or but
one over-writing the other until all becomes whole*

God, it's me. For the blessings of knowing you, I offer my praise. For the joy that is mine to share with others, I praise your name. Even when difficulties come, I know your Spirit leads and guides me. Especially then, your Spirit is my strength and my shield. May I not avoid grief and sorrows but embrace them with the hope that is my inheritance, until all mourning is turned into dancing and all sorrows transformed by joy.

1 Peter 1:10–16

The truth-tellers from ages past told about the Story that makes us whole and complete, our true selves as we are intended to be. They spoke of it as a gift. Like scientists peering into a microscope, the truth-tellers looked for the smallest clue that would unlock to them its mysteries.⁶⁹² Their quest for discovery was the Divine Spirit at work in them, to crack open for them foreknowledge of the Anointed.

Their “Eureka!” moment unveiled to them the truth that the Anointed would both bear our brokenness in himself and radiate The Sovereign’s brilliance to all people—suffering and sorrow commingled with restoration and renewal in the one Anointed. The Divine Spirit unveiled to them that this knowledge about the Anointed was not for themselves alone but for future generations, to be told by those whom Jesus would send, through whom the Spirit would speak heaven’s message. Even the heavenly host were jealous.

So, with this in mind, fully informed, aware and alert, set your sights on this hope: the gift to be unleashed when Jesus the Anointed is unveiled in his full glory. Let hope be your North Star. Be obedient, too. Let your hope set the course for your journey and then walk the Way set out for you. Don’t be poured into the mold of moral blindness and ethical ignorance—neither greed nor corruption are to be your North Star! “Just because I want it” does not make an action good and just and true. Instead, seek to be like The Sovereign, who said in Torah:

Be like me!
Live the God-life!
Dance to the God-rhythms!
Be like me!

*I almost never find what I'm looking for...
I search for selfish things, easy things.
I usually find the unexpected:*

*How raising children transformed me,
How life is more fragile and precious than I imagined,
How sorrow and joy both teach deep truths—*

*The Anointed immersed in suffering
The Anointed engulfed by blessing
The same Anointed—the same, the same.*

God, it's me. I seek to be holy, as you are holy. I long to be set apart for meaningful work, for service that makes a difference: touches a life with love, heals a hurting heart, provides food and shelter to those in need. I long for these things because you planted a seed in me that refused to die. May I nurture that seed unto harvest—blessed to be a blessing. O Sovereign, may I be holy as you are holy.

1 Peter 1:17–25

The Sovereign doesn’t play favorites and expects us all to live the God-life. Though we are on this earth only for a brief time, we are to live with reverence and respect.

We are like refugees—in this world but not to live according to its values. Our human dignity depends not

⁶⁹² The Greek text uses *exezetesan* and *exeraumesan* back-to-back, which are translated as “seek” and “search for, investigate.” I attempt to capture Peter’s emphasis in the paraphrase.

on riches—silver and gold do not define us—but on our being redeemed.⁶⁹³ As slaves in the market have had their freedom purchased for them, so The Sovereign purchased our freedom from the clutches of the Accuser through the self-giving of Jesus. Jesus the Anointed is like a lamb without blemish, upon whom the world's brokenness was placed, a scapegoat that takes away the sin of the world.⁶⁹⁴

Before time began, Jesus was appointed this task. In more recent times, Jesus was unveiled for you, that you might trust The Sovereign, letting go of old practices that bring death to be embraced by the ways that raise us to life. It is The Sovereign at work through Jesus, raising him from death to life and making his name to shine like the sun, that infuses our trust with perseverance and causes our hope to shine like the North Star it is.

You opened yourselves to the transforming work of the Spirit when you submitted yourselves to truth. Your authenticity as followers of Jesus is demonstrated by how you love⁶⁹⁵ one another. Keep loving! Love deeply and sincerely from the heart, for you are new creation. Seeds of corruption were not planted in your hearts but eternal seeds, seeds that endure, seeds that cause The Sovereign's Word to live and abide within you. As the truth-teller Isaiah wrote,

All humans are grass,
our glory like the flowers of the field,
grass withers and flowers fade,
The Sovereign's Word endures.⁶⁹⁶

This is the Word that was told you—the Story that endures.

*Forest wind—
dry, barren arms silhouette gray skies.
Brown tufts peek on the trampled path,
awaiting the renewal of spring.*

⁶⁹³ The following sentences describe the economic, market context that define the meaning of redeem.

⁶⁹⁴ c.f. Leviticus 16:8-10.

⁶⁹⁵ The Greek text uses both *philia* and *agape*, both of which translate as “love.” The former connotes familial love while the latter connotes a love without condition.

⁶⁹⁶ c.f. Isaiah 40:6-8.

*Fall and fade we must,
but wind ushers in
hope and the promise of life,
dreams we will live again.*

*Wind
breaks and blesses,
creates belovedness
in all in whom the Word abides.*

God, it's me. May I learn humility as I accept my mortality. May maturity deepen not through length of years but by plumbing the depths of your Word's understanding, acceptance, and embrace. For in its pages, I find Jesus and am found by him. In its pages I learn the Story of true freedom. May I abide in your Word and your Word abide in me.

1 Peter 2:1–3

Because The Sovereign's Word lives and abides in you, be new creation. Peel away all the layers of malice and deceit with which you have clothed yourselves. Strip yourselves naked of every kind of hypocrisy, envy, and slander. Such clothes no longer fit you (and are definitely out of style). Instead, like a newborn swaddled in a warm blanket, suckle the milk that makes you whole and complete. Yearn for The Sovereign's breast that nourishes your true self. Taste and see:

The Sovereign is good (all the time);
all the time, (The Sovereign is good).

Would you prefer...

*Spew and view:
Malice, malignancy,
Envy and slander embracing, or*

*Taste and see:
Life without guile
Goodness growing, or*

*Spew and view:
Deceit, devolution, devolving, devolving,
Hypocrisy heightened to highest heights, or*

Taste and see:

God is good (all the time)

All the time (God is good)...

May I take your order?

God, it's me. I long to taste the pure spiritual milk that helps me grow toward my true self. I crave that which causes the image of Jesus to live more fully within me. "Teach me how to filter, when to release, what to treasure. Remind me that your ways are everlasting, your paths well-trodden, your journey life-giving."⁶⁹⁷

1 Peter 2:4–10

Come to the Living Stone! Come to the One rejected and ridiculed by humans but respected by The Sovereign. In him and through him you also are like living stones and, piece by piece and stone by stone, all y'all, together, are being built into a spiritual house—the dwelling place in which The Sovereign lives. The Sovereign lives in you all and through you all so that, together, you may be set apart for divine service to bring people to The Sovereign and The Sovereign to people.⁶⁹⁸ The giving of yourselves is a gift The Sovereign honors, a gift that pleases, a gift that brings life to others through Jesus the Anointed.

Now, what do the Scriptures say? The Psalmist declares,

Look! I lay a stone in Jerusalem,
chosen and honored it is.

The one who trusts in the Living Stone
will always live with honor, never disgrace.⁶⁹⁹

To all who trust in Jesus, the Living Stone is honored and respected. But those who reject Jesus are shocked when they discover,

The Living Stone

rejected by ones who thought they knew best,
ridiculed by ones who thought they had it figured out.

The Living Stone

The Sovereign's masterpiece,
the foundation upon which the God-life is built.⁷⁰⁰

The Living Stone

people trip over, stumbling, falling.
So sad!⁷⁰¹

Those who reject Jesus as the Living Stone trip, stumble, and fall, setting in motion their own demise as they refuse to dance the God-rhythms of the God-life.

Not so all y'all. You have not rejected Jesus as the Living Stone but embraced him as such. You, therefore, have been engrafted into the work, purpose, and role of Israel:⁷⁰² to be those whom The Sovereign has chosen, the beloved; to be those who serve the royal work of bringing people to The Sovereign and The Sovereign to people; to be those who are a people set apart from the world's values and set apart for The Sovereign's purposes.

All this—*all this!*—is a gift to you all so that—*so that!*—you may proclaim the praises of The Sovereign, who lured you from the dark cave you called home and brought you into the warmth and light of the Sun. Once you were nobodies, now you're somebodies—The Sovereign's beloved! Once you all only knew to expect judgment (and rightly so), now you all have been overshadowed by The Sovereign's loving-kindness, mercy and peace. It is good to be you all.

⁷⁰⁰ c.f. Psalm 118:22.

⁷⁰¹ c.f. Isaiah 8:14.

⁷⁰² c.f. Exodus 19:5-6. This verse is an example of how interpreters can either combat or conform to supercessionism (the idea that the Christian Church supersedes Israel; c.f. Introduction). I have interpreted the Greek text as suggesting the Church continues and enhances the ongoing work of Judaism rather than replacing Judaism with Christianity. Israel remains a royal priesthood, a holy nation, etc. (c.f. Romans 11).

⁶⁹⁷ Shirin McArthur, "Psalm Flight for Psalm 119," *Psalm Flights: Engaging with Scripture through Poetry and Prayer* (Unpublished manuscript shared with the author, April 27, 2022, Microsoft Word file.

⁶⁹⁸ "...bring the people to The Sovereign and The Sovereign to people" is the literal description of what it means to be a holy priesthood.

⁶⁹⁹ c.f. Isaiah 28:16.

*Dancing with two-left feet,
“trip, stumble, and fall” concerns me,
for I am broken, tempted by*

*the sexy stranger’s eye across a room,
the fortunate accounting error,
the desire to avoid suffering and loneliness.*

*I could fall from all of the above
if I didn’t cling, cling, cling to the
Living Stone, the Living Stone, the Living Stone.*

God, it’s me. I rejoice that as I cling to you, you have always embraced me. I give you thanks that when I trip, stumble, and fall, you are beside me to lift me up. I give you praise that you chose me for a purpose—your purpose. As you have lured me from the dark cave of my own self-interest, send me into the light of your Son, that I may reflect your love to all.

1 Peter 2:11–12

Beloved, as foreigners and refugees, create a barrier between you and the floodwaters of broken desire that continually rise and threaten to overwhelm your souls. Keep your distance from distorted desire. Learn to let it go; indeed, get in the habit of sending broken desire packing.

In the way you live, give those who do not know Jesus zero excuse to judge or accuse. You know that many falsely accuse us of cannibalism because we say in holy communion, “Take, eat, this is my body....”⁷⁰³ You also know we are falsely accused of being atheists because we do not believe in the Roman gods. You know, finally, we are always under suspicion because we welcome poor and rich, women and men, and people of all nations to act as a family united in Jesus. Such breaking down of human barriers is unheard of and causes the Roman authorities

⁷⁰³ I lean heavily into interpretation here. This sentence and the next two are not found in the Greek text but describe the 1st century social context for the reasons Greeks and Romans accused the followers of Jesus of unethical behavior and lifestyles.

to wonder if we have a political agenda against Caesar.⁷⁰⁴ Again I say: Give those who do not know Jesus zero excuse to judge or accuse. Instead, seek the good and perform the good. Walk in the light and reflect the light. Let your lives reflect The Sovereign and prepare you all for the Day when the kin-dom will be unveiled in its fullness.

*Misunderstood and falsely accused?
true intentions ignored?
Love anyway⁷⁰⁵*

God, it’s me. Teach me to love for love’s sake. Not to be thought of as good by others. Not to open a door for evangelism. Not to get my foot in the door for a business deal. Rather, help me love for love’s sake. To love because loving is right and just and good. To love as a reflection of your Spirit at work in me. To love because I desire to honor you. When others falsely (or rightly) judge or accuse, help me to love...anyway.

1 Peter 2:13–17

With full understanding that we are under suspicion, falsely judged and accused, arrange⁷⁰⁶ your lives in such a way as to avoid false accusations. Accept that The Sovereign allows human cultures to be organized by rulers and their delegates: from Caesar down to the local sheriff, rules are made and laws enforced to preserve the

⁷⁰⁴ It is the nature of authoritarian regimes to be suspicious of gatherings of people who would ordinarily not associate with each other.

⁷⁰⁵ This poem is inspired by the words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who is reported to have said,

People are often unreasonable and self-centered. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you are honest, people may cheat you. Be honest anyway. If you find happiness, people may be jealous. Be happy anyway. The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough. Give your best anyway. For you see, in the end, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

⁷⁰⁶ The Greek word used is *hupotasso* which is ordinarily translated as “submit” or “obey.” However, *hupotasso* is a compound word that literally translates as “under/arrange.”

good and discourage the bad. Obeying just laws, therefore, honors The Sovereign and is a good way to keep out of trouble.

So, live free and do what you think is right and just, but don't use your freedom as license. "Because I can" is no excuse for abuse, betrayal, or corruption, no excuse for allowing injustice or tolerating inequality. Live as servants of The Sovereign, who is your true ruler. Here's how: first, respect everyone without exceptions; second, love⁷⁰⁷ the beloved, the Body of Jesus, without condition; third, revere The Sovereign with awe and trembling; and, fourth, give to Caesar as much honor as he is due—no less and no more.⁷⁰⁸

Church and State

Two peas in a pod

Rivals for a common crown

Awkward dance partners

Protection from the abuses of each other

The order is everything: Church then State

God, it's me. Help me do justice even when the laws say I don't have to. Help me to love kindness even though no law says I must. Help me to walk humbly with you, my true sovereign, whose rule of my heart is deeper than any Law of the Land could ever hope to be.

1 Peter 2:18–25

To the beloved who live in poverty⁷⁰⁹ I say: Roman culture is contrary to The Sovereign's kin-dom in the way it creates social and economic hierarchies that oppress those with the least power. So, if you suffer,⁷¹⁰ do

⁷⁰⁷ The Greek word used is *agape*.

⁷⁰⁸ The Greek word used is *timao*, which translates as "value at a price" or "assign value."

⁷⁰⁹ The Greek text uses the word *doulos*, which translates as "slave" or "servant." I lean into interpretation to paraphrase this for our 21st century cultural context. In this passage, Peter is not saying that slavery is the way things *should be* but responding to the way things *are* in Roman culture.

⁷¹⁰ Some translations seem to suggest suffering is a command. Such translations do not acknowledge the realities of Roman culture and the necessity for Peter to respond to the culture *the way it is rather than the way we prefer it would be*. The paraphrase seeks to acknowledge the reality of suffering for Christians in the

so as those in whom the Divine Spirit lives. Whether your master is kind or harsh, gentle or severe, to show respect testifies to your grace amidst suffering—you honor The Sovereign. Now, if you are punished for doing wrong, that's another story. But if you live with integrity while enduring suffering, you preserve your dignity and your light shines for others to see. The Anointed encourages you to suffer as he suffered: without malice in your heart nor hatred upon your lips. As Isaiah, the truth-teller from ages past, wrote:

The Servant broke no law,
the Servant spoke no evil.⁷¹¹

The Anointed's example endures for all who suffer unjustly. When soldiers insulted him, he was silent. When abused, he did not respond in kind. He surrendered himself to The Sovereign, giving himself over to judgment and the work set before him. He assumed others' brokenness that they might be healed.⁷¹² He received the world's darkness within himself that he might transform it into light. On the cross, he died that we might live as those given the gift of right relationship with The Sovereign. It is just as Isaiah the truth-teller wrote:

The Servant's wounds healed your own,
like sheep you were lost, lost, lost.⁷¹³

And now the Good Shepherd is the boss of you all (so you're in good hands).

Suffering

not commandment but reality,

not welcome yet instructive,

not denied, transforms.

1st century who were usually poor and always a religious minority.

⁷¹¹ c.f. Isaiah 53:9.

⁷¹² This is a paraphrase of St. Gregory's famous quote in his letter to Cledonius: "that which is not assumed is not transformed." Gregory argued that Jesus' incarnation was fully human (contra Docetism, which argued Jesus only seemed human—Greek *doceo*, "to seem,"—and therefore he didn't really suffer). The quote is also attributed to Origen.

⁷¹³ c.f. Isaiah 53:4-6.

God, it's me. Teach me anew that suffering is not divine punishment but human opportunity to turn to you in trust and hope. Malice and avarice consume and lust for control inflames. May my heart be open only to you as my true hope. When suffer I must, may I follow the example of Jesus, whose heart remained outward in love.

1 Peter 3:1–7⁷¹⁴

To the beloved who are wives I say: Roman culture is contrary to The Sovereign's kin-dom in the way it tolerates Patriarchy—men oppressing women. In the kin-dom all who are married, both husbands and wives, are called to submit to one another out of reverence to Jesus.⁷¹⁵ Reverence to an unbelieving partner may open their heart to hear The Sovereign's message of unconditional love. Inner beauty matters more than outer beauty. Integrity and respect shine brighter than a Gucci bag or Brooks Brothers suit. Your heart's humanity is revealed through the indestructible, incorruptible, and immortal beauty of a kind and gentle spirit. Neither Gucci nor Brooks Brothers can compete with such a spirit.

Scripture is littered with stories that assume Patriarchy is The Sovereign's will. Immersion into the Scriptures, however, reveals a deeper truth. Sarah was made whole and complete through her hope in The Sovereign (though she also listened to Abraham).⁷¹⁶ Sarah did what was right and lived with courage. Husbands, you can learn a thing or two from Sarah. Indeed, treat the women in your life as if you are serving Mother Sarah, as those who are to be honored. And remember, you do not

⁷¹⁴ In this passage, as in the last passage, I lean into interpretation for the paraphrase. Whereas Peter gives distinct counsel to wives and husbands, I merge Peter's meta message about caring, faithful relationships and apply it to both partners in a marriage.

⁷¹⁵ c.f. Ephesians 5:21, which is not in the Greek text but the same ethical value seems to be assumed by Peter as he attempts to be egalitarian in his counsel.

⁷¹⁶ Peter offers a counter-cultural example in this paragraph. Though in the Greek text Peter says Sarah listened to, hearkened or obeyed Abraham, the emphasis in his statement (and his use of Sarah's life as an illustration of the larger point) revolves around how Sarah's value came from her trust in The Sovereign rather than her being Abraham's property.

journey to the kin-dom alone but accompanying one another, dancing together the rhythms of the God-life.

*We sever head from heart whenever
equality bends the knee to hierarchy*

*Two are made one and made beautiful
through kindness*

*Intimacy that is life-giving
dances the God-rhythms as partners*

God, it's me. Thank you, O Sovereign, for my beloved. I am truly blessed and a better follower of Jesus because of her influence in my life. I have learned and am learning to love, for I must shut down my inward narcissism, my desire to be served and not to serve.⁷¹⁷ I thank you we get to dance "The Kin-dom Twist" together!

1 Peter 3:8–12

To all I say: share a common purpose, shower each other with compassion and caring, be tender-hearted and humble. Don't return evil for evil or insult for insult. Instead, repay evil with blessing and insult with affirmation, remembering you are heirs of The Sovereign's blessing. As the Psalmist wrote:

Do you love life and desire goodness?
Then tame the tongue!
Let no evil drip from your lips:
honesty not deceit,
transparency not manipulation is what I require.
Turn away from evil and turn toward goodness.
Seek The Sovereign's *shalom!*
Seek and keep seeking until you are in its embrace.
The Sovereign sees and hears.
The Sovereign is attentive to all goodness,
and turns away from evil.⁷¹⁸

⁷¹⁷ This is the opposite of what Jesus said about himself in Mark 10:45, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve..." (NIV).

⁷¹⁸ c.f. Psalm 34:12-16.

*Kindness is life-giving.
Kind words the Balm of Gilead.*

*Easy to hate, to spew venom.
Tongue's poison the serpent's legacy.*

*No one deserves venom.
None have the right to bite.*

God, it's me. Make me an instrument of civility in uncivil times. Attune my ear both to the words I say and the tone with which I speak. As I have been blessed, make me a blessing. As I have been loved, teach me to love. In your shalom may my home large enough for others to find shelter.

1 Peter 3:13-22

A passion for good protects you from bitterness. Eagerness for the right douses anger's flames. As Isaiah the truth-teller wrote:

You need not wallow in fear, even when conspiracies abound and persecution is around every corner, for you bear the imprint of The Sovereign's blessing upon you. The Holy One of Israel has called you.⁷¹⁹

Instead of fear, turn your hearts toward the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. Revere the Anointed and fear will flee!

Always be prepared to speak hope into the world. Don't offend through arrogance and presumption, but gently and respectfully speak of the hope that lives within you in Jesus. Give no one a cause to slander you by the way you behave. If you must suffer, better to suffer for doing good than because you deserve it. Neither being a "Goofball for Jesus" nor "Obnoxious for Christ" is The Sovereign's will.

And here is a summary of our hope in Jesus:⁷²⁰
The Anointed suffered for our sins. The one who was just

⁷¹⁹ c.f. Isaiah 8:12-13, though only Isaiah 8:12 is in the Greek text. Allusion seems to be made to Isaiah 8:13 though it is not quoted specifically.

⁷²⁰ This phrase is not in the Greek text, but Peter's paragraph in chapter 3 is clearly a summation of the hope we are to be prepared to share.

confronted evil and overcame it to bring us into The Sovereign's presence. His confrontation with evil brought him to the Cross,⁷²¹ where the Accuser sought to turn his heart inward toward hate. But the Accuser failed, for the Anointed's heart remained outward in love for all people.

Though the Anointed's body was put to death, the Breath⁷²² still enlivened his soul. The Breath led him into the abyss, to those who had died long ago, in the days of Noah. In the Abyss the Anointed proclaimed The Sovereign's mercy to those who had never had a chance to hear of it—The Sovereign's heart had been hidden from them, but the Anointed revealed it by sharing Good News.

And so The Sovereign's plan to bring new creation came full circle: through the waters of the flood, righteousness was given a new beginning, and eight people were saved through the waters that foreshadowed the waters of baptism.⁷²³ Now, you all are made whole and complete through baptismal waters, cleansed not from dirt upon the body but purified in your moral conscience. Baptism River flows through Jesus' resurrection and into heaven itself, carrying us to Jesus, who sits next to The Sovereign. There the heavenly hosts sing praises to his name.

*Tiptoe between
anger and fear
awkwardly stumbling
on the journey.*

⁷²¹ What follows is interpretive paraphrase and offers a description of an atonement theory (re: explanation of what happened on the Cross) known as Christus Victor, which was the Church's dominant theory for the first 1,000 years. Christus Victor emphasizes Jesus' victory over sin, death, and evil and contrasts with atonement theories that presume a judicial framework. Theories of atonement that emphasize a judicial perspective are known as either satisfaction theory or penal substitution theory, which are more common and better known within Protestant churches. The third major theory is known as the moral exemplar theory, and there are variations on the theme for each atonement theory. The New Testament hints at each of these theories but does not specify any of them as the sole, perfect explanation of what happened when Jesus went to the Cross. It is best to remember the ancient axiom: "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, diversity. In all things, charity."

⁷²² The Greek and Hebrew words for spirit also mean "breath" or "wind."

⁷²³ c.f. Genesis 6-9.

*Better by far to be zealous for
kindness and respect
drifting on baptismal waters
toward hope.*

God, it's me. The whispers of hope I speak are drowned by shouts—angry shouting, a cacophony of bitterness, resentment, and indignation. Can I speak light into this darkness, O Sovereign? Can my words effect goodness? I confess that at times I despair. Renew in me a vision of Jesus on the Cross—confronting the powers with emptiness, overcoming hatred with love, defeated in the moment yet victorious forever.

1 Peter 4:1–6

Hold as your intention to adopt the same resolve as the Anointed expressed when he suffered. Though afflicted with trauma, the Anointed did not flinch from loving those around him. Suffering inflicted upon us may lead to death, and then we will be finished wrestling with sin, for sin cannot live after we die.⁷²⁴ Living with Jesus' resolve, however, we may choose to live for The Sovereign's purpose and pleasure rather than our own indulgence.

You lived a long time wallowing in indulgence. Before you came to know The Sovereign, your lives were consumed with carousing, seeking lust over love, ignorant and agnostic about the God-life. Those who knew you then are now surprised you will not join in their unending

quest for self-gratification. They mock you now but will soon have to pay the bill for their willful and wanton ways.

There is One who judges the living and the dead, and that One is both just and merciful. Therefore, Jesus was sent into the abyss to proclaim The Sovereign's love for all people, even the dead! They have received the judgment of all humanity⁷²⁵ in their dying, but The Sovereign invites them to dance the God-rhythms of the God-life.

*That was me, carousing.
I liked to party.*

*That was me in lust,
yes indeed.*

*That was me, unknowing and unbelieving,
God-life a hazy dream.*

*Your judgment, just and merciful, O Sovereign,
liberated my mind, then my heart.*

*Your Spirit taught me to dance
God-rhythms.*

God, it's me. Thank you for the love and mercy you rain down upon me in Jesus—his suffering, my resolve; his self-emptying love, my being filled with purpose. O Sovereign, may I find joy in living for you that is greater than any self-gratification. May I offer myself to others this day for the work of your justice and joy.

1 Peter 4:7–11

The purpose⁷²⁶ of all things has drawn near. Therefore, notice with intention both those near you and the Divine Spirit at work all around you. Notice with a clear mind and calm heart. Notice, then pray and act: to

⁷²⁵ i.e., death and taxes.

⁷²⁶ The Greek word used is *telos*, which can mean “end, purpose, fulfillment, perfect, or complete.” While it is more common to translate 4:7 as “end” to suggest the cessation of linear time, I chose to wonder what happens in the text if end is understood in the sense of “The Great Ends of the Church,” aka purpose.

⁷²⁴ The Greek of 4:1 is difficult to translate because of the use of passive verbal forms (“I am acted upon”). Particularly difficult is the use of *pepantai*, translated as “done, finished, or ceased,” which appears in passive form only once in the New Testament (thus, literally: “I am ceased upon,” which is a non-sequitur in English). Adding to the difficulty are the two uses of *pathon*, translated as “suffer,” but whose meaning actually implies a passive form (even when grammatically constructed as an active verb!); thus, *pathon* means “acted upon in a way that causes one pain.” My attempt in the paraphrase is to capture the sense of loss of agency being described in the early Christians' lives and Peter's focus on the one choice for which they still have agency: their intention or resolve about how they will respond to being acted upon.

notice, pray, and act are the dance steps of the God-rhythms.

And when you act, loving without condition is the first and best of all things you can do. Love deeply and intensely, for such love hides blemishes and heals brokenness. Love strangers into friendship, into becoming family. Love with neither grumble nor murmur of complaint.⁷²⁷

Each one of you received a gift from The Sovereign. These gifts were given for a purpose, and you are to use them as wise and faithful stewards to bless the gathering. If you speak, speak as if The Sovereign was speaking through you. If you serve, serve with all the ability The Sovereign gives you. Use your gifts to serve others so people will shout, “Huzzah! Huzzah!” to The Sovereign and sing thanksgiving to Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar. To Jesus is given all authority in the kin-dom, for he perfectly reflects The Sovereign.

Notice is an active verb.

Intention and focus embrace.

Personal agenda released

*to welcome the gift of another,
to hear the Spirit's whisper,
to become*

gift and blessing,

*The Sovereign's intent,
our true self.*

God, it's me. Quiet my mind through your Breath. Still my spirit through breathing. Help me to notice—my own longings and needs. Help me notice when I lie to myself and then others. Help me notice, as well, the gifts waiting to be discovered, affirmed, and then used for blessing. Help me to notice others, too, to give to them the gift of being seen and heard and loved. Let me not forget to love, for what is the point of noticing another if I do not love them? Help me, O Sovereign, to notice you also, and, in noticing, to remember I am not alone.

⁷²⁷ c.f. Exodus 14:7-12. Peter here makes an allusion to the Israelites grumbling or murmuring in the desert.

1 Peter 4:12-19

Beloved, don't be surprised⁷²⁸ when suffering comes and walks alongside you—not as a stranger but as a companion. Rejoice that you share in the suffering of the Anointed and so will be overjoyed when he is unveiled, his radiance revealed for all to behold.

Being insulted because you reflect the Anointed's character and integrity is a point of pride: blessed are you—yours is the kin-dom of heaven,⁷²⁹ and The Sovereign's pleasure rests upon you. Now, if you suffer because you deserve it—that is, because you murder or steal or just because you mess with people and disrupt their lives—well, that's a different thing. However, if you suffer because you claim Jesus, being proud you bear his name—you are a fellow heir with Jesus of The Sovereign's kin-dom.

The *kairos*⁷³⁰ is at hand, when The Sovereign brings judgment to the gathering, who are indeed heirs with Jesus of the kin-dom. The kin-dom has been promised to us as a gift, and we are not yet prepared to receive it. The Sovereign loves us just as we are and too much to let us stay that way. If judgment is upon us, how much more is it on those who refuse justice and joy? As the Proverb says,

If it is difficult for those with right relationships to be made whole and complete.

How much more difficult is it for those who do not dance the God-rhythms of the God-life?⁷³¹

So, if you must suffer (and we all will suffer), better to do it because you are pursuing the Creator's justice and joy, leading others to the life of *shalom*.

*Suffering— no stranger to
“Good Trouble.”*

⁷²⁸ The Greek word *xenizo* can mean either “entertain a stranger” or “startle, bewilder.”

⁷²⁹ c.f. Matthew 5:10.

⁷³⁰ The Greek word *kairos* means “time” and is used to convey the “key moment” or the transformational moment. *Kairos* contrasts with the other Greek word for time, *chronos*, which conveys chronological or linear time.

⁷³¹ c.f. Proverbs 11:31.

*Suffering—companion to
the labor of justice and joy.*

*Suffering, too, comes alongside us
in a Buffalo supermarket or in a Taiwanese church.⁷³²*

*Suffering erupts when
suspicion, paranoia, and lies,
lead to hatred and obliterate Jesus' way.*

*But suffering, when walked with Jesus,
becomes a strange, sacred friend,
and weeping becomes our new Way.*

God, it's me. I don't want to suffer but am willing, if needed, in order to protect my neighbor's rights to healthcare or civil protections I assume as a birthright. If I must suffer, may it be because I spoke out for free school lunches for our nation's children or against the practice of redlining.⁷³³ O Sovereign, in many ways, from multiple directions, suffering will enter my life. When it does, may I encounter it not as a stranger but as a friend prepared to guide me ever deeper into the heart of Jesus.

1 Peter 5:1–4

I am an old man, but I remember what the eyes of my youth saw: My eyes saw the Anointed's suffering! I saw his suffering and shared in it as *koinonia*,⁷³⁴ as spiritual fellowship, so I speak with authority when I say, "You who share the *koinonia* of the Anointed's suffering will also share the *koinonia* of his glory when the kin-dom is unveiled in its fullness."

⁷³² This line refers to the events of May 15, 2022, when 10 were slaughtered in a mass shooting at a Buffalo, NY supermarket and three killed while attending a post-worship luncheon of the Taiwanese congregation of Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, CA. See also note 763.

⁷³³ Redlining is the practice of denying a creditworthy applicant a loan for housing in a certain neighborhood, usually for racial reasons.

⁷³⁴ The Greek text uses the noun form, *koinonos*, translated as "partaker" by the ESB but part of the word cluster conveying "spiritual sharing and fellowship."

Therefore, be not afraid that suffering comes, and tend your sheep. The Sovereign has placed sheep under your care, so love them like they are your own children. Love them with glad and generous hearts; love them not for greed but in goodness. Eagerly teach them to dance the God-rhythms. Infuse them with God-life in the way you serve and set an example for them. When the Good Shepherd is unveiled, you will receive the victor's crown—even better than the Olympian's garland, which fades away, but The Sovereign's wreath that endures forever!

*Mine eyes have seen the glory
of the suffering of the Lord.
He's unlocking every vintage
that produces what is poured.
He hath loosed the faithful wonder
of his sorrow and his Word.
His care is tending on.*

*Loving, caring, hallelujah!
Loving, caring, hallelujah!
Loving, caring, hallelujah!
His care is tending on.*

*He has sounded forth the trumpet
that does call us forth to serve.
He is sifting hearts and minds
to find those with the needed nerve.
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer
and be filled with joy and verve.
His care is tending on.*

*Loving, caring, hallelujah!
Loving, caring, hallelujah!
Loving, caring, hallelujah!
His care is tending on.*

*In the beauty of the lilies,
Christ did die across the sea.
With a glory in his visage
that does transform you and me.
As he died to make us holy,
let us live to make all free.
His care is tending on.*

Loving, caring, hallelujah!
Loving, caring, hallelujah!
Loving, caring, hallelujah!
*His care is tending on.*⁷³⁵

God, it's me. Make me a faithful shepherd, who cares not for greed nor gain but in goodness. When the hours get long, give me strength. When sheep go astray, give me patience. When troubles come, give me the courage to stand against all that would harm my flock, which is really your flock, for we are all the sheep of your pasture.⁷³⁶

1 Peter 5:5-14

Likewise, you who are not shepherds and who are less experienced in the God-life, arrange your lives under the tutelage of those who are mature in Jesus. All y'all should clothe yourselves with humility, for,

The Sovereign opposes braggarts
 but showers the humble with
 loving-kindness, mercy, and love.⁷³⁷

Humble yourselves, therefore, by opening yourselves to The Sovereign's strength, trusting you will be raised up in the *kairos* moment. Discover your wholeness by giving yourselves to The Sovereign, for the God-life is not divided,⁷³⁸ but a unity of love and concern and care. Trust this truth: The Sovereign holds your entire person—all of you!

Be aware and alert to the dangers around you that destroy the God-life. Your enemy, the Accuser, walks around looking for trouble to send your way. Stand firm! Stand in The Sovereign's love! Stand even though you

⁷³⁵ This is a variation on Julia Ward Howe's *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. As you read the poem, I hope you "heard" the music in your head.

⁷³⁶ c.f. Psalm 100.

⁷³⁷ c.f. Proverbs 3:34.

⁷³⁸ The Greek word used is *merimnan*, which the NIV translates as "anxiety" (e.g. "Cast your anxiety..."). *Merimnan* has the connotation in Greek of being divided in mind and heart, so it is understandable why translators chose to describe this phenomenon as anxiety. However, in our therapeutic culture, anxiety is something different than *merimnan*'s sense of being a divided self that lacks wholeness.

know suffering may come. Stand knowing that others before you have stood against the Accuser, others after you will stand against the Accuser, and others right now stand alongside you in your fight against the Accuser. So again I say: Stand!⁷³⁹

Stand, then, assured The Sovereign's gifts overshadow you, for you were named⁷⁴⁰ before the beginning of time and will be embraced until after the end of all things. The radiance of the Anointed shines upon you to restore what has been divided, to make you secure and strong, your true self. To the Anointed is given honor and authority to make it so. So be it.

