

W O E T O T H E S C R I B E S
A N D P H A R I S E E S

A Jon Mote Mystery

Daniel Taylor



WOE TO THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES

A Jon Mote Mystery

Copyright © 2020 Daniel Taylor. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401.

Slant

An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3

Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-5326-9786-9

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-5326-9785-2

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-5326-9787-6

Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Names: Taylor, Daniel.

Title: Woe to the scribes and pharisees : a Jon Mote mystery /Daniel Taylor.

Description: Eugene, OR: Slant, 2020.

Identifiers: ISBN ISBN 978-1-5326-9786-9 (hardcover) | 978-1-5326-9785-2 (paperback) | ISBN 978-1-5326-9787-6 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Detective and mystery fiction |Private investigators--Minnesota--Minneapolis | Minnesota--Fiction

Classification: PS3570.A92727 W64 2020 (paperback) | PS3570.A92727 (ebook)

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

02/04/20

For my translation buddies—living and passed. You know who you are.

(And no, none of these folks are you.)

You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

—Deuteronomy 4:2

Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye.

—Jesus, Mark 7:13

Then unbelieving priests reformed the nation,
And taught more pleasant methods of salvation;
Where Heaven's free subjects might their rights dispute,
Lest God himself should seem too absolute.

—Alexander Pope, "Essay on Criticism"

I am an atheist who says his prayers.

—Karl Shapiro

The problem is not so much that death is the end of life as that it might not be. I could, as many do, acclimate myself to life being absolutely finite if I were certain that it is. It's the possibility that, with a transition, it goes on forever, and that we must conduct ourselves accordingly, that keeps us unsettled. At least it does me, and I'm the only us that I have any say about.

And now death is back. It never went away, of course. But now it's returned to my door. It's on the front stoop. Knocking. Insistently.

Why am I surprised—again? Why does death continue to shock us? It happens more than 150,000 times a day, every day, minute after minute, without interruption or pause, relentlessly, universally, under all conditions, in good times and in bad, during war and during peace, to the old and to the young, to the wise and to the foolish, to the healthy and to the infirm, sometimes after long warning, sometimes with none at all. And yet, when it happens again, close by, death stuns us body and soul. We stop what we are doing and stare. Stare outward into space, not seeing, and inward into our hearts and minds, seeing even less.

And that is precisely what everyone in the room is doing at the moment. The steady drone of the blizzard is the only sound. The windows are nearly opaque with driven snow, a muffler of sound and light in a darkened room. One of us has died, violently and unexpectedly—not the first one—and we are all staring.

And beginning to be afraid.

ONE

WE ARE GOING FOR a walk—me, Zillah, Judy. Walks are virtuous for Zee. Especially walks together. They ring most all her bells: healthy, relational, low-tech, environmentally sound, aesthetically pleasing in many cases. They make exercise inescapable and conversation almost equally so. She cannot comprehend why the prospect does not immediately and thoroughly thrill me—every time.

Better yet, this is to be a walk in the woods. In northern Minnesota. As winter approaches, an early reminder that though everything must die, the dying can be beautiful, a foreshadowing of rest.

I'm waxing poetic because I'm getting sleepy. I've put in a hard few days at this northwoods meeting of the translation project, and in late afternoons the nearest sofa or bed is always calling my name. Just a few minutes, I always tell myself. Just a quick recharge so I can be productive in the evening, even chatty.

More than a few of the folks on the project are thinking the same. The DeAngelos are sitting across the room, about to go to their room. Lilith is striding across the lounge with a pack of cigarettes in her hand and making no mystery of where she's headed.

"I'm on my way to the balcony, Jon. Care to join me?"

One of the first things Lilith does when we have these meetings is identify where she's going to smoke. In this case, it's the balcony on the third floor, just outside her room. We had early on found each other out as fellow smokers—though I doubt she would let the term "fellow" slide past without comment. We've stood outside in both rain and cold in the past, sucking on our little burning sticks, shameful sinners in the eyes of committee conservatives and progressives alike.

Of course I want to join her. At the moment, smoking is the only thing as attractive to me as napping. Better yet would be smoking in bed in preparation for napping, with a light snack on the nightstand—it beats anything promised by my Sunday school teachers, largely because its pleasures are more immediate and more certain, consequences be damned.

But Zillah will have none of it. The workday is over, she and Judy want to get outside. They arrived last night after a long drive from the Twin Cities, we haven't seen each other in almost a week, and it's perfect walking weather in a perfect place. Clearly this walk was ordained from before the beginning of time. Only a fool would fight it.

Which is where I come in.

So I'm sitting in the lounge, staring out the window at the birch trees, waiting for Zillah and Judy to get ready, reflecting on how I got here. With these people, on this project, at this place, being visited by my wife and sister.

