

Notes on Selected Stories

OMPHALOS

The title “Omphalos” is Greek for belly button. In the ancient world, it also referred to conical or beehive-shaped stone monuments, one of which (in Delphi) was thought to mark the navel of the world. More to the present point, it was the name of a book published in 1857 by the English naturalist Philip Gosse, who set out to harmonize Biblical creation in 4004 BC with the geological evidence for an old Earth. His argument was that, just as God created Adam with navel, teeth, hair, nails, and food in his gut, all signs of a personal history that never happened, so too God created the Earth with mountains, rivers, deltas, and penneplains indicating a geological past that never happened. The book fell flat, though it makes at least as much sense as the works of 21st century “scientific creationists,” and is much better written.

TOWER OF BABBLE

Okay, so I changed the ending a bit. In the Biblical original, the tower actually did get built, partly (according to Josephus) as a place of refuge in case God forgot Himself and sent down another murderous deluge. This constituted a gross underestimate of God’s ability to dream up new and exciting ways to make the human race miserable. Anyway, God saw the tower as dangerous because it showed humans they could accomplish great things if they worked together towards common goals. He cleverly divided and conquered them by making their speech mutually unintelligible.

According to fundamentalists, this was the origin of linguistic diversity, though historical linguists beg to differ. In my story, the humans never get as far as building the tower, and they achieve mutual unintelligibility all on their own.

THE TRICKSTER

The tale of Jacob, in Genesis, is one of the most engaging bits of narrative in the Bible. In Sunday school, they gave us the story straight and straight-faced, but even then I thought Jacob was a good laugh. Now I think his story sounds like the kind of oral tradition that would be told around tribal campfires a few thousand years ago. I can imagine listeners in striped headcloths rolling helplessly on the ground with mirth. But Jacob is clearly more than a clown; he is a Trickster. No folklore should be without one.

The Trickster archetype, the Bugs Bunny of world folklore, crops up *everywhere*. Think of Raven, Coyote, Loki, Anansi, Kokopelli, Maui, Puck, and

the Monkey King, among many others. Tricksters are subversive, slippery, and often cruel. They are weak, but able to slip it to the strong by brilliant sneakiness. They puncture pretensions and kick the butt of pomposity. They are troublemakers, shit-stirrers, con artists, psychopaths. They are notorious for giving humans information the other gods don't want us to have. A version of Prometheus fits in here, along with Loki and the trickster serpent who tempted Eve in Eden. Even with their undisputed dark sides, we have a soft spot for Tricksters. Jacob is my favourite Biblical character.

BRIDEGROOM OF BLOOD IN THE WILDERNESS OF SIN

A Jewish friend who read an early version of this story was worried it might be construed as anti-Semitic. It is nothing of the sort. My sympathies lie entirely with the unfortunate Children of Israel. My beef is with Moses and his ilk.

Moses is probably my *least* favourite Biblical character. It irks me that he is regarded as a Judaeo-Christian-Muslim culture hero, an icon of liberation, when what he actually did was con the hapless Hebrews into a bondage much worse than whatever they left behind. He was a textbook case of the mind-control messiah, first isolating his followers in a wilderness, and then subjecting them to a spiralling series of bizarre, baroque, and oppressive demands. No, I do not like Moses at all, any more than I like Jim Jones, David Koresh, or Charles Manson. In fact, I found the transcript of the Jonestown tragedy quite useful in constructing Moses' address on the shore of the Sea of Reeds.

DAGON

I remember exactly the date when I started this story: September 10, 2001. I didn't work on it the next day, however. The next day, along with most other humans on the planet with access to television, I stayed superglued to CNN. I also cried a lot and smoked too much.

Nothing much got done for the next few days. Then on Saturday, I heard a galvanizing news report: the infamous ain't-it-awful television conversation between the late Rev. Jerry Falwell and quondam presidential hopeful Pat Robertson. This was the one where they agreed God had withdrawn His protection from America and allowed 9/11 to take place because He was pissed off with pagans, abortionists, feminists, lesbians, gays, the ACLU, and the People for the American Way. So I went upstairs and finished my story. Thanks, Jerry. Thanks, Pat.

DEATH OF A PAGAN

This was originally intended to be a vignette, not a full-fledged story, but it got out of hand. Wiser heads than mine persuaded me not to subtitle it, "*Don't Go, Julie, Don't Go!*"

Julian's father was half-brother to the Emperor Constantine the Great, who made Christianity the official religion of Rome in the early 4th century. When Constantine died, his three sons divided the empire among themselves, and removed the other competition by having all their close male relatives assassinated except Julian (then a motherless five-year-old) and his half-brother Gallus. In due course Constantius, one of the triumphant cousins, killed off his own two brothers as well, and became the empire's Augustus.

Julian, meanwhile, was brought up as a Christian, but became a philosopher, a scholar, and a closet pagan. He also, somehow, became a damned good army commander. His survival to become the successor of the odious Constantius is a long story. Suffice to say that once he became Augustus, he did his best to turn back the tidal wave of Christianity, guarantee freedom of worship throughout the empire, and restore the old Roman gods. Then he got himself killed. If he hadn't, who knows? We might all have ended up singing from a very different hymnbook.

GIORDANO BRUNO AND FRIENDS DO LUNCH AT THE LOST SOULS BAR AND GRILL

The problem with this story was knowing when to stop. Large numbers of my most and least favourite historical/mythical characters clamoured for admittance. How could I leave out that darkside military messiah, Bonaparte? Couldn't Kali be terrorizing the back streets of Heaven with a gang of her thuggees? Would Antony and Cleopatra still be an item? Where are Xerxes and Caligula, Rameses the Great, the Emperor Shihuangdi, Jack the Ripper? Where is the woman who invented toilet paper? I suppose they'd all be up there somewhere, but I could not go on writing this story forever.

The same thing, of course, could be said for this entire volume. The selection of stories is idiosyncratic, and patchy in terms of how much of the Bible makes the cut. A lot of old favourites and highly significant themes have not been touched. But I was not trying to retell the whole ruddy Bible, merely to ask some of the questions that bothered me in Sunday school, plus a number that occurred to me in the decades since.

Amen.

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