With the help of my scribe, Silas, who is a trusted brother, I have written you briefly to encourage you. I speak truth when saying my words bear witness to the gift and truthfulness of The Sovereign. Stand in these words.

Your sister in "Babylon"⁷⁴¹ greets you, as does Mark, my beloved son in Jesus. Greet each other in love in ways that convey solidarity and support for each other while respecting boundaries.⁷⁴² *Shalom* to all who live in intimacy with the Anointed.

⁷³⁹ The Greek uses *antistete stereoi* back-to-back at the beginning of the sentence, which creates emphasis. Both words can mean "stand," so the paraphrase leans into the value Scripture places on standing. In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, "Who can stand?" This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible, when Malachi asks of the Day of the Lord, "Who can stand when he appears?" (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when, at the end of chapter 6, the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes (Revelation 6:17). Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord (Revelation 7:1, 9).

⁷⁴⁰ The Greek word used is *kalesas*, which can mean either "call" or "name." I allow my Reformed theological heritage to influence the paraphrase 😊

⁷⁴¹ This is likely a coded reference to Rome, which is why I added quotations.

⁷⁴² I am being somewhat playful here. The Greek translates as "holy kiss," which obviously meant something different in 1st century Mediterranean culture than it does today. Heck, it means something different for my wife's Italian family than in my Scottish roots!

Do I kneel or stand?

Humility, the power for resistance.

Submission, the leap to greater heights.

I stand by kneeling.

Kneeling I stand.

God, it's me. Help me to kneel that I may stand. May my dependence on you drive me to embrace a sanctified humility that learns to serve with joy and perseveres when lifting others up. As I stand, may it not be for my own justification but as one who walks with you, serves for you, and seeks your honor in all I do.

2 Peter 1:1–11

Simon (my original name), now known as Peter (the name given me by Jesus, meaning “Rock”),⁷⁴³ a servant and sent one⁷⁴⁴ of Jesus the Anointed. To those who have been gifted with a right relationship with The Sovereign through trusting, which itself is a gift and privilege and honor: May gifts of goodness and the presence of The Sovereign’s peace surround and embrace you through Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar.

The Sovereign’s *dunamis*⁷⁴⁵ gifts to us all we can need, hope, or desire to dance the God-rhythms of the God-life. With these gifts we discern our true purpose: to honor The Sovereign through lives of virtue. Through these gifts The Sovereign bestows,⁷⁴⁶ and we receive, the full promise of life in Jesus: to share in *koinonia*,⁷⁴⁷ with

⁷⁴³ c.f. Mark 3:16.

⁷⁴⁴ The Greek word *apostolos* literally means “one who is sent,” from which we get the word “apostle.”

⁷⁴⁵ *Dunamis* is the word translated as “power” but from which we get “dynamite” and “dynamic.” I paraphrase the Greek with the Greek, for we become more dynamic when we release our power to allow The Sovereign’s dynamite to unlock opportunities and overcome challenges.

⁷⁴⁶ The Greek word used here and in the next verse is *dedoremenos*, which translates as “give or bestow generously.” Significantly, both verbs use the Greek middle voice (“I and you do together”).

⁷⁴⁷ The noun form of *koinonia* is used and can be translated as “partakers of the divine nature.” *Koinonia* translates as

his image being formed within us to transform us into our true self. For this we were created. For this we escaped the broken world of abuse, betrayal, and corruption.

For this reason, therefore, come alongside⁷⁴⁸ Jesus who comes alongside you. Give yourself both to Jesus and to the work of being your best and true self. With energy and enthusiasm, amplify your trust with virtue, your virtue with wisdom, and your wisdom with mastery of self. With passion and power, magnify your mastery of self through perseverance and your perseverance through devotion. And then bring all these to culmination through tenderness that leads to affection and affection that leads to *agape*—love that is whole, complete, and without precondition.

Growing ever deeper into these virtues will keep you from being confused or befuddled when you try to discern the ways and wisdom of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. Those without these virtues can’t see their own shadow—oblivious to the God-life! Therefore, my beloved, live ever deeper into these virtues. Remind yourselves that you were called before the beginning of time—The Sovereign chose you, named you, and embraced you. Then live according to this truth. Live like this and you will always dance the God-rhythms, and, when the moment is right, you will be welcomed by Jesus himself into the kin-dom with a grand celebration. And he can do it, for he is the Healer of All and sovereign above Caesar.

Virtue

*not seen by the naked eye
obvious to the human heart.*

Virtue

*creating character
preventing corruption.*

Virtue

*in search of self-discovery
never-ending journey.*

“fellowship” and conveys a deep sense of spiritual and social kinship.

⁷⁴⁸ The Greek word used is *pareisenekantes*, which the ESV translates rather prosaically as “make.” However, it has the connotation both of “close beside” and “bring deeply into,” which I try to convey in the paraphrase.

God, it's me. Grant to me the virtuous gifts—not that I may claim them as my own but rejoice that they are gifts from your Spirit. Grant to me the virtuous gifts—not so others will see me and be impressed but that they will see you more clearly. Grant to me the virtuous gifts—that I may discover my best and true self through love that is whole, complete, and without precondition.

2 Peter 1:12–21

I tell you these truths even though you know these truths. I remind you of them even as you live ever deeper into them. It is my joy to refresh your memory while I remain in this human tent of a body. As has been revealed to me, one day soon I will go to meet Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. Until that day my zeal burns, to sear into your memory the truths about the God-life revealed by Jesus. These truths aren't manipulative myths but the source of power and presence⁷⁴⁹ in Jesus! And we who are sent ones are eyewitnesses of his majesty, dignity, and radiance, which reflect The Sovereign. We heard the Voice on the sacred mountain—heard it declare,

My Beloved! My Beloved!
Who brings joy to my heart!⁷⁵⁰

In addition to our witness, we have the truth-tellers from ages past.⁷⁵¹ Their words endure, for the Divine Spirit speaks through them, remaining unshakeable from age to age. You would do well to attend to them, to let them not merely flit about in your mind alone but allow them to seep into the deep places, into the very marrow of your soul.⁷⁵² The words of the truth-tellers shine light into dark corners, including the

⁷⁴⁹ The Greek word used is *parousia* which translates as either “presence” or “coming.” I choose the former because this verse seems focused on present blessing and strength. Later in the letter, Peter's focus seems to be on *parousia* as coming.

⁷⁵⁰ c.f. Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35.

⁷⁵¹ Commentators remark this is an early example of what would become the Christian typology of apostles and prophets.

⁷⁵² This is a paraphrase of a quote from John Calvin, source read in seminary and long since lost. But the quote was memorable, so the paraphrase stayed with me. 😊

corrupted corners of our hearts, until the presence of Jesus dwells within us. No word spoken by a truth-teller from ages past was uttered by mere whim. Instead, their words were influenced by the Divine Spirit upon them, so their words originate in The Sovereign.

*What is trustworthy
in an era of “fake news”
when manipulative myths
become common coin?*

*What is trustworthy
in an age of unrelenting data
when sipping water from a fire hose
becomes daily habit?*

*Jesus is trustworthy
in this age and any age
where light shines into the darkness
becoming life and love that cannot be overcome.*

God, it's me. I long for truth rooted in your goodness, sprouting from your grace, that bears the fruit of godliness. Not the sanctimony I see among TV preachers but the sanctity of those who leave water for travelers in the desert, serve at soup kitchens, and help children learn to read. I long for the kind of truth that looks like Jesus. I pray your Spirit would help me live such truth.

2 Peter 2:1–11⁷⁵³

What is the opposite of a truth-teller? Liar, scoundrel, and hypocrite—all of these lived and spoke amidst the truth-tellers of ages past, and such persons will live and speak among you, too. They introduce discord—depravity their goal and disparaging the Way of Jesus their method. They tread paths that shock the conscience and are filled with reckless violence.⁷⁵⁴ In their greed, they

⁷⁵³ In the second and third paragraphs of 2:1-11, I adapt the order of the Greek text for the sake of the paraphrase. Whereas the text's structure is A-B, A-B, A-B, I order Peter's words as A-A-A (second paragraph), B-B-B (third paragraph) in the paraphrase.

⁷⁵⁴ This sentence contains the literal translation of the Greek word *aselgeiais*, “violence,” often translated as “depravity.”

weave together fabrics of myth and manipulation that sell books by the truckload. The gathering storm of their judgment neither slumbers nor sleeps.

The Sovereign's justice is not always gentle; forbearance and restraint are sometimes removed. Celestial messengers were cast from light to darkness, the ancient world consumed by flood waters, and Sodom and Gomorrah became a cautionary tale of the fruit of lawlessness. And yet, even amidst these shadows, The Sovereign's light shines.

The Sovereign's messengers remain strong and steadfast, even though some of their number strayed. Through the flood waters, Noah gave righteousness a new beginning. Amidst the depravity of those who would rape Lot's guests, Lot himself endured and persevered.⁷⁵⁵ The shadow of The Sovereign's judgment is cast by the light of The Sovereign's love.

In the Sovereign we are rescued from the test that would destroy us, from the temptation that would weigh us down. Instead, The Sovereign weighs justice and mercy, darkness and light, law and grace, and makes us able to stand.⁷⁵⁶ Liars, scoundrels, and hypocrites will have to give an account of their lives. The stench of their contaminated desire bears witness to how ornery they are. The scorn they heap upon those who lead testifies to their arrogance. Liars, scoundrels, and hypocrites harass and harangue even the celestial messengers who convey The Sovereign's discipline (which is profoundly foolish, as anyone who knows anything about the messengers can tell you). Luckily for them, the messenger's show restraint!

*Bearing false witness
depravity and discord
myth and manipulation*

⁷⁵⁵ c.f. Genesis 19:1-29.

⁷⁵⁶ In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, "Who can stand?" This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible when Malachi asks of the Day of the Lord, "Who can stand when he appears?" (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when at the end of chapter 6 the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes. (Revelation 6:17) Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord. (Revelation 7:1, 9).

*Light casting shadow
weighing justice and mercy
scoundrels need beware*

*Light still shining now
grace, mercy, peace triumphant
always and amen*

God, it's me. May I never be a liar, scoundrel, or hypocrite—at least, not as a habit nor apt description of my character. Yet I confess I have lied, done scoundrel-like things, and been a hypocrite more times than I care to admit. Forgive me, O Sovereign! Free me to live as my best and true self. May I never lie about your love, defame your name by how I conduct myself, or act with false face in ways that hide the light of Jesus from others.

2 Peter 2:12–22

The liars, scoundrels, and hypocrites shout of things they do not know; they vilify what they do not understand. Like wild animals, they snarl and chase destruction and will perish like the beasts they emulate, being paid just wages for their injustice. Their idea of fun is debauchery; they revel in deceit and are a stain upon your feasts. Adultery is a game to them and seducing those weak of mind or heart is their sport. What wretched beasts they are, trained for avarice and skilled in duplicity.

The liars, scoundrels, and hypocrites are like Balaam, who deserted his service to The Sovereign to serve the cause of injustice. Balaam's madness was restrained by a donkey, who spoke sense into the chaos—an ass was more grounded in the God-life than a truth-teller gone astray.⁷⁵⁷

The liars, scoundrels, and hypocrites are like legislators who do not pass laws and talking heads spouting white noise.⁷⁵⁸ Moral gloom follows them around like a cloud, for their shouting and pontificating appeal only to human desire—power and control being the gods they serve. They lure their prey from among those who

⁷⁵⁷ c.f. Numbers 22-24.

⁷⁵⁸ The Greek refers to non-productive natural phenomena (e.g. spring without water). I lean into interpretive paraphrase to convey the sense of this paragraph for modern readers.

would escape their gloom, from those who seek the light and love of the God-life. Instead, their prey become victims, enslaved and lured into a stupor that overwhelms their moral senses.

These victims are worse off than they were before! Mastery of the God-life is easier for those who have never heard the Good News of Jesus the Anointed, never discerned Jesus is Healer and sovereign above Caesar. More difficult is mastery for those who have been invited into right relationship with The Sovereign, danced to a few songs of the God-rhythms, and then left the party. Such people know the sacred way yet refuse to embrace it or be embraced by it. The Proverbs speak of them:

A dog returns to its vomit!⁷⁵⁹

A washed pig rolls in the mud!

Pity the nation for whom

*a monster truck rally conveys the Way of Jesus
to those seeking to follow the Master.*

Pity the church for whom

*political rallies deform theology and ethics
exposing believers to heretics.*

Pity the children for whom

*a world filled with white noise
distorts the God-life.*

God, it's me. Protect me from white noise—from hearing it or heeding it, from preaching it or teaching it. As a pastor, may I take seriously your command that I speak truth as seen in Jesus, revealed in the Word, and heard through your Spirit.⁷⁶⁰ As a pastor, may I guard my flock by helping them discern truth from falsehood and the Way of Jesus from the ways of the world.

2 Peter 3:1–10

Beloved, this is my second letter to you all and in both I have written with a purpose: to give you genuine insight, uncorrupted clarity, and the ability to reason with both depth and breadth. I have written that you might remember the words, discern the justice, and live according to the truth-tellers of ages past and the sent ones of Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar.

You need to realize there will be those who will mock the justice and joy of Jesus. These are the same people who hear The Sovereign's promise of *shalom* and ridicule it. They would heap scorn on their own mothers to make a buck.

Those who mock will ask, "Where is Jesus' second coming? Why is he taking so long? Nothing ever changes—same old, same old." They neglect to remember The Sovereign's power: that heaven and earth were formed by The Sovereign's Word, dividing water from water,⁷⁶¹ and that The Sovereign also used water to give righteousness a new beginning through the waters of the flood. The *kairos* will come when heaven and earth endure their just judgment, and on that day all creation shall receive The Sovereign's purification. Only that which conforms to the God-life will endure. All else will endure the Refiner's fire.⁷⁶²

Beloved, what is time to The Sovereign? A thousand years are like a day! The Sovereign does not dawdle but waits patiently. The promise of new creation will be fulfilled; there is no rush nor hurry. Instead, The Sovereign waits and works, inviting some and luring others, but desiring for all to dance the God-rhythms and live the God-life.

Now, when *chronos* becomes *kairos*, The Sovereign will act decisively! What is experienced as chaos and calamity to some will be perceived by us as new creation being revealed. We who trust in Jesus the Anointed will see it all unfold, behold its beauty, and rejoice that we get to be a part of the eternal kin-dom.

⁷⁵⁹ c.f. Proverbs 26:11.

⁷⁶⁰ Reformed theology highlights the three-fold nature of the Word of God: Jesus is the Living Word incarnate, Scripture is the Word read that bears witness to the Living Word, and Sermon and Sacraments are the Word proclaimed and enacted in the power of the Spirit.

⁷⁶¹ c.f. Genesis 1:7.

⁷⁶² c.f. Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the "Redeemer's Fire." Rather than Dante's "fire as punishment," the biblical metaphor for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious.

*Rejoice (even amidst Buffalo's sorrow).⁷⁶³
 Revel (even amidst Laguna Wood's tribulation).
 Recognize (even amidst Uvalde's lament) that*

*new creation is promised (as much now as ever),
 new creation is coming (yet not fully present),
 new creation will overcome the old.*

*Don't mock. Trust and work.
 Don't despair. Strive for the solution.
 Don't fear. Jesus is coming.*

He does not look pleased.

God, it's me. Visions of "baby Jesus" collide with visions of Jesus as "the just and righteous Judge who comes to restore heaven and earth." I know these are not mutually exclusive roles for Jesus. The former is promise in love; the latter is promise, too, in holiness. One proclaims your desire and will; the other enacts the same. One invites repentance; the other inflicts it upon heaven and earth. O Sovereign, may I accept your invitation to dance the God-rhythms because I trust your desire and will. May I welcome your promise in love. In your mercy, hear my prayer.

2 Peter 3:11–18

The sage once said, "Begin with the end in mind."⁷⁶⁴ New creation comes: Who will you be? What will you do? Dance the God-rhythms! Devote yourselves to the God-life! Work toward the kin-dom and desire it earnestly.⁷⁶⁵ On that day, all Heaven will break loose—

⁷⁶³ This stanza refers to the mass shootings in May 2022 in Buffalo, New York, Laguna Woods, California, and Uvalde, Texas.

⁷⁶⁴ This is one of the chapter titles from Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Free Press, 1989). This quote, obviously, is not in the Greek text but conveys the sense of what Peter writes and how he uses the culminating words of chapter two to call forth focus and behavior.

⁷⁶⁵ The Greek word *spendo* can mean either "hasten, speed along" or "desire earnestly." The interpretive paraphrase incorporates both meanings but leans toward the latter definition in its emphasis. As a Reformed pastor, my theological orientation trusts what The Sovereign does more than what we humans do!

calamity and chaos becoming new creation, heaven and earth becoming one, and right relationships dwelling⁷⁶⁶ in and through all.

Beloved, as you look forward and long for new creation, live as those becoming your best and true selves. Live as those who seek justice and, even if you fall short of its ideal, live so that others will say you love mercy and walk humbly. Remember, The Sovereign's patience means others may also become whole and complete, their true selves.

Our beloved brother, Paul, makes the same point in his letters, which are sacred writings even though they can be difficult to understand at times and people twist their meaning for broken purposes. Whoever distorts The Sovereign's Word, whether in Paul or any other of our sacred writings, does so to their own harm.

Thus, forewarned, be wary and aware of those who perpetrate fraud and promote license in the God-life. Don't become ineffective or aimless⁷⁶⁷ in how you live. Rather, grow more fully into the gift that is the God-life. Root yourselves more deeply in its wisdom. Rejoice that you know and are known by Jesus the Anointed, our Healer, who is sovereign above Caesar. To Jesus be songs of praise today and into all tomorrows. So be it!

However, I am aware that both the progressive Social Gospel movement of the early 1900s and the fundamentalist, dispensationalist preachers of the late 20th century interpret *spendo* as "hasten" and believe their efforts can speed along the culmination of all things.

⁷⁶⁶ The Greek word used is *kataoikesai*, which is a cognate of *oikeo* with its rich connotations of residing, abiding, and home. The verb, translated as "dwells," has a rich, biblical history, beginning with the stories of Israel's Tabernacle (c.f. Exodus 26-27ff.) in which the Lord's presence was said to dwell. The dwelling place of The Sovereign transitioned to the Solomonic Temple (c.f. 1 Kings 8ff.) and later The Sovereign's presence "dwelled among us" in the Word made flesh (John 1:14) and promises to dwell in "spirit and truth" (John 4:23) among all people.

⁷⁶⁷ The Greek word used is *ekpipto*, which can translate as "fall away" or "become ineffective." Falling away has been co-opted by some theologies to suggest eternal peril for those who have been claimed by Jesus. However, *ekpipto* in Greek culture has a nautical connotation, as in "off course," suggesting believers may stray like lost sheep (c.f. Luke 15:1-8) or wander from the truth (c.f. James 5:19-20) but that such is not eternal peril.

*On the horizon
sun rising
new day dawning*

*On the horizon
son risen
new creation dawning*

*Toward the horizon
journey embarked
kin-dom restoring.*

*Horizon, O Horizon!
How I long to see
your dawning become Day!*

God, it's me. Who will I be this day? What will I do? Will I live deeper into your truth for me: beloved and chosen, called and sent? Will I live faithfully to what you require of me: justice and mercy and humility? As I look to the horizon of your new creation—heaven come to earth—make me an instrument of your peace.

1, 2, and 3 John

Introduction

John's letters are a love fest. Love is in the air. Love is all around. If the Beatles had written a portion of the New Testament, they would have written John's letters: *All You Need Is Love* (da-da-dadda-da)!

And not just any love: *agape*. *Agape* is one of seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four. *Agape* connotes love that is perfect: whole and complete, offered without reservation or pre-condition. No one earns *agape*, for it is given as a gift. In John's letters, a version of *agape* is used 21 times. Compare this to two uses in Hebrews, zero in James, four in Peter's letters, and three in Jude. John's letters are not just a love fest but an *agape* feast. The prevalence of *agape* in these letters inspired me to call God "The Love" in the following pages.

As one reads 1 John, it becomes clear that John writes with a different style than the other New Testament writers. One reason for this difference is that, technically speaking, 1 John is not a letter but a sermon. Also, John's writing style incorporates a Greek rhetorical form known as "amplification." There are many ways a writer can amplify, and John's favorite technique is to repeat a thought, exaggerate for effect, and present stark contrasts (e.g. light versus darkness). The writer is not attempting to build a linear, sequential case using a thesis-evidence-conclusion format. For the reader, amplification may feel overwhelming, a jumble of thoughts, ideas, and examples piled one upon the other toward the writer's desired conclusion. This is John's style, especially in 1 John.

Many readers will recognize that they have experienced amplification as a communication technique but usually through preaching rather than the written word. When reading 1 John, it helps to imagine a pastor bringing energy, intelligence, imagination, and love through the spoken word. Imagine thoughts, ideas, and examples pouring out of your pastor toward an inexorable conclusion: God loves us!

John's letters also use dualism, a literary style associated with the intertestamental period of Second Temple Judaism (between the Hebrew Scriptures and the writing of the New Testament, roughly 165 BCE to 70 CE). Often associated with Greek philosophy, dualism (e.g. body vs. soul, material vs. spiritual) entered Jewish culture through the Greek empires that followed Alexander's conquests. Jewish religion of that time was in constant conflict and protest against Greek cultural influence. However, Jewish religion also adapted Greek dualisms, using a similar form to express a different meaning.⁷⁶⁸ For example, The Love's *agape* is contrasted against the work of the devil and those who carry it out—the antichrist (singular) and antichrists (plural), whom I paraphrase as the Accuser, Opposer, and Opposers. Other dualisms include light vs. darkness, life vs. death, and truth vs. deception. John contends that the Opposers seek to destroy the truth that Jesus is the Way into the God-life.

The letters of John encourage the early Jewish-Christian community to affirm, support, and practice the Way of Jesus that grows out of his life, teachings, physical death, bodily resurrection, and heavenly ascension. The Opposers rejected the idea that Jesus had a physical body, arguing that Jesus only seemed to be physical. This teaching, known as Docetism (after the Greek word *doceo*, meaning "to seem"), was pronounced a heresy by the early Church. The Docetic heresy persisted into the 2nd century CE and became an aspect of what is known as Gnosticism, a spiritual system that emphasized knowledge of certain abstract truths about gods, angels,

⁷⁶⁸ The separatist movement known as the community in Qumran, possibly associated with the Essenes, give examples of Jewish dualisms. I do not intend to say that John was part of the Qumran community but rather the Dead Sea Scrolls, as Qumran's written expression, give evidence of this form of cultural adaptation. The same adaptation is found in John's letters, that are not written from Qumran yet similarly express dualisms.

and the heavenly realm. Gnosticism minimized nitty-gritty, earthly compassion toward individuals and justice for society. John rejects all teachings that would make the God-life a theoretical endeavor rather than a lived Way,

arguing instead for (you guessed it) love, a commitment to act in others' best interests and shared as a gift that cannot be earned and needs no precondition—in a word, *agape*.

1 John 1:1-4

Before the beginning of time, before all that is seen and unseen, the Word of Life lived and moved and had its being, dancing the God-rhythms together with The Love and with their Divine Spirit—a fellowship of sacred Trinity. Then, in the fullness of time—when human *chronos* became The Love’s *kairos*⁷⁶⁹—we heard, we saw, and we touched the Word of Life. The Word of Life was unveiled to us, and we cannot deny what we witnessed but must testify to its truth: The Love is revealed through the Word of Life, and we are invited into sacred *koinonia*⁷⁷⁰ through him. Amazing, right? The Love invites us to dance the God-rhythms through Jesus the Anointed, invites us to join the celebration that is the fellowship of sacred Trinity. It is our joy to tell you this truth. Our joy is made whole and complete as we write this to you all.

What do we know?

How do we know it?

*What have we seen, heard, and touched
that enlivened our souls?*

*To witness Life leads us to The Love:
As it was in the beginning, is now, and forever shall be.*

God, it’s me. I love to dance the God-rhythms—to love effortlessly and eagerly, to be lifted upon the winds of the Spirit and breathe the Spirit of Jesus. O Love, as I live, may you dance through me—teaching me to love as you love, helping me to live as you live. As I live, may my life bear witness to how great is your faithfulness.

1 John 1:5-10

News! News! Hear ye! Hear ye! We report what we heard with our own ears: The Love is light. In The

⁷⁶⁹ Greek has two words for “time.” *Chronos* depicts “linear, chronological time.” *Kairos* depicts the “key moment” when transformation comes (e.g. when the expecting mother tells her partner, “It’s time.”)

⁷⁷⁰ *Koinonia* translates as “fellowship” and conveys a deep sense of spiritual and social kinship.

Love there exists no darkness—none, nada, zilch!⁷⁷¹ We deceive ourselves and others if we say we share *koinonia* with The Love yet meander the path of darkness. Truth is not constructed through deception. However, if we hop, skip, and jump down the Way with the Word of Life, who is the light, then we share *koinonia* with each other. And together as one, the self-emptying sacrifice of Jesus, The Love’s own son, liberates⁷⁷² us from our brokenness.

If we imply to others that we are not broken at all, we deceive ourselves. (The truth cannot be manipulated into something it is not.) If we openly acknowledge before The Love that we are not whole and complete, The Love embraces us! (We can trust The Love to infuse us with right relationship and to liberate us from our broken past—totally and completely.) If we imply to ourselves that we don’t need this kind of help from The Love, we accuse The Love of being a liar! The Word of Life does not make its home in self-deception.

*Into what kind of home do I
invite The Love to
reside?*

*Must my home be
neat and tidy for The Love to
feel welcome?*

*Cluttered sink and unmade beds,
bills piling up and couches with cat scratches does
The Love care about these things?*

*An ever-deepening journey toward
self-awareness and self-discovery, honesty and humility:
the marks of genuine hospitality for The Love.*

God, it’s me. Chagrin, regret, and confession are in short supply in our culture—replaced by bluster and

⁷⁷¹ The Greek text reads *ouk estin oudemia*, which translates literally as “no is none.” I attempt to capture the enthusiasm and emphatic negation in the paraphrase.

⁷⁷² The Greek word *katharizo* (from which we get the English “catharsis”) is ordinarily translated as “purify” or “cleanse,” which suggest the ceremonial or liturgical context of the Jewish Temple. My paraphrase frames *katharizo* as more dynamic, in keeping with its English term, as more than merely taking something away but creating something new.

berating of others. Help me, O Love, not to contribute to this circus of self-promotion and self-justification. Help me, O Love, to discover the freedom of being my true self through honesty about my false self. Help me, O Love, to become who you have called me to be.

1 John 2:1-6

My little lambs, I write to you so that you will not miss the mark nor be led astray. And if you do miss the mark and are led astray, you are not lost forever, for we have a Counselor and Guide who intercedes for us with The Love—Jesus the Anointed, the one who creates right relationships between us and The Love. Indeed, Jesus makes right relationships for everyone in the whole world!

We are confident through personal experience and intimacy with Jesus when we follow his commands. Anyone who says, “Sure, I’m tight with Jesus—we’re best buds,” and then lives a life that looks nothing like the way Jesus lived, that person lies to themselves and to others. Truth does not dwell in deceit and manipulation. But anyone who lives as Jesus lived—all who walk Jesus’ cruciform Way—are made whole and complete by The Love’s *agape*⁷⁷³—love, offered without precondition, that transforms us. All who live like this have the confidence that comes through personal experience and intimacy with Jesus.

*“Hitting the mark” without
self-awareness and honesty—an illusion.*

*How can I hit the mark of something I cannot see
unless someone shows me the Way?*

*Agape aims the arrow,
hitting the God-life’s bullseye.*

God, it’s me. Help me know what I do not know. Through a willingness to listen to others, help me perceive what I do not understand. Through a commitment to follow Jesus, help me live as he lived,

⁷⁷³ *Agape* is one of seven Greek words for “love,” of which the New Testament uses four. *Agape* connotes love that is whole, complete and offered without reservation.

walking the Way of the Cross. As I so live, increase my confidence that I do not walk alone.

1 John 2:7-14

My beloved, my command that you should love with *agape* is nothing novel. *Agape* was in the beginning—both in the creation and with the Christ⁷⁷⁴—and is what you have heard from me before (and will hear again). It is “novel” only in that it does not conform to the pattern of this world, which is dying away. The broken culture in which we live and move and have our being may appear robust but in reality is on its last gasp—its gasping no match for The Love’s Spirit, which shines light into every dark corner and illumines every forlorn alley.

Anyone who says, “I love the light!” but denounces another while elevating themselves, remains in darkness. Living with *agape* is light, and the one who lives in the light avoids stumbling. To despise another is to walk in darkness. The Way is obscure to them, and they fall.

To my little lambs,⁷⁷⁵ I write to remind you that in Jesus your past is released, and you are made new creations. Little lambs, experience The Love and dance the God-rhythms.

To those who are apprentices in the God-life, I write to remind you that you are powerful in Jesus to overcome the Accuser. Apprentices, you are stronger than you imagine because the Word of Life lives in you to help you to stand against the Accuser.

To those called to be guardians in The Love, I write to remind you that you live in the One who is from before the beginning of time. Guardians, experience The Love and live the God-life to its fullest.

⁷⁷⁴ In *Rhythms of the God-Life* I have paraphrased *Christ* as “the Anointed.” However, here I break my pattern (a) because I just love alliteration, and (b) because John’s literary and theological style likes to link Genesis and Exodus to the new creation and new exodus unveiled in Jesus. This was an opportunity to mirror that style.

⁷⁷⁵ Verses 2:12-14 in the Greek text read as two triplets of exhortation (A-B-C, A-B-C), which I have paraphrased as three doublets (A-A, B-B, C-C).

*It feels weird to think
“old school” is novel:
speaking truth in love,
speaking truth to power.*

*I long for the “good old days”
when loving neighbor didn’t require
sides to be taken,
toxic division to be elevated, honored, cherished.*

Walking in the light should not be this difficult.

God, it’s me. The darkness, O Love, descends so quickly sometimes, as if to devour my soul. I fear not the darkness but long instead for the light of your presence upon me and through me. Help me to walk in the light, as you are in the light, that I may have fellowship with you and build your shalom with those around me.

1 John 2:15-25

Seek purpose more than pleasure. Direct your passion toward The Love rather than allowing your passion to be diverted toward that which does not bring life: unbridled desire, obsession with “beauty,” and bragging about the size of your wallet. These things do not come from The Love but distort holy desire. The broken culture that gives birth to these things will die but doing the will of The Love endures into eternity.

My beloved students, apprentices in the God-life, the *kairos* draws near when the kin-dom will be unveiled for all to see. The Opposer⁷⁷⁶ comes to do the work of the Accuser: to fight against the influence and activity of Jesus the Anointed. Indeed, there is not just one Opposer but many Opposers. Some of these who oppose Jesus went out from our own gathering, though they never really belonged to us. Had they truly been a part of us, they would have remained. Deserting us demonstrated their true colors; they never were a part of our family.

But all of you are part of The Love’s family, and so you were given a *charism*, a gift. All of you remember the truth and appreciate⁷⁷⁷ it. I don’t write because I doubt you remember the truth nor appreciate it. I know you remember and appreciate it, for the truth protects us from deceit and manipulation. Who deceives? The one who rebuffs Jesus the Anointed, rejecting both The Love and the son. No one who rejects the son appreciates The Love, but all who covenant to walk the Way of Jesus belong to The Love. You belong to The Love, so see that what you have heard from the beginning continues to live in you—the Word of Life dwelling deeply to nourish you. As the Word lives in you, you will live in The Love and be drawn ever deeper into the God-life until it becomes your eternal home.

I write as one who desires to protect you from those who would lead you astray. You are those in whom the Divine Spirit abides; you got this. I do not need to teach you anything because you are being taught by the Divine Spirit already. Trust the Spirit’s nudges. Go forward in *agape* with The Love.

And now, my little lambs, continue to abide in Jesus the Anointed so that when the Day arrives, we may be bold, open, and free to celebrate his unveiling without chagrin, regret, or shame. He is right, just, and good, so do what is right, just, and good to show you are born of the Anointed.

*Oppose:
fight against
stand against
contradict
manipulate
distort
shade
gloss over
look upon without doing anything
remain silent.
Lots of ways to be an antichrist.*

⁷⁷⁶ The Greek text of 1 John speaks of the devil, the antichrist (singular), and antichrists (plural). My paraphrase refers to an antichrist and antichrists. I chose to use a term that focused on their work: to be in opposition to Jesus’ influence and ongoing activity within the Church and in the world.

⁷⁷⁷ The Greek text changes the primary verb used for knowing or knowledge from the previous section. The last section used *ginosko*, which conveys knowing as intimacy and personal experience. This section uses *eido*, which conveys knowing as to remember or appreciate.

God, it's me. I prefer the notion of one antichrist—a really “bad guy” that I can despise and fear. I know it is not biblical, but it is theatrical. There's comfort in believing I just have to avoid one bad person. More discouraging is to think there are many who oppose the influence of Jesus upon them and upon our society. Most discouraging of all is to recognize there are times when I oppose Jesus' influence upon me! In that moment, I am one of the Opposers!! O Love, in your mercy, save me from myself. In your mercy, hear my prayer.

1 John 3:1-3

Look! Listen! Discern the moment: The Love surrounded us in *agape* when he claimed us as family, calling us children! Beloved is who we are. The broken culture cannot accept us (and we cannot be intimate with it) because it did not recognize The Love. Friends, though we are now indeed The Love's beloved, the fullness of what we will become remains a mystery—the unveiling of our true self an unformed hope. But of this we can be confident: When the Anointed is unveiled, it will be the transformative moment of our lives. We will see Jesus in his perfect humanity and become our true selves.⁷⁷⁸ Those who walk toward this horizon journey toward the sacred, as he is sacred.

*Who hasn't wondered
what it would be like to be
Captain America or Marilyn Monroe?*

*Who hasn't wanted
to go back to a certain age
and get a do-over?*

⁷⁷⁸ There are several, nuanced interpretations of this verse but two are primary. One primary interpretation assumes a rather linear progression that downplays the significance of the word “like”: (A) see Jesus, (B) be Jesus. The paraphrase conveys the other primary interpretation and emphasizes the significance of the word “like”: (A) just as Jesus was his best, truest self as a human, so (B) we will become the best version of our self (our true self) as The Love created us to be.