All of which is beyond prediction, even if we knew where every atom was a nanosecond after the Big Bang—an event I promise not to mention again. I was working with the Specials at New Directions—and still do from time to time—knowing I had to find something with a better future and fatter paycheck. Then the terrorists knocked down our big symbol of capitalism, which, rightly, pissed everyone off. More than that, really, because so many died so fast. It made everyone sick, but me more than most, because I know about collapsing buildings and people dying fast—and slowly, too. And I know about sick.

I was still feeling at risk, you might say, when along comes this opening for an editing job with a Minneapolis publisher. And I think, "I'm an English major, with almost a doctorate even; I know the difference between an en-dash and an em-dash; I'm going to apply for this job." It displayed a decisiveness on my part seen only in a handful of folks in human history—Napoleon, Patton, and Captain Kirk come to mind.

So I became an editor for Luxor House, a wholly-owned subsidiary of giant Continental Media, itself only one part of World Wide Holdings International. I thought it stopped there, but once the project began, Robert Green let me know, after a few beers, that World Wide was just a small slice of something beyond even the top of the food chain. He was reluctant to name it, but eventually indicated, after a few more beers, that insiders referred to it as Imperial Interests.

I thought “Interests” was itself interesting. Effectively vague, as powerful words often are. The word could mean many things—interest in profits to be sure, and in power, but maybe interest in control as well (an expression of power but a step beyond it)—for its own sake. Interest in providing direction in an increasingly directionless world. When God and gods are no longer thought to be in charge, other forces fill the vacuum.

In fact, “force” was the word Green used for those hovering behind Imperial Interests. They were referred to, by those who even knew they existed, as The Force. When Green said so, I laughed.

“You mean the Rothschilds, the Gettys, the Queen, and Colonel Sanders?”

“What?”

“Do they perchance meet at The Meadows?”

“What are you talking about, Jon?”

“Never mind.”

Anyway, I edited away at Luxor, more or less contentedly, still working on occasion at New Directions, mostly to keep in touch with my friends there. And with Judy.

Luxor House is a minor tributary of the big river that is Continental Media, only a little merging streamlet actually. And I’m a drainage culvert along that small stream. I am to Continental Media what a leaky toilet upstream is to Niagara Falls. Then again, what is earth in its entirety to the rest of the cosmos? So even Imperial Interests should show some humility. (“The ant’s a centaur in his dragon world. / Pull down thy vanity.”)

Luxor has a few different lines of books. The most eccentric, and the one I’ve worked in most often, is Gaia Books, their “spirituality” line, with the slogan, “Above and Beyond.” (They sued when Buzz Lightyear said something similar, but it came to nothing—“My lawyer can beat up your lawyer” and all that.) They target readers who announce to the world, “I’m spiritual but not religious.” I see the utility of that slogan, associating oneself with the good parts of spirituality, but not allowing anyone to make you responsible for anything unpleasant—either historical or intellectual. Still, the claim always sounds to me more than a little wishy-washy, like proclaiming, “I’m political but don’t vote.”

I like editing the Gaia books because of their variety and creativity. And many of them are unintentionally hilarious, the degree of humor directly related to the stone-faced seriousness with which they present themselves. Like the conspiracy theory book (discernment of conspiracy being

somehow a spiritual quality, I guess) that argued that conspiracy theories are themselves the result of a conspiracy—of the powerful, sown among the masses in order to keep the rest of us fearful and confused. It was a big seller, titled, if I remember, *The Conspirators: The Secret Creators of Conspiracy Theories*, or something like that.

Anyway, somewhere between Minneapolis and The Force, it was discovered that there's big money to be made in Bibles, even in The Modern Age. (You heard right—Bibles.) And he or she or they—a conspiracy?—decided that Continental Media needed to own a Bible. Not an individual Bible, of course. Rather a brand. A Bible with a catchy title and fresh slant and big ad budget. But then they—let's spread the credit—discovered how expensive it is to do a Bible translation from scratch—all those translators, all those editors, all those meetings in all those places. Not to mention creating all the maps and illustrations and other padding that's often what closes the deal for a typical buyer. And even if the company wanted to commit the resources, the timeline was a nonstarter. Five years at least, more likely ten. Hell, by then the Bible-buying fad might be over. Levitation might be hot, or nude gardening (*Flowers and Fruits, Au Naturel*), and Continental Media had to stay quick on its feet rather than get bogged down with expensive, long-term projects.

But then someone pointed out that Bible translations, as with anything else, can be bought and sold. Like wheat futures or pogo sticks or votes. Rather than building a house from scratch, you can buy someone else's house. And then live in it or rent it out. Or flip it for a profit—after a little remodeling.

And so they went looking for a Bible translation for sale and they found Dr. DeAngelo—Jerome DeAngelo, better known to his followers as Dr. Jerry. Sometimes shortened to Dr. J, long before the hoopster with the big hair. Dr. Jerry is everybody's stereotype but nobody's fool. He began as a rural fundamentalist pastor, graduated to a semi-successful radio preacher—eventually on a tentacular network of Christian radio stations—and was raised up by the Lord to television as founder of the 750 Club, the minimum amount one needed to donate to be a full member. Or was it the final number of folks saved when Jesus comes back?