*Who
looks forward not backward
to the horizon of our hope?*

*That one becomes and will become
the one The Love saw when
Creation sprang forth in the Word: “Let....”*

God, it's me. I long for the beatific vision: Jesus in glory, standing before my kneeling self. When I think of that moment, I am filled with awe and wonder yet also chagrin, for I am confident it will not be what I expect. I will have gotten so many things wrong about Jesus (who will have neither blond hair nor blue eyes)! Yet I rejoice that you have brought me into right relationship with you. I can ask for nothing more; I long for nothing else.

1 John 3:4-10

Missing the mark creates chaos; missing as a habit is moral anarchy.⁷⁷⁹ You remember the Anointed was unveiled to carry sin away (though he himself did not sin), so no one who abides in Jesus, who makes him their home, abides in the chaos and anarchy created by missing the mark (to do so means one probably has never met the real Jesus).

Little lambs, don't be led astray. Doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason in the right way leads to right relationships of the kind Jesus offers. Anyone who seeks to abide in the chaos and anarchy created by missing the mark is being influenced by the Accuser, who has been an expert in chaos and anarchy from the beginning. The Love's son, Jesus, came to destroy the Accuser's influence—to replace chaos with new creation and anarchy with the assurance that we are The Love's children. The knowledge of that love inspires us to hit the mark through right relationships and *agape* toward others in The Love's family. Those influenced by the Accuser are led away from these things. Little lambs, don't be led astray but rather make your home in Jesus.

⁷⁷⁹ The Greek word *anomia* is a compound word (*a* – *nomia*) that literally translates as “not law.” However, the meaning of *anomia* can refer either to the act, “lawlessness,” or the result, which I have paraphrased as “chaos and anarchy” (c.f. HELPS Word Studies 458: “the end impact of law-breaking”).

Chaos
muddled choices
misguided, awry, astray
miss the mark of
agape

God, it's me. Thank you for your influence in my life—for the way you guide me toward justice and joy in my choices. You challenge me to reject my false self and express my true self in how I live and love. May your *agape* win the day in my heart as I open myself more and more to your inspiration, influence, and impact.

1 John 3:11-15

The acoustics of the God-life reverberate *agape*—love made whole and complete and offered without precondition. It's always been this way, even from the very beginning, and always will be.

Don't tread the path of anger that leads to hatred; Cain walked this path to his destruction. He gave his heart, mind, and spirit to the Accuser, and it led him to murder. Hatred had its way with Cain: first causing him to be stingy with his offering and then leading Cain to hold on jealously to what he perceived belonged to him (when it really belonged to The Love). Hatred, having stalked Cain like prey, finally pounced, causing Cain's killing rage against his brother, Abel. Abel, however, lived in right relationship with The Love, to whom Abel freely gave from the best of his flock, an offering of thanksgiving.⁷⁸⁰

Don't be surprised when those immersed in the broken values of culture dislike you. Our false selves have died, and our true selves have moved into the God-life. (We know this to be true because we seek to love with *agape*.) Those drowning in culture's broken values cannot understand us, for they are living as already dead, with the spirit of Cain sharing their home. Murder and the God-life cannot share a home; the God-life only abides in those who seek to live with *agape*.

Stalked like prey:
infotainment prompting outrage
addiction whispering to demons
lust overwriting love

Stalked like prey:
inner critic encouraging shame
negative self-talk inviting depression
hubris unwilling to look in the mirror to see the true self.

Stalked like prey:
poverty that
crushes, crushes, crushes
people, neighborhoods, and community

Stalked like prey:
racist thoughts insinuating themselves
into minds unaware
anger simmering beneath the surface of every moment

God, it's me. I cry unto you, O Love; O Love, hear my prayer. The jackals of anger howl, and the lions of hate stalk their prey. I pray I would not give in to them but flee, flee, flee! Even more, help me protect my herd, especially those who are easy targets: the emotionally frail, the intellectually dishonest, the immature who do not know they are in danger. Anger distorts vision and hatred decapitates the God-life. O Love, in your mercy, deliver me from these evils, for yours is the kin-dom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

1 John 3:16–24

The experience of *agape* is in this: Jesus the Anointed gave himself for us. Likewise, we should give ourselves for our brothers and sisters in the Body. If you perceive one of them is in need and close your heart⁷⁸¹ to their pain, The Love's *agape* is but a visitor to your home rather than a full-time resident.

My little lambs, *agape* always dives deep into the truth of the God-life; it is an action not a feeling, doing and not mere speaking. By living into *agape*, we are able to discern that we are in the truth, and this sets our hearts at ease. (Even if our hearts are troubled and worry overwhelms us, The Love is greater than our hearts.) The

⁷⁸⁰ c.f. Genesis 4:3-7 and Leviticus 7:14-15.

⁷⁸¹ The Greek text, *kleise ta splanchna*, literally translates as “close your intestines.” This idiom could be paraphrased as “If your guts don't pour out” because of others' pain. My paraphrase seems tame—I may change it in future editions 😊

Love knows who we are and whose we are. So my beloved, take heart. Be encouraged. And trust this truth: if our hearts are not troubled as we live into *agape*, then we are fully and unequivocally assured that we belong to The Love.

As we belong to The Love, we take hold of those things that are *of* The Love and *in* The Love. As we follow the Way of Jesus and obey all The Love's commands, we bring joy to Their heart. And this is the first and best command: that we trust the character and integrity of Jesus the Anointed, love one another with *agape* (as he commanded us to do), and make our home in The Love just as They make a home in our hearts. The experience of home is this: The Love lives in us and gave us the Divine Spirit as a housewarming present.

*“Greater than our hearts”
seems like the bar is set too low,
for my heart leads to
doubt,
despair,
distrust.*

*“Knows whose we are”
is a truth that brings comfort,
for I am not
in charge,
in control,
in constant need to prove myself worthy.*

*“Makes a home in our hearts”
is exactly what I need,
for the pilgrim journey is a
long walk toward trust,
life worth living,
love that will not let me go.*

God, it's me. I thank you for the many ways I receive *agape* from you and others. May I also give *agape* to others in your name. I thank you that you are greater than my heart. May I encourage others that they may move forward in hope. I thank you that I belong to you. May I be a messenger of peace that others may know they, too, are welcome in your home.

1 John 4:1–6⁷⁸²

Beloved, trust only the Wind⁷⁸³ whose gust leads to The Love. Much wind blows like a dust devil swirling up into nothing; such winds are the words of false preachers and teachers. You will know them because their version of Jesus avoids the nitty-gritty of life in this world; they reject the cruciform Way of Jesus—solidarity with the poor and oppressed. In their telling of the Good News, Jesus doesn't lift a finger to help those who suffer injustice and oppression.

Not so the true Wind that leads to Jesus incarnate as the Word made flesh. The true Wind refreshes us as we walk with Jesus through deserts and down dusty roads. The true Wind inspires us to work for equity and equality. The true Wind leads us to confess with our lives that Jesus is the crucified God—and not to be ashamed that we put our trust in him.

Those who proclaim a disembodied version of Jesus work in opposition to him. Their influence avoids the challenge of bringing *shalom* into the world—on earth as it is in heaven. The false preachers and teachers align

⁷⁸² The heart of this passage in the Greek text centers on whether Jesus came in the flesh (the theological word *incarnate* literally means in meat) or only seemed to have taken on human flesh (c.f. the Docetist heresy, from the Greek word *doceo* which means to seem). This question was generated by Greek culture's dichotomy between the material and immaterial worlds, where, according to Greek philosophy, the material world was corrupt because it changed, and the immaterial world was honored for its permanence. Thus in the early Church there were some who resisted the claim that Jesus came in the flesh. In the early second century, this heresy evolved into Gnosticism, which amplified the spiritualized version of Jesus and the Gospel. The Church has struggled throughout its history with this dichotomy between flesh and spirit (e.g. the Social Gospel vs. Spiritual Gospel debates of the 1900s). I attempt, therefore, to lean into interpretation with this paraphrase to address these questions: What is the significance of affirming Jesus as incarnate? How does this differ from preaching that so spiritualizes the Gospel that it downplays Jesus' incarnation (i.e., being so heavenly bound as to be no earthly good)?

⁷⁸³ The Greek text uses *pneuma*, ordinarily translated as “spirit,” throughout this passage. I used the metaphor of “wind,” an alternative translation of *pneuma*, in the paraphrase to explore how using a metaphor opens meaning and understanding of the passage. While one may justifiably critique this choice, I note that Jesus also used metaphors from time to time to express meaning.

with the avarice, betrayal, and corruption of the culture, which is why they are so popular! Such false preachers and teachers already work among you but fear not, my little lambs! You belong to The Love and so will triumph over them. The Wind that blows upon you is a trade wind that propels ships compared to the light breeze they experience. We belong to The Love, and those who dance to God-rhythms listen to what we have to say. Those immersed in avarice, betrayal, and corruption cannot hear nor accept what we have to say. This is the litmus test: The true Wind leads to The Love, while dust devils disappear into nothing.

*Summer heat brings dust devils
spouting beside I-10 between Phoenix and Tucson.
I see them in the empty fields.*

*Occasionally dust devils cross the freeway,
rattling my car as I grip the wheel tighter.
They are more bark than bite.*

*Summer heat also brings the haboob:
a wall of dirt and dust
eclipsing the sun.*

*I follow truckers to the side of the road,
not daring to continue my journey.
Haboobs are the fear of the Lord.*

*Different winds
bringing unique vistas:
only one must I heed.*

God, it's me. I long for heaven. So why do I resist bringing heaven to earth? I believe Jesus is "fully human, fully God" yet I give more honor to his divinity than his humanity. I know the Gospel narratives of "doing to the least of these,"⁷⁸⁴ "Go and do likewise,"⁷⁸⁵ and "proclaim the Year of Jubilee,"⁷⁸⁶ so why is the Jesus I proclaim so heavenly bound that his Church is too seldom earthly good? O Love, forgive my heresy of practice and

hypocrisy of proclamation! Free me from the chains of living only half of the Gospel that I may work for your justice and joy—today, tomorrow, and until the Day comes when Jesus is unveiled for all to see.

1 John 4:7-12

Beloved, do *agape*: now, always, and forever. Do *agape* with everyone, especially the Body. *Agape* is birthed in The Love and flows from the experience of The Love because The Love is *agape*. If you cannot or will not do *agape*, then your experience of The Love is lacking.

We saw and experienced *agape* when The Love sent Jesus into the world—The Love's own son—so that we could live in him and he live in us—now, always, and forever. In Jesus' life and death, in his kin-dom words of comfort and challenge, in his resurrection and ascension, in everything that happened to Jesus and through Jesus,⁷⁸⁷ The Love's craving for justice was satisfied⁷⁸⁸ and we were brought into oneness—now, always, and forever. Therefore, as we have been showered with *agape*, so we should show *agape* to others. No one has seen The Love face to face so *agape* is the Way that The Love makes a home in us and, breath by breath, makes our *agape* whole and complete.

Remembering a song:

*Behold what manner of love
the Father has given unto us!
That we should be called children of God!*

⁷⁸⁷ Most readers are more familiar with Paul's connecting atonement to the cross. Here in 4:9-10, John connects atonement to Jesus' incarnation—not just the cross but the fullness of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

⁷⁸⁸ The Greek word used is *hilasmos*, which can mean "atoning sacrifice" or "propitiation." There is a sense in *hilasmos* of The Love's anger or vengeance needing to be satisfied, which is the familiar connotation adopted by many Protestants. Critics of this perspective suggest this sounds like divine child abuse. Further, such vengeance-as-motivation is at odds with other passages in the New Testament that imply The Love's motivation is born from mercy and borne through mercy (c.f. 2 Peter 3:9, John 3:16). The paraphrase seeks to walk the tightrope between justice and mercy in a way similar to Romans 3:26, which declares The Love to be "just and the one who justifies...."

⁷⁸⁴ c.f. Matthew 25:40.

⁷⁸⁵ c.f. Luke 10:37.

⁷⁸⁶ c.f. Luke 4:19.

*Joy again fills my heart.
Behold indeed.
Being held.
Now, always, and forever.*

God, it's me. I rejoice that I am being held. I give thanks that I am called one of your children. I rejoice that, through Jesus, I can show *agape* to all whom I encounter. In Jesus, I am one with you—now, always, and forever. Amen and amen!

1 John 4:13-21

We experience living in The Love and Them living in us through the Divine Spirit. This is why we who have seen and perceived that The Love sent the son into the world bear witness that the son is the rescuer of all the world. As you confess that the son belongs to The Love, then They live in you and you in Them. In this way, we experience and trust The Love's *agape* for us. The Love is *agape* and whoever makes *agape* their home also opens their heart and makes their heart a home for The Love.

Loving with *agape* makes us whole and complete, our true selves. Loving with *agape* builds our confidence that when the Day comes, and The Love's kin-dom is unveiled in its fullness, we will stand with The Love and with one another. Side by side with The Love, we will stand together as one in the midst of the broken world becoming new creation.

So fear not! *Agape* knows no fear; *agape* made whole and complete drives fear away. Fear is a response to threat, to punishment. *Agape*, when made whole and complete, cannot fear, for it knows that we have been loved from before the beginning of time and will be loved even after the end of all things. Such love overshadowed us, and we have responded to it, each in its own time: first the *agape* from above and then our *agape* in response.

So love with *agape*! Whoever says, "I love The Love," yet hates a brother or sister, that person lies. If we cannot love with *agape* the one we see before us, how can we hope to love The Love whom we have never seen? So remember the commandment: Show *agape* to all: first to The Love then also to our brothers and sisters.

*As the world seems to fray at the seams
there is much to fear.*

*Wars begun by Russia or over Roe invite
our hearts to quiver with hatred for "the other."*

*Who is "other" in a world
created for love by The Love?*

*Helping us see fear's frail shape,
agape drives away hatred.*

*Under agape's influence,
fear becomes an apparition in the light of the Day.*

*No one will be "other" when the Day is unveiled
for those known and named by The Love for love.*

God, it's me. You have created me in love, for love, to love. Help me live toward the fullness of my calling as one who follows Jesus. May fear loosen its grip upon me as I abide in you, and you abide in me.

1 John 5:1-12

All who trust that Jesus is the Anointed are born of The Love. Indeed, all *agape* is born of The Love and leads to love for Jesus. Through *agape*, the son is born in us.⁷⁸⁹ We experience The Love's *agape* by giving *agape*—first to The Love and then to all Their children, just as we have been commanded to do. By following the commandments we express our *agape*, and they are not burdensome. The commandments are given by The Love and make us strong to overcome the broken culture in which we live. Our trust is a testimony to the ways we are victorious over the broken culture of avarice, betrayal, and corruption. Who wins the victory over the broken culture? Only those who by trusting The Love entrust themselves to Jesus the son.

Jesus the son is the one who entered the world and gave himself over to water and to blood; that is, to

⁷⁸⁹ This is an awkward sentence in English, in my humble opinion. I chose not to make the paraphrase smoother because the Greek text is also awkward; indeed, the Greek text's awkwardness seems to be intentional. Variants of the verb *gennaō* ("born or begotten") are used three times in this single verse of 5:1.

baptism and to the cross,⁷⁹⁰ just as the Divine Spirit bears witness, for this is the truth. Thus do we see that we have three who testify that Jesus is the son: the Divine Spirit, baptism, and the cross. Indeed, there is even a fourth witness: The Love! (Human testimony is good but The Love's testimony is even better.) All who trust the son cling to this testimony. And whoever does not trust The Love's testimony calls The Love a liar. And here is the purpose of all this testimony: to invite and to lure us into right relationship, to provoke and to evoke trust that the gift freely offered to us in the son is the God-life! Whoever says, "Yes" to this invitation lives the God-life. To reject this invitation is to walk away from the God-life.

*Testimony
bearing witness
seen, heard, touched
experience of The Love
truth*

God, it's me. I learn to love by loving. I learn to love by being loved. I learn to love so that I can love even more. Love begets love. May love be born in me. May love be borne by me into the world. May love, your love, infuse all I do and who I am becoming.

1 John 5:13-21

I write to all of you who trust the character and authority of The Love's son so that you may experience the fullness of the God-life—today and into all tomorrows! We who trust the son can ask for what we want. If it conforms to The Love's purposes and passion for new

⁷⁹⁰ At this point in the paragraph, the Greek text only mentions water and blood; what is meant by water and blood engenders substantial debate. The paraphrase suggests water and blood refer to baptism and the cross; however, commentators interpret this to mean a variety of things: the water and blood that flowed from Jesus' side on the cross (Augustine), a reference to the cross and baptism in Jesus' name (Tertullian), a reference to John's baptism and the cross (Baur), the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper (Luther), physical birth and spiritual death (some modern scholars), or birthing images (feminist scholar Deborah Sawyer). In the spirit of this enterprise of interpretive paraphrase, I invite you, Dear Reader, to choose the interpretation that makes the most sense to you (but keep an open mind and open heart toward others who may disagree).

creation, we can be confident They listen to us. And as The Love hears, so we take hold of our goals and dance the God-rhythms that lead to justice and joy.

Beloved, we must encourage each other—those within the Body⁷⁹¹—to dance the God-rhythms. If you see something—such as one of the beloved going astray, accepting the broken practices of avarice, betrayal, and corruption—say something. Pray The Love would lead them back toward the God-life. Pray that your beloved's heart would turn away from twisted desire that results in injustice and the oppression of others. Pray that your beloved's mind would be freed to embrace the Way that turns death into life.⁷⁹²

We understand that repetition of behavior leads to habits and habits form character: therefore, acts that conform to the broken culture distort our true self and lead to death. That is not the Way we are to walk. Instead we walk the Way of Jesus that breaks free from the Accuser's hold on the world. The Way of Jesus leads to life. In Jesus, we discover truth that brings justice and joy. In Jesus, we find and are found by The Love, who will not let us go—not now, not ever. My little lambs, abide in Jesus and evade idolatry.

*Sin leading to death
hatred living in the heart
in your mercy, free me*

God, it's me. Free me from the temptation to judge. Free me from judgment's lure to exert power over another. Free me from the sense of control I feel as I cast aspersions upon my brother or sister. Free me to recognize I live in a glass house! Free me to accept that to glance out the window at others is far less

⁷⁹¹ The emphasis in the Greek text is on holding those within John's community accountable rather than focusing outside the Christian community to judge others.

⁷⁹² The Greek text uses the phrase *hamartian me pros thanaton*, "sin leading to death." What is this sin? The answers are plentiful, as commentators disagree. Commentators speculate the apostle refers to Old Testament sins whose punishment was death (e.g. Numbers 18:22); to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (e.g. Matthew 12:31); to something that leads to physical death; to actions that, when one persists in practice, lead to spiritual death; or to the state of being one has that leads to sin. As always when confronted with a phrase impervious to clarity, humility is encouraged.

important than to gaze in the mirror and see myself clearly. Free me, when I see someone sin, to pray that I will not be filled with false pride but will pray for them and with them. Free me to see we are all a part of your Body, and no one can live apart.

2 John 1:1-3

The wise one, to milady, she who was claimed and named by The Love before the beginning of time, and to your children, whom I love with *agape* as truth directs—and not I alone but all who walk the Way of truth and live ever deeper into the truth of the Way: the gifts of lovingkindness, renewal and *shalom* be upon you from The Love and from Jesus the Anointed, The Love's own son. May these gifts be with and within us all through truth and love.

*Greetings
bring joy,
reminder of love shared that
never leaves and
never disappoints.*

God, it's me. This is such a simple greeting yet so filled with tenderness, joy, and love. May I never take for granted the love shared in Jesus that makes my heart one with another through grace, mercy, and peace. O Love, may I rejoice in the gift of those whom you have shared with me as dance partners in the God-rhythms!

2 John 1:4-6

It brings me joy to discover (what I expected all along) that your children hop, skip, and jump along the Way of truth, as The Love commands us. So now, milady, I write to you not a novel command but one that is as ancient as human breath: live with *agape* toward each other. *Agape* is doing and not just feeling; it is action that conforms to The Love's heart. *Agape* was the beginning of your journey—its first word—and will be its compass as you continue forward.

*I don't always know
what to do
where to go
when I have arrived,
but am always assured when
agape is the path I travel.*

God, it's me. Your way is really not that complicated: "Love one another." Yes, life can be complex: "Love one another." Ethical conundrums abound: "Love one another." People I respect disagree: "Love one another." I'm uncertain of the best choice to make: "Love one another." O Love, teach me to love...one another.

2 John 1:7-13

I remind you to love with *agape* in all you do because many oppose the God-life through deceit and manipulation. These Opposers do the bidding of the Accuser. They refuse to accept that Jesus the Anointed came *en-carne*; that is, incarnate, in a human body. He did not merely "seem"⁷⁹³ to be flesh but actually ate and drank, grew tired and slept, suffered in heart, mind, and body as do we all. Those who preach and teach that Jesus only seemed to be human oppose the God-life, for that which is not assumed cannot be redeemed.⁷⁹⁴

Be wary and aware of the Opposers. Do not allow them to influence you nor lead you astray. Instead be assured that you make Jesus happy as you walk toward the true teaching about the Anointed—keep on keeping on. Only the true teaching about Jesus leads to the God-life: that Jesus walked through deserts and down dusty roads; he worked for equity and equality; he is the crucified one whose humanity reveals The Love.⁷⁹⁵

⁷⁹³ The heresy John confronts is called Docetism, after the Greek word *doceo*, which means "to seem." The Docetists taught that Jesus only seemed to take on human form but remained only and exclusively divine.

⁷⁹⁴ This phrase is not in the Greek text but is taken from the Apostolic Fathers and Mothers and is attributed to Gregory of Nazinius as well as Origen.

⁷⁹⁵ c.f. Jurgen Moltmann, "This is God, and God is like this. God is not greater than Jesus is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than Jesus is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than Jesus is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than Jesus is in this humanity." The Crucified God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 295.

The Opposers who teach a spiritualized Jesus cannot heal the world's brokenness; such teaching is so heavenly bound as to be no earthly good. Do not welcome them into your home. To honor them with your hospitality is tacit endorsement of their teaching—may it never be! Do not share *koinonia* in work that destroys the Way of Jesus.

I have more I could write about this but prefer to speak with you face-to-face. Seeing each other will make our joy complete. The children of your sister, who also was claimed and named by The Love, send their greetings.

An Ode to Isaiah 58⁷⁹⁶

*“On the day of your fasting you do as you please,
and exploit all your workers.”*

*“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice?”*

*“Is this the kind of fasting I have chosen,
only a day to humble themselves?”*

*“Is it not to share your food with the hungry,
to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?”*

*We would see Jesus!
Do you dare?*

God, it's me. Help me to see my neighbor in need (and not look away). Help me to hear the cries of strangers (and listen, listen, listen). Help me to act as one who follows Jesus, who suffered hunger, fatigue, taunting, and torture. In a virtual world, help me keep it real.

3 John 1:1-8

The wise one, to my beloved friend, Gaius, whom I love with *agape* as we walk together the Way of Jesus. Beloved friend, I pray your journey finds you well and in good health. I pray also that your journey in Jesus is making you into your best, true self. I rejoiced to hear some of our beloved in Jesus tell about your steadfast

trust and how you always walk the Way of Jesus. I have no greater joy than to hear that those whom I love are walking in the Way.

Friend, you are trustworthy to treat the brothers and sisters I send to you with open and robust hospitality, even though you don't know them personally. These brothers and sisters have returned to the Body telling stories of your *agape*. Please support them as they continue their journey; send them out in a way that brings honor to The Love! Their work of Good News sharing started only with the help of those in the Body—no one from outside the gathering supported them. Showing them open and robust hospitality, therefore, is a way to share in their work, to work together to teach others the God-rhythms that lead to the God-life.

*I met Ernest for the first time at the airport.
Midnight-thirty at the end of a 30 hour journey.
Exhausted, I thanked him for his kindness.
With a smile and a sigh, I got in his car.*

*The next morning came too early.
Breakfast was on the table, waiting for me.
Two boys, bundles of energy and glee, waited as well.
They called me grandpa.*

*I was not actually their grandfather.
Just someone with gray hair
who sat at their parents' table.
Discovering the welcome of home.*

God, it's me. Open my heart to the spiritual gift of hospitality. May I find joy in welcoming others. And when the gift is given to me, may I not demur, with a false humility, but accept the gift with gratitude—humbled to be so honored.

3 John 1:9-13

I wrote to the Body but Diotrephes, who believes himself to be the most important person of all and gatekeeper of all that is allowed to happen in the gathering, refuses to welcome us. We shall see about that.

When I come to visit—and I shall—I will confront Diotrephes' behavior: spiteful slander, refusing to

⁷⁹⁶ c.f. Isaiah 58:3-12.

welcome others who are of the Body, and even forcing them out of the gathering!

Friend, do not imitate such worthless and depraved behavior. Instead, do what is just and leads to right relationships. The one who walks in darkness is blind to The Love.

As for Demetrius, everyone speaks highly of him, as does the truth itself! And as do we, and you know we always speak the truth about others.

I have so much to write but prefer to speak with you face-to-face. Pen and ink cannot convey my thoughts and feelings about you. May The Love's peace rest upon you. All your friends here greet you. Greet our friends there by name.

*Inhospitality
welcome refused
shutting others out
arrogance ascending and condescendingly
cold*

God, it's me. May I learn the art of hospitality: a warm smile, open arms, a desire to serve and refresh. May my spirit seek this spiritual gift not for my own sake but for the sake of those I encounter, those whom you bring into my home and my church. May I see them as already abiding in your heart.

Jude

Introduction

I find Jude difficult to read. I am a Mainline denominational pastor, and *Amazing Grace* is my favorite hymn. I would rather love people into the kin-dom than scare them, and my training for pastoral care emphasized unconditional, positive regard. I find judgment unhelpful in drawing people deeper into the God-life; fire and brimstone sermons are not my style. I am not alone in my distaste for negative religion.

What I find in Jude is the New Testament's most definitive proponent of no-nonsense morality. Jude is willing to name immorality as evil, inspire holy and healthy guilt, and (arguably) cross the line into inviting shame. Consider these examples from the NIV:

They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus. (1:4)

...these ungodly people pollute their own bodies, reject authority and heap abuse on celestial beings. (1:8)

These people are blemishes at your love feasts... (1:12)

The Book of Jude reminds me of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words about costly grace:

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again and again...Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a [person their] life, and it is grace because it gives a [person] the only true life. It is costly because it

condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.⁷⁹⁷

Jude preaches a Gospel of costly grace. Like the early Christian communities whom Peter and John addressed, some people in Jude's community proclaimed Christian liberty included license to sin. While Peter and John name such leaders as the Antichrist or antichrists (that is, those who oppose the Way of Jesus), Jude merely denounces their immorality and impact upon the Body.

Jude's writing is associated with literature specifically directed toward moral and ethical teaching (what scholars call *parenetic* literature) from the intertestamental period (between the end of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament). Jude quotes directly from two parenetic works,⁷⁹⁸ and in Jude scholars notice similarities to four other parenetic texts.⁷⁹⁹

The intertestamental period was dominated by an evangelistic Greek culture that sought to impose Greek perspectives and practices onto its subjected cultures, including Israel. One typical response of the conquered nations was to accommodate and allow Greek culture to influence and create a new, syncretistic culture. But the majority of Jews of the intertestamental period resisted all syncretistic influences. The Jewish literature from this period reflects this rejection of Greek culture. It is fierce, unapologetic, and forever willing to protect Jewish culture, especially its moral foundations, ethical mandates, and liturgical practices. Jude fits right in with the great cloud of parenetic witnesses.

I have chosen The Holy for the divine name as a reminder that the God of love is also the God of justice. God's mercy and holiness are two sides of the same

⁷⁹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan, 1937), 45.

⁷⁹⁸ The Assumption of Moses and 1 Enoch (see notes below).

⁷⁹⁹ c.f. Sirach 16:7-10, Damascus Document 2:17-3:12, 3 Maccabees 2:4-7, and Testament of Naphtali 3:4-5.

Gospel. Jude, therefore, reminds me to appreciate costly grace:

Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.⁸⁰⁰

⁸⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Jude 1:1-4

Jude, servant of Jesus the Anointed and brother of James, to all who have been summoned through love. The love of The Holy guards us for Jesus the Anointed, in whom mercy, *shalom*,⁸⁰¹ and *agape*⁸⁰² are received in abundance.

Beloved, I write to exhort you to stand with Jesus and walk the Way of Jesus. I urge you to dance the God-rhythms delivered to you and live the God-life entrusted to all of The Holy's family. I am distressed by what I see happening among you all: deceptive leaders slithering into your gatherings. These snakes were foretold, as is their condemnation. They refuse to behave like children who belong to The Holy. "Anything goes" is their motto and YOLO⁸⁰³ their mantra. They mock the lovingkindness of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar and our true and only leader in the Body.

*Christians gone wild
Anything goes, even sin
Who cares what God thinks?*

God, it's me. I worship and serve among people of grace—mercy and lovingkindness are cornerstones of our faith. Therefore, I am uncomfortable with judgment, intolerance, and pharisaic morality. Yet there are limits. Teach me the distinction between setting a boundary that brings grace and wholeness and being a bully that brings guilt and shame. May I learn to stand for good without being a git.

⁸⁰¹ *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for "peace" and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

⁸⁰² *Agape* is one of several Greek words for "love" and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others. The New Testament has different words for different kinds of love, including: *agape*, *eros* which is "sexual love," *phelos* which is "deep friendship or brotherly/sisterly love," (thus the reason Philadelphia is The City of Brotherly Love), and *storge* which is "empathy or a close bond." There are seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four.

⁸⁰³ YOLO: You Only Live Once.

Jude 1:5-11

Though you know these things, I feel the need to remind you that tolerating deceptive leaders slithering into your gatherings is spiritually dangerous. Remember that The Holy liberated the Israelites from political oppression and economic servitude in Egypt yet later punished those who refused to entrust⁸⁰⁴ themselves to Them. And celestial messengers who rebelled against The Holy are chained in darkness, awaiting the Day when The Holy will unleash the kin-dom in all its fullness.⁸⁰⁵ Recall that the men of Sodom and Gomorrah sought to rape The Holy's messengers.⁸⁰⁶ These cities and their people serve as a warning to all that The Holy's justice cannot be denied and the redeeming fire⁸⁰⁷ will not be quenched.

As past is prelude, so these snakes slither into your midst. Their arrogance deludes them, and so they pollute their own bodies, reject your authority, and even mock The Holy's celestial messengers! As Moses declared,

Even Michael, leader of all the celestial messengers, when struggling with the Accuser over who would get to possess Moses' body upon his death, refused to claim authority for himself but submitted to The Holy. Michael declared, "The Holy rebuke you!"⁸⁰⁸

These snakes say whatever they want and speak of that which they do not understand. They slander the good, slithering into dark holes that lead to their demise. They murder like Cain,⁸⁰⁹ profiteer like Balaam,⁸¹⁰ and are

⁸⁰⁴ c.f. Numbers 14.

⁸⁰⁵ c.f. Revelation 20:10.

⁸⁰⁶ c.f. Genesis 19:1-29.

⁸⁰⁷ c.f. Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the "Redeemer's Fire." Rather than Dante's "fire as punishment," the biblical metaphor for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious. However, here Jude seems to mean fire as punishment.

⁸⁰⁸ c.f. *The Assumption of Moses* (1st century CE). Though the precise quotation cannot be found in existing papyrus manuscripts, it is presumed to have existed because it is cited here and by other ancient sources; c.f. Zechariah 3:1-2 for the quote that appears to be the quotation's original source.

⁸⁰⁹ c.f. Genesis 4:1-15.

insolent toward authority like Korah.⁸¹¹ Woe is their destiny! Woe is their name!

*Wrestling with darkness
denial of its power
unwise in extreme*

God, it's me. Help me to be wary and aware that some in my life have ill intentions. Help me guard against the desire to trust others at all costs, especially the cost of the health and well-being of others in the Body. Such a cost is too high a price to pay.

Jude 1:12-16

Deceptive leaders are a blemish upon your *agape* feasts. They gorge themselves on deceit and manipulation without the slightest hint of shame. They are like rainless clouds over parched land, harvest trees without fruit (uprooted, too, so doubly useless), wild waves that toss ships to and fro but never into a current, a galaxy of stars sucked into a blackhole.

Enoch of old spoke truth about these snakes,

Look! The Holy arrives with thousands and ten-thousands—holy ones all—to declare the *kairos* of justice: Deception will be swept away by truth. Manipulation will crumble under the weight of integrity. Mouths spewing defiance against the God-life will be muted.⁸¹²

These snakes murmur complaint when they should burst forth in praise. Their desires usurp the Way of Jesus; they vomit arrogance with their lips and use flattery as a weapon!

*Look! The Holy comes!
Peeved is an understatement
Justice has its day*

God, it's me. Jude seems angry. Yet it isn't a general anger but specific and targeted: directed at religious leaders like me. O Holy, help me take this word of warning with all due necessary caution: that I as a leader of your sheep will be held accountable. My words and actions will be weighed upon the scales of holiness, justice, and shalom. I am forewarned; may I live and lead accordingly.

Jude 1:17-23

Beloved, remember the words of the sent ones⁸¹³ of Jesus the Anointed, he who is sovereign above Caesar. The sent ones spoke of scoffers and cynics and the “Anything Goes” crowd. What I describe is no surprise. These people seek to conquer by dividing; they influence by appealing to instinct. They know not the influence of the Breath of The Holy.

You, my beloved, are not like them. You build your house upon that which is sacred. You strengthen your Body through trust emboldened by prayer. Keep on keeping on! These things lead to The Holy's *agape* and prepare you to receive the mercy poured out through Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. This mercy leads to life anew, life abundant, and life eternal.

In your own leadership, don't be like the deceptive snakes. Instead, be compassionate with those trying to figure things out.⁸¹⁴ In their wavering, be a steadfast friend and guide. When they are hesitant, be patient. When they begin to separate themselves from the Body, lure them back with *agape*. Stir up in others a passion for The Holy and a longing to live the God-life the way Jesus lived it. Help others become those who burn with desire to be like Jesus in all they do and in how they do it, always avoiding the degrading, corrupting stain of the snakes.

⁸¹³ The Greek word *apostoleos* means “sent ones,” so apostles are literally “those who are sent.”

⁸¹⁴ The Greek word in the text is *diakrino*, which the ESB translates as “doubt,” but which ordinarily is translated as “distinguish” or “judge.” *Diakrino* also has connotations of “separate, waver, be hesitant.” The paraphrase plays with several of these connotations.

⁸¹⁰ c.f. Numbers 22-24.

⁸¹¹ c.f. Numbers 16.

⁸¹² c.f. 1 Enoch 1:8 for the quotation and Deuteronomy 33:2 for the source of 1 Enoch's quote.

*Protect the bruised reed
snuff not the smoldering wick⁸¹⁵
Gentle is the way*

God, it's me. I am challenged by Jude's fiery words. Fire and brimstone are not really my style. Yet as Jude is your Word, I submit to its message. Mold my spirit by these words; conform me to the pattern that leads to a passion for you, The Holy.

Jude 1:24-25

To The Holy, who is willing and who is able to keep you from stumbling and make you to stand⁸¹⁶ even before Their presence—

To The Holy, who is willing and who is able to present you before the heavenly host without fault (and a very great joy it is to do!)—

To The Holy, who is our Rescue, be the radiance of a thousand suns and the glory of ten-thousand galaxies, be the shouts of all rulers and the whispers of all who are oppressed—

To The Holy, through Jesus the Anointed, he who is sovereign above all creation today and into all tomorrows, be our joy, our gratitude, and our thanksgiving! Amen.

*The Doxology
is more than singing a song
life of thanksgiving*

God, it's me. Yes. Yes. Yes. And yes.

⁸¹⁵ c.f. Isaiah 42:3.

⁸¹⁶ In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, "Who can stand?" This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible when Malachi asks of the Day of the Lord, "Who can stand when he appears?" (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when at the end of chapter 6 the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes. (Revelation 6:17) Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord. (Revelation 7:1, 9).

Revelations

Introduction

Imagine: 1,000 years from now a scholar researches an ancient document written in code:

And I saw a woman in a long, flowing gown of red and white wearing a blue crown. In her arms were held the multitudes of the earth, and in her hand was a torch whose brightness blinded kings and those who would make war against God's people.

The scholar is uncertain what to make of the cryptic passage until she unearths a book written by 20th century historian David McCullough: *1776*. Suddenly the scholar understands the passage is more poetry than prose. She scribbles a note to herself:

The woman is obviously Lady Liberty dressed in the colors of the American flag. The torch in her hand is the light of liberty and the multitudes are those of whom it is said "give me your tired, your poor...."

She continues to scribble, "A translation might be:

America is the land of liberty whose light shines into all the world drawing people to its shores; its freedom is a challenge to all dictators who would oppress their own people; its religious freedom a special source of strength against tyranny and oppression."

Interpreting Revelation is like trying to interpret a bit of U.S. history out of context. Indeed, the majority of Revelation's verses have a referent point in either the Hebrew Bible or Roman culture, which I cite in the nearly 300 footnotes that follow. Knowing these referents is key to understanding Revelation's symbolism. One can read this devotional without reading the footnotes, of course, but reading them and connecting them to the

symbols in the text will deepen one's understanding of John's message.

If it seems outlandish to suggest an ancient reader would be able to recognize almost 300 Hebrew Bible references while reading Revelation, consider our modern lexicon of phrases:

Four score and seven years ago....
Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.
One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.

Most readers of this work will recognize these saying as quotes from a U.S. president, actor, and astronaut, and the list of such quotes is nearly endless. Even if a reader could not name Abraham Lincoln, Clark Gable, or Neil Armstrong, the setting of the quote and its symbolic connotations would be understood.

In Revelation, symbolism conveys the message in a similar way that emojis communicate. If I type the symbols for "eye + heart + u," I am saying, "I love you." If I type the symbols for a church steeple + an infinity symbol I am saying either, "The Church is eternal," or, "This sermon is sooooo long!"

Symbols convey meaning beyond themselves. We know this in our society through politics (the American flag), economics (the Apple logo), and entertainment (the Oscar statue). The symbol itself is the message; the message is found in the symbol. By symbolism, John⁸¹⁷ conveyed his message. John follows the books of Ezekiel and Daniel⁸¹⁸ in using the literary genre known as apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature is visually communicated, like a well-crafted movie in which

⁸¹⁷ Due to stylistic and linguistic differences between the works, most scholars argue the author is not the same John who wrote the Gospels and letters but a disciple known as John the Elder.

⁸¹⁸ It is significant that both Ezekiel and Daniel were also written by authors living under political occupation—Ezekiel under Babylonian rule and Daniel under Greek rule.

the story is communicated as much visually as through dialogue. Revelation is better seen than read.

John wrote under house arrest on the Isle of Patmos, just off the west coast of modern Turkey, during the general persecution of Emperor Domitian (c. 95 CE). John used the coded language of apocalyptic literature to critique the Roman Empire. He denounced “Babylon” rather than Rome; and foretold its eventual demise. Because he wrote symbolically, his allusions to Rome were oblique enough not to attract his jailors’ attention.

Revelation is more than social critique, however; it is also John’s pastoral appeal to a persecuted people. John wrote to give hope to those languishing under Domitian’s ire: The Emperor seemed to be in control of all history, but the Emperor’s control was an illusion according to Revelation. Jesus, the Lion who looks like a Lamb, is the First and Last, the One who holds the keys to life and death, the only one who can open the Book of Life, the one riding the white horse to war against the Dragon and the Beast, the one who will be victorious! All of these images will unfold in the pages to follow. Revelation says less about the specifics of history and more about who holds the ultimate destiny toward which history travels.⁸¹⁹

I blend symbolism and meaning into the text of this interpretive paraphrase. English translations of the Bible name the symbols (e.g. trumpets, seals and lamps, etc.). By contrast, I convey what these symbols *mean*. Therefore, “the translation” will read differently than what you are used to reading when you open Revelation. When forced by literary considerations to choose between naming the symbol or describing its meaning, I describe its meaning.

An example of how literary considerations influence my interpretive paraphrase is found in Revelation 4:3. The New International Version translates Revelation 4:3 as,

⁸¹⁹ Christians proclaim the risen Lord Jesus as victor over death, victor over sin, victor over the powers and principalities! How can it be that the followers of Jesus are suffering persecution? This is the existential question that plagues John’s people and to which John offers pastoral encouragement.

And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne.

In my interpretive paraphrase I convey that in ancient, Hellenistic culture, jasper and ruby symbolize holiness and passion. While I found no good way to work in the words “jasper and ruby” except in a footnote, I was able to convey both the symbol and its meaning of the emerald rainbow (with a footnote to two verses in Ezekiel). My version of Revelation 4:3 reads as follows:

On the throne sat The Glory, whose radiance shone with holiness and passion, with an emerald rainbow—symbol of the Messiah—encircling the throne.

Footnotes will be especially helpful. Revelation uses what preachers call a “diamond” approach for its literary form. That is, it looks at the same thing (the diamond in this analogy) from one direction and then the next, with the light that shines upon the diamond giving the viewer a different perspective each time (though discussing the same diamond). A better-known example of this literary technique is found in Matthew 13 where Jesus says, “The kin-dom is like...” seven times in a slightly different way each time (e.g. “mustard seed,” “treasure hidden in a field,” etc.)

This diamond approach is used in chapters 6-20 to describe the conflict between God and evil, and God’s eventual victory, from five perspectives, but each time it is the same cycle being described: conflict with evil / victory.

A brief outline to introduce you to this cycle and prepare you for what you will read below follows:

- Chapter 1: Describes God and Jesus as those in charge of heaven and earth.
- Chapters 2-3: Jesus encourages and challenges seven churches.
- Chapter 4: Worship prepares the Church for conflict.
- Chapter 5: Jesus, not Caesar, controls history.
- Chapters 6-7: First conflict with evil / victory cycle: the four horsemen of the apocalypse (unlocking seven seals).
- Chapters 8-9: Second conflict with evil / victory cycle: a series of plagues (blowing seven trumpets).

Chapters 10-11 Conflict pauses for an interlude as Scripture is read; (second conflict cycle concludes in 11:15-19).

Chapters 12-15 Third conflict with evil / victory cycle: the Dragon and two Beasts are introduced.

Chapters 16-18 Fourth conflict with evil / victory cycle: the grapes of wrath (pouring out seven bowls).

Chapters 19-20 Fifth conflict with evil / victory cycle: final judgment of the Dragon)

Chapters 21-22 Description of the new heaven and new earth.

A final note: In *Revelation*, I refer to God by using the term The Glory. The Glory is Revelation's theme and an apt description of the One to whom the book points.

Revelations 1:1-6⁸²⁰

The unveiling of what is, has been, and will be⁸²¹ was given to me by Jesus the Anointed, and it was given to Jesus by The Glory. Jesus unveiled who holds the future by sending a celestial messenger to me, his servant John, who witnessed everything. And everything I saw and heard I wrote down—The Glory’s Message and Jesus’ Witness. Sacred joy overshadows the one who reads to the Body the truth embedded in this message. Sacred comfort overshadows those who hear this message, heed its truth, and allow it to move beyond their minds and into their hearts, for what follows is a message of hope: The *kairos*⁸²² is near.

John, to the seven churches in Turkey: may you be overwhelmed by lovingkindness and *shalom*⁸²³ from The Glory—who was before the beginning of time and who will be after then end of all things and who is in every moment in between, the eternal present. And lovingkindness and *shalom* be also from Jesus the Anointed, who speaks the truth of all that has happened

⁸²⁰ The churches to whom John wrote were under general cultural and specific political persecution. The Revelation is not written to 21st century Christians wanting to know a timeline for the future but to 1st century Christians needing pastoral encouragement to endure in the face of massive trials! In chapter one John begins his encouragement by focusing on the person at the center of all things: The Glory found through Jesus.

⁸²¹ The Greek text uses *tachei genesthai*, which means “immediately happen” and is often translated as “soon come to pass.” This raises the issue of time perspective in Revelation, which has clear references to past events (e.g. quoting Jesus’ words from the cross in 16:17, 21:6 and Paul’s writing to the Thessalonians in 3:3, 16:5), present-at-the-time-of-writing references to Rome (e.g. 18:11-15), as well as what appear to be future events (e.g. Revelation 21-22). The inclusion of past, present, and future lead most mainline interpreters to adopt what is known as the amillennialist view, which interprets Revelation as focusing on the timeframe between Jesus’ Cross and his return (i.e. Parousia). The amillennialist view is used in this interpretive paraphrase (see extended note 1 in Appendix A).

⁸²² Greek has two words for time. *Chronos* depicts “linear, chronological time.” *Kairos* depicts the “key moment” when transformation comes (e.g. when the expecting mother tells her partner, “It’s time.”)

⁸²³ *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for “peace” and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

to him—descending into death’s dark depths and arising into eternity’s first light, the promise for all who will follow. He is sovereign above Caesar and above all who rule upon the earth. To Jesus who loves us and has liberated us to live the God-life through the giving of his own life; to Jesus who has called us into the kin-dom to serve as those who bring The Glory to people and people to The Glory; to Jesus be the radiance of a love that defeats death itself and wins an eternal victory.

Huzzah! Huzzah! Amen.

Good start.

*Can you finish?*²

Talking a good game

*Doesn’t solve problems IRL.*⁸²⁴

God, it’s me. Here at the beginning of Revelation, John conveys my theology well: You, O Glory, and your son Jesus are light, life, and love. Why, then, is life sometimes so difficult? Why, then, does “Caesar Domitian” persecute your Church? When, then, shall justice roll down like a river; righteousness like an ever-flowing stream?⁸²⁵ Where, then, are you, O Glory, in our hour of need?

Revelations 1:7-20⁸²⁶

Look! See! He who is fully human, archetype of all humankind, comes.⁸²⁷ He to whom The Glory has

⁸²⁴ IRL: In Real Life.

⁸²⁵ c.f. Amos 5:24. (NIV)

⁸²⁶ Chapter one proclaims the fundamental message of Christian hope: Jesus has defeated sin, death and the grave. He was before Caesar and will be after Caesar. Caesar can take your life, but only Jesus holds the keys to death and the afterlife. However, the chapter also raises the existential question that plagues John’s people: How can it be that the followers of Jesus are suffering persecution? The chapter is the beginning of John’s response to this existential question. Note to the reader: John clearly does not mind mixing metaphors! In fact, his style is to pile symbol upon symbol to hammer home his point: The Glory is in their midst, even though their present circumstances might suggest otherwise. Take hope, therefore, because The Glory who has redeemed the beloved will restore them.

⁸²⁷ c.f. Daniel 7:13: “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of

given all authority arrives for all to see; even those who crucified him will behold his majesty.⁸²⁸ All humankind will grieve their broken ways, for he will teach them to desire the God-life. So shall it be! Amen!

“I am that I am,” says The Glory.⁸²⁹ “I will be who I will be. I have always been and will always be—the eternal present who yet arrives, the Sovereign over all sovereigns.”

I, John, your brother who shares with you the *koinonia*⁸³⁰ of suffering, kin-dom, and enduring patience in Jesus, was on the Isle of Patmos because of my devotion to The Glory’s Word and trust in Jesus’ witness. On the day of resurrection (the day after the Jewish sabbath), I was overwhelmed by the Spirit and given a vision mystic and transcendent. The voice of a trumpet declared, “Write! Put down into words what you see and send it to the seven churches who live in central and western Turkey.”⁸³¹

I turned to see the voice and encountered The Glory in the throne room of heaven.⁸³² Standing beside The Glory was Jesus, the Son of Humanity to whom The Glory had given all authority in heaven and on earth. He was a sight to behold. Jesus was dressed like the High

heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.”

⁸²⁸ c.f. Zechariah 12:10: “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.”

⁸²⁹ c.f. Exodus 3:14: “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’”

⁸³⁰ The Greek word *koinonia* translates as “fellowship” and conveys a deep sense of spiritual and social kinship. *Koinonia* was a hallmark of early Christian communities and a cause for Roman suspicion of their motives—the Romans assuming something political must be the source of the Christian community.

⁸³¹ The seven churches are in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

⁸³² The text refers to seven golden lampstands, which could be found in the Tent of Meeting and, later, in the Jerusalem Temple. The lampstands symbolize The Glory’s presence; c.f. Exodus 25:31-40, especially 25:31: “Make a lampstand of pure gold... Then make seven lamps and set them up on it so that they light the space in front of it. Its wick trimmers and trays are to be of pure gold.”

Priest⁸³³ yet looked like the Ancient of Days.⁸³⁴ No clay feet for Jesus, but rather feet of bronze that would endure, a sign of his eternal kin-dom.⁸³⁵ His voice thundered like the sound of a raging river⁸³⁶—a sure sign that he is the God of Israel—and a sword⁸³⁷ was in his hand—the prophetic word of judgment that requires people to choose whom they will serve: The Glory or another. Jesus’ presence shined like the radiance of the sun.⁸³⁸

When I saw him, I fell at his feet, utterly overwhelmed. Jesus placed his hand upon me and said, “Be not afraid. I am the beginning and end of all creation, from A to Z.⁸³⁹ Though once dead, I live. Look! See! I live forever. Death and the afterlife are my possessions, for I have authority over them. I have the keys to unlock every door that leads through death to life.

“Write what you have seen. Describe what is, has been, and will be. Let my people know that they are not alone! My celestial messengers watch over each church. Their gatherings become the place where The Glory is

⁸³³ c.f. Exodus 28:4: “These are the garments they are to make: a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a woven tunic, a turban and a sash. They are to make these sacred garments for your brother Aaron and his sons, so they may serve me as priests.”

⁸³⁴ c.f. Daniel 7:9: “As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze.”

⁸³⁵ c.f. Daniel 7:31-45, especially verses 44-45: “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.”

⁸³⁶ c.f. Ezekiel 43:2: “I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory.”

⁸³⁷ c.f. Isaiah 49:2: “He made my mouth like a sharpened sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.”

⁸³⁸ c.f. Exodus 34:29: “When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.”

⁸³⁹ c.f. Isaiah 44:6: “This is what the LORD says—Israel’s King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: ‘I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.’”

revealed; their worship becomes the very throne room of heaven.”

*The eye beholds
only what it can imagine.*

*The heart sees
for what it can hope.*

*Look! See!
It is Jesus.*

God, it's me. John's vision begins in heaven's throne room, and we are directed to cast our vision toward Jesus. He is the center of our hope, always has been and always will be. Beyond pandemic panic, Jesus stands. Through wars and rumors of war, Jesus stands. Alongside inflation and election debates, Jesus stands. We are drawn to him as the center of our vision, for only he unlocks the door to your presence and peace. May I rest in Jesus today.

Revelation s2:1-7⁸⁴⁰

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Ephesus; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus,⁸⁴¹ who directs the messengers and holds his churches by the hand.

⁸⁴⁰ Revelation 2-3 contain seven letters to seven churches. Interpreters use different lenses through which to understand these letters (see endnote 2 in Appendix A). The lens through which we look either distorts or clarifies that which we see. I paraphrase chapters 2-3 as referring to seven historical churches. It has the advantage of speaking a message of challenge and comfort to the churches of the 1st century, but any church in any century can hear all of these messages as if they are spoken to them and be challenged and comforted. Ockham's Razor is a famous philosophical tool which says, "Take the simplest viable solution." This historical lens meets the test of Ockham's Razor.

⁸⁴¹ I repeat in the paraphrase certain phrases (this first sentence and a half among them). In the Greek text, some of these phrases are actually repeated for each of the seven churches, while some of them are implied by the rhetorical structure of the message. The common themes embedded in Jesus' message to the seven churches are (1) All churches are filled with grace and please The Glory, (2) all churches are filled with sin and must grow, (3) The Glory promises grace and life to all who endure,

"You are filled with lovingkindness and make The Glory happy through your good works and perseverance through pain. You do not tolerate deception and manipulation from those who claim to be sent by Jesus but who practice depravity. Instead, like the tortoise, you continue ever forward for my name's sake. You endure for the sake of the God-life.

"Yet you struggle with brokenness—your false self must diminish that your true self might grow. You have lost your first love! The first blush of passion you once had for me has become blasé. Reignite the flame of your love, for without love passionately expressed you cannot shine my light. I know you are trying—you reject the followers of "The Destroyer,"⁸⁴² who lure you to indulge your most base appetites without even a hint of chagrin. Good for you that you reject them, but you can do better than merely rejecting what destroys you.

"If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches! I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who endure and persevere. To whomever prevails against their most base appetites, I will give eternal nourishment: You shall eat from the tree of life!"⁸⁴³

*"Love is a marathon, not a sprint."
Deepening over time,
a flower blossoming, blossoming, blossoming
into bloom.*

*"Yes, but sometimes lovers need to run."
Across a meadow, into each other's arms,
falling into ecstatic embrace amidst your
blooming flowers.*

and (4) the Spirit speaks to these seven churches, and through them, to all churches.

⁸⁴² English translations say, "Nicolaitans," followers of Nicolas, whose name means "conqueror" or "destroyer" in Greek. Scholars debate the sin of the Nicolaitans, but the majority opinion (guess) is they practiced and taught that engaging in the indulgences associated with Greco-Roman culture was acceptable (under the false argument that Christian liberty allowed license).

⁸⁴³ c.f. Genesis 2:9: "The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

God, it's me. I remember my first love of you. I was 17 and wrote a seven-page letter to my parents about why they should believe in Jesus. I am older now, wiser. My faith is both deeper and more cynical. I would gladly return to that first blush of love, especially if I could leave behind my impetuous youth. What does it look like to return to my first love? How would I act if my first love of you were to return?

Revelations 2:8-11

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Smyrna; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus, who was before the beginning and will be after the end, who died and was raised to life.

"You are filled with lovingkindness and make The Glory happy, even as you suffer persecution and poverty. Yet you are rich in the God-life! I know about those who claim to belong to The Glory but actually serve the Accuser, a gathering of abusers. Be not afraid regarding what they are about to heap on you. I speak truth: the Accuser's servants will imprison you. You will be tested and learn anew your trust in The Glory brings you strength.⁸⁴⁴

"If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches! I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who endure and persevere. The second death⁸⁴⁵ cannot touch you."

I wake up anxious.

Did I really have a final exam for a class I never attended?

No, thankfully, it was just a dream—nightmare actually.

⁸⁴⁴ c.f. Daniel 1:12-15: "Please test your servants for ten days. Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." So the king agreed to this and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food."

⁸⁴⁵ The Palestinian Targums are Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible written in the 1st through 3rd centuries C.E. Though contemporaneous (and later) with the writing of Revelation, the Targums give a rough approximation of how the term "second death" was used during this time period; c.f., for example, Targum Jeremiah on Jeremiah 51:17: "They shall die the second death and not live in the world to come."

I am awake now and concerned.

*What if the test is not a dream but reality—
the world unhinged, coming for me, for you, for us?*

God, it's me. It's easy to feel dread these days—just watch the news or mention politics, gender or the climate with someone from "the other side." It's easy to be concerned, even anxious, about inflation, the stock market, and one's job. I wonder if the historians who predict a civil war is on the horizon are correct. O Glory, save me from the time of testing! Or, better yet, make me strong when the test comes, that I will shine the life, light, and love of Jesus to all whom I encounter—friend or foe.

Revelation s2:12-17

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Pergamum; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus, whose two-edged sword inflicts forces a choice between friend or foe.⁸⁴⁶

"You are filled with lovingkindness and make The Glory happy. You live amidst pagan temples devoted to Zeus, Apollo, Athena, Dionysus, Aphrodite, and Aesculapius, which lay together in the grove called the Nicephorium;⁸⁴⁷ you are surrounded by the Accuser. Yet you all abide in me—remaining true to the character and integrity by which I am known. You abided in me rather than abandon your trust, even as your bishop, Antipas, was martyred.

"Yet you struggle with brokenness—your false self must diminish that your true self might grow. There are some among your gathering who seduce people into idolatry and sexual immorality. There are some also who indulge in the license of Greek culture and teach others to do likewise, as Balaam did.⁸⁴⁸ Turn around! Turn toward

⁸⁴⁶ c.f. Psalm 149:6-7: "May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands, to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples...."

⁸⁴⁷ The Greek text translates as, "Where Satan has his throne," which, scholars believe, may have been inspired by the Nicephorium's many pagan temples.

⁸⁴⁸ c.f. Numbers 31:16: "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the LORD in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the LORD's people."

me! If you do not, I will confront you with my words; my splendor will overcome you.⁸⁴⁹

“If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches! I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who endure and persevere, and I will reveal to you The Glory’s mysteries and Their provision.⁸⁵⁰ I will declare you innocent by giving you a white stone,⁸⁵¹ symbols that you are made whole and complete, your true selves. You will be vindicated!”⁸⁵²

*Character counts
in a culture that invites depravity.*

*Integrity matters
more than ever when “anything goes.”*

*Vindication comes
not from me but from Thee.*

God, it’s me. I am intrigued by the notion of the Nicephorium: a grove of pagan temples. What is the modern equivalent? Times Square? The D.C. Monuments? Hollywood Boulevard? The seedy lane of strip clubs? The row of sweat shops? O Glory, the ancients had nothing on us moderns, for the temptations to betray our true selves is as ever present now as it was then. Help me, O Glory, to choose well—to conform to your loving-kindness in what I do and in how I do it.

⁸⁴⁹ c.f. Isaiah 49:2: “He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.’”

⁸⁵⁰ The text uses the symbol of manna; c.f. 2 Maccabees 2:4 where Jewish tradition held the ark of the covenant was not lost but hidden, and within the ark, among other things, would be a sample of manna from the desert wanderings.

⁸⁵¹ Roman courts would display a white stone to symbolize acquittal.

⁸⁵² c.f. Isaiah 62:2: “The nations will see your vindication, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.”

Revelations 2:18-29

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Thyatira; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus, in whose sight justice comes and cannot be averted,⁸⁵³ whose kin-dom lasts for eternity.

“You are filled with lovingkindness and make The Glory happy. Your *agape*⁸⁵⁴ and your trust, your service and perseverance continue to grow.

“Yet you struggle with brokenness—your false self must diminish that your true self might grow even more. You tolerate those⁸⁵⁵ who, like Jezebel,⁸⁵⁶ lead people astray into sexual immorality and the indulgences of Greek culture. Such people even claim to be guided by the Divine Spirit! I have given them time and space to turn away from their immorality. They refuse. Therefore, I will give them over to themselves. They will suffer through leaping into their avarice, betrayal, and corruption, which lead to death—spiritually, morally, and often physically. The gatherings of my people will then recognize I search hearts and minds and let justice have its day.

⁸⁵³ The paraphrase conveys the meaning of the symbols “eyes like blazing fire” and “feet are like burnished bronze”; c.f. Daniel 5:6: “His body was like topaz, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.”

⁸⁵⁴ *Agape* is one of several Greek words for “love” and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others. The New Testament has different words for different kinds of love, including, *agape*, *eros* which is “sexual love,” *phelos* which is “deep friendship or brotherly/sisterly love,” (thus the reason Philadelphia is The City of Brotherly Love), and *storge* which is “empathy or a close bond.” There are seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four.

⁸⁵⁵ Scholars debate whether Jezebel refers to a particular woman or symbolically to people who lead others astray. The majority opinion sides with a symbolic interpretation, so I refer to them in the plural rather than to her in the singular.

⁸⁵⁶ c.f. 1 Kings 16:31: “He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians and began to serve Baal and worship him”; c.f. also 1 Kings 18:19: “Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

“To those in Thyatira who do not tolerate Jezebel I say this: Good for you for rejecting the teaching that leads you astray! You have rejected the so-called mysteries of the Accuser; therefore, the only obligation I place on you is to keep on keeping on. Continue to walk the long obedience that leads to the Day when my kin-dom will be unveiled in its fullness.⁸⁵⁷ I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who endure and persevere. When the Day of my unveiling comes, I will share with you my moral authority over the Nations,⁸⁵⁸ and you will shine like the brightness of the heavens⁸⁵⁹ and lead many into right relationships. If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches!”

*I've been watching Handmaid's Tale on Hulu:
Why are women always blamed
(as if no man in Thyatira was a "Jezebel")?*

*Handmaid's Tale is set in mythical "Gilead,"
yet depicts authoritarian violence against women.
Where is the Balm in Gilead?*

*Long ago, men turned away from The Glory's justice:
Giving ourselves over to desire,
my wife, my daughter, and my sisters suffer.*

God, it's me. I repent of my assumptions about my primacy of place in a society designed by and for men. I try not to be "that guy," yet know I am (at times). O Glory, may I grow ever more honest in my relationships, ever more self-aware, ever more willing to serve not to be served. As I walk away from the indulgences of this culture, may I lead others to join me—may we journey together until there is a balm in Gilead.

⁸⁵⁷ c.f. Psalm 2:7-9: "I will proclaim the LORD's decree: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have become your father. Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.'"

⁸⁵⁸ c.f. Numbers 24:17: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel...."

⁸⁵⁹ c.f. Daniel 12:3: "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."

Revelations 3:1-6

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Sardis; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus, who is imbued with the seven⁸⁶⁰ spirits—symbol of the fullness of the Divine Spirit—and holds in his hand the seven stars—symbol for each gathering and the whole Body.

“You struggle with brokenness—your false self must diminish that your true self might grow. I know who you are; you're not fooling me. You have a strong reputation as 'The Church Alive' and 'The Happening Congregation' but it's all a mirage. Your hearts are dead. Wake up! Stir yourselves from your slumber!⁸⁶¹ Nourish what is about to die—the God-life within you and your true selves (which remain incomplete, not fully formed). Recall what you have seen. Recite what you have been told. Remember to embrace the Way of Jesus. If you do not awaken to the God-life, you will remain in your slumber and miss the moment of my unveiling.

“Yet a few of you in Sardis, who I know by name, make The Glory happy. You refuse to pollute yourselves but seek purity and integrity in how you live the God-life.⁸⁶² I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who live the God-life in this way. Your names are written forever in the Book of Life!⁸⁶³ As you endure and persevere, continuing to trust in me, I will speak your name before The Glory and all heaven. If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches!”

*I get concerned
when like a roller coaster my faith ascends
only to descend again.*

⁸⁶⁰ In biblical numerology the number seven refers to the divine perfection.

⁸⁶¹ c.f. Proverbs 24:33-34: "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man."

⁸⁶² c.f. Ezra 9:10-11: "But now, our God, what can we say after this? For we have forsaken the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other.'"

⁸⁶³ c.f. Daniel 12:3: "...at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered."

*Mercurial as my faith may be
the time to worry is when my faith descends
never to ascend again.*

God, it's me. I pray I will live until I die—live in you, live for your justice and joy, live until the shalom of Jesus escorts me into your unveiled presence. Until that moment, help me to hear "The Shema,"⁸⁶⁴ practice Micah's to-do list,⁸⁶⁵ and walk the way of Jesus.⁸⁶⁶ Though I may fall, help me not to fail. When I slumber, awaken me with your trumpet call.

Revelations 3:7-13

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Philadelphia; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus, who is holy and true, who alone is given authority and dominion over David's House to welcome and to cast out, to usher in and prevent from entering.⁸⁶⁷

"You are filled with lovingkindness and make The Glory happy. I know what you do—you have but meager strength, yet you struggle to keep my Word and honor my Name. Look! See! I have opened the door to David's House to you and no one can shut it. Fear not the crowd surrounding the Accuser, who claim religion yet practice deceit, manipulation, and cruelty. I will see to it they are humbled and acknowledge the truth: I love you! As you have obeyed my exhortation to endure and persevere, I will surround you, guard and protect you, and keep you from the trials that test every human heart upon the whole earth.

"I will be unveiled for all to see. Embrace the God-life you have and trust that no one can take it from you. I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who endure and persevere. I will establish you and in me will be your strength.⁸⁶⁸ Never again will you leave my presence. I will inscribe The Glory upon your heart and

⁸⁶⁴ c.f. Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

⁸⁶⁵ c.f. Micah 6:8.

⁸⁶⁶ c.f. Luke 4:18-19, among many.

⁸⁶⁷ c.f. Isaiah 22:22: "I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open."

⁸⁶⁸ c.f. 2 Chronicles 3:17 where the Temple's two pillars are named, Jachin and Boaz, which in Hebrew mean "I will establish" and "In him is strength."

Jerusalem upon your hands; indeed, the New Jerusalem shall be your home.⁸⁶⁹ I will make you new creation.⁸⁷⁰ If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches!"

*Word to the oppressed:
Come you who are weary,
whose labor degrades, whose dignity is denied.*

*I AM with you.
I WILL BE always with you.
I open the door of my heart to you.*

*Good luck to anyone trying to shut it.
Ain't never going to happen.
The door to my heart is always open—to you.*

God, it's me. I receive comfort hearing these promises, yet I acknowledge they are written for people other than me: those whose labor degrades, whose dignity is denied. They are written to those around the globe and in my own community who live paycheck to paycheck, who live in food deserts, whose vote is denied. Though they may feel as if their prayers are not heard, I know you hear and heed each word they speak, even the sighs too deep for words. O Glory, may I be your instrument of blessing to answer their prayers.

Revelations 3:14-22

Write to the gathering of chosen ones in Laodicea; to their celestial messenger write. Write the words of Jesus, who says it and it is so, for he is trustworthy and true, the sovereign over all the Cosmos.

"You struggle with brokenness—your false self must diminish that your true self might grow. I also know what you all do, that your 'yes' means 'maybe' and your

⁸⁶⁹ c.f. Ezekiel 48:35b: "And the name of the city from that time on will be: The Lord is there"; c.f. also Jeremiah 33:16: "In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior."

⁸⁷⁰ c.f. Isaiah 65:17: "See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind."

‘no’ means ‘we’ll see.’ You are neither passionate nor apathetic, neither fire nor ice. You must choose the God-life! So because you dance the God-rhythms tentatively, because you embrace the God-life with restraint, I will vomit⁸⁷¹ you out of my mouth, until you choose not to defile yourselves.

“You think that because you are wealthy and have every luxury you can want, need, or imagine that The Glory holds you in high esteem. You say to yourselves, ‘We are living the good life!’ But you are not living good lives. More than this, the lives you are living are actually just sad: misery and sorrow embrace within you, ignorance and shame are your best friends. You are naked.⁸⁷² Hear me! Heed my words! Seek what belongs to The Glory, for it cannot be destroyed. Open yourselves to the Refiner’s fire⁸⁷³—that the dross of your false self might be purged and only your true self remain. Then you will be clothed in glory, The Glory will be your covering.⁸⁷⁴

“Be not disheartened. I seek to compel and to convince, to educate and train⁸⁷⁵ those whom I love. So be eager and enthusiastic about the God-life. Dive into the

⁸⁷¹ c.f. Leviticus 20:22: “Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out.”

⁸⁷² c.f. Genesis 3:7, 9-10: “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid’; c.f. also Isaiah 47:3: “Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered. I will take vengeance; I will spare no one.”

⁸⁷³ c.f. Malachi 3:2-3a: “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.”

⁸⁷⁴ c.f. Zechariah 3:3-4: “Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, ‘See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.’”

⁸⁷⁵ The Greek words used are *elencho* and *paideno* which are usually translated as “rebuke” and “to discipline.” However, *elencho* also means “to compel or convince” and *paideno* also means “to educate or train.” I lean into these latter definitions for the paraphrase because the words of Jesus seek to invite growth rather than convey punishment.

deep waters that renew and refresh. Open your minds to new ideas and your hearts to fresh experiences. I am right here before you! I am waiting, just waiting, always waiting! Whoever opens themselves to me, I will join them for Sunday dinner, and it will be a feast to remember. Even better, it will change the way you are living.

“I, Jesus, promise life, light, and love to all who endure and persevere. You will sit beside me in heaven just as I sit beside The Glory. What a celebration that will be! If you can hear, listen, for the Spirit speaks to the churches!”

The rain came early to the desert.

The man stepped on to his patio—

not quite cool yet absent the promised heat to come.

Absent the brutality of an Arizona summer,
the man sipped his coffee.

“Life is good,” he thought. “Comfortable.”

The maid delivered his oatmeal a few moments later.

“Just the way I like it,” he complimented her.

“Berries, nuts, and not too hot, not too cold.”

The man smiled at her.

The maid averted her eyes, lowering her head,
returning the man’s gesture as best she could.

“Yes, quite comfortable,” he thought.

“Complacent,” she thought.