Anyway, it was a cable television juggernaut back in the day. Somewhere along the way, Dr. Jerry found time, with the help of Hebrew and Greek dictionaries and an advisor or two, to birth a paraphrase of the Bible

known at the time as *The What's Happening Now Bible*. (Okay, it was the 1970s; a lot of questionable things happened in the 1970s.)

At least he was honest about it. He called it a paraphrase, not a translation. His slogan was, "Read the King James to discover God's Word, then read *What's Happening Now* to find what it means!" Not all that snappy, but good enough for the followers of Dr. Jerry. They knew that God had dictated the King James Bible directly to the king, but they also knew the vocabulary was a little tricky. They liked the thees, thous, and thines, because they equated archaic with authoritative. But cockatrice, carbuncle, and concupiscence—not to mention propitiation—were a bit opaque. So as long as the King James came first, they were mostly okay with slipping a look at Dr. Jerry's paraphrase to help clarify the message God was sending them. Sort of like a cereal box decoder ring.

Dr. Jerry's career was abetted in no small way by his hair. Thick, combed straight back, a natural pompadour in the front, a wave in the middle, and just a hint of rebel—or better, prophet—in the collar-covering tail in the back. His hair was an asset in his youth and a full-blown synecdoche in his prematurely whitened middle years.

Dr. Jerry's body has now caught up with his white hair. He is old, even if eighty is the new sixty, or whatever rationalization boomers are making to disguise their inevitable decline. His own sixties are well back in the rear-view mirror and his eighties are extending welcoming arms, and, to tell the truth, many of his disciples have lit out for the Promised Land ahead of him.

Which is why he was more than a little thrilled to be contacted by Continental Media about *The What's Happening Now Bible*. No longer on television—a thousand cable channels notwithstanding—no longer much invited to speak, even his famous white hair finally thinning, he had been wrestling with depression—"Satan disguised as a large, black dog" he said, channeling Churchill channeling Samuel Johnson. It was mostly just him and Cate, his faithful wife, after decades of being him and "here comes everybody."

How do I know all this? Because I am minding my business one day, sitting in my company cubicle on the twenty-fifth floor of the IDS building in downtown Minneapolis—trying to make readable a celebrity-authored book provisionally entitled *God's Good Life for You: Living Free of Guilt, Gluttony, and Gluten* (reading the prose was like chewing wet cardboard,

and the celebrity was insisting that not a word be changed) when I get a call commandeering me to a meeting in the Big Guy's office.

The Big Guy is the head of Luxor, which I just called a tiny tributary to the river that is Continental Media, itself a contributor to the flood that is World Wide Holdings, a component of the oceanic Imperial Interests. Just before going into the meeting room, a Medium-Size guy pulls me aside and gives me a quick heads-up. Turns out a Bigger Guy than the Big Guy is in town from New York, and that means that Something Important is in the works. It has all the trappings of the infamous Big Deal.

So why invite a minnow like me?

The meeting is already in full swing when I come in. I find an empty seat at the far end of a very long conference table. The New York Bigger Guy is talking and he has a chart. (My dad used to say, "You can't beat a man with a chart," especially when the chart explained the intricacies of the End Times to a dazzled adult Sunday school class.)

"Exact numbers are hard to come by," the Bigger Guy is saying, "trade secrets and all that—but here are the facts as best we know them."

He repeatedly whacks the chart with a long pointer while giving a staccato reading of bullet-pointed statistics:

"There are over 100 million Bibles printed in the world every year.

"Americans buy twenty-five percent of those.

"Ninety-two percent of American households have a Bible in them.

"The average household has three separate copies of the Bible.

"The single most common gift for graduating students? The Bible.

"The biggest best seller of all time and still every year? The Bible.

"The number of Bibles printed since 1815? At least six billion.

"The number of different versions of the Bible in existence in all languages? Around 80,000.

"The annual revenue from sales of Bibles? Four hundred to six hundred million dollars—conservatively. Not counting the spin-off products."

He turns away from the chart and slaps the pointer down on the conference table. Leaning on his knuckles, he looks up one side of the table and down the other and slowly says in his most measured, emphatic Bigger Guy voice:

"Ladies and gentlemen, we need a Bible."

Normally, a declaration like that in a Bigger Guy voice gets a bobble-head response from the Little People and the show of mad scribbling on

notepads. This time it receives stunned silence and the frozen looks of the confused and slightly frightened.

(I mean, nothing had prepared any of them for the words, in a boardroom no less, “We need a Bible.” It would be like Hitler telling his generals, “We need to go a little easier on Poland.”)

The Bigger Guy waits a moment for the message to penetrate, then turns and puts up another chart.

“The biggest seller currently is the NIV Bible. Green, what does NIV stand for?”

He doesn’t look away from his chart, but a diminutive man with a cautious mustache replies, “The New International Version, sir.”

“That’s right, the New International Version. They’ve got about a third of the market for Bibles in English.”

He turns and looks at Green.

“It is English, isn’t it, Green. These sales numbers? We’re talking translation here, are we not? The Bible was originally written in, what was it, Latin or something?”

“Hebrew and Greek, sir. Mostly.”

“Right. I knew it was one of those old ones.”

He pauses to regain his focus.

“Anyway. The NIV is top dog. Then comes the King James Version. That’s the granddaddy. That’s the one with legs. Now there’s a backlist book for you. A thousand years old and it still sells better than the hottest cookbook—and we know how those sell. And that’s the one the fundies buy. We need to keep that in mind.

“Then there’s what they call the New King James Version. Green, what’s the difference between the King James and the New King James?”

“Pronouns, sir. Mostly.”

The Big Guy ignores Green and answers his own question.

“I’m thinking it must have something to do with marketing. Like slapping ‘New and Improved’ on a box of soap, making it smaller in size, and raising the price.”

He makes himself sound like a carnival barker.

“‘The New and Improved King James Bible!’ Genius! Pure genius!”

He looks up and into the distance, maybe wishing he had that kind of genius, then comes back to the rest of us.

“Anyway, King James and New King James are second and third, and if you combine them, they outsell the NIV. After that, selling about the same as the New King James is something called the NLT. Green?”

“The New Living Translation, sir.”

“There’s that ‘new’ word again. Americans love it. So if it’s new, then there must have been an old?”

“It appears to be a remake of something earlier, sir. Not sure what that was.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that even at number three or four, they sell a hell of a lot of Bibles. Millions.”

He pauses again for effect.

“And if these folks can all sell a lot of Bibles, my friends, so can we.”

He then proceeds to explain that they had been in negotiations with Dr. DeAngelo to buy his Bible. But it would have to be “cleaned up” a bit—those are the Bigger Guy’s words. And re-titled for sure.

“And we’re going to have to market it big time from now to, what is it, the Next Go Round?”

He hesitates.

“Green?”

“Second Coming, sir.”

“Right. So that’s why we’ve called you all together. New York wants this project coordinated out of this office and they want your best people on it. If we get a foothold in this Bible biz, it will make Harry Potter sales look like chump change.”

None of this, of course, told me why I was at that conference table. That came later the same day when the meeting after the meeting took place, which, like the party after the party is the one you supposedly want to be invited to. That’s where I discovered I had been outed.

It’s a smaller meeting—the Big and Bigger Guys, Green, a woman from design, two marketers, and me. (They later re-assigned both design and marketing to the New York office.) We find out from Bigger Guy more about the progress of negotiations with Dr. DeAngelo.

“We’re not hung up on the money. He’s happy with what we’re offering. But he’s refused to sell it to us outright. He wants to have a hand in the update. Turns out he’s really invested in this Bible stuff. To be honest, I thought at first that he was something of a charlatan. Kind of a Billy Graham for the trailer park crowd. But after spending time with him, I’ve come to see that

he actually believes it all. And he's in love with the Bible, especially his own version. No one else in the Bible biz gives it any respect, and it's long out of print, but it's his baby and he dotes on it, homely as it is.

"Our job is to turn that ugly baby into a swan. But he's not going to go along unless he gets a say. What he doesn't realize, of course, is that the fine print in the contract sets up a process, with an oversight committee, and that its votes are final."

He smiles.

"And he gets only one vote."

The Bigger Guy turns it over to our local Big Guy, and that's when I find out why I'm there. He explains that, as the publishers, Continental Media will be allowed to name four members of the Central Committee for Bible Translation—a nice Bolshevik name for a highly capitalist enterprise, I'm thinking. Dr. Jerry will be a member and he will be allowed to name one other, for a total of six. I am designated to be a non-voting representative for editorial at the meetings and will both report back to Luxor and New York and do some of the in-house editing work.

Truth is, I'm too small a fish to represent editorial, but I have a quality that seems to be in short supply at the company.

"The word is, Mr. Mote, that you grew up among the fundamentalists. Those are your people. We need someone on our side who understands them."

Where he picked up that factoid I have no idea. But the perception explains why the kooky, quasi-Christian books for editing have been flowing my way from the start. I, apparently, would know that translating "wise men" as "astrologers"—which is what they were—would be the kiss of death for most Bible buyers and that maybe I'd even know the difference between the three Marys (though that's more a Catholic thing).

"We especially need someone to keep an eye on Dr. DeAngelo, to see when he's getting jumpy. He only has one vote, maybe two with his sidekick, but he could still cause us trouble, and we want his endorsement even if his followers are getting long in the tooth."