“Complicit,” say the prophets.

God, it’s me. Help me repent of complacency and complicity—to see others in their dignity and humanity, to act with compassion and advocate for justice. Help me look beyond my own comfort to the cries of others. May I choose not to defile myself. May I choose you.

Revelations 4:1-11⁸⁷⁶

After hearing the celestial messenger speak Jesus’ words of encouragement and challenge to the seven

⁸⁷⁶ In Revelation 4-5 we see that worship precedes the Great Battle between The Glory and evil (Revelation 6 – 20). Before the battle, the Body prepares through worship.

churches, I continued in my vision mystical and transcendent. I looked and saw beyond the veil that separates earth from heaven—the curtain between them was open to me! And the voice of the trumpet spoke to me again, saying, “Come! Enter! I will show you the divine necessity,⁸⁷⁷ that which The Glory has proclaimed must happen—what is, has been, and will be.”

I was taken by the Spirit into the throne room of The Glory. On the throne sat The Glory, whose radiance shone with holiness and passion,⁸⁷⁸ with an emerald rainbow—symbol of the Messiah—encircling the throne. Worship of The Glory was the foundation of both heaven and earth.⁸⁷⁹

Surrounding the throne were the elders of Israel and the Church—all The Glory’s people together as one voice and singing praise to the One who sits upon the throne. They had been made pure, their true selves, and wore golden crowns upon their heads. From the throne came lightning and thunder,⁸⁸⁰ as on the mountain when Moses stood before The Glory: the presence, the radiance, the splendor overwhelmed! Seven Spirits, representing the fullness of the Divine Spirit, encircled and permeated the throne, which was set upon baptismal waters⁸⁸¹ and The Glory’s promise never again to destroy the earth with a flood.⁸⁸²

⁸⁷⁷ The Greek word is *dei*, which is translated as “necessary” and has the connotation of being a divinely ordained event.

⁸⁷⁸ The text refers to “carnelian and jasper,” which are precious jewels associated in ancient cultures with holiness and passion.

⁸⁷⁹ c.f. Ezekiel 1:26-28: “I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.”

⁸⁸⁰ c.f. Exodus 19:16: “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled.”

⁸⁸¹ The phrase “baptismal waters” is interpretive, as the symbol refers to a huge bowl, like a baptismal font, that stood at the entrance to the Jerusalem Temple and was called “the Sea”; c.f. 1 Kings 7:23-25: “He made the Sea of cast metal, circular in shape, measuring ten cubits from rim to rim and five cubits high. It took a line of thirty cubits to measure around it. Below the rim, gourds encircled it—ten to a cubit. The gourds were cast in two rows in one piece with the Sea. The Sea stood on twelve bulls, three facing north, three facing west, three facing south

In the center of the throne were four living creatures covered with eyes.⁸⁸³ They see all—behind and before, above and below, within and between—and represent The Glory’s omniscience. The four living creatures were like the best from among all creation: the noblest like a lion, the strongest like an ox, the wisest like a human, and the swiftest like an eagle. Each living creature had six wings: with two they covered their face to convey reverence, with two they covered their feet to convey humility, and with two they flew like the wind to accomplish the Glory’s will.

The four living creatures live for all eternity to worship before the throne. Day and night they sing, directing all to the deeper dimensions of worship—rooted in eternity and pointing to The Glory’s sovereignty, a political act of rebellion against the alleged power and control of Caesar, both divine decree and human necessity. The four living creatures never pause their worship of The Glory as they sing:

Holy! Holy! Holy!⁸⁸⁴

The Glory!

Who was before the beginning of time,
Who will be after the end of all things,

Who is in every moment in between—
the eternal present!

and three facing east. The Sea rested on top of them, and their hindquarters were toward the center. It held two-thousand baths.” (So, the Sea was more the size of a modern swimming pool than baptismal font.)

⁸⁸² c.f. Genesis 9:11: “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

⁸⁸³ c.f. Ezekiel 1:4-6: “I looked, and I saw...an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, but each of them had four faces and four wings.”

⁸⁸⁴ c.f. Isaiah 6:2-4: “Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.

“At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.”

As the four living creatures sang of glory and honor and thanksgiving to The Glory, the elders of all the people fell to their faces. They removed their golden crowns and lay them at The Glory's throne to proclaim their allegiance, their worship, and their confession of The Glory as the true sovereign over all the Cosmos. The elders also sang:

Worthy! Worthy! Worthy!
The Glory—our Lord and our God!⁸⁸⁵

No Caesar lays hold of authority, honor and power!⁸⁸⁶
The Glory created all things: praise be forever!

*Lightning and thunder
convey glory, honor and authority
to speak without interruption.*

*To whom is such power given?
To whom, to whom, to whom?*

*I am silenced before the One
to whom glory, honor and authority
cannot be taken away.*

God, it's me. Too often our worship is shallow—about us rather than you. Too often we enter worship asking what it will do for us rather than what we will do (and become) for you. Too often we neglect to remember that worship brings us into your direct presence. Too often do we forget that we do not worship alone but with the communion of saints! Forgive us! Renew our worship that it may be a sacred act. Free us through our worship to live only for you.

⁸⁸⁵ The song the elders sing is deeply subversive. In the text, the elders proclaim The Glory to be “our Lord and our God,” which usurped the title by which Caesar was known.

⁸⁸⁶ The elders also proclaim the attributes of “glory, honor, and power belong to The Glory.” Roman culture argued these attributes are Caesar's exclusive possession. Again, the song the elders sing is deeply subversive!

Revelations 5:1-14⁸⁸⁷

As I continued to look into The Glory's throne room, I saw someone holding a scroll with writing on both sides, a symbol of The Glory's power!⁸⁸⁸ But the scroll was sealed, not just with one seal but seven seals. No one could read it,⁸⁸⁹ for no one in heaven or on earth could open the scroll! I heard a celestial messenger, mighty in voice and visage, cry out, “Who can open the scroll that holds the names written in the Book of Life? Who can open the scroll that foreshadows the divine necessity that The Glory has proclaimed must happen—what is, has been, and will be? Who controls the destination to which the arc of history must bend?”⁸⁹⁰

I looked, expecting someone to come forth. I looked upon the strongest and wisest in human history, but they could not. I looked upon the idols and deities of the Romans, but they could not. I looked upon the fearsome force of nature itself, but it could not. I wept, for nothing nor no one could open the scroll. No one was able. No one was worthy.

Then one of the elders from among the tribes of Israel and the sent ones⁸⁹¹ of the Church called out to me,

⁸⁸⁷ In chapter five John offers his persecuted parishioners encouragement: The Glory is in control of history, even though their lives suggested otherwise. It is neither Caesar nor any other political, economic, or social oppressor that ultimately guides the destinies of life and death. In chapter five no one can be found to open the scroll (of unfolding human history) except the Lamb that was slain (Jesus) because the scroll was sealed with seven seals (completely and utterly closed except to Jesus' will.)

⁸⁸⁸ Ancient papyrus was woven together and so was smooth on one side and bumpy on the other side. Therefore, people only wrote on the smooth side. That this papyrus was written on both sides symbolizes an act of The Glory's power; c.f. Ezekiel 2:9-10: “Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.”

⁸⁸⁹ c.f. Isaiah 29:11: “For you this whole vision is nothing but words sealed in a scroll. And if you give the scroll to someone who can read, and say, ‘Read this, please,’ they will answer, ‘I can't; it is sealed’”; c.f. also Daniel 12:4: “But you, Daniel, roll up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.”

⁸⁹⁰ The Greek text does not indicate what is written on the scroll at this point in Revelation; however, c.f. Revelation 6ff.

⁸⁹¹ The Greek word *apostoleos*, which usually is translated as “apostle,” is from the verb meaning “to send”; thus “sent one.”

“Weep not, child, but look! See! The Lion of the tribe of Judah⁸⁹²—Strength from David comes, the Root of David⁸⁹³ upon which the House of Israel is built, approaches. He has won victory over death and the grave and proved victorious over all the schemes of the Accuser. He can do it. He can open the scroll. Seven seals are no match for he who is sovereign over all human history.”

I turned toward the One to whom the elder pointed, expecting to see a great lion. Instead I saw Jesus, like a lamb that had been slain.⁸⁹⁴ Though slain, he had all power and authority. Through his sacrifice, the Divine Spirit was sent to the four corners of the earth. Jesus, the Lion who looked like a Lamb, strode forward and took the scroll from the right hand of The Glory. The four living creatures and the elders fell prostrate in worship with songs, prayers and incense ascending.⁸⁹⁵ The four living creatures sang a new song:

Worthy! Worthy! Worthy!
Taking the scroll, breaking the seals - Yes, he can!

You, O Crucified Messiah,
ransomed people from their slavery,
from every tribe and clan and nation,
from every tongue and dialect!⁸⁹⁶

You form and transform them into a kin-dom
to bring people to The Glory,
to serve not to be served,
to join you in the work of bringing heaven to earth!

⁸⁹² c.f. Genesis 49:9-10: “You are a lion’s cub, Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.”

⁸⁹³ c.f. Isaiah 11:1: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.”

⁸⁹⁴ c.f. Leviticus 4:32-33: “If someone brings a lamb as their sin offering, they are to bring a female without defect. They are to lay their hand on its head and slaughter it for a sin offering at the place where the burnt offering is slaughtered.”

⁸⁹⁵ c.f. Psalm 141:2: “May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.”

⁸⁹⁶ c.f. Isaiah 42:10: “Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it, you islands, and all who live in them.”

Then I looked and heard the voices of the heavenly host—celestial messengers numbering in the thousands and ten-thousands,⁸⁹⁷ a multitude that seemed to go on forever. They encircled the throne and were joined by the living creatures and the elders. All of them joined together in singing praise to the Lamb:

Worthy is the Lamb!
Though slain he lives:
to him is given sevenfold doxology!⁸⁹⁸

Then their voices were joined by every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth as together they sang:

To The Glory and to the Lamb: Doxology!
Praise to the four corners of the earth!⁸⁹⁹

The four living creatures said, “So be it!” And the elders once again fell prostrate in adoration.

*The couple sat anxiously
waiting for the oncologist to join them.
The small, well-lit room
not matching their spirits.*

*The mother watched as her infant
failed to latch on to her breast.
Glassy eyes presaged
dread, sorrow, and a mother’s lament.*

⁸⁹⁷ c.f. Daniel 7:10: “A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened”; c.f. also Psalm 148:7-14: “Praise the Lord from the earth...kings of the earth and all nations, Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.”

⁸⁹⁸ The text translates as “power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.” The significance of seven acclamations is to convey the divine perfection of the doxology.

⁸⁹⁹ The text translates as “praise, honor, glory, and power.” The use of four symbolizes the act of praise goes throughout the earth, to the four corners.

*Rage for a time, O Elite!
Lift your voices in haughty self-congratulation.
The kairos is coming when the Lion stalks and
the Lamb is no longer prey.*

God, it's me. I sometimes forget that I am not in control of my own life, and certainly not history. I may control a certain, few choices, yet I am acted upon more often than I act—the river of culture, with me in its midst, flows to places I prefer to avoid. How much more are the oppressed, the poor, and the marginalized acted upon? How much less influence and autonomy do they have? O Glory, I trust that you direct the course of history. I trust that when the river of culture flows toward turbulent falls, even there and especially there, you embrace me and them with your love. O Glory, do not let us go!

Revelations 6:1-17⁹⁰⁰

I continued to watch and saw the Lamb open the first of the seven seals from the Book of Life, and then heard one of the four living creatures command in a voice like thunder, “Go forth to battle!”⁹⁰¹ I looked and saw a white horse,⁹⁰² the animal of war!⁹⁰³ Its rider held a bow

⁹⁰⁰ The battle begins! Having prepared us for the coming conflict in previous chapters, the Revelation now enters into a description of that conflict between The Glory and evil. For John's flock, who were living in the midst of persecution, Annie Dillard's question reverberates: “What in Sam Hill is going on?” Revelation 6-7 answers Dillard's question.

⁹⁰¹ The Greek word *erchomai* can mean either “come” or “go,” so scholars argue whether the four horsemen of the apocalypse are coming or going, and, whichever it is, from where are they coming and to where are going? Are they coming from heaven or earth? Are they going to heaven or earth? The interpretive paraphrase conveys the rider on the white horse as going from heaven to earth and as the other riders coming from earth to heaven to engage the battle between them. The invitation for the riders to come is less a command and more a sense of resignation similar to Jesus' words to Judas, “What you do, do quickly” (c.f. John 13:27).

⁹⁰² In Revelation 19:11-16 the rider on the white horse defeats the Dragon and two Beasts.

⁹⁰³ In the symbolism of the 1st century the ox was the animal for farming, the donkey the animal for transportation, and the horse the animal for war.

and wore a crown. He rode out as a conqueror committed to triumph⁹⁰⁴ over the riders who were to follow.

When the Lamb opened the second seal, the second living creature called out, “Come do what you must.” I looked and saw a red horse⁹⁰⁵ whose rider was given the power of war; social evil was the arrow in his quiver. He had the power to rob the earth of its peace and inspire murder and mayhem (and he was good at his job). The sword in his hand was drunk upon bloodshed.

When the Lamb opened the third seal, the third living creature called out, “Come do what you must.” I looked and saw a black horse whose rider was given the power of famine; ecological evil was the arrow in his quiver. He reveled when food was scarce and mocked those who could not pay inflated prices for their basic food supplies.⁹⁰⁶ Yet he was not allowed to touch the oil or the wine; deep roots he could not touch for limits had been placed upon him.

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, the fourth living creature called out, “Come do what you must.” I looked and saw a pale horse whose rider was given the power of disease and plague;⁹⁰⁷ biological evil was the arrow in his quiver. The rider had a name, Death, and the afterlife followed closely behind him. The riders were granted the power over only a portion⁹⁰⁸ of the earth,

⁹⁰⁴ c.f. Psalm 45:3-4: “Gird your sword on your side, you mighty one; clothe yourself with splendor and majesty. In your majesty ride forth victoriously in the cause of truth, humility and justice; let your right hand achieve awesome deeds.”

⁹⁰⁵ c.f. Zechariah 1:8-10: “During the night I had a vision, and there before me was a man mounted on a red horse...I asked, ‘What are these, my lord?’ The angel who was talking with me answered, ‘I will show you what they are...They are the ones the LORD has sent to go throughout the earth....’”

⁹⁰⁶ The text refers to wheat and barley.

⁹⁰⁷ c.f. Leviticus 26:25: “And I will bring the sword on you to avenge the breaking of the covenant. When you withdraw into your cities, I will send a plague among you, and you will be given into enemy hands”; c.f. also Ezekiel 14:21: “For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem my four dreadful judgments—sword and famine and wild beasts and plague—to kill its men and their animals!’”

⁹⁰⁸ The portion delineated in the text is one-fourth. The point is less about the percentage and more that it was limited in scope (c.f. also a similar use of proportional limitations in chapter 8).

for The Glory also placed limits upon the extent to which their evil could be inflicted.

When the Lamb opened the fifth seal, I saw under The Glory's altar all those who had been slain for being steadfast and true to the Word; for giving testimony on behalf of justice and joy their lives were taken. "How long, O Glory, sovereign over all the Cosmos," they cried out, "until we are vindicated?"⁹⁰⁹ How long must we wait until our oppression is overturned and we see your justice and joy?" Each of them was given a pristine robe, symbol of their purity and integrity, and encouraged to endure a little longer and wait patiently until the full number of their siblings could be gathered, all who will be slain for dancing the God-rhythms and living the God-life.

When the Lamb opened the sixth seal, I saw heaven's power burst forth as a kaleidoscope of light and wind, as if The Glory's own Breath was rushing through the midst of the earth. Sun and moon and stars were darkened.⁹¹⁰ Mountains were brought low and islands displaced.⁹¹¹ No one could escape The Glory's call for justice and right relationships. All who had once scoffed at The Glory's command to let justice roll down like a river and right relationships like a never-ending stream⁹¹² were found hiding in dark corners and the crevices of caves. The Elite of the earth—captains of industry and rulers of nations, the famous and the fabulous—could not escape having to give an accounting for their actions. Overwhelmed by it all, they cried out, "Who can stand in this Day?"⁹¹³

⁹⁰⁹ c.f. Psalm 43:1: "Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation. Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked."

⁹¹⁰ c.f. Joel 2:28-32, especially 2:31: "The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD"; c.f. also Isaiah 13:10-11: "The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and humble the pride of the ruthless."

⁹¹¹ c.f. Haggai 2:6-7: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty."

⁹¹² c.f. Amos 5:25.

⁹¹³ c.f. Malachi 3:2: "Who can stand the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?"; c.f. also Nahum 1:6: "Who can

*Wars and rumors of wars,
famine and global warming,
pestilence and plague,*

*Who will stand in their way?
Who will stand against their fomenting chaos?
Who will stand for the least, the last, and the lost?*

*Only One who is faithful and true,
who sets boundaries and limits lest all be destroyed,
who looks like a Lamb yet roars like a Lion.*

God, it's me. Though I seek peace, may I stand with you against war and famine and disease. Though I desire only to live under your shalom, may I stand with victims of abuse, betrayal, and corruption for whom your shalom is a mirage. Though I trust "you got this," may I stand with you as you overturn injustice and oppression. O Glory, even more than wanting to be on "the right side of history," I want to be on the right side of your will.

Revelations 7:1-17

I continued to watch and saw four celestial messengers standing at the four corners of the earth. They were holding back the four winds⁹¹⁴ that harm and destroy, for The Glory had commanded them to protect those who belong to the kin-dom from dangers that would come were it not for The Glory's providential will. The messengers have the authority to release the winds, but I heard the messenger from the east command them, "Wait! Do not allow any harm to come to the gatherings of The Glory's people until they are properly sealed with the sign⁹¹⁵ that they are part of the kin-dom who belong to The Glory."

withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger?" Yet, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees the answer to this question.

⁹¹⁴ c.f. Jeremiah 49:36: "After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree."

⁹¹⁵ c.f. Deuteronomy 6:8: "Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads"; c.f. also Ezekiel 9:4: "...Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the

I heard the number of those who were sealed with the sign of their being chosen, beloved, and anointed: 144,000⁹¹⁶—symbol for the fullness of those whom The Glory has chosen and called from before the beginning of time! They came from among all the twelve tribes of Israel and were the fruit of all the twelve sent ones of Jesus, not just a few but a vast multitude too numerous to count. They had been gathered from among every race and nation, every tribe and clan and family, every tongue and language. They wore the pristine robes of purity and integrity and waved palm branches⁹¹⁷ of exultation and celebration. But what was most remarkable to me was this: They were standing!⁹¹⁸ They were able to stand for the Lamb had made them whole and complete. And so they sang their praise:

Rescue and healing come from The Glory,
who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!

The innumerable gathering of heavenly beings and earthly vessels fell prostrate in worship before The Glory, as they continued to sing the seven-fold doxology:

Amen! Amen! Amen! Amen! Amen! Amen!
Forever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever and ever!

Then one of the elders surprised me by asking me a question, “This vast gathering in pristine robes, who are they and where do they come from?”

“Surely I do not know!”

foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it.”

⁹¹⁶ In Hebrew numerology, the number 1,000 represents a veritable infinity similar to the English usage of “oodles” or “gajillion.” The number 144,000, therefore, is 12 tribes of Israel times 12 apostles of Jesus time a gajillion (12 x 12 x 1,000 = 144,000). That 144,000 is a symbolic number for “all those who belong to The Glory” is indicated in 7:9 where the crowd is said to be too numerous to count.

⁹¹⁷ c.f. Nehemiah 8:14-15: “They found written in the Law...that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month...‘Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from...and shade trees, to make temporary shelters....”

⁹¹⁸ Here is the answer to the question asked in Malachi 3:2 and at the end of chapter 6: “Who can stand when the Day comes?” The answer is all those who have been made whole and complete by the Lamb.

“They are those who have been chosen and called from before the beginning of time—who belong and have always belonged to The Glory. They have fought the good fight and run the race to completion. They have endured persecution and overcome it. They wear pristine robes that have been washed by the Lamb himself, just as they have been made clean, whole and complete. Enoch spoke of them when he said,

Before The Glory they will sit,
serving before the throne,
sheltered by the One who is Eternal Light.⁹¹⁹

“The truth-teller Isaiah also spoke of these who wear pristine robes and stand before the Lamb,

Hunger never again! Thirst never again!⁹²⁰
Though the sun beat down upon you,
and scorching heat wither you.
The Lamb will be your shepherd;
the Lamb will lead you to springs of living water;
the Lamb will wipe away all your tears!
Death shall never again have dominion over you.”⁹²¹

*“Great is Thy Faithfulness” is not my favorite hymn.
Hard to sing, for me,
usually pitched just a wee bit too high for my voice.*

*As I stood in the basketball venue,
with 19,000 others—beloved of Jesus all,
singing “Great Is They Faithfulness” became easy.*

*The God-life is
intended to be lived in
community.*

⁹¹⁹ c.f. Enoch 45:4: “And on that day I will cause My Chosen One to dwell among them and I will transform Heaven and make it an Eternal Blessing and Light.”

⁹²⁰ c.f. Isaiah 48:9-10: “Say to the captives, ‘Come out,’ and to those in darkness, ‘Be free!’ They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill. They will neither hunger nor thirst...He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water.”

⁹²¹ c.f. Isaiah 25:8: “...He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth.”

God, it's me. Thank you, O Glory, that I can stand before Jesus and stand with him. Thank you that I do not stand alone but with a great cloud of witnesses and together with brothers and sisters. Together we sing your praise. Together we seek your kin-dom. Together we serve your people. May our service bring others whom you have called, whom you love and have always loved, into the eternal gathering that will be our joy to behold. Amen!

Revelations 8:1-13⁹²²

When the Lamb opened the seventh and final seal, thus demonstrating his sovereignty over all the Cosmos, I heard only the sound of silence. No voice. No trumpet. Only a pause as all heaven listened to the peoples' prayers. All the prayers from the four corners of the earth were gathered together by a celestial messenger who held a golden censer⁹²³ in his hand. This messenger took the censer filled with prayer, added to it the passion of The Glory's own Spirit, and flung it to the earth: And Heaven burst forth upon the earth!

Seven of the celestial messengers, who had witnessed the power of prayer to unveil The Glory's will, were handed seven trumpets⁹²⁴ and prepared to sound them. The first messenger sounded her trumpet and The Glory's justice sprung forth as on the day when Pharaoh

⁹²² In chapters 8-9 John circles back to revisit the same period of time dealt with in chapters 6-7—the time period between Jesus' cross and his return. In chapters 8-9 John deals with the issue of conflict between God and evil from a slightly different perspective than that which is found in chapters 6-7. Here in chapters 8-9 John speaks of the spiritual conflict as it relates to prayer, judgment, sin and repentance. See endnote 1 in Appendix A on John's use of time.

⁹²³ The text uses the symbol of golden censers, which were used in the Temple for prayer; c.f. 1 Kings 7:50 (not quoted in full as the verse lacks clarity without greater context).

⁹²⁴ c.f. Leviticus 23:23-26: "The LORD said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites: 'On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of sabbath rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts...The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement''"; c.f. also Numbers 31:6: "Moses sent them into battle, a thousand from each tribe, along with Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, who took with him articles from the sanctuary and the trumpets for signaling"; and, finally, c.f. Joshua 6, the battle of Jericho narratives.

was overcome by plagues:⁹²⁵ hail and fire, mixed with blood.⁹²⁶ The Glory's justice would have consumed all things but in mercy only a limited portion of the earth was consumed.

The second messenger sounded his trumpet and The Glory's fury was unleashed against all abuse, betrayal, and corruption in the Cosmos, yet once again only a portion was consumed. Had The Glory not withheld Their full fury, all creation would have been destroyed.⁹²⁷

The third messenger sounded her trumpet, and I witnessed the princes of the earth stripped of their glory and thrown down from their places of privilege⁹²⁸—their power and honor and glory became a mirage. In their arrogance, these princes had polluted the waters of the earth, making all creation bitter. Thus these princes are called "Wormwood," whose name means "bitter."

The fourth messenger sounded his trumpet and earth was undone: day became night.⁹²⁹ Through the darkness The Glory was revealed, and The Glory's sacred promise made good: oppressors may rise for a time but shall not abide in the kin-dom. The night reigned over a third of the day so only a portion was consumed.

I watched and listened with dread in my heart. Above me flew an eagle⁹³⁰ pronouncing, "Woe! Woe!

⁹²⁵ c.f. Exodus 9:13-25, especially verse 24: "...hail fell and lightning flashed back and forth. It was the worst storm in all the land of Egypt since it had become a nation."

⁹²⁶ c.f. Ezekiel 38:22: "I will execute judgment on him with plague and bloodshed; I will pour down torrents of rain, hailstones and burning sulfur on him and on his troops and on the many nations with him"; c.f. also Exodus 7:20: "Moses and Aaron did just as the LORD had commanded. He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood."

⁹²⁷ c.f. Exodus 12:13: "The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt."

⁹²⁸ c.f. Isaiah 14:12: "How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations!"

⁹²⁹ c.f. Exodus 10:21: "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness spreads over Egypt—darkness that can be felt.'"

⁹³⁰ c.f. Hosea 8:1: "Put the trumpet to your lips! An eagle is over the house of the LORD because the people have broken my covenant and rebelled against my law"; c.f. also Deuteronomy 28:49: "The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away,

Woe!” as in the days of Moses who warned the Israelites and the truth-teller Hosea who warned the kings and priests against arrogance, abuse, and injustice. I dreaded what might come next, for there remained still three messengers prepared to sound their trumpets.

*“Disney Princess Theology”
aligning always with the weak,
never the strong;*

*always the Hebrew slaves, never Pharaoh,
always the exiles, never Babylon,
always the disciples, never the Pharisees.*

*Judgment of the weak, of slaves, of exiles,
and even stumbling disciples seems unfair,
but what if I am none of these?*

God, it's me. I thank you for the gift of prayer. That all heaven awaits my heart is stunning (and encouraging). May my prayers ascend that they may descend, empowered by your Spirit, emboldened by your fury, able to transform your judgment into justice. I confess: I am strong not weak, Pharaoh not the Hebrews, Babylon not the exiles, more a Pharisee than a disciple. O Glory, in your mercy forgive. In your mercy renew. In your mercy I find my only hope.

Revelations 9:1-21⁹⁸¹

The fifth messenger sounded his trumpet and a star descended from heaven to earth—the Accuser thrown out of heaven and down into the abyss. When the abyss

from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand.”

⁹³¹ Revelation 9 is difficult to paraphrase because several of the symbols lack a clear referent in either the Hebrew Bible or Roman culture. For example, locusts refer to several passages in the Hebrew scriptures, but the multi-hued locusts do not. Because of this lack of specific referents, interpreters have used chapter 9 to conjecture fanciful meanings (e.g. the colorful locusts are the Ottoman Turks or modern helicopters). Mainline scholarship deems it best to maintain consistency and integrity in form; that is, be consistent in the way one interprets. In the absence of a clear referent, I have chosen to paraphrase broadly: Clearly what John describes is disturbing for his readers, even bleak.

was opened it poured forth smoke, as the Accuser unleashed his fire and fury upon the earth. This is the source of persecution of those who belong to The Glory and have been sealed by the blood of the Lamb.

Like locusts⁹³² overwhelming Egypt during the plagues or the undoing of the heavens described by Joel,⁹³³ so the Accuser's fury and fire tormented people and nations, especially those who belonged to The Glory. The torment was fierce but bounded by The Glory's providence: green grass could not be touched, and the locusts' oppression would die with the swarm.⁹³⁴ These days of oppression will be awful to live through. Those targeted for persecution, especially those who belong to The Glory, will wish for death that does not come quickly enough.

Those who swarm like locusts came from the east, from beyond Israel, riding horses prepared for battle.⁹³⁵ They dressed like ancient enemies: wearing a crown upon their heads, growing their beards like men but braiding their hair like women—all according to the customs of those living beyond Israel.⁹³⁶ They swarmed with ferocity to do the Accuser's bidding: chaos and anarchy, sorrow and suffering followed in their wake. There was no escape from their wrath, only patient endurance, for they were equipped to accomplish complete destruction, but The Glory limited their power.

⁹³² c.f. Exodus 10:1-20, especially 10:4: “If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow”; c.f. also Joel 1:4: “What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten.”

⁹³³ c.f. Joel 2:1-2: “Blow the trumpet in Zion... Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness... such as never was in ancient times nor ever will be in ages to come.”

⁹³⁴ The text notes the locusts will be at work for five months, which is the typical lifespan for a locust.

⁹³⁵ c.f. Joel 2:4-11, especially 2:4-6a, in which the horde is depicted as a blend of human soldiers and swarming locusts: “They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle. At the sight of them, nations are in anguish....”

⁹³⁶ Scholars suggest the enemies depicted were from the Arabian peninsula.

Their king was the one who slithered up from the abyss, whose name is Destroyer.⁹³⁷

This is the first sorrow and suffering, yet there is more to come.

The sixth messenger sounded his trumpet. I heard a voice coming from the altar in the Temple, from the four horns decorated with gold that mark the four corners of the altar. This is a place of refuge for the guilty. This voice spoke with The Glory's authority, saying, "Release the four messengers who are bound and who come from beyond the great river Euphrates."⁹³⁸

With their release evil descended upon evil, and humanity was caught up in the maelstrom. Evil did the Accuser's bidding. The Glory gave humanity over to themselves, to the Accuser, and to the ten thousand times ten thousand⁹³⁹ of the Accuser's servants. The result was brutal, bloody yet boundaried, for The Glory had set limits on what would be allowed.

The Accuser's calvary rode forth with passion and a burning desire to destroy. Looking demonic they rode forth. Speaking demonic desires they rode out. Acting with demonic intent they struck. The Accuser would be found in all that they did, for all was designed to destroy.⁹⁴⁰ And destroy they did, even a third of the earth (yet again The Glory would not allow them to go beyond).

Though humanity watched in horror, still they did not turn away from what they saw and heard. As Pharaoh⁹⁴¹ in the days of the plagues, people continued to

pursue idolatry, injustice, and oppression of others. People chased riches and ruin and gave themselves over to twisted pleasure, power, and privilege. Though humanity saw and heard all the Accuser's work, they refused to turn away.

*Eternal battle
seen in Dachau and Auschwitz
fought in the Donbas
famine, disease, the climate itself boiling in rage.*

*Are we to believe evil is boundaried?
Do you mean to say it could be worse?
But for your mercies travel all of us, O Glory,
a pilgrimage to the abyss.*

God, it's me. This is pretty bleak, yet an honest description of "Man's inhumanity to man." The battle rages in every human era, every culture and country, every heart. The battle rages and all seems lost. Where, O Glory, is the rider on the white horse in this recounting of the battle? Where is the One present between the Cross and the Coming of the Day? Is redemption to come in chapter 10 or perhaps chapter 11? Can the mess we have made of things ever be redeemed? O Glory, in your mercy, give us the patient endurance we need, or all will be lost. O Glory, help me endure, for I do not want to lose my way.

Revelations 10:1-13⁹⁴²

Then I saw a celestial messenger mighty in appearance, coming down from heaven. Indeed, he was The Glory robed in a cloud as on Mount Sinai⁹⁴³ with a

I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites."

⁹⁴² The battle pauses for an interlude—a vision behind the scenes in the heavenly courts. After describing the battle between The Glory and evil from two perspectives (chapters 6-7 and 8-9), we see and hear assurance that The Glory has a purpose which cannot be thwarted.

⁹⁴³ c.f. Exodus 14:24: "During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion."

⁹³⁷ The Greek text uses the Hebrew name *Abaddon* and its Greek synonym *Apollyon*, which mean "Destroyer."

⁹³⁸ The Euphrates marked the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire. Beyond the Euphrates were the "Parthian Hordes" or "Parthian Menace," whom the Romans feared. John seems to be saying here that one day Rome will be overcome by another army kept ready for this very hour.... The Euphrates is also associated with the first sin (Genesis 2:10-14), the first murder (Genesis 4:16), the first organized revolt against The Glory (Genesis 11:1-9), the first dictatorship (Genesis 10:8-10), and the first war confederation (Genesis 14:1)—so a happy place 😊

⁹³⁹ c.f. Psalm 68:17: "The chariots of God are tens of thousands and thousands of thousands; the Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary."

⁹⁴⁰ c.f. Psalm 11:6: "On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot."

⁹⁴¹ c.f. Exodus 7:2-4: "You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though

rainbow⁹⁴⁴ as a head covering as seen by the truth-teller Ezekiel. The Glory, whose face shone like the sun and voice roared like a lion, whose feet traversed both land and sea, spoke with the sound of seven thunders—the number of divine wholeness. The voice thundered justice made whole and complete, but I am not allowed to bear witness to what I heard. The voice thundered once again, “Seal up what you have heard, for there are mysteries mortals shall not know nor be allowed to express. What humans cannot imagine is seen clearly by The Glory. This I declare as the One who created heaven and earth and all living things!”⁹⁴⁵

“The *kairos* is near when all pause is ended, and the fullness of my purpose will be accomplished. When the seventh messenger sounds her trumpet, the *kairos* of my purpose will be fulfilled, just as foretold by truth-tellers from ages past and sent ones of present times: Jesus will be unveiled as sovereign over all the Cosmos and all people made one—the dividing wall of hostility broken down.”⁹⁴⁶

After saying this the voice thundered once again, “Take the scroll from the messenger whose feet stand upon land and sea. Take it and eat it. Consume its message. It will taste as sweet as honey upon the lips and then sour the stomach, for the purposes of The Glory are good but difficult.”⁹⁴⁷ I took the scroll and ate it, and it did indeed taste sweet in my mouth but then soured my stomach. And I was told, “The days of honey are not yet arrived. There are still difficulties to confront: truths to speak to cultures and countries, to royals and to the rich, to every language and tongue upon the earth.”

⁹⁴⁴ c.f. Ezekiel 1:28, previously cited.

⁹⁴⁵ c.f. Daniel 12:3-4: “This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking: ‘Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, roll up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.’”

⁹⁴⁶ These verses are not referenced specifically in the text of Revelation; the reference made is to The Glory’s purpose; therefore, c.f. Ephesians 1:9-10, 2:14, and 3:4-6.

⁹⁴⁷ c.f. Ezekiel 3:1-3: “And he said to me, ‘Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel.’ So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, ‘Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.’ So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.”