Eventually I figure out that the other reason I've been chosen is that no one else from editorial wants to travel to the various meetings laid out in the schedule, nor are they nearly as excited about the Bible project as New York is. (Spiritual is good, but the Bible is heavily tainted with religion.) So I'm both familiar with the fundamentalists and haven't much of a life, giving me flexibility—another usefully vague word. A sort of First Responder

DANIEL TAYLOR

for editorial, chosen to report any small fires before they blossom into a conflagration.

I'm perfect—and therefore doomed.

TWO

SOMEBODY WE'VE ALL HEARD of once turned water into wine. With this project it's more like turning vinegar into arsenic. In the first place, most everyone on the translation committee arrived with suspicions. And those suspicions were quickly confirmed.

It was inevitable, given Continental Media's guiding principle for selecting the Central Committee and for the translation itself—diversity. Selective diversity of course, as always. New York wants a Bible that has something for everyone, offends no one (not actually possible—it's a highly offensive book, now more than ever) and can be priced to sell (very possible). They want to market this translation to the widest audience conceivable, so they figured they needed the widest conceivable representation on the Central Committee. Diversity was therefore the defining principle of selection—theological, denominational, racial, genderial (okay, I made that word up), you name it—because they thought pluralism in creators would yield plurality in sales. Or something like that. Sort of like assuming that the best restaurants are smorgasbords, I guess. (The Red Dragon Chinese Buffet—four Michelin stars.) Dr. Jerry had insisted that “all the members of the translation committee must be Christians,” but he seemed unaware of how elastic that term has become, perhaps always was. It's like insisting that all judges must swear to uphold the Constitution. Which of them ever thought they were doing anything else? Whether you invoke original intent or claim it as a living document, you have no doubt you are holding the Constitution up with all your might. Same with the Bible and Christianity.

Anyway, in consultation with their consultants' consultants, the Continental Media folks picked the most publicly known progressive figure—Dr. Bart Sprung; an established feminist scholar—Dr. Lilith Weekly; a rising young black scholar (no one on the CCBT initially knew his place

on the theological spectrum, but they knew he was black)—Dr. Martin Shabazz Douglas; and Dr. Adam Corinth, an expert on the historical books of the Old Testament (and therefore by definition unknown to the public), because they needed someone to speak up for the part of the Bible that filled up the most pages.

Yes, no shortage of doctorates on the committee. Which reminds me of the anti-intellectualism of my childhood pastor, who, in a fulmination against academic opponents of traditional faith, said the letters PhD stand for “piled higher and deeper” and called such folks “educated idiots.” Dr. Jerry, by the way, felt right at home among all the other doctorates, because he had picked up his honorary one from Praise University back in his heyday when he was Doing Great Things for God. (He used to sign programs at rallies: “Dr. Jerry—God’s Servant and Yours.”)

And then there was Dr. J’s own pick. He used his contractual guarantee to choose Peter Stone, a relatively young scholar as the breed goes, somewhere in his forties, teaching at a Baptist university in Virginia. He was a small man but made up in pugnaciousness what he lacked in stature. He had a doctorate, too, but had gone to the wrong schools, and the other academics around the table did not consider him a scholar at all. He had the wrong theology, the wrong training, spoke at the wrong conferences—in the wrong accent no less: southern—all of which generally disqualified him from Being Taken Seriously, even if they *had* heard of him, which they hadn’t.

But he did have a vote—and a voice accustomed to being listened to—and however he voted, you could be sure that Dr. Jerry would double it.

The first meeting was in Minneapolis and was primarily explanatory, allowing the members to meet both each other and the Luxor staff who would be doing much of the editing. Robert Green, the company man from New York, was welcoming everyone and going over project procedures.

“Good morning. I’ve spoken with all of you since your arrival, but I thought I would formally introduce myself and explain my role in the project and answer any questions you might have.

“I am Robert Green. My official title is ‘Liaison to the President of Continental Media.’ My job is to act as the company representative on any project to which I am assigned, trying to be useful in any way that helps bring the project to a successful conclusion. In this case, that assignment

includes overseeing the formation and functioning of the Central Committee on Bible Translation, which is you all.”

Green smiles and everyone smiles back.

“I did not choose you folks myself. Those choices were made by a committee in the New York office in consultation with the scholarly community and others. The final choices were approved by the president of Continental Media.

“The New York committee that chose you still functions and will do so long after your translation work is done, though they have ceded much of the hands-on work to the folks at Luxor House here in Minneapolis. Ultimately, it’s New York’s responsibility to see that this project is a success and that it continues to be part of the larger success of both Luxor and Continental Media.”

Success. An interesting word. From the Latin, *successus*, meaning a good or welcomed outcome. A desirable result. Requiring one, alas, to know what the good is, what should be desired. Not an easy thing to know, though every culture offers its opinions.

Green continues.

“My own assignment this time is more hands-on than usual. These meetings need someone to chair them, and New York has asked me to be that someone. My responsibilities as chair are purely procedural. I am not a scholar of any kind, least of all of the Bible. I will not vote, but I will sometimes act as an arbiter in cases where the company feels it has a direct interest.

“We will be addressing possible changes in Dr. DeAngelo’s text in each meeting. The Central Committee has six voting members. When a vote is tied, we will continue discussion until a majority agree. If, after further discussion, a tie is not broken, then we will default to the existing wording of Dr. DeAngelo’s text and no change will be made.”

Quite clever. I’m sure there will be many places where DeAngelo’s rendering of a passage will make everyone else on the committee green around the gills. The possibility of having to keep the existing wording will prove a powerful stimulus toward compromise.

“You have all received the payment schedule, both amounts and target dates. Payments are made as portions of the project are completed. Needless to say, there is an incentive for us all to work expeditiously.”

Incentive indeed. Every month that passes during the project is a month that Luxor is not selling Bibles and therefore not contributing as

fully as it might to the revenue stream of Continental Media, which diminishes the potential flow to World Wide, which would not be at all pleasing to Imperial Interests. Actually, neither World Wide nor Imperial Interests likely know that this Bible project exists, nor would they care to know. But they do care about revenue streams and so they want, if only subconsciously, for this project to move along. (Yes, pace Rousseau, large fiscal entities have a general will and a subconscious, not always accessible even to those who lead them. A kind of corporation *gaia*, I'm thinking.)

At this point the first sign of trouble arises—a sign that will become a neon billboard in the meetings that follow.

Green announces a principle for the project whose aim is to promote expedition and, thereby, profits.

“I will remind you all that we are not working on a new translation. We are working on a revision of an existing translation.”

Dr. Sprung interrupts.

“A paraphrase, Mr. Green. A self-acknowledged paraphrase.”

Green side-steps the comment like a shifty running back side-stepping a tackle.

“A paraphrase to the scholar, Dr. Sprung, but a translation to the reader, who does not understand the difference. This Bible, whose new name is yet to be decided, will be identified and marketed as a translation, and it is your job to make that an accurate or at least believable designation.”

The implications of that assertion do not please Sprung, who is not used to such coarse pragmatism. He responds.

“Are we going to be allowed to do an accurate translation of the Bible, Mr. Green, or will this be the same white-wash we've had to put up with for the last 1,600 years?”

I do the math in my head. Sprung is flying past the King James all the way back to St. Jerome and the Vulgate. That's a lot of white-wash. At the same time, I see Stone's eyes bug and Green sees it too. He heads off Stone's response with a quick answer.

“You are going to be allowed, collectively, to do a translation that satisfies a majority of the members of this committee and, at the same time, meets the needs of Luxor House and Continental Media.”

Touché.

As I've said elsewhere, I stopped reading the Bible for edification and comfort (more often terror) well before I left Uncle Lester's house for the army. But it insinuated itself back into my life—by the back door—during

all those years studying lit. You can't understand western literature and culture without having at least a baseline understanding of the wild claims and wilder stories of the Bible. There are very few writers up until Virginia Woolf who didn't know and use the Bible, and most of them actually took it seriously. The Norton anthologies try to make up for the evaporation of general Bible knowledge with ever-increasing footnotes. ("Abraham: a major Jewish figure in the early stories of the Bible, a once widely-known religious text.") The professor has to at least be able to fake it, lest he or she be outed like the presidential candidate who confidently identified his favorite New Testament book as "Job." You even have to know some theology and church history.

And since being appointed to this project, I've not only been reading the Bible again, but books *about* the Bible, especially about Bible translation. Add that to the years as an innocent victim of fundamentalist Sunday school, and I actually know more about the Bible than I realized. Just enough to be dangerous, mostly to myself. You might even say I'm involuntarily religious but not spiritual.

Green continues.

"Which gets me to an important point about this project. Our timeline is three years—plus design and typesetting. Make it a translation, yes, but only by correcting—let us say improving—it where improvement is most called for, not by starting from scratch. I will state our guiding principle in colloquial language: 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.'"

Lilith raises her eyebrows.

"And what does that mean?"

"It means, do not let the perfect be the enemy of the good—or of the schedule. Correct mistakes, raise the level of accuracy where needed, make simple changes for the better, smooth out where bumpy—either in form or content—and generally straighten things up. But do not try building a new house. This is not a tear-down, nor even a full remodeling; it's a freshening up. A new coat of paint, minor repairs, a rearrangement of some of the furniture."

Green looks around the table.

"Broke means erroneous or opaque. It doesn't mean, 'it could be better.'"

This is greeted with silence, which Green takes as consent, and so he wraps things up.

Snow is coming, yet again, to Minnesota, falling without consciousness or intent from the Pipestone plains to the bitter Superior waves.