*Limits to my vision
not even Hubble or Webb can see.*

*Mysteries beyond my conceiving
neither Tolkien nor L’Engle imagined.*

*So I consume your Word
bitter and beautiful, sour and satisfying.*

God, it’s me. I am told the mystical vision is both transcendent and sublime, that it changes not only a person’s perspective but also the person. How I long to see a vision of you robed in a cloud, rainbow upon your head, and hear your voice thunder. Alas, I have only glimpses of your glory—Spirit nudges of assurance or guidance along the way. What I do have, though, is your Word, which I crave. Your Word, which I consume, is indeed both bitter and sweet. Portions of it make my heart sing! Portions make my mind wonder. I will spend my life seeking its understanding, accepting its mystery, and living its truth.

Revelations 11:1-19⁹⁴⁸

I was handed a reed to use as a measuring rod and told to measure the Temple, just as the truth-teller Ezekiel had once measured the Temple.⁹⁴⁹ I was told to measure all of the Temple, including its worshipers, who know The Glory and are known. I was surprised because the Romans had destroyed the Temple two decades before my vision (though what is *chronos* to The Glory). Then I remembered the Temple is not built of bricks and mortar but of those who have been chosen and called, those in whom the Divine Spirit dwells. I was to measure only the inner courts of the Temple for The Glory had given the outer courts over to the Nations to do what they must.

⁹⁴⁸ The interlude, or pause, begun in chapter 10 continues in chapter 11 and does not cease until 11:14. Beginning with 11:15, the second depiction of the battle between The Glory and evil (described mostly in chapters eight and nine) resumes and is consummated with The Glory’s victory in 11:15-19.

⁹⁴⁹ c.f. Ezekiel 40 in which Ezekiel, while in exile, was given a vision of the Jerusalem Temple, which lay in ruins. The Temple was being rebuilt and restored for the people’s worship of The Glory.

The Nations will trample Jerusalem and destroy all they are allowed to destroy but only for a time. Like the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes IV, whose reign of destruction and blasphemy was limited to three and one-half years,⁹⁵⁰ so the Nations will be limited. Yet in the midst of these three and one-half years, The Glory shall maintain two witnesses to the truth, even if what they speak is filled with grief and lament.

These two witnesses are Moses and Elijah—who represent the Torah and the truth-tellers from throughout the ages. They are the ones the truth-teller Zechariah called “the two olive trees” and “two lampstands who serve The Glory before the whole earth.”⁹⁵¹ The two witnesses speak truth and bear witness to The Glory’s purpose, that all will be made whole and complete. When they speak, The Glory’s truth burns away all falsehood.⁹⁵² When they speak, The Glory’s truth is enacted. When they speak, The Glory’s truth transforms what is not into what can be.⁹⁵³ In their words, The Glory’s justice is unleashed not by might but by the Divine Spirit.⁹⁵⁴

Yet the Accuser will not be easily dissuaded. The Accuser will persecute and kill through the power of moral decadence as in Sodom, political power as in

⁹⁵⁰ “Three and one-half years” (or 42 months or 1260 days) is the length of Gentile rule under the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who desecrated the Temple (“the abomination of desolation”) by, among other things, hanging icons of himself in the Temple and placing a carved image of a pig on the Temple altar!

⁹⁵¹ c.f. Zechariah 4:11-14: “Then I asked the angel, ‘What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?’ Again I asked him, ‘What are these two olive branches beside the two gold pipes that pour out golden oil?’ He replied, ‘Do you not know what these are?’ ‘No, my lord,’ I said. So he said, ‘These are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth.’”

⁹⁵² c.f. 2 Kings 1:10: “Elijah answered the captain, ‘If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!’ Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men.”

⁹⁵³ c.f. Ezekiel 37:1-14, especially 37:4-5: “Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.’”

⁹⁵⁴ c.f. Zechariah 4:6: “So he said to me, ‘This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.’”

Egypt, and religious oppression like those who crucified Jesus. The persecution will be fierce, even to the point of desecrating the dead⁹⁵⁵ and gloating about their ways!

Yet neither will The Glory be easily dissuaded. The persecutors will think they have won victory, but The Glory is the One who breathes new life into the dead, even those like Jesus and Lazarus who were three days and four days dead.⁹⁵⁶ When the time of the Nations is brought to an end, Moses and Elijah will lead a parade into heaven, into The Glory’s throne room itself. The earth will tremble and quake⁹⁵⁷ before The Glory’s justice, which will be made whole and complete. All in heaven and those upon the earth will be struck with awe and revere The Glory—some in praise and others in anguish.

This is the second sorrow and suffering, yet there is still a third to come.

The seventh messenger sounded her trumpet and praise burst forth in heaven, a multitude of those whom The Glory has chosen and called sang,

The kin-dom in heaven and earth have become one!
The Glory and Jesus the Anointed reigning forever!

The twenty-four elders who were seated on thrones surrounding The Glory fell prostrate, singing,

We give thanks to The Glory,
who was before the beginning of time,
who will be after the end of all things,
who is in every moment in between,
the eternal present.

⁹⁵⁵ The text uses the symbol of “three and one-half days,” which refers to the custom of ensuring that a corpse was buried properly within three days. To leave a corpse unburied for longer than three days was a grave insult (double entendre intended). I paraphrase this as “desecrating the dead.”

⁹⁵⁶ c.f. Ezekiel 37:14: “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.”

⁹⁵⁷ c.f. Psalm 18:6-7: “In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears. The earth trembled and quaked and the foundations of the mountains shook....”

The Nations raged yet your justice prevailed!
Chronos has become *kairos* for renewal and reward.
 The *kairos* for accountability has arrived—
 to depose the destructive forces that destroy.

I saw heaven unleashed and unbound, the fullness of The Glory unveiled: thunder, lightning and hailstorms from heaven.⁹⁵⁸ The Nations trembled, the powers were overturned, the principalities undone.

*Moral arc of history
 bending then breaking
 shattered by avarice, betrayal, corruption*

*How long, O Glory,
 shall you forget
 those for whom Jesus died?*

*Into swirling chaos steps
 a whisper
 that sets free.*

*Chaos ignores but cannot
 mute the whisper—
 its voice guarded by the One who repairs the broken arc.*

God, it's me. Give me a voice to use for justice, compassion, and peace. May my voice not be silenced—neither by the Accuser nor my own fear. May my voice whisper in hidden corners and shout in the streets. May my voice comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. May my voice bear witness to Torah and prophets' truth until the Nations rage no more.

Revelation s12:1-17⁹⁵⁹

With the echo of praise from the twenty-four elders ringing in my ears, I saw a great sign in heaven: the woman⁹⁶⁰ foretold by Isaiah the truth-teller—she who is the instrument of our deliverance, before whom even her own people will give reverence.⁹⁶¹ The *kairos* was at hand for her to give birth—our Deliverer approaches! Then another great sign appeared: the Accuser, like a giant, red⁹⁶² Dragon. The Accuser, now looking monstrous with seven heads and ten horns, wearing seven crowns,⁹⁶³ sought to usurp The Glory's authority. It spoke proudly and multiplied his arrogance, creating an entire system of

⁹⁵⁹ Chapter 12 begins the third depiction of the battle between The Glory and evil that occurs between the Cross and the Coming of Jesus to restore the kin-dom in its fullness. Please note as a reminder that this is the same battle described in chapters 6-7 (depiction one) and then in chapters 8-9, ending in 11:15-19 (depiction two). In chapters 6-7 the key image was a rider on a white horse waging war against three horses symbolizing war, disease, and death. In chapters 8-9 the key image was trumpets being sounded, which alludes to Joshua and the battle of Jericho narrative (Joshua 6). Here in chapter 12 the third depiction begins with a symbolic reference to the birth of Jesus and establishment of the Church.

⁹⁶⁰ Scholars most often interpret the woman to be either Mother Mary or the Church, though the reference in Isaiah is to Jerusalem. I paraphrase the woman as a reference to Mary giving birth to Jesus. For the Isaiah reference, c.f. Isaiah 66:6-13, especially 66:7, 11: "Before she goes into labor, she gives birth; before the pains come upon her, she delivers a son... For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance."

⁹⁶¹ c.f. Genesis 37:9: "Then Joseph had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. 'Listen,' he said, 'I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.'"

⁹⁶² Red (or scarlet) was the color associated with Roman power.

⁹⁶³ There is no clear referent. Daniel 7 is the most likely referent, though even in Daniel 7 the symbolism is unclear. Lacking specificity and clarity, this symbol (these symbols) lead to interpretive mischief. There is robust debate among literalist interpreters regarding the meaning—from arguing they depict different departments within Roman government to listing ten, specific emperors who could be the intended meaning (with the list of ten differing from commentator to commentator). Caution is advised. In the interpretative paraphrase I lean toward the non-literalist interpreters who understand the symbols and numerology to refer to the way oppressive human systems (like Rome) tend to multiply and become pervasive.

⁹⁵⁸ c.f. Exodus 9:23: "When Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, the LORD sent thunder and hail, and lightning flashed down to the ground. So the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt...."

abuse and oppression that permeated all I could see, even to the horizon, and infected all it touched. The Accuser mimicked The Glory through its displays of power.

The red Dragon, its giant maw spread wide, squat in front of the woman about to give birth; it prepared to consume her child the moment it was born. (You who remember Herod know that of which I speak.)⁹⁶⁴ Yet the child was The Glory's will and set resolve and so was rescued from the mouth of the Dragon, swept into heaven and The Glory's embrace. The woman's son was also The Glory's Son, as the Psalmist proclaimed:

Ruler of all Nations! Dispenser of Justice!
He whose rule scatters the wolves of oppression.
He who shatters systems of tyranny.⁹⁶⁵

For three and one-half years the woman was in the wilderness, protected by the Divine Spirit. The great, red Dragon could not touch the woman. To say the Dragon was angry is an understatement. War erupted in heaven! It wasn't a fair fight.

The celestial messenger Michael led an army of messengers to fight the Dragon. The Dragon and its army fought back and were no match for Michael. The great Dragon—the ancient serpent,⁹⁶⁶ the devil, Satan, the Accuser—who seeks to obscure the God-life from all humanity, was thrown down, thrown down, thrown down, thrown down!⁹⁶⁷ Heaven would never again be home to the Dragon.

⁹⁶⁴ This sentence is not in the text but added as an interpretive note because the symbolism refers to Herod's "slaughter of the innocents" in Matthew 2:16-18.

⁹⁶⁵ c.f. Psalm 2:7. Note that I interpret the reference to "rod of iron" in the Psalm as associated with Psalm 23, the work of a shepherd to guard the flock rather than a royal beating a subject.

⁹⁶⁶ c.f. Genesis 3:1: "Now the serpent was craftier than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?''"; c.f. also Isaiah 65:25: "'The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,' says the LORD."

⁹⁶⁷ Four times in the next five verses the Greek verb *ballo* is used, which means "to cast, hurl, or throw." The use of repetition creates emphasis in the text. Admittedly, my use of "thrown down" four times *in the same sentence* is excessive, but I bet, O Gentle Reader, you remember the point. Shout out to my friend, the Rev. Dr. Doug Kelly, for his "Berkeley Banana Bombs"

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven: "Now is the *kairos*, the kin-dom come, earth becoming as it is in heaven! The Accuser of our beloved, who accuses them before The Glory day and night, has been thrown down out of heaven! Our beloved have triumphed over the Accuser through the gift of love shed by the Lamb and the gift of his teaching the kin-dom Way. Our beloved loved The Glory and the Lamb more than life itself. They did not betray their ideals even in the face of death! Therefore rejoice and shout thanksgiving you who dwell in The Glory's embrace! But sorrow and suffering to the earth, for the Accuser has been thrown down from heaven and is in your midst. Be wary and aware! The Accuser's fury is filled to the brim and overflowing. Its fury spills upon the ground itself, into lakes and rivers; its fury distorts human thinking and hunts human hearts. The Accuser knows its time is short."

When the Dragon saw that it had been thrown down from heaven, never again to be allowed into The Glory's direct presence, it pursued the woman.⁹⁶⁸ The woman, and all whom she represents—the fullness of the Body—were lifted up on eagles' wings⁹⁶⁹ and carried into the wilderness⁹⁷⁰ to be cared for by the Divine Spirit. For three and one-half years, the Body (whom the woman represents) was guarded from the Dragon, who was not allowed to touch them, though not for lack of trying. The Dragon attacked and sought to engulf the Body with flood waters but was prevented—the earth itself swallowed the flood—for the Body was protected throughout this time.

Stifled for a time, the Dragon's fury boiled to overflowing and was unleashed on the woman's offspring—all those who abide in Jesus, following the Way, who have not seen Jesus in the flesh yet trust the

sermon on Revelation 12 that informed my understanding of the text.

⁹⁶⁸ The symbolic meaning of the woman seems to have shifted from Mother Mary to the Church founded in Jesus (c.f. note 960).

⁹⁶⁹ c.f. Exodus 19:4: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself."

⁹⁷⁰ c.f. Deuteronomy 32:10: "In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye...."

testimony about him. These are the persecuted people to whom this vision of hope speaks.⁹⁷¹

*Danny Parsons beat the snot out of me.
I was seven, and he was eight.
I remember his fury as if it was yesterday,
not having lost many fights in my day.*

*Seven-year-old me would have had Danny thrown down
(if it had been up to me which, thankfully, it was not).
Now I understand that his fury
may have reflected his home life.*

*Who is the one who should be “thrown down”?
Not the Dannys of this world, I think, but
those for whom abuse and oppression are set resolve,
those for whom heaven will never feel like home.*

God, it’s me. Teach me to see all people with “Jesus Eyes”—seeing them not as they present but as they truly are. Help me to look beyond outer countenance to perceive inner character. Help me to attend with compassion the pleas of the poor and heed the prophet’s call for the people, cities, and countries devastated by greed, injustice, and ecological disaster. O Glory, in these days of constant judgment, make me an instrument of your peace.

Revelations 13:1-10⁹⁷²

And I saw one who opposed The Glory and the Lamb, an Opposer (also called an antichrist) that looked

⁹⁷¹ This last sentence is not in the Greek text but would have been understood, assumed, and experienced by John’s 1st century readers.

⁹⁷² John now adds two more personifications of evil to the mix to form an unholy trinity. These two, both called Beasts, are empowered by the Dragon and are given power (“ten horns”), wisdom (“seven heads”) and glory (“ten crowns”), but also carry a blasphemous name. They are ferocious (like a leopard, bear and lion) and the world follows after them (13:1-4). The perpetual question people probe is this: “Who is the antichrist?” to which there are three kinds of answers: (1) a modern politician, (2) generally anyone who opposes The Glory, or (3) Caesar. See endnote 3 in Appendix A for a more in-depth explication of these options.

like a Beast, rising from the chaos that is the sea. This Beast was most impressive in appearance!⁹⁷³ It had political power, secular wisdom, and social pizzaz. It derided The Glory and the Lamb. The Beast I saw stalked its prey as Empires have always done, just as the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks had done before Rome.⁹⁷⁴ The Accuser, looking like a Dragon, collaborated with the Beast, giving it power, privilege and authority to use in its drive to control all policy and all people, both wealthy or wise as well as least and last. The Beast wanted it all for itself, and the Dragon was happy to accommodate it, for the Beast served the Dragon’s purposes.

Though the Beast had received a death blow⁹⁷⁵ (the power of the emperor having been diminished following Nero’s death), yet did the Beast survive (with emperor Vespasian restoring power and dictatorial rule to the Roman throne). In awe and appreciation, all the Empire paid homage to the Beast and followed it willingly. They followed the Beast and worshipped the Dragon, saying, “Who is like the Beast? Who has such

⁹⁷³ The text describes the first Beast’s appearance as having ten horns, seven heads, and ten crowns. This passage does not contain an obvious referent. As noted above, symbols without a clear referent in Jewish literature (Hebrew Bible, apocrypha, or pseudepigrapha) or Roman culture induce speculation and conjecture from some interpreters. These symbols seem like they might suggest power (“ten horns”), wisdom (“seven heads”), and glory (“ten crowns”). Please note the humility and lack of declarative phrases in the previous sentence.

⁹⁷⁴ The text speaks of “leopards, bears, and lions.” Again, we have a symbol without a clear referent. While leopards, bears, and lions populate the pages of the Hebrew Bible, there is no special meaning other than the obvious biological one: they’re predators. When given symbolic meaning, leopards, bears and lions refer to The Glory (c.f. Hosea 13:6-7), which is problematic because the predators in chapter 13 are The Glory’s enemies. These symbols seem to refer to the previous Empires (before Roman rule) that occupied and oppressed Israel in a predatory manner.

⁹⁷⁵ The vast majority of interpreters agree this symbol should be taken allegorically. Some spiritualize the symbolism (e.g. Easter resurrection was a death blow to Satan, who yet rallied to wage war against the Church) while most find a historical referent. When Nero died in 69 C.E. the power of the emperor was diminished (due to Nero being an unreliable personality). It was not until emperor Vespasian that the autocratic authority was restored to the role of emperor.

power, such authority? Who speaks with lips dripping arrogance and is applauded? No one can stop the Beast!”

The Beast (who is an antichrist who opposes the Way of Jesus) spoke arrogantly, defaming The Glory and ridiculing the Lamb. It was allowed its moment—three and one-half years—allowed to distort the God-rhythms and speak against the God-life. It even spoke against heaven itself! It was allowed to wage war against those whom The Glory had chosen, called, and named. It was even allowed to overwhelm them. Every nation and every country, every language and every tongue, every tribe, clan, and family was touched by the work the Beast enacted. The whole earth was given over to the Beast and its purposes; all except The Glory’s beloved, whose names are written in the Book of Life and who are protected by the Lamb—he who was slain, even Jesus the Anointed. This is a difficult truth for those who belong to The Glory, who are the persecuted flock of the Lamb. As the truth-teller Jeremiah spoke:

Captivity comes, unwelcome though it may be;
vengeance sought is vengeance received.⁹⁷⁶

This calls for patient endurance from all, especially from those who are chosen, called, and named by The Glory.

*Who has not asked humanity’s pervasive question,
the question asked in hospital rooms and funeral parlors:
Why?*

*Who has not proclaimed, the child’s sense of the world,
echoing across playgrounds:
It’s not fair!*

*And what word do we hear from on high,
if any response ever comes?
Endure.*

*God, it’s me. I look around at the fundamental
unfairness of the world and wonder where you are? As
I sip coffee in the mountains, I wonder why you allow
others to suffer heat. As I watch the news on my*

⁹⁷⁶ c.f. Jeremiah 15:2: “And if they ask you, ‘Where shall we go?’ tell them, ‘This is what the LORD says: ‘Those destined for death, to death; those for the sword, to the sword; those for starvation, to starvation; those for captivity, to captivity.’”

*big screen, I seethe to see photos of refugee
camps—come on, Glory, what’s up with that? On
vacation I am dismayed the hotel staff get paid so
little. At bedtime, as I tuck my children into bed,
praying you would keep them safe from the dangers
of violence and addiction, I congratulate myself,
thinking, “What more could I do?”*

Revelations 13:11-18

Then I saw another who opposed The Glory and the Lamb, (also an antichrist and also looking like a Beast). This second Beast had two horns like a lamb⁹⁷⁷ but spoke like a Dragon. It was given authority by the first Beast, to undergird its political and secular power by adding a religious veneer. It even mimicked the works of the truth-teller Elijah!⁹⁷⁸ The second Beast gave speeches and dollars and performed great deeds in service of the first Beast’s desire to dominate all the earth. Its influence equaled that of the first Beast and its ability to deceive surpassed it, yet all was done to secure the first Beast’s ability to slay and enslave all humankind.

The second Beast empowered the first Beast’s use of money as the means for goodness, glory, and blessing. It emboldened the belief that economics define human value. Those who did not bow before the first Beast were killed. No one was spared: great and small, rich and poor, big boss and frontline worker. All participated in the unjust systems created by the first Beast. No one could escape. And so it was said that all who had the mark⁹⁷⁹ of the Beast upon their head or

⁹⁷⁷ The second Beast has two horns (rather than ten), the significance of which is that it is utterly normal looking.

⁹⁷⁸ The text says the second Beast causes fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people, as Elijah did on Mt. Carmel; c.f. 1 Kings 18, especially 18:38: “Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.”

⁹⁷⁹ Roman coins bore the image of Caesar and the inscription, “Our Lord and god.” All persons were required to pay an annual tax using these coins as their assent to Caesar’s lordship. When Christians refused to pay the tax because they considered the practice idolatrous, they were punished with legal and political consequences, including persecution during the time when Revelation was written. These verses caution against how easy it is to let go of the true worship of The Glory in order to participate in the powers and principalities of economic and

hands belonged to the Beast, for people's thoughts were defined by these systems and their every action dictated by them. Understanding this requires wisdom not fear. The Beast is known, and we know the Beast—we see it as it truly is. We are not fooled, not one bit. The number⁹⁸⁰ of the Beast is Neron's name: 666.

*The book was scary!
Innocuous on the outside:
white cover with red lettering.
Inside, though, it purported to name "the Antichrist!"*

*I was 17,
a newly minted Christian,
desperate to know the truth,
intrigued to read the Antichrist was...Anwar Sadat!*

*Months passed,
Sadat was assassinated.
Unconcerned about his family or geopolitics,
I only worried about that book's sales!*

political power. Martin Luther said that we worship anything or anyone we put as a priority before The Glory. In Luther's understanding, the "image of the beast," a coin with which to buy and sell, would be giving ourselves over to the realities of our economic well-being even at the expense of living the God-life.

⁹⁸⁰ The Greek and Hebrew alphabets served as numbers as well as letters, so someone's name could be added up to form a number. We all know the number of the beast, right? Of course we do: it's 666. But wait! Some ancient manuscripts put the number of the beast at 666 and others put it at 616! What's going on with the manuscripts? It seems that Nero, the notorious emperor and persecutor of Christians, spelled his name both as Nero and as Neron, depending upon the geographic region of the empire. In those parts of the empire where the name was spelled Neron, the number of the beast was "666." In those parts of the empire where the name was spelled Nero, the number of the beast was "616." This comes as close to proof as possible that John is saying that Nero is the antichrist. But wait! Nero had been dead for 20 years by the time John wrote the Revelation, so how could he be the antichrist? Clearly, John is using Nero as a symbol to convey meaning: the antichrist is that person, any person, who fights against The Glory and persecutes The Glory's people. John refers to Nero as the archetype of evil in ways similar to modern allusions to Hitler, Stalin, or Bin Laden.

*I stewed.
How could the book have gotten it so wrong?
My 17-year-old self took matters into my own hands:
I read Revelation!*

*I studied and studied,
still desperate,
still intrigued,
still understood next to nothing!*

*Years passed,
I browsed curriculum in the Christian Book Store,
a pastor plum out of ideas, running on fumes,
when I saw it: The Book!*

*Same white cover, same red lettering,
like the first Beast with a fatal head wound,
the book had come back to life.
Who, I wondered, is the Antichrist now?*

*Less desperate,
less intrigued,
I peeked between the covers:
Saddam Hussein!*

*Fool me once,
shame on you.
Fool me twice,
shame on me.*

God, it's me. I admit, no, I confess! I am still intrigued, (still curious at least) about the antichrist. Even though the actual words of your Word point to two "beasts," I still think in Hollywood terms about the one "antichrist." Even though 1 John talks about "antichrists" in the plural,⁹⁸¹ I wonder and can't seem to get it out of my system. Perhaps I am avoiding what your Word means by what it says: The systems created by those who oppose you serve to slay and enslave. Maybe not me, specifically, but billions around the world are caught in the web of economic destruction undergirded by religious deceit. O Glory, it is so much easier to argue for "regime change" of a Hitler, Sadat, Saddam, or Bin Laden than to advocate

⁹⁸¹ c.f. 1 John 2:18.

for systemic change that impacts my pocketbook. Is this why I am so enamored of the one “Bogeyman” interpretations about the antichrist? O Glory, help me perceive the ways I am caught in the web. Help me understand the ways I help create the web in the first place. In your mercy, forgive, redeem, and renew.

Revelations 14:1-5⁹⁸²

Then I looked and saw a most glorious sight: the Lamb standing in triumph, standing on Mount Zion!⁹⁸³ With the Lamb was all Israel and all the Body,⁹⁸⁴ all those who bore the Lamb’s name upon their foreheads and hands, whose minds, hearts, and actions defied the two Beasts⁹⁸⁵ and served The Glory. These are the gathering of those who dance the God-rhythms and live the God-life.

Then I heard The Glory’s voice, which sounded like the roar of rushing waters,⁹⁸⁶ as the truth-teller Ezekiel had heard, and loud peals of thunder⁹⁸⁷ as the Psalmist proclaims. And I heard all those who were gathered, who were singing praise—their voices a symphony of harps and lyres.⁹⁸⁸ They sang a new song to The Glory, a song of praise for joy unending. They sang before The Glory’s

⁹⁸² The Revelation’s structure has descriptions of conflict (chapters 6, 8-10, 12-13) followed by descriptions of triumph (chapters 7, 11). Chapters 14-15 are the descriptions of triumph that follow the conflict with the Dragon and the two Beasts.

⁹⁸³ c.f. Psalm 2:5-6: “He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, ‘I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.’”

⁹⁸⁴ See note 916 regarding the “144,000” in 7:1.

⁹⁸⁵ The majority of subsequent references to the Beast in the text of Revelation use the singular form to refer to the first Beast. As an interpretive choice, I paraphrase using the plural form to remind readers there are actually two Beasts—a political Beast and religious Beast. While 1st century Christians would have been most concerned about the political Beast (Caesar Domitian’s persecution), modern readers are reminded of our role either to conform to or confront the pattern of behavior (read: systemic oppression and injustice) of the first Beast.

⁹⁸⁶ c.f. Ezekiel 43:2, previously cited.

⁹⁸⁷ c.f. Psalm 68:33: “...to him who rides across the highest heavens, the ancient heavens, who thunders with mighty voice.”

⁹⁸⁸ c.f. Psalm 150:3: “Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre....”

throne with all heaven listening; the heavenly host rejoiced in their song. Only the gathered in heaven could learn the song, for they had been renewed—made whole and complete, their true selves.

The gathered are those who refused to defile themselves with the two Beasts, refused the invitation to allow idolatry to dine with them at Sunday dinner and turned injustice away when it came calling at their door. They remained pure in heart and so look upon The Glory’s face.⁹⁸⁹ They danced the God-rhythms and lived the God-life. The Way of Jesus was their life path, and he bought them out of their slavery to the Dragon and two Beasts. These gathered that I saw are but the firstfruits of The Glory’s harvest (for surely more will join them). The Dragon speaks lies and deceit drips from the lips of the two Beasts. Not so the gathered! They speak and live The Glory’s truth and have been made blameless by the Lamb.

Sing!

*Sing a new song.*⁹⁹⁰

Sing, you who are beloved.

Sing, you who are too broken to know your belovedness.

Sing, you who are too afraid to hope it may be true.

Sing, for you are beloved.

Sing the new song about The Glory’s love.

Sing about the love that will not let you go.

Sing!

God, it’s me. Rebuke my idolatry of power and privilege; renew my practice of servanthood. Rebuke my toleration of injustice; renew my commitment to

⁹⁸⁹ The Greek text translates as “remained virgins,” which is a reference to Hosea 2:2-8 where the prophet engages in an extended metaphor that Israel is The Glory’s unfaithful wife. Thus, the reference to being a virgin is less about one’s sexual practice or marital status but symbolizes fidelity to The Glory. Given our culture tends to become anxious when talk turns to sex, I have chosen for the paraphrase to avoid referring to the literal symbol and focus on the symbol’s meaning, (c.f. Matthew 5:8).

⁹⁹⁰ c.f. Psalm 98:1: “Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.” c.f. also Psalm 96:1.

seek justice for all. Rebuke my silence; renew my song—may it be a song of praise for unending joy.

Revelations 14:6-12⁹⁹¹

Then I saw three of the celestial messengers flying amidst heaven, each with a message to proclaim to those who live on earth. The first messenger proclaimed the Good News about Jesus the Anointed to all who live on the earth—to every country and every culture, to every language and every tongue, to every city, town, village, and hamlet. He instructed all humankind: “Revere The Glory! Be in awe and wonder! The *kairos* of *shalom* has come; therefore, honor and serve the One who made the heavens and earth, the sea and all that is within them!”⁹⁹²

The second messenger then proclaimed: “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!”⁹⁹³ Fallen is Rome the Magnificent! Fallen are all Citadels of human power, glory, and self-importance! They force all humankind to imbibe their adulteries: idolatry and injustice that bring anguish and destruction upon the earth.”⁹⁹⁴

The third messenger then proclaimed: “All who bear the image of the two Beasts and practice its ways in

⁹⁹¹ The timeline of this passage is essential for its interpretation. The proclamations regarding punishment that follow in 14:9-12 are centered on the here and now and not the afterlife. Therefore, drawing an inference about hell being a place of eternal torment *from this passage* is an exegetical error. See notes in this passage for a fuller description of the interpretive boundaries needed for a proper exegesis of this passage.

⁹⁹² c.f. Psalm 24:1-2: “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters.”

⁹⁹³ The text only mentions Babylon. However, for the sake of the interpretive paraphrase, I expand the pronouncements against Babylon to include also Rome and all Citadels of power and carry this expanded metaphor into chapter 18; c.f. Isaiah 21:8-9: “Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses. And he gives back the answer: ‘Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!’”

⁹⁹⁴ The text only names Babylon, but commentators agree the reference is to Rome. Some will ask, “Then why didn’t John just say Rome?” The most likely answer is that Roman authorities would not have taken kindly to having their authority directly confronted, so Babylon, the power that oppressed The Glory’s people 400 years before, is used to represent Rome. In the paraphrase, I carry this representation forward to include all great cities who subvert the God-life.

their thinking and doing, they, too, will be given over to The Glory’s wrath,⁹⁹⁵ which allows human agency to set its own course. We⁹⁹⁶ will drink deeply from the cask of insolence and arrogance until there is no love in our hearts. We will imbibe ignorance and infidelity until we are devoid of mercy. The Lamb and his messengers will watch our torment⁹⁹⁷ in grief and sorrow, for it will continue and continue. Our false selves do not have the capacity to end it. Our broken systems will not repair themselves.”

This invites chagrin, regret, and repentance from those who belong to The Glory! And accompanying our

⁹⁹⁵ In Pauline thought, the wrath of God is not the kind of punishment stylized by Genesis 19:28 (i.e. Sodom and Gomorrah) but a giving over of humans to human agency. Three times in Romans 1:18-32 Paul says The Glory’s response to human idolatry is to allow human freedom (c.f. “gave them over” in 1:24, 26, and 28). The consequences of The Glory’s giving humans over to themselves are pervasive. Though most readers focus on sexual immorality, this is merely the most obvious example of The Glory’s wrath. The passage climaxes (pardon the pun) with a more comprehensive list of consequences in 1:29-31: “They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.” See the next note for further implication of The Glory’s wrath as giving humans over to our own agency.

⁹⁹⁶ The transition from the third person they to the first person we is intentional and interpretive. As mentioned in a previous note, the vast majority of humankind participate in the broken, human systems that allow injustice and oppression; therefore, it seems “meet and right” to include ourselves in the consequences (i.e. wrath) of The Glory’s having given us over to human agency.

⁹⁹⁷ While the most obvious referent here is to Genesis 19:28, I note the distinction between fire and sulfur: Both burn but only fire consumes while sulfur torments but does not consume. This distinction will become significant later in Revelation (c.f. 20:10 vs. 20:14). In the current passage, the distinction is significant in that sulfur is said to torment those who think in conformity to and practice the oppressive systems of the Dragon and two Beasts, which is basically 99.9% of humanity. The Glory’s beloved are not spared participation in the consequences of a society dominated by abuse and betrayal, corruption and greed, deceit and manipulation. Moreover, though The Glory’s beloved (you and me, Gentle Reader) struggle against direct practice of these things, we yet participate in the cultural systems created by human agency; the result of The Glory giving us over (see previous note).

repentance must be patient endurance, for the world created by human agency, the world guided by the Dragon and the two Beasts, is not an easy world in which to dance the God-rhythms, to live the God-life, or to walk the Way of Jesus.

*Wars and rumors of wars
Civil war on the horizon.*

*Fires rage and hurricanes rush
Creation itself subjected to frustration⁹⁹⁸*

*Where is love?⁹⁹⁹
Where is mercy?*

*Who shall endure?¹⁰⁰⁰
Who can escape?¹⁰⁰¹*

God, it's me. Forgive my complicity in the world's brokenness, O Glory. Forgive my participation in broken systems that I did not invent but from which I certainly benefit. Forgive my indulgence of that which brings me indulgence while oppressing others. Forgive me that "I wish I could quit" but cannot. O Glory, what shall become of me? What shall become of us?

Revelations 14:13-20

Then I heard a voice say, "Write! Sacred to The Glory are those who die in Jesus. They will rest from their toil—weariness and fatigue shall stalk them no longer, and all the ways they have been a blessing will be carried forward, remembered and celebrated."

I looked and saw before me the Anointed, who represented all humankind and yet also stood in the place of The Glory,¹⁰⁰⁰ as one who is co-equal in power and authority and dominion. One of the celestial messengers called to the Anointed, calling him "Son of Humanity," as the truth-teller Daniel had seen and heard in a mystical

⁹⁹⁸ c.f. Romans 8:20.

⁹⁹⁹ See the next verse (14:13) for an answer to this question.

¹⁰⁰⁰ c.f. Daniel 7:13: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence."

vision. The messenger said, "Son of Humanity, it is time for the harvest!" So the Anointed, seated in the place of authority, swung the harvest sickle and justice was fulfilled. The whole earth was harvested with the justice decreed when the Anointed swung his sickle.

Another messenger came out from The Glory's presence, and he also had a harvesting sickle, while another messenger had the Refiner's Fire from the altar that was placed before The Glory. This second messenger said to the first, "Swing! Swing your sickle¹⁰⁰¹ for the harvest has come—the *kairos* of The Glory's justice is fulfilled. Harvest the grapes of wrath,¹⁰⁰² for The Glory's justice shall fill all the earth, from north to south and from east to west,¹⁰⁰³ from head to toe all humankind will be immersed in The Glory's justice. There shall be no escape."