THREE

THE REST OF THAT first meeting was cordial. The second one, a few months later, and the first to go over translation material, was less so. By the third session of that meeting (we usually have three sessions a day for three to five days at a time), the gloves were off and by the fourth there was blood on the canvas. The artificial politeness of academic discourse (also found in political chambers around the world) was showing itself for what it usually is—a facade for ritualized assassinations.

How one interprets a passage of scripture is directly related to how one reacted to lima beans as a child, and we know how people differ on that. This is not as absurd as it sounds. Everyone knows that what you already believe about God—your conscious or unconscious theology—will largely determine what you believe a biblical text is saying about God. But the whole process actually begins long before anyone has formulated a theology. What you decide about vegetables as a child will emerge in disguise in that theology or the meaning assigned a text. As it will in your politics, how you dress, or what sports you follow. We like to think we are rational decision makers, but actually reason comes in about eighth on the list of influences, well after lima beans.

In short, nobody approaches any text—or anything else in life—as a blank slate.

An early example of the committee's inherent contradictions comes in that second meeting as we labor to get the Israelites out of Egypt and on their way to the Promised Land. That is the defining story for Jews. It tells them who they are—the people God rescued out of slavery—and they keep returning to it throughout the Bible and throughout their history down to the present. And Christians, of course, embrace the story, too. Which sets up a nice little discussion.

The committee doesn't process material in any kind of order, such as starting with Genesis for instance. We work on whatever is ready for approval at that point. In this case it was the book of Exodus, a text as ripe for a food fight as any in the Bible.

Adam Corinth, as the Old Testament scholar, was the one presenting his revised version of Dr. Jerry's original. Of all my new cronies, I was most drawn to Adam. He smiled a lot, a characteristic not widely distributed among Bible scholars. He had a light spirit, invited friendship, and was a consistent source of positive energy to boot. (Not things I could say about myself.) One could interpret all this variously—seeing him as a sort of force for life or as a frivolous dust devil.

Peter Stone undoubtedly had another term for him: heretic. When at that second meeting Adam proclaimed confidently, but unnecessarily, that the events of Exodus never happened, a passionate rebuttal followed immediately from Stone, a harbinger of collisions to come.

Adam starts things with a casual wave of the hand, and no apparent awareness that he is saying anything controversial.

"Of course there never was an Exodus. But it's an important story—and a good one."

Bart Sprung nods. None of the committee progressives find much that is historical in the so-called "history books" of the Bible. But there is a significant difference between Sprung's condescending skepticism and Adam's more good-natured rationalism. Juvenal versus Horace you might say. (Apologies for the pedantry.)

That difference didn't matter to Peter Stone, who took all reservations about the absolute historicity of every detail of the Bible as the direct work of Satan.

"Why not a historical Exodus, Dr. Corinth? What are your objections?"

Adam seems a bit surprised by the question. He keeps company with academics who share without significant question his take on the reliability of the Bible as a historical document. So does Stone for that matter.

Adam answers gently, apparently wanting to upset Stone as little as possible.

"We could start with the numbers, Peter. Six hundred thousand men says the text, or approximately two million plus folks counting women and children. Not possible. It would have taken weeks for them all to even begin

moving, and there wasn't enough water out in the wilderness to support that many."

Stone responds calmly.

"Aren't liberal scholars the ones who tell us that numbers in the Bible are often symbolic or used for effect? Even your fellow progressives would point out that you are arguing from a post-Enlightenment understanding of numbers, rather than from how a pre-scientific society uses them. Other Old Testament texts suggest a much lower number of people coming out of Egypt."

Very clever, I'm thinking. A die-on-every-hill conservative citing progressives to defend his conservative position. Fire with fire.

Adam doesn't concede Stone's point, but chooses to move on to the next in a long list of objections.

"There's no mention anywhere in the Egyptian records of Moses, or of the Israelites as slaves, or of any escape of slaves or anything else that indicates that the later Israelites were ever slaves in Egypt."

Stone doesn't even blink.

"The Egyptians had slaves from many areas and they never referred to them by where they came from, just as American slave-holders did not refer to the specific areas of Africa from which their slaves came. Egyptians had one term for all slaves and would not have referred to Israelites uniquely.

"Further, no record of Israelite slaves should even be expected. Almost all the papyri from the region in that period have been lost. With few exceptions, the only surviving historical records of any event were those carved in stone. And the Egyptians were not in the habit of recording their defeats in stone carvings, only their victories. The humiliation of a slave escape is not likely to have been recorded."

Adam simply moves to the next item on his list.

"There's no archaeological evidence in either the wilderness or later in Israel to indicate that a group—of any significant size—either wandered for forty years in the wilderness or entered into and disrupted the land of Canaan."

Stone seems especially happy that Adam has made this claim.

"As to lack of archaeological evidence, Dr. Corinth, you ignore the wise and widely accepted dictum: 'Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.' Most of human history has come and gone without leaving a clear archaeological record. During the years of exodus, these people lived in tents, not stone cities. Tent stake holes do not survive over the centuries.