*The Army of the Potomac¹⁰⁰⁴
Patton's Fifth Army*

*Ghandi's reform
King's movement*

*More than my daddy's belt
Much more than prurient accounting*

*Renewing all
Restoring justice*

*New creation
As it was in the beginning*

¹⁰⁰¹ c.f. Joel 3:13: "Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness!"

¹⁰⁰² c.f. Isaiah 63:3; "I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath..."

¹⁰⁰³ The text refers to "1,600 stadia," which is a term for distance; specifically, the distance between Dan in the north of Israel to the Gulf of Aqaba in the south of Judah (1,600 stadia or roughly 180 miles). The reference is to the totality of the judgment "from top to bottom."

¹⁰⁰⁴ One of the most famous literary uses of "the grapes of wrath" and "trampling out the vintage" comes from Julia Ward Howe's *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, which was inspired by the army of the Potomac during the Civil War.

God, it's me. Make me an instrument of your peace.¹⁰⁰⁵ Where there is hatred, let me bring love. Where there is despair, let me bring hope. Where there is darkness, let me bring your light. O Glory, let me not seek as much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love, for it is in giving that I receive, it is in pardoning that I am pardoned, it is in dying that I am raised to eternal life.

Revelations 15:1-8¹⁰⁰⁶

Then I looked and saw yet another great phenomenon in heaven: the fulfillment of The Glory's justice. Seven¹⁰⁰⁷ celestial messengers, each with a judgment to be poured out, consummated The Glory's wrath—the joy of redemption—that had begun by giving us over to ourselves. It was finished.

And I saw a huge, bronze bowl, like the one that had stood before the entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem. The bowl contained water for cleansing and fire for purging and looked like a great, glassy sea.¹⁰⁰⁸ In this sea all who belonged to The Glory could swim and be refreshed, renewed, and celebrate their victory over the two Beasts. They celebrated for they did not succumb to the Beasts' ways of thinking and transactional practices of relating to one another. Instead, they endured with patience, trusting The Glory would restore *shalom* to the earth. The people stood upon the shores of the sea with musical instruments, with harps and lyres, and sang the song of Moses,¹⁰⁰⁹ servant of The Glory, and the song of the Lamb.

Amazing the works!
Wondrous the ways!

¹⁰⁰⁵ c.f. The Prayer of St. Francis.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Chapter 15 continues the depiction of The Glory's triumph and promises The Glory's presence, comfort, and love.

¹⁰⁰⁷ The number seven is prominent in this chapter: seven messengers, seven judgments, seven golden bowls. As a reminder, seven is the symbolic number for divine completeness, wholeness, and perfection.

¹⁰⁰⁸ c.f. 1 Kings 7:23-26: "He made the Sea of cast metal, circular in shape...The Sea stood on twelve bulls, three facing north, three facing west, three facing south and three facing east. The Sea rested on top of them...It held two thousand baths."

¹⁰⁰⁹ c.f. Exodus 15:1-8: "I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea."

The Glory is just and true!
The Glory is sovereign over the nNtions!
Who fills all with awe!
Who leads all to reverence!
All nations will honor and adore The Glory,
for The Glory's justice has been unveiled.

After this I looked and saw the dwelling place of The Glory—like the Tent of Meeting in the desert and the Temple in Jerusalem.¹⁰¹⁰ In that place the *shekinah*¹⁰¹¹ overwhelmed all who encountered The Glory and yet they were able to endure. From this dwelling place came the consummation of The Glory's justice—the seven messengers each with a judgment to be poured out—but now they were dressed in honor with golden sashes,¹⁰¹² as Aaron and the priests had been dressed. One of the four living creatures gave the celestial messengers seven bowls, like those upon the altar in the Tent of Meeting and the Jerusalem Temple, the bowls that are used for cleansing the people and proclaiming their forgiveness.¹⁰¹³ The bowls were filled with justice from The Glory, the One who lives and has always lived and will always live. In the presence of The Glory, the throne room filled with smoke¹⁰¹⁴ from the might of Their power, and no one could enter until The Glory's justice was made whole and complete, the creation made new when all would live the God-life.

¹⁰¹⁰ c.f. Exodus 40:34-35: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle"; c.f. also 1 Kings 8:10: "When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD."

¹⁰¹¹ *Shekinah* is a Hebrew word meaning "dwelling" and refers to the experience of being in the direct presence of The Glory.

¹⁰¹² c.f. Exodus 28:39-41: "Weave the tunic of fine linen and make the turban of fine linen. The sash is to be the work of an embroiderer...put these clothes on your brother Aaron and his sons, anoint and ordain them. Consecrate them so they may serve me as priests."

¹⁰¹³ c.f. Exodus 24:6-7: "Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, 'We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.'"

¹⁰¹⁴ c.f. Isaiah 6:4: "At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke."

*Subtle the difference
Fire that destroys
Fire that purges.*

*Significant the distinction
Judgment that punishes
Justice that restores.*

*Salvation:
made empty
to be made whole.*

God, it's me. Your justice forces a recognition: our world is not as you would have it. I am not as you would have me. I need a swimming lesson: in the great, glassy sea where cleansing and purging refresh and renew. I need immersion into the deep waters of baptismal mercy that forgiven I may be free from the powers that distort my thinking and lead me to relate to others only according to the benefit they give me! I need your forgiveness, O Glory, that I may be free to live as you would have me live. O Glory, in your mercy, hear my prayer.

Revelations 16:1-21¹⁰¹⁵

Then I heard a loud voice from the throne room commanding the seven celestial messengers to make whole and complete the fulfillment of The Glory's justice. The voice sent the messengers, saying, "Go! Pour out my justice upon the land and sea, upon rivers and springs, upon the sun and the two Beasts. Let it pour out upon Babylon, upon Rome, and upon all Citadels of human oppression. Let it open the floodgates of restoration. Nothing shall remain untouched; all shall be renewed."

One by one five of the messengers poured out upon the earth their bowls, which had been filled with The Glory's justice. As in the days of Moses when The Glory confronted Pharaoh, The Glory's justice flowed.¹⁰¹⁶ With blood and darkness and death it flowed. With

festering sores, fire and scorching heat it flowed. Upon those who practice the ways of the two Beasts it rained. Upon the living and the dead it rained. Upon all those who, like Pharaoh, understood the power and majesty of The Glory yet refused to turn toward the God-life it rained. Even when it was understood that the ways of the Dragon and the two Beasts led to sorrow and suffering, they refused to turn away! Their distorted thoughts had become entrenched, and their broken practices had become addictions. For them, there was no turning back, no turning back.

Then I heard the voice of the messenger in charge of the waters shout,

Harmony and hope come from The Glory,
who is the eternal present,
who lived before all time.

Those who shed the blood of the beloved,
who opposed those who spoke truth to power,
have drunk the cup prepared by their deeds.

And I heard those gathered around The Glory's throne respond:

Amen! Just and true is The Glory's justice,
which restores all things,
which brings new creation.

Then I looked and saw the sixth celestial messenger pour out her bowl on the great river Euphrates,¹⁰¹⁷ which boundaries Rome's eastern border and holds back the dreaded Parthian hordes. When The Glory's justice was poured out, the water dried up, and Rome's protection disappeared.

Rome fought back. I saw three unholy messengers, who bore the image of the Dragon and the two Beasts upon them and croaked like frogs. Their croaking was a crescendo of cacophony as they spewed deceit and manipulation that rallied their armies. They

¹⁰¹⁵ Chapter 16 begins the fourth conflict with evil / victory cycle as an extended *midrash* (or commentary) on the Exodus narratives that tell the story of the ten plagues inflicted upon Egypt.

¹⁰¹⁶ c.f. The plague narratives in Exodus 8-12.

¹⁰¹⁷ The sixth bowl poured out is on the River Euphrates (16:12), the area of the Parthians, who were the people on Rome's eastern, hostile border. When the judgment is poured out even on the Euphrates, it "prepares the way for the kings from the East" (i.e. for Rome's destruction).

manufactured alliances and honed their skills for battle as they prepared for war against The Glory.

And I heard the Lamb proclaim:

Watch! Be alert! I come like a thief in the night.¹⁰¹⁸
Blessed is the one who abides in me, who stays awake and remains clothed in the robes with which I dress you. You will not go into the world naked or ashamed.

Then the armies of the Dragon gathered for battle in the valley of Megiddo,¹⁰¹⁹ the place of many battles throughout Israel's history, known in Hebrew as *Har-Meggedon*.

Then the seventh messenger poured out his bowl and so consummated the fulfillment of The Glory's justice. "It is finished!"¹⁰²⁰ proclaimed the voice from the throne. The Glory, power unleashed and majesty unbound,¹⁰²¹ descended with flashes of lightning, peals of thunder and an earthquake¹⁰²² that transformed creation and made all things new.

The Nations shattered and scattered into parts and pieces,¹⁰²³ each seeking its own salvation. The Glory triumphed over Babylon and Rome and all Citadels of self-importance. The wine of justice filled the cup to the brim, and The Glory's *shalom* touched all the places where the cup overflowed—not one place was spared, for the wine of that cup flows forever. Nothing remained untouched; all was renewed.

¹⁰¹⁸ c.f. 1 Thessalonians 5:2: "...the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."

¹⁰¹⁹ c.f. Judges 5:19: "Kings came, they fought, the kings of Canaan fought. At Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo...."

¹⁰²⁰ c.f. John 19:30.

¹⁰²¹ c.f. Joel 3:16: "The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the heavens will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel"; c.f. also Exodus 19:16ff.: "On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast."

¹⁰²² c.f. Matthew 27:50-54, 28:1-2 and Hebrews 12:26-28.

¹⁰²³ c.f. Daniel 2:44-45: "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces."

"It is finished!"

Words from the Cross—

*past event projecting forward,
the arc of moral history finding its compass.*

*The battle is won,
even as it is still being fought,
nothing remains untouched,
all will be renewed.*

God, it's me. It's hard to read Revelations and not see its images as literal expressions of your anger and fury, our just comeuppance for tolerating injustice and welcoming oppression. Where, O Glory, is the line between literal and symbolic, between prose and the poetic? I trust the prophets, truth-tellers from ages past, who spoke in symbols and used them to provoke imagination and evoke repentance. I trust, even more, that your character is love. You may love us just as we are but too much to let us stay that way. May your justice begin with me, O Glory, and may I be even a minor character in the narrative that leads toward the horizon of your victory.

Revelations 17:1-18¹⁰²⁴

Then one of the seven celestial messengers came to me and said, "Come! I will show you the sentence handed down for the Great Prostitute whose power rests on many waters and might lays upon many lands."¹⁰²⁵ It sells itself for human oppression. The powerful purchase it and pretend it means something. The rich use it to satisfy their lusts that are never sated. Influencers get intoxicated on the access the Great Prostitute brings."

Then the messenger carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness where I saw the Great Prostitute of our time. I saw the way it lied about The Glory and paraded around in self-importance. I saw its bling, meant to impress with its wealth—layer upon gaudy layer of gold,

¹⁰²⁴ Chapter 17 includes the famous quotation associating Babylon the Great with the Great Prostitute. As previously noted, references to Babylon are clearly intended as references to Rome.

¹⁰²⁵ Rome's greatness, like empires before it, was described as "sitting on many waters."

precious stones, and pearls. Its purple and scarlet outfit¹⁰²⁶ gave away the secret of its identity as much as the name inscribed on its forehead:

Babylon,¹⁰²⁷ Rome, and All Citadels of Power
Whores Who Pretend to Give Love
Liars about What Really Matters

The Great Prostitute was drunk on the blood of The Glory's beloved, having persecuted those who bore witness to Jesus.

I was astonished when I saw the Great Prostitute, for its opulence was not what I expected. Then the messenger explained to me, "What you see is an illusion. The Great Prostitute mimics but cannot become The Glory.¹⁰²⁸ It exults in its power but cannot match The Glory's majesty. It brags of its riches but what is any human wealth compared to the beauty of the earth and skies that belong to The Glory? It boasts that it will yet become as The Glory already is, but to its proud, 'Not yet!' The Glory responds, 'Not ever.' It was born of death and into death it leads all who follow it, whose names are not inscribed in the Book of Life that was written before the beginning of time.

"This calls for wisdom and discernment yet let me be clear: The Great Prostitute is 'the city on seven hills.'¹⁰²⁹ It knows great power—it's military sits on many waters—yet its time is coming to an end. Its rulers have reigned over many peoples yet never been sovereign over heaven and earth. Caesar Nero, 'the beast who once was, now is not, and is yet to come' will not actually return—*Nero redivivus*¹⁰³⁰ is urban legend not something real. There is only one who has died and returned to life: Jesus

the Anointed. Indeed, Caesar Domitian is like all others before him—destined for destruction.

"The Great Prostitute will rule human affairs for yet a while longer. For a moment it lingers but for eternity it is doomed. For this moment it has but one purpose: to wage war against the Lamb, but its purpose is folly and its destruction assured. The Lamb will triumph for he is Sovereign over all creation; he is Sovereign above Caesar. With the Lamb will be all whom he has chosen, all whom he has called to himself, all who have abided in him through trust."

Then the messenger said to me, "Here is the divine irony: The waters you saw where the Great Prostitute sits refer to people—gatherings great and small, even nations. They lie with the Great Prostitute yet despise it, drink of its cup only to spew the wine out when it looks away. When the *kairos* arrives, the peoples of this earth will leave the Great Prostitute naked, ashamed, and unable to cover itself, for it will serve their purpose no more. The Great Prostitute is the Citadel that rules over the peoples—for now only and only for this moment."

*Lying about life—
no joining of lives
only genitals.*

*Deceptive fantasies—
fundamental impoverishment rather than
gift with sacramental qualities.*

*Promise of success, ecstasy, and meaning
that we can get for the price of a
depersonalized identity.*

*Using a gift to do evil—
the problem is not the pleasure but the belief:
love can be purchased.*

*Worship under the Great Prostitute—
spiritual sacrilege
transactional salvation that cannot transform.*¹⁰³¹

¹⁰²⁶ Purple and scarlet were colors traditionally associated with Roman clothing, especially its governmental and military leaders.

¹⁰²⁷ c.f. Jeremiah 51:7: "Babylon was a gold cup in the LORD's hand; she made the whole earth drunk. The nations drank her wine; therefore, they have now gone mad."

¹⁰²⁸ The text of 17:8 says, "who was, now is not, and is to come," which is similar to 4:8, "who was, and is, and is to come."

¹⁰²⁹ This is the clearest and most direct reference linking Rome with the Great Prostitute.

¹⁰³⁰ Nero Redivivus: some Romans believed a superstition that Nero would return to life or that Domitian was Nero reincarnated, as both Caesars were renowned for their enmity against Christians.

¹⁰³¹ This poem is adapted from Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*. (New York: HarperOne, 1991), pages 147-148.

God, it's me. Guide me to protect my mind, that I would perceive the significance of ideas and beliefs that define meaning. Lead me to guard my heart, that I would not share it as a transaction but only give myself to another for transformation. Strengthen me to safeguard my will, that I may live more deeply into my true self, honoring your image within me.

Revelation s18:1-24¹⁰³²

After this I looked and saw another celestial messenger coming down from heaven. She radiated authority and grandeur as she proclaimed:

Fallen! Fallen are Babylon and Rome and all Citadels of human glory, honor, and power.¹⁰³³

These cities have become wastelands of idolatry and toxic dump sites of injustice. The stench of their corruption has become unbearable!

All the Nations have caroused with them: drinking their maddening wine,¹⁰³⁴ succumbing to the seduction of their beds and fevered dreams of affluenza.¹⁰³⁵

Then I heard another voice from heaven, saying:

¹⁰³² Chapter 18 concludes the fourth conflict with evil / victory cycle as a diatribe against the political and economic oppression of “Babylon,” which John intends for his readers to understand refers to Rome (and which I extend the metaphor to encompass “all Citadels of human power”). Of note is that chapter 18 appears to be a *midrash* (or commentary) on large portions of Ezekiel 27 and Jeremiah 51 (see notes in this section).

¹⁰³³ c.f. Isaiah 21:9: “Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses. And he gives back the answer: ‘Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!’”

¹⁰³⁴ c.f. Jeremiah 51:7-8a: “Babylon was a gold cup in the hand of the LORD, making the whole earth drunk. The nations drank her wine; therefore the nations have gone mad.”

¹⁰³⁵ c.f. Ezekiel 28:4-5: “By wisdom and understanding you have gained your wealth and amassed gold and silver for your treasuries. By your great skill in trading, you have increased your wealth, but your heart has grown proud because of it...”

Come out of these Citadels, my beloved! Run from their broken ways.¹⁰³⁶ Flee their abuse, betrayal, and corruption. Do not get mired in their greed or weighed down by the accumulation of their evils, for the accounting of their debts and trespasses is piled as high as the heavens.¹⁰³⁷ They will receive double payment¹⁰³⁸ for their debts and the serving of their grief shall be supersized. They will gag on the luxuries with which they gorged themselves. In their hearts they boasted, “I am the queen bee forever,”¹⁰³⁹ and, “No harm will ever come to me,”¹⁰⁴⁰ yet their ruin will come in an instant—the height of their success will see their collapse. They are more fragile than they imagined and less mighty than The Glory to whom justice is owed.

First the rulers and politicians will tremble when they see the Citadel’s ruin, for they will recall all the ways they fornicated with it through idolatry and tolerance of injustice. They will seek to distance themselves from the Citadel, crying out,

Sorrow and sadness! Guilt and shame!
The mighty Citadel a shadow of its former glory!
In a single hour its *kairos* arrived—
swift and thorough its destruction.¹⁰⁴¹

¹⁰³⁶ c.f. Jeremiah 51:45: “Come out of her, my people! Run for your lives! Run from the fierce anger of the LORD.”

¹⁰³⁷ c.f. Ezra 9:6: “I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.”

¹⁰³⁸ This seems to be an allusion to—yet reversal of—the comfort given Judah while in exile; c.f. Isaiah 40:2: “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”

¹⁰³⁹ c.f. Isaiah 47:7: “Yet you said, ‘I will be a queen forever.’ These things you did not consider nor remember the outcome of them.”

¹⁰⁴⁰ c.f. Isaiah 47:8: “Now then, listen, you lover of pleasure, lounging in your security and saying to yourself, ‘I am, and there is none besides me. I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.’”

¹⁰⁴¹ The set of three woes found in 18:9-20 (from kings, merchants, and sea captains) are an extended reflection on Ezekiel 27:30-36. Here, c.f. Ezekiel 27:30-31: “They will raise their voice and cry bitterly over you; they will sprinkle dust on

Then the industrialists and influencers will watch the Citadel's destruction with fear, as they recall nights of seduction followed by mornings of regret. They will weep over their lost opportunities, for no more can they extort the Citadel over its greed and avarice. They will watch in horror as luxury markets vanish and their profit margins disappear; even their ability to exploit workers will fade away.¹⁰⁴² They, too, will cry out,

Sorrow and sadness! Guilt and shame!
Purple and scarlet—the colors of
glory, honor, and power—
have become symbols of
ruin, disaster, and death.
In a single hour its *kairos* arrived.¹⁰⁴³

Finally every sea captain will look away from the Citadel's ruin and turn their gaze to other shores. They will see the once prosperous Citadel no longer holds the promise of prosperity and will exclaim, "Their loss is our loss!" They, too, will cry out,

Sorrow and sadness! Guilt and shame!
So much wealth upon the seas—gone forever.
In a single hour its *kairos* arrived.¹⁰⁴⁴

Rejoice, beloved of The Glory.
Rejoice, sent ones and truth-tellers.

Judgments inflicted are now justice received.
The meal they served their prisoners
has become their feast.

their heads and roll in ashes...They will weep over you with anguish of soul and with bitter mourning."

¹⁰⁴² This single sentence paraphrases 18:11-15, which scholars describe as an accurate depiction of the economic consequences that occurred when Rome's economy collapsed.

¹⁰⁴³ c.f. Ezekiel 27: 32-34: "As they wail and mourn over you, they will take up a lament concerning you: 'Who was ever silenced like Tyre, surrounded by the sea?' When your merchandise went out on the seas, you satisfied many nations; with your great wealth and your wares you enriched the kings of the earth."

¹⁰⁴⁴ c.f. Ezekiel 27:35-36: "Now you are shattered by the sea in the depths of the waters; The merchants among the nations scoff at you; you have come to a horrible end and will be no more."

Then a celestial messenger of great strength picked up a millstone of heavy burden that lay around the necks of the beloved, removed it from them, and tossed it into the sea, for the oppression of the Citadel was no more. The messenger said,

Thrown down is the Citadel of oppression;
thrown down the city of injustice.¹⁰⁴⁵

Never again shall the Citadel rise;
never again shall it trample the beloved.¹⁰⁴⁶

No joy shall be found in all the Citadel¹⁰⁴⁷—
neither music nor singing,
neither love nor laughter,
nor the enchantments used to seduce nations.

For in you was found murder and mayhem—
the blood of truth-tellers flooded your streets,
The Glory's own beloved were slaughtered.

Aquinas, great doctor of the Church:

*One who is not angry at injustice is immoral,
for anger looks to the good of justice.
If you can live amid injustice without anger,
you are immoral as well as unjust.*

Doctor, what is your diagnosis of my condition?

God, it's me. COVID has shown us: We are vulnerable—not just to disease but to dis-ease. We are uneasy with each other, uneasy with our jobs, uneasy in our common life, uneasy in our churches, uneasy with ourselves (many of us). O Glory, I do not ask to return to an "easy" life but to a life made whole and complete through your love. I ask to

¹⁰⁴⁵ c.f. Jeremiah 51:48: "Then heaven and earth and all that is in them will shout for joy over Babylon, for out of the north destroyers will attack her," declares the LORD."

¹⁰⁴⁶ c.f. Jeremiah 51:64: "Just so shall Babylon sink down and not rise again because of the calamity that I am going to bring upon her; and they will become exhausted."

¹⁰⁴⁷ c.f. Jeremiah 25:10: "I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp."

return to a life in which all dis-eases are confronted by a commitment to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with you.¹⁰⁴⁸

Revelations 19:1-10¹⁰⁴⁹

After seeing the millstone of heavy burden lifted from the necks of the beloved, I heard the sound of a great crowd rejoicing:

Hallelujah!
Wholeness and God-life are birthed of The Glory!
In The Glory comes the splendor of transformation!

Hallelujah!
Integrity and faithfulness are born of justice,
and the Great Prostitute is exposed for all to see.

Hallelujah!
The blood of those who belong to The Glory
drips from the Prostitute's lips and is upon its hands.

Again the great crowd rejoiced:

Hallelujah!
The Great Prostitute's judgment is forever!

And the twenty-four elders of Israel and the Church, along with the four living creatures, fell prostrate in worship before The Glory. They, too, rejoiced:

Hallelujah!
Amen and amen!

¹⁰⁴⁸ c.f. Micah 6:8.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Chapter 19 describes the conflict with evil – victory cycle with two metaphors: the marriage meal (19:1-10) and military battle (19:11-21). The marriage meal bespeaks relationship, connection, and intimacy, while military battle bespeaks overcoming enemies, being set apart, and valor. There are parts of our true selves that connect with the marriage meal: the connection with Jesus, being Jesus' beloved. Other parts of our true selves connect with battle: struggle and courage in the Christian life. The marriage meal challenges one toward a deeper intimacy and communion with Jesus. The image of battle challenges one to recognize that we do not live in a spiritually benign culture, for there are people and values that war against Jesus.

Then a voice came from the throne itself, quoting the words of the Psalmist:

Praise The Glory, all who are beloved!
Praise The Glory, all who are in awe!
Praise The Glory, all who are great or small!¹⁰⁵⁰

And I heard The Glory's voice, which sounded like rushing waters and peals of thunder,¹⁰⁵¹ join with the great crowd's rejoicing:

Hallelujah!
The Glory is sovereign above the earth!
The Glory is sovereign above the Cosmos!

Rejoice and sing praise!
The wedding¹⁰⁵² of the Lamb has come,
his bride has prepared herself for this *kairos*.

Rejoice and sing praise!
The bride has dressed herself in purity and integrity,
through right relationships and acts of justice.

The celestial messenger said to me, "Write this down: Sacred joy is reserved for those invited to the wedding supper¹⁰⁵³ of the Lamb, for they will experience knowing and being known. They will share their hearts, and the Lamb will be with them forever." And then he added, "This isn't a guess, and I'm not making this up. These words are direct from The Glory's lips."

¹⁰⁵⁰ c.f. Psalm 135: "Praise the LORD. Praise the name of the LORD; praise him, you servants of the LORD"; c.f. also Psalm 115:13: "...He will bless those who fear the LORD— small and great alike."

¹⁰⁵¹ c.f. Ezekiel 43:2 and Exodus 19:6 (previously cited).

¹⁰⁵² c.f. Hosea 2:19-22: "I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, In lovingkindness and in compassion, And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD"; c.f. also Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

¹⁰⁵³ c.f. Isaiah 25:6-8: "On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth."

Upon hearing this stupendous message of hope, encouragement and invitation to joy, I fell prostrate at the messenger's feet. "Stop!" he commanded. "I am but a fellow servant with you and all the beloved who bear witness to Jesus. Worship only The Glory, for it is the Divine Spirit, who speaks the truth about Jesus, who gave me these words."

The groom waited.

Joking with friends in a back room.

High fives when the preacher arrived: "Kairos!"

The bride prepared.

Friends admiring and encouraging.

Getting ready for "The Walk."

Their eyes met from opposite ends of the aisle.

Joy danced in the soft light.

Journey to consummation being fulfilled.

God, it's me. What a great metaphor! Who doesn't like a good wedding feast? May my heart rejoice with friends and neighbors celebrating your eternal love that makes all things new. Who hasn't felt joy at the beauty of two hearts bound together? May my heart be bound together with Jesus—now and forever. Who doesn't desire to know and be known—love deepening over time, teaching us our true name? May I learn anew that my true name is Beloved of The Glory.

Revelations 19:11-21

Heaven opened before me, and I saw once again the rider on the white horse. His name was Trustworthy and True. He rode to wage war against the Dragon and the two Beasts. He rode to wage war against the Citadels of oppression and injustice. With justice he rode, for right relationships were his determination and *shalom* his destination.¹⁰⁵⁴ His eyes bore the look of fire,¹⁰⁵⁵ burning

¹⁰⁵⁴ c.f. Isaiah 11:4-5: "But with righteousness He will judge the poor and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be the belt about loins and faithfulness the belt about His waist."

¹⁰⁵⁵ c.f. Psalm 97:3: "Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side"; c.f. also Isaiah 66:15: "See, the LORD is coming

with a desire for equity and equality that would not be denied. There was a deep truth about him that no human could ever comprehend. Though he himself was the king and wore a golden crown, still did he lead his army of celestial messengers into battle. The messengers' armor was fine linens of purity and integrity.

The rider was dressed in a robe splashed with his own blood,¹⁰⁵⁶ for his power had been revealed in weakness and his glory unveiled in humiliation. His sword was sharp, for it was the Word of God, and he wielded it to bring down nations, as the Psalmist declared:

Sovereign is the Anointed,

whom The Glory has chosen.

He will rule the nations with moral strength—

with equity and equality will break all chains.¹⁰⁵⁷

With ferocity of intent he trampled upon the grapes of oppression. The strength of his winepress transformed them into the wine of justice, and all heaven and earth finally knew his full name:

Sovereign above all sovereigns!

The Glory that outshines all glory!

And I saw a celestial messenger standing, with the sun blazing behind him as if he was born of it. He cried out to the scavengers encircling the carnage of the battle, "Come and eat until your stomachs are full, for the battle is over and The Glory's victory complete."¹⁰⁵⁸ And the

with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire."

¹⁰⁵⁶ c.f. Isaiah 66:1-3: "Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? 'It is I, proclaiming victory, mighty to save.' Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress? 'I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing.'"

¹⁰⁵⁷ c.f. Jeremiah 23:29: "'Is not my word like fire,' declares the LORD, 'and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?'" c.f. also Psalm 2:9: "You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery."

¹⁰⁵⁸ c.f. Ezekiel 39:17: "Son of man, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'Call out to every kind of bird and all the wild animals: 'Assemble and come together from all around to the

vultures of the air feasted upon the Vultures of the Earth—on the rulers and politicians, on the industrialists and influencers, even on every sea captain who once called the Citadel home port.

Still the Beasts and their minions were not finished venting their anger. They waged useless warfare that would lead to one and only one conclusion: their defeat. The first Beast was captured—its secular power stripped from its paws. The second Beast was also captured—its religious veneer exposed for the lies it proclaimed. Both were thrown into the lake of sulfur¹⁰⁵⁹ that burns but does not consume. Their torment is forever. Those who followed them in their thinking and acting (those who bore the Beasts' mark upon their heads and hands) were defeated by the Word spoken by the rider on the white horse. Their defeat was absolute.¹⁰⁶⁰

*It shall not always be this way—
children going hungry,
wives trembling in fear,
fathers sneaking across the desert.*

*It shall not always be this way—
white faces assuming cultural deference,
billionaires claiming the tax system impoverishes them,
nations transgressing sovereign boundaries.*

*It shall one day be different—
parents unafraid while their children play in the park,
health and wellness a human right,
elders cared for with dignity and tenderness.*

*It shall one day be different—
the lion will lie down with the lamb,
the earth will be filled with the knowledge of The
Glory,¹⁰⁶¹
the moral arc of history arriving at its horizon.*

God, it's me. I do not value war, per se, but then this is no ordinary war—no land grabs, no supply lines, no

sacrifice. I am preparing for you, the great sacrifice on the mountains of Israel. There you will eat flesh and drink blood.”

¹⁰⁵⁹ See note 997 on the distinction between fire and sulfur (Revelation 14:10).

¹⁰⁶⁰ Note, however, they are not thrown into the lake of sulfur.

¹⁰⁶¹ c.f. Isaiah 11:6-9.

political support or strategic timing required. The weapons—being trustworthy and true, Jesus' Cross and Word—define the kind of war being fought: the battle for justice and right relationships. This battle is not a military battle but a spiritual one, a battle for hearts and minds. This is a battle for my heart and my mind. O Glory, I give to thee. I give to thee. Take my heart, use my mind, let me give my life to this battle, for it must be won. It must be won.

Revelations 20:1-15¹⁰⁶²

And I looked and saw a celestial messenger coming down from heaven, holding the keys to Death and the afterlife and a chain in his hand with which to imprison the Dragon and the two Beasts. The messenger grabbed the Dragon—the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan, the Accuser—and imprisoned it for the enormity of time.¹⁰⁶³ The messenger took the Dragon and threw it down, threw it down, threw it down—into the realm of Death, locked away with a seal upon the lock.¹⁰⁶⁴ It was powerless except for the briefest¹⁰⁶⁵ of moments when its mayhem and manipulation distracted people from the God-life.

I saw the thrones of those given the authority to pronounce The Glory's justice. Behind and around them were gathered those whose lives had been martyred for their witness to Jesus and the truth of the Word. These

¹⁰⁶² Revelation 20 describes a 1,000-year reign, which commentators interpret in one of three distinct ways, using the terminology of Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Amillennialism. See endnote 1 in Appendix A.

¹⁰⁶³ The text says, “1,000 years,” which is symbolic; c.f. Psalm 90:3-5: “You turn people back to dust, saying, ‘Return to dust, you mortals.’ A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—they are like the new grass of the morning....”

¹⁰⁶⁴ c.f. Daniel 6:17: “A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed”; c.f. also Job 12:13-15: “Wisdom and strength belong to God; counsel and understanding are his. What he tears down cannot be rebuilt; the man he imprisons cannot be released. If He holds back the waters, they dry up, and if He releases them, they overwhelm the land....”

¹⁰⁶⁵ The Greek word used is *mikron*, indicating something very small.

martyrs had not worshiped the Beasts, nor participated in the thought-life and ways of living that conformed to the pattern of this world; that is, they had refused the mark of the Beasts upon their heads and hands. Though they had been martyred, they were alive, standing beside Jesus. With Jesus they will govern for the enormity of time. (The rest of the dead would remain so for the same enormity; that is, forever.) For the martyrs, this is the first resurrection, for they were raised to live with Jesus. Sacred joy embraced them, and holy comfort pervaded their true selves that had been made whole and complete. The second death—the annihilation—will have no power over them, but they will stand with Jesus and celebrate the God-life for the enormity of time.

When The Glory determines the *kairos* has come for the fulfillment of the kin-dom—for the horizon of hope to live fully present in human hearts and communities—the Accuser will be permitted a final stand, and it won't be nearly enough. Nations will come from the north—Gog and Magog as the truth-teller Ezekiel foretold¹⁰⁶⁶—as Israel's invaders have always come. They will appear invincible, numbering in the oodles and

gajillions. They will seem ubiquitous, thick upon the ground like so many cockroaches in a hot and humid Texas summer. They will be defeated by the fiery might of The Glory.¹⁰⁶⁷ And their leader, by whatever name it is called—the Dragon, the serpent, the devil, Satan, the Accuser—will be thrown into the lake of sulfur¹⁰⁶⁸ along with the two Beasts, their defeat consummated for the enormity of time.

Then I saw a throne of purity and integrity¹⁰⁶⁹ and the One sitting upon it,¹⁰⁷⁰ who said, “Let there be *shalom*,” and it was so. Before this sovereign One even the heavens and earth receded, fleeing from the presence of One so majestic and radiant.¹⁰⁷¹ But the dead, whether rich or poor, powerful or peasant, weren't afraid to stand with the One. Regardless of status, the dead stood beside the One on the throne as people's stories were told.

A second book, the Book of Life, was opened. Together these books told the story of The Glory's justice—each person's life told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about how they lived the God-life (or not). And when every story had been told and every accounting given, Death and Hell were tossed into

¹⁰⁶⁶ “Gog and Magog” do not refer to two specific nations, but the nations aligned against The Glory's people, who are innumerable “like the sand on the seashore” and “from the four corners of the earth.” (In Hebrew, Magog literally translates as “place of Gog,” so some translators see this as not two locations but one.) As is John's custom, Gog and Magog are used as an archetype of those who would oppose The Glory's people. That Gog and Magog come from the north is an allusion to the nations who conquered and oppressed Israel and Judah: Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome—all of whom invaded from the north. Interpreters who believe Gog and Magog are actual nations (e.g. “Christian Zionists”) look for a battle, which in turn distorts political alliances and theology toward Israel in the Middle East. Conversely, interpreters who understand Gog and Magog as archetypes accept that there are innumerable enemies and innumerable ways for people to battle against The Glory, thereby preparing one for spiritual, ethical, and social justice conflicts without inculcating political views that see nations, *a priori*, as enemies; c.f. Ezekiel 38-39, especially 38:14-16: “Therefore, son of man, prophesy and say to Gog: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘In that day, when my people Israel are living in safety, will you not take notice of it? You will come from your place in the far north, you and many nations with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army. You will advance against my people Israel like a cloud that covers the land...’”

¹⁰⁶⁷ c.f. 2 Kings 1:10: “Elijah replied to the captain of fifty, ‘If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.’ Then fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.”

¹⁰⁶⁸ See note 997 on the distinction between fire and sulfur (Revelation 14:10). Note they are thrown into the lake of sulfur.

¹⁰⁶⁹ c.f. 1 Kings 10:18: “Then the king made a great throne covered with ivory and overlaid with fine gold.”

¹⁰⁷⁰ c.f. Daniel 7:9-11: “As I continued to watch, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took His seat. His clothing was [pure] as [newly fallen] snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from His presences. Thousands upon thousands attended him, and myriads upon myriads stood before him. The court was convened, and the books were opened. Then I kept watching because of the arrogant words the horn was speaking. As I continued to watch, the beast was slain, and its body was destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire...”

¹⁰⁷¹ c.f. Psalm 114:3-7: “The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back; the mountains leaped like rams, the hills like lambs. Why was it, sea, that you fled? ...Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob...”; c.f. also Psalm 18:15: “The valleys of the sea were exposed, and the foundations of the earth laid bare at your rebuke, LORD, at the blast of breath from your nostrils.”

complete, utter darkness. Never again would these twin devils harm or destroy on God's holy mountain. Never again would Death or Hell be allowed to dominate people's going out or coming in. Death and Hell were thrown into the lake of fire to be consumed. This is the second death, which is reserved for those whose names are not inscribed in the Book of Life. The second death is the final chapter of their story.

*Knowing the story
without reading the last page.*

*Confident of a happy ending
even though the chapters are foreboding.*

*I open the book
with One reading over my shoulder.*

*This story is scary!
And I am not afraid.*

God, it's me. I am encouraged! Knowing the end of the story emboldens me to write each chapter with hope and each page with courage. Seeing the horizon of my destiny makes me want to get up in the morning—Let's do this! But you know, O Glory, that my poetic heart sometimes battles with my pragmatic head, so help me find a balance, for I don't want to be "so heavenly minded that I am no earthly good." What kind of story would that be? Help me to know that, on this day, it is enough that I seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you.

Revelations 21:1-8

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,¹⁰⁷² for the first heaven and first earth had departed, and the sea, the place of primordial chaos, was no more. I saw the new Citadel—called Trustworthy and True, David's city, Jerusalem reborn—descending in beauty from the foundations of heaven. The new Citadel was not like the

¹⁰⁷² c.f. Isaiah 65:17: "See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind"; c.f. also Isaiah 66:22: "'As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,' declares the LORD, 'so will your name and descendants endure.'"

Citadel that served the Dragon and the Beasts, for it was dressed in a wedding gown¹⁰⁷³—the Lamb's bride prepared for intimacy and communion. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! See! The Glory's presence overshadows the beloved—the *kairos* of salvation has become the *chronos* of new creation. The Glory will abide with the people and the people with The Glory."¹⁰⁷⁴ Never again will the people's brokenness destroy right relationship. Always and forever they will dance the God-rhythms with The Glory. The Glory will remove all sorrow; tears shall not be shed nor lament heard anymore, for The Glory has destroyed Death.¹⁰⁷⁵ New creation has come and will live forever."

The Glory, who sat upon the throne, then said, "Let there be new creation!" And it was so. And The Glory said, "Write these words, which are trustworthy and true: It is finished!"¹⁰⁷⁶ I am the first and the last, the One who was before the beginning of time and who will abide after the end of all things. To those who thirst I will give water without cost¹⁰⁷⁷ from the spring that bubbles up from the water of life. To those who endure and persevere I will give the inheritance of a new heart and new home.¹⁰⁷⁸

¹⁰⁷³ c.f. Isaiah 61:10: "I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels"; c.f. also Isaiah 62:4-5: "No longer will they call you Deserted or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah (my delight is in you) and your land Beulah (married); for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married. As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you."

¹⁰⁷⁴ c.f. Ezekiel 37:27-20: "My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever."

¹⁰⁷⁵ c.f. Isaiah 65:19: "I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more"; c.f. also Isaiah 25:6-8, previously cited.

¹⁰⁷⁶ c.f. John 19:30, previously cited.

¹⁰⁷⁷ c.f. Isaiah 55:1: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."

¹⁰⁷⁸ c.f. Jeremiah 24:6-7: "My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD."

But to those who pervert justice and themselves, who practice deceit and manipulation, who claim the power of life and death is in their own hands, they will be sent to the only home their hearts have ever known: away from my presence. They will be thrown into a lake that burns with fire and sulfur.¹⁰⁷⁹ This is the second death—annihilation—and they shall be no more.

*Why
focus on
the second death
when offered as promise
is new heaven and new earth?*

*Why
be enthralled
with burning lake
when The Glory's presence
will be direct, personal, intimate?*

*Please people:
Get your priorities straight!*

God, it's me. I rejoice in the promise of new heaven and new earth. I praise your name for the promise of new creation. That I will be part of that new creation astounds and amazes me. That I will be new creation fills my heart with wonder. May the awe I feel as I contemplate such wonders inspire my courage, direct my speech, temper my actions, and guide my living that I may seek your honor in all that I do.

Revelations 21:9-27

Then one of the celestial messengers said to me, "Do you want to see something cool? Let me show you the Lamb's bride!" And the messenger carried me away

They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart."

¹⁰⁷⁹ The Greek text describes the lake into which people are thrown as *kaiomene puri kai theio*, which translates literally as "burning with fire and sulfur" and not as the NIV translates, "fiery lake of burning sulfur." This suggests a more severe punishment than found in 20:14 (where only fire is mentioned); however, this verse still refers to a fire that consumes.

in yet a deeper vision mystic and transcendent,¹⁰⁸⁰ and I saw up close the new Citadel called Trustworthy and True, descending in beauty from the foundations of heaven to the highest place on earth, above all mountains, supreme in its majesty and splendor.¹⁰⁸¹ Like precious jewels, it appeared priceless.¹⁰⁸² Like Fort Knox, it appeared perfectly safe, with high walls on every side guarded by The Glory's own messengers.¹⁰⁸³ All who had been chosen and who belong to The Glory were present there—from the 12 tribes of Israel to those who received the testimony about Jesus from the 12 sent ones of the Church.

The messenger who spoke to me took out a measuring rod to measure this new Jerusalem. The city measured with precision and perfection exactly the same as the Holy of Holies in the old Jerusalem Temple¹⁰⁸⁴—the place where The Glory's *shekinah* had been known, the place where immediacy became intimacy and nearness became oneness. Now this thin place¹⁰⁸⁵ had become thick, with The Glory's presence imprinting upon all who lived in the city.

¹⁰⁸⁰ c.f. Ezekiel 3:14: "The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the LORD on me."

¹⁰⁸¹ c.f. Isaiah 2:2: "In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it."

¹⁰⁸² c.f. Tobit 13:16: "For Jerusalem shall be built up with sapphires and emeralds, and precious stone: thy walls and towers and battlements with pure gold."

¹⁰⁸³ c.f. Isaiah 26:1: "In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: We have a strong city; God makes salvation its walls and ramparts. Open the gates that the righteous nation may enter"; c.f. also Zechariah 2:5: "'And I myself will be a wall of fire around it,' declares the LORD, 'and I will be its glory within.'"

¹⁰⁸⁴ I omit the exact measurements but acknowledge they suggest a cube-shaped city. However, it is too literal to exclaim, "Heaven is a cube!" as one literalist preacher so exclaimed at a church camp I once attended. In Hebraic culture, a cube was considered the perfect geometric shape. The symbolism is that the new Jerusalem will be a place of wholeness and peace.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Spiritual writers use the phrase "thin place" to describe certain locations around the world where the veil between heaven and earth seems thin (e.g. Iona for Scottish Presbyterians, the Vatican for Catholics, or Sedona for New Age Arizonans).

The city itself was majestic and beautiful.¹⁰⁸⁶ Its walls were made of holiness and integrity; its streets paved to endure and never tarnish, as smooth as glass. Even the foundations of the walls were majestic and beautiful, filled with priceless things to evoke wonder, capture the imagination, and swell the heart. The gates were made of pearls so huge a camel could walk through the gate. There was no duplicity anywhere to be found.

I looked around but saw no Temple in the city, which perplexed me at first. Then I realized the city doesn't need a Temple, for The Glory and the Lamb are present there. Neither does the city need the sun or moon for the light and splendor of The Glory and the Lamb shine upon all who abide there.¹⁰⁸⁷ Even the Nations will see the city's light and be guided into *shalom*, and the rulers and Elite will bring their riches to share among all—returning their power and reversing their privilege. The city gates will never close, so all who long to become their true and best self might find refuge there,¹⁰⁸⁸ all who desire to dance the God-rhythms and live the God-life will be welcome there. But those who refuse to be redeemed, who bathe in deceit while wallowing in

abuse, betrayal, and corruption, will never live there. Their names are not inscribed in the Book of Life.¹⁰⁸⁹

“Heaven is a cube!”¹⁰⁹⁰

proclaimed the literalist preacher.

*My youth group kids turned to look at me,
perplexed looks upon their faces.*

*Tracy silently mouthed the words,
“A cube?”*

*Later that night we debriefed our day at church camp,
a robust and rousing conversation it was!*

What is heaven?

What is the longing of your heart?

Beware, preachers, when describing the afterlife!

No eye sees nor mind imagines the glory that awaits.¹⁰⁹¹

God, it's me. I am thankful you make me worthy of heaven—not that I deserve it but that I am loved with a love that will not let me go. I am thankful that heaven's gates remain wide open—that the hope belongs not just to folks like me but to others as well (and perhaps others first and foremost). I can't wait to get there—what a reunion it shall be! Just not today, O Glory. Until that day, make me your servant that heaven may be found on earth. In my life may I evoke wonder, capture the imagination, and swell the hearts of those who hear your Good News.

Revelations 22:1-21

Then a celestial messenger showed me the Garden, restored beyond its original perfection. The river of the water of life ran through it,¹⁰⁹² with fish from every

¹⁰⁸⁶ In 21:18-21, a series of precious stones is listed, including jasper (walls), gold (streets), sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, ruby, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, turquoise, jacinth, and amethyst (foundations), and pearls (gates in the walls). Most of these precious stones do not have a specific symbolism attached to them other than that they are, well, precious; c.f. Ezekiel 28:12-13: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: carnelian, chrysolite and emerald, topaz, onyx and jasper, lapis lazuli, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared’”; c.f. also Isaiah 54:11: “O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted. Behold, I will set your stones in antimony, and your foundations I will lay in sapphires. Moreover, I will make your battlements of rubies, and your gates of crystal, and your entire wall of precious stones.”

¹⁰⁸⁷ c.f. Isaiah 60:19: “The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.”

¹⁰⁸⁸ c.f. Isaiah 60:11: “Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that people may bring you the wealth of the nations—their kings led in triumphal procession.”

¹⁰⁸⁹ c.f. Isaiah 52:1: “Awake, awake, Zion, clothe yourself with strength! Put on your garments of splendor, Jerusalem, the holy city. The uncircumcised and defiled will not enter you again.”

¹⁰⁹⁰ c.f. note 1084.

¹⁰⁹¹ c.f. 1 Corinthians 2:9

¹⁰⁹² c.f. Ezekiel 47:9: “Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so

sea. The throne of The Glory and the Lamb were the headwaters for its clear as crystal water, which ran through the middle of the Citadel, refreshing all who live there. On each side of the river were trees that delighted the eyes with their colors and the nose with their aromas—twelve different kinds of fruit were harvested every month!¹⁰⁹³ Never again would there be hunger, and the fruit of the trees healed the nations. The curse of Adam had been reversed.¹⁰⁹⁴

The throne of The Glory and of the Lamb will be the center of the Citadel, and all who are called to serve will serve—it will be their heart’s joy. They will see The Glory and the Lamb face to face,¹⁰⁹⁵ and they will be transformed—the Lamb’s character will be their character, the Lamb’s thoughts will be their thoughts, his ways will be their ways.¹⁰⁹⁶ Fear will disappear like the morning mist, never again to hold hostage the heart. The light that brings security and peace, that shields the heart with *shalom*, will be The Glory and the Lamb, who will reign sovereign above the Cosmos forever and ever.

Then the messenger said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. You can count on them, assured they speak the truth as The Glory has decreed it—the same One who inspired the truth-tellers from ages past inspires these words of what is, has been, and will be.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lamb cry out, “Look! See! I shall be unveiled when *kairos* and *chronos* embrace! Sacred comfort is given to those who embrace

where the river flows everything will live”; c.f. also Joel 3:18, Zechariah 14:18, and Psalm 105:41.

¹⁰⁹³ c.f. Ezekiel 47:7, 12: “When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river...Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.”

¹⁰⁹⁴ c.f. Genesis 3:17: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life”; c.f. also Zechariah 14:11: “It will be inhabited; never again will it be destroyed. Jerusalem will be secure.”

¹⁰⁹⁵ c.f. Isaiah 52:8b: “When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes”; c.f. also Job 19:26: “And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God....”

¹⁰⁹⁶ This is a reversal of Isaiah 55:8-9: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’”

these words. Sacred joy will be shared by those who live them.”

I, John, heard and saw these things in a vision mystic and transcendent, yet as real as my own birth. Upon hearing them I fell prostrate at the messenger’s feet. “Stop!” he commanded. “I am but a fellow servant with you and all the truth-tellers and all who will live according to these words. Don’t worship me. Worship only The Glory!”

Then the messenger told me, “These words are not to be sealed up. Write!¹⁰⁹⁷ Write these words for the *kairos* is near. There are some who can neither hear nor heed these words—that is not your concern. There are some who are unable or unwilling to dance the God-rhythms—they are not your concern. Let those who choose defilement live defiled. Let those who choose right relationships live with integrity and *agape*.¹⁰⁹⁸

The Lamb said again, “Look! See! I shall be unveiled when *kairos* and *chronos* embrace! I bring with me the fulfillment of what each person has done.¹⁰⁹⁹ What is precious remains, and what is dross is discarded. I am the beginning and the end of all creation, from first to last and from A to Z.¹¹⁰⁰

“Sacred joy is given to those who allow me to wash their robes, for they will be pristine and nap beneath the shade of the tree of life. They will freely enter the gates of the Citadel, and no one will stop them or check for their papers. Left beyond the gates will be those who had no desire to dance the God-rhythms or live the God-life. They degraded themselves and others, destroyed themselves and the creation, and refused to dance.

¹⁰⁹⁷ c.f. Isaiah 30:8: “Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness.”

¹⁰⁹⁸ c.f. Ezekiel 3:27: “But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says. ‘Whoever will listen let them listen, and whoever will refuse let them refuse; for they are a rebellious people.’”

¹⁰⁹⁹ c.f. Isaiah 62:11-12: “The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: ‘Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your Savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.’ They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD; and you will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted.’”

¹¹⁰⁰ c.f. Isaiah 44:6, previously cited.

“I, Jesus, sent my celestial messenger to give you these words for the gatherings. They are for their comfort, encouragement, and hope. I am the Root of David and David’s Branch,¹¹⁰¹ the Bright Morning Star. My testimony is trustworthy and true.”

The Divine Spirit and the beloved—they who are the Lamb’s bride—say together, “Come! Welcome! Be at peace in this place. Let the one who is thirsty come and drink from the water of life, for which there is no cost;¹¹⁰² drink from the spring that will never run dry.”

I warn those who hear these words: Do not add to them¹¹⁰³ but speak the message of comfort, encouragement, and hope found within them. The Glory will add plagues to the life of the one who adds to the words of this scroll. The Glory will remove that person from the Citadel, and they shall neither walk its streets nor nap beneath the shade of the tree of life.¹¹⁰⁴

The Lamb, who gives personal, eye-witness testimony to the truth of these words, says, “Yes, my *kairos* is near.”

Amen! Come, Jesus. Come, Anointed One! May the lovingkindness of Jesus the Anointed be with all The Glory’s beloved.

The Glory wins.

Love wins.

Justice wins.

Joy is birthed.

Hope is fulfilled.

Trust is rewarded.

Justice wins.

Love wins.

The Glory wins.

God, its’ me. My heart bursts in anticipation of the moment when longing transforms into fulfillment, when hope turns into your presence, and I see you face to face. Teach me that this burst of anticipation is not intended exclusively for me, for it is a communal hope. Indeed, it is a hope for new creation—heaven and earth restored. Teach me to live more deeply into this hope for new creation that my daily life may be a part of the life of your kingdom—on earth as it is in heaven. Give me the strength to dance your God-rhythms and live your God-life until present hope turns into eternal joy.

¹¹⁰¹ c.f. Isaiah 11:1: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit”; c.f. also Zechariah 6:12-13a: “Tell him this is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the LORD. It is he who will build the temple of the LORD, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne.’”

¹¹⁰² c.f. Isaiah 55:1, previously cited.

¹¹⁰³ c.f. Deuteronomy 4:2: “Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.”

¹¹⁰⁴ Confession: As one writing an interpretive paraphrase, this verse gives me some trepidation. I only pray my efforts have been faithful and will be judged with grace.

Appendix A: Extended Endnotes for Revelations

1. How does John understand or use time? Is Revelations focused on the past, present, or future?

Revelations projects both backward, forward, and to the present time (as understood by John, the author). It describes the past: the birth of Jesus, slaughter of the boys of Bethlehem, and the holy family's escape to Egypt (12:1-6); Jesus' words on the Cross (16:17, 21:6); and Paul's description of the return of Jesus (3:3, 16:5). It describes the 1st century present by addressing actual congregations (chapters 2-3) as well as describing Roman economic practices (18:11-15). It describes the future hope of a transformed heaven and earth (c.f. 21-22).

The reality that past, present, and future are all described argues strongly that readers look not only for "future attractions" in Revelations but understand that John is addressing his contemporaries. Readers will benefit from understanding the scope of John's focus encompasses (1) Jesus' birth, death, resurrection, and ascension; (2) Jesus' return (what commentators sometimes call the Parousia, after the Greek word meaning return); and (3) the years *between* Jesus' Cross and Parousia.

Understanding John's scope and focus helps readers understand the ancient literary form I described in the introduction as a diamond approach—looking at the same event from different perspectives. As noted in the introduction, chapters 6-20 describe from multiple perspectives the spiritual conflict that occurs between The Glory and evil. This conflict was "finished" on the Cross, yet the battle continues toward the inevitable fulfillment of The Glory's ultimate victory.

A second area of debate among commentators revolves around what happens when Jesus returns. Revelations 20:2 describes the Dragon as being bound for "1,000 years" and then released. Commentators use three different interpretive lenses to understand what is meant by 1,000 years, with their perspectives being shaped by their relative literalism versus their comfort with interpreting the text symbolically. Here are the three interpretive lenses used regarding the 1,000 years:

- A. *Premillennialists*: Jesus will come to establish 1,000 years of peace, after which the Accuser will be released so that he and Jesus can go mano-a-mano in a final battle. Theological tone: pessimism.
- B. *Postmillennialists*: Jesus will come after 1,000 years of peace brought about by the Holy Spirit and the Church's preaching. Jesus is present spiritually during this time, followed by his Parousia (second coming). Theological tone: optimism.
- C. *Amillennialists*: Jesus already reigns because of his cross and resurrection, so the 1,000 years is symbolic, representing a very long time. During this entire period, the Accuser's power is limited (Luke 10:18) even though the "last days" have begun (Acts 2:17, Hebrews 1:2). Jesus will restore all things at the end of this 1,000 years of his kin-dom's rule (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). Theological tone: realism.

The premillennialist view seems to look for a physical battle where there need not be one, which distorts one's social and political perspective. The postmillennialist view seems hopelessly out of touch with reality, although it raises its voice periodically throughout history. The last time postmillennialism was in vogue in the U.S. was during the Progressive Era around the turn of the 20th century. Both the postmillennialist and premillennialist views have the difficulty of explaining how Jesus can reign for 1,000 years and then have everything "go to hell." Contrasting these views, the amillennialist view conforms to the general scope of the rest of the book (a symbol is a symbol is a symbol...) and solves the difficulty of having to explain the reemergence of the Accuser after the victory of Jesus. In the amillennialist view, the victory of Jesus on the cross and through the resurrection is the kin-dom "now" while the final, post-1,000-year victory is the kin-dom "not yet."

2. The three interpretive lenses used by scholars to understand the messages to the seven churches are:

- A. *Seven Epochs in Church History*: Some interpreters divide church history into seven, distinct time periods. However, these time periods are constantly changing and, therefore, quite arbitrary. The “seven epochs” of an interpreter in 900 C.E. look very different from an interpreter today or an interpreter 1,000 years from now.
- B. *Seven Kinds of Churches*: Some interpreters distinguish between different church archetypes. However, it is virtually impossible to assign churches to a category with sufficient theological perspective and cultural humility. If there is an interpreter with such skills, this “lens” could be valid.
- C. *Seven Historical Churches*: Some interpreters say the letters were written to the seven churches in Asia Minor with which John the Elder was known to have associated. These were actual, historical churches for which we have evidence both in the New Testament and extra-canonical writings. John’s message of challenge and comfort coheres with the known needs of these churches, which is helpful if John’s purpose in writing was to minister to his flock.

The lens through which we look either distorts or clarifies what we see. The first two lenses have the disadvantage that they force the interpreter to see church epochs, church denominations or individual churches judgmentally, “Oh, that church on the corner is a Thyatiran kind of church because the pastor’s spouse is like a Jezebel.” The third lens, however, has the advantage of speaking a message of challenge and comfort to the churches of the 1st century, but any church in any century can hear all of these messages as if they are spoken to them and be challenged and comforted. Ockham’s Razor is a famous philosophical tool which says, “Take the simplest viable solution.” This third lens meets the test of Ockham’s Razor.

3. Who is the Antichrist / Beast?

A. *Answer #1: a particular political figure*

A particular person, such as the book which made the case for Anwar Sadat being the antichrist. I read the book about a month before Sadat was assassinated. Other traditional favorites include: the current pope (mostly it is fundamentalist Protestants who put this forward), the current leader of Russia or the current strong man of the Middle East (e.g. Saddam, the Ayatollah, Bin Laden, etc.).

B. *Answer #2: generally anyone who opposes The Glory*

In a general sense, the antichrist is anyone that opposes The Glory’s purposes, especially those in positions of secular power, beginning with Rome and continuing into our time with Nazism, Communism, radical Islam, and (perhaps) Christian nationalism. Note that there are actually two Beasts: one is clearly the secular power (13:1-10), while the second beast is a power that speaks with a religious veneer (13:11-18) yet supports the first Beast and is used for the Dragon’s purposes.

C. *Answer #3: Caesar*

A third option is that the antichrist is the Roman Caesar (c.f. note 980), which is how I paraphrase chapter 13. However, option #3 does not preclude one of the other options from also being correct, so.... Let the eternal debate continue (but please be kind to one another while debating).

Appendix B: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Bible Study

Format

1. *Choose a facilitator.* The person who leads can be the same person each week or rotate among participants. The facilitator's job is not to teach but to create a safe space for everyone to share their perceptions and understanding of the material without being interrupted, talked over, or argued into silence. For all activities, participants may share or pass.

1. *Round 1—NOTICE*

Write¹¹⁰⁵ and then share five (5) "I notice..." statements about the passages's textual or literary content (e.g. "The word joy is repeated," "The speaker is Moses," "The younger son went to a distant country"). Focus only on the text's content but not meaning or ethics (e.g. Not, "I think this means," or, "What I hear God saying is..."). There will be an opportunity to focus on meaning and action in later steps.

Focus = DATA and DETAILS.

2. *Round 2—WONDER*

Write and then share four (4) "I wonder about..." statements or questions. Questions can focus on textual content, theological meaning, or ethical expression (e.g. "I wonder about how this passage relates to Psalm 119?" "I wonder why David was so angry?")

Focus = INQUISITIVENESS.

3. *Round 3—THINK*

Write and then share three (3) "I think..." statements about what this passage means. These three statements are the cognitive and intellectual expressions of your engaging Scripture (e.g. "This passage expresses God's mercy," or, "God hates injustice.>").

Focus = CLARITY AND COHERENCE.

4. *Round 4—VALUE*

Write and then share two (2) "I value..." statements that describe the two values to which you are being called by the passage (e.g. "I am called to express humility," or, "God wants me to value corporate unity"). There may be many values implicit in the passage, but only write the two values to which you are most strongly being called today.

Focus = CORE CONVICTIONS.

5. *Round 5—COMMIT*

Write and then share one (1) "I commit..." statement that says one action to which you will commit as a response to this passage (e.g. "I will give you my full attention when you speak," or, "I will honor the sabbath this week by...").

Focus = ACTION

6. Close by praying for each other!

¹¹⁰⁵ Writing can be done either before or during the study.

Appendix C: P³ Bible Study

Format

2. *Choose a facilitator.* The person who leads can be the same person each week or rotate among participants. The facilitator's job is not to teach but to create a safe space for everyone to share their perceptions and understanding of the material without being interrupted, talked over, or argued into silence. For all activities, participants may share or pass.

3. Round 1—*PARAPHRASE*

Have each participant choose one passage of Scripture from the assigned text that stood out for them. It may have stood out because it inspired them, or challenged them. It may have stood out because it caused them to wonder or answered a question. Invite each participant to share the passage that, for them, stood out and speak to why they chose the passage they did.

(Alternate I) The facilitator chooses one to three verses or short sections of a passage for the group to discuss. For each verse or section, invite participants to respond with what they notice, appreciate or wonder about. Invite participants to respond also to the core comfort, conviction, or challenge they hear in the verse or section.

(Alternate II) The facilitator chooses one to three verses or short sections from an English Bible. Invite participants to write their own paraphrase. If they choose to do so, participants may share their paraphrase with the group.

4. Round 2—*POETRY*

Have each participant choose one passage of poetry from the assigned text that stood out for them. How did the poem speak to them? What insights into Scripture or life did the poem invite? Invite each participant to share the poem that, for them, spoke to them.

(Alternate I) The facilitator chooses one or two poems for the group to discuss. How does the poem tell the Scripture "slant"? What insights or wonder does it invite? What questions or challenge does it provoke?

(Alternate II) Facilitator chooses one or two verses or short sections from Rhythms. Invite participants to write a poem based on the verse or section. If they choose to do so, participants may share what they write with the group.

5. Round 3—*PRAYER*

Have each participant choose one prayer from the assigned text that stood out for them. What in the prayer spoke? Did the prayer evoke "amen" or "may it never be," or some other kind of response? Invite each participant to share the prayer that, for them, stood out and why they chose the prayer they did.

(Alternate I) The facilitator chooses one or two prayers for the group to discuss. How does the prayer reflect the Scripture? How does it flow from Scripture to life? What insights or wonder does it invite? What questions or challenge does it provoke?

(Alternate II) The facilitator chooses one or two verses or short sections from Rhythms. Invite participants to write a prayer based on the verse or section. If they choose to do so, participants may share what they write with the group.

6. Round 4—*3P FREE-FOR-ALL*

Invite participants to share something they have written from the assigned text. It may be their own paraphrase, a poem, or prayer. Invite each participant to share something they have written.

7. Close by praying for each other!

Appendix D: Writing Exercises

Poetry Writing Exercises

1. (A) Choose a passage of Scripture. (B) Choose a word or phrase from the passage. This word or phrase will be the focus of your attention and the expression of your poem. (C) Write a Haiku that focuses on the word or phrase.

Five syllables

Seven syllables

Five syllables

The Haiku may express wonder, insight, challenge, inquiry, lament, rejoicing or whatever the Spirit leads!

Write! _____

_____.

2. (A) Choose a passage of Scripture. (B) Choose a word or phrase from the passage. This word or phrase will be the focus of your attention and the expression of your poem. (C) Write a Cinquain that focuses on the word or phrase.

One word

Two words

Three words

Four words

One word

The Cinquain may express wonder, insight, challenge, inquiry, lament, rejoicing or whatever the Spirit leads!

Write! _____

_____.

3. (A) Choose a passage of Scripture. (B) Choose a word or phrase from the passage. This word or phrase will be the focus of your attention and the expression of your poem. (C) Write a free verse poem that focuses on the word or phrase. The poem need not rhyme but it may. The poem can have one stanza or several. The point is not to explicate or summarize the word or phrase but to engage the Word. The poem may express wonder, insight, challenge, inquiry, lament, rejoicing or whatever the Spirit leads!

Write!

Prayer Writing Exercise

1. (A) Choose a passage of Scripture. (B) Choose a word or phrase from the passage. This word or phrase will be the focus of your attention and the expression of your prayer. (C) Write a prayer that uses one of the literary themes listed below:

ACTS Prayer

/

Colloquial Alternative (different order from ACTS)

Adoration

Please!

Confession

Thank you!

Thanksgiving

Oops!

Supplication

Wow!

(D) Additional challenge: using the same passage, choose one of the other literary themes above and write another prayer. It's okay to write four prayers that each have a different literary focus!

Write!

Write!

Write!

Paraphrase Exercises

Ephesians 1:17-18a (literal Greek): “ ...

so that the God of the Lord of us Jesus Christ the Father the of glory may give to you (spirit / breath /wind) of wisdom and revelation in (knowledge / perception / intuition) of him being enlightened the eyes of the heart in order for you to (know / remember / appreciate) you what is the hope of the calling of him....”

Write a paraphrase: _____

_____.

Philippians 1:20 (literal Greek): “...according to the earnest expectation of me that in nothing I will be ashamed but in all (speak openly / frankness / bluntness) as always and now will be magnified Christ in the body of me whether by life whether by death.”

Write a paraphrase: _____

_____.

Colossians 3:4 (literal Greek): “...(when / whenever) the Christ (made visible / manifest / made clear) the life of you all then (and / but / also) you all with him (made visible / manifest / made clear) (in / by / with) glory.”

Write a paraphrase: _____

_____.

2 Thessalonians 2:11 (literal Greek): “...and because of this (send / permit) to them the God working (wandering / deceit / delusion) for the (believing / faithing / trusting) them what falsehood....”

Write a paraphrase: _____

_____.

1 Timothy 2:4 (literal Greek): “...who all humanity (desire / will / intend / design) (preserve / heal / rescue / save) and to (know / perceive / intuit) truth (come / go).”

Write a paraphrase: _____

_____.

Comparison of the New International Version (NIV) and The Interpretive Paraphrase (TIP)

Ephesians 1:17-18a (NIV): “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit^{of} of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you.”

Ephesians 1:17-18a (TIP): “I pray continuously to The Mystery, who is our strength in splendor and in song and who sent Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above the cosmos. I pray They will gift to you all Their Divine Spirit to make y’all wise: able to perceive truth and grow in experience of Jesus. I pray the vision of your hearts may shine forth to remember and appreciate the hope that burst forth within all y’all when The Mystery called you to Themselves.”

Philippians 1:20 (NIV): “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.”

Philippians 1:20 (TIP): “I will be rescued through bluntness as I proclaim Jesus in words and deeds, with eagerness and enthusiasm matching the very best of our beloved. In body and soul, I will be rescued. Whether I live or die, I will be rescued.”

Colossians 3:4 (NIV): “When Christ, who is your^l life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Colossians 3:4 (TIP): “Be assured, whenever Jesus is unveiled for others to see, you also will be seen with him, a reflection of his light and life.”

2 Thessalonians 2:11 (NIV): “For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie.”

2 Thessalonians 2:11 (TIP): “The Hope will permit them to wander about as they seek their delight in their false self.”

1 Timothy 2:4 (NIV): “...who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”

1 Timothy 2:4 (TIP): “...for Their design is for all people to be made whole and complete through the God-life and dance the God-rhythms as if they know the beat by heart. More than mere wish or desire, The Root has willed what They intend.”

Appendix E: Reading Plan for Rhythms of the God Life

Hebrews

Week 1: Introduction and Hebrews 1-3

Week 2: Hebrews 4-6

Week 3: Hebrews 7-10

Week 4: Hebrews 11-13

James

Week 1: Introduction and James 1-2

Week 2: James 3-5

1 and 2 Peter

Week 1: Introduction and 1 Peter 1-2

Week 2: 1 Peter 3-5

Week 3: 2 Peter 1-3

1, 2, and 3 John

Week 1: Introduction and 1 John 1-2

Week 2: 1 John 3-5

Week 3: 2 John and 3 John

Jude

Week 1: Introduction and Jude

Revelations

Week 1: Introduction and Revelations 1, 4-5

Week 2: Revelations 2-3

Week 3: Revelations 6-7

Week 4: Revelations 8-11

Week 5: Revelations 12-15

Week 6: Revelations 16-18

Week 7: Revelations 19-20

Week 8: Revelations 21-22

About Rhythms of the God-Life

“...an interpretive paraphrase rooted in the Greek text that gives wings to God’s Word through paraphrase, poetry, and prayer. By providing cultural insights to help the reader understand the Word’s meaning, *Rhythms* seeks to capture the beat and harmony of the original text yet also convey wisdom, ethics, and hope for today.”

“...a comprehensive study of biblical scripture, and a confronting, immersive read...with an ability to fascinate even the less experienced reader on the subject through an accessible authorial voice and an in-depth analysis of the language....[The author’s] choices of focus allow deeper analysis on the history of the text, and creates a layered approach that can be used in a contemporary setting. It is a compelling and well researched read, showing the author’s deep knowledge and understanding. The assured writing style, attention to detail, and clarity of the research set out in the work make this work one that will intrigue and fascinate.”

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About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Brad Munroe is Pastor to the Presbytery for the Presbytery of Grand Canyon and the Presbytery de Cristo. He earned his Doctor of Ministry from San Francisco Theological Seminary, receiving the Outstanding Contribution to Ministry award for his dissertation in which he coined the phrase “blended worship.” He is also the author of *Waging Peace: Developing Interpersonal Skills for Conflict Transformation* and numerous devotional works and curriculum that can be downloaded at www.BradMunroe.org.

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