“As to the entry into the Promised Land, excavations at Bethel, Yokne’am, and Hatzor—all cities the Bible cites as taken by Joshua—indicate major destruction around the time the Bible indicates. Further, there is a marked absence of pig bones thereafter, commonly found in such places, reflecting a Jewish diet. Finally, they uncovered Canaanite cultic statues at Hatzor that had been defaced, evidence of a conquest by people who abhor idolatry. I could go on.

“In your own case, Dr. Corinth, allow enough time to pass, stir in a few wars (possibly nuclear), add a pinch of plague or flood or fire, change the technology for record keeping, and all evidence of your own existence may well disappear. No proof that an Adam Corinth ever existed. And yet here you are. Same for all of us.”

None of this dents Adam’s congeniality. Nor does it persuade him.

“Bravo, Peter! Well done. You are a worthy defender of your . . . I won’t say ideology . . . let us say, of your understanding of the biblical record. You are fighting a rear-guard battle that I think has been already lost, but you fight it well.”

(Sort of like Japanese soldiers holding out in dense jungles on obscure Pacific islands years after the end of World War II.)

Rather than accepting the compliment, Stone strikes one more blow.

“Lost in the eyes of the academy, perhaps, which hires only its own. But not lost in the eyes of the One who rescued Israel out of bondage.”

That’s more than Sprung can take. He’s not inclined to be as generous as Adam, who he clearly thinks has gone too easy on Peter.

“The Bible can no longer be taken seriously, Dr. Stone, if we do not admit and even embrace its fundamentally mythic nature. Modern biblical interpretation must be rational, using the same investigative tools employed with all other historical texts, or it will be useless. Scholarship of necessity reads the Bible through the eyes of reason and logic, not of faith. It’s the only way to reclaim relevance for an ancient and, one must say, ethically flawed document. There is significance, even consolation, in the Exodus story, but it does not reside in the Nile turning to blood, or seas parting, or clouds of fire, or manna dropping from heaven, or water springing out of rocks, or, least of all, the imperialistic butchering of indigenous people by foreign invaders.”

Clearly Stone is not the only member of the team given to soaring rhetoric. But Sprung's flight only serves to tee-up Stone for a searing rebuttal.

"Finally, Dr. Sprung, we get to the real objection regarding the biblical account of the Exodus. It is offensive to you not because it offends reason, which it doesn't, but because it acknowledges God's power to enter into His creation and perform mighty acts that give the lie to your materialistic understanding of all things. It is transcendence that offends you, in this case miracles, but actually any genuine transcendence—reality beyond the material, here and everywhere in the Bible."

I haven't seen a confrontation this charged since Fischer fought off Spassky in Reykjavik.

"You know in advance that the Exodus account is untrue, because you have judged all miracles untrue. The same with prophecies, which you date as written *after* the events they prophesy simply because you can't abide divinely inspired foreknowledge.

"You are wrong. Prophets speak what God tells them to speak. Miracles do not offend reason. Reason works with what is, and if miracles happen, then reason has to deal with them rather than flee to the comfort of naturalistic presuppositions!"

Bam.

Bart is not used to this kind of challenge. It is shocking, apparently, that anyone who thinks this way has been allowed on the translation committee. He looks at Green and then at Stone.

"No, not presuppositions, Dr. Stone. There's nothing pre- about it. These are assertions proven by human experience, by logic, by testing."

Stone will have none of it.

"Nonsense! Human experience is replete with experiences of transcendence. Only recently in the human record have we tried to eliminate it. You judge the Exodus account guilty and non-historical until I can prove that it happened. I judge the Exodus account innocent and trustworthy until you can prove that it didn't. You say it's only true if we can find other written documents or arrangements of stone that corroborate it. I take the biblical account itself, and later history, as evidence for the truth of what it describes. We are both men of faith! Yours is in the fads of the current academy. Mine is in the Creator God of Genesis, Exodus, and the Gospels!"

That's enough for Green.

"Gentlemen . . ."

DANIEL TAYLOR

A useful euphemism.

“May I remind you that we are only responsible to *translate* the text, not to *evaluate* it. Nor to convey the implications of the text for each of us personally. These different understandings are no doubt interesting, but they are also time-consuming. And, as we all know, time is money.”

He says this with a smile, but it brings no smiles to anyone at the table. Except for Adam, who seems to have enjoyed the whole episode.

FOUR

BEING ON A BIBLE translation project, a development in my life, as I said, unpredicted by either the stars or the entrails of any fowl, is not the only new thing in my life. Almost as unpredictably, Zillah and I are back together. For good this time, I'm hoping.

No, not hoping, vowing. A renewing of a vow, I guess. Or a reclaiming. Of the vows we made when we got married. Made according to convention, without a lot of thought really, almost flippantly, but vows made nonetheless. In an age that lacks the seriousness—sense of awe, in fact—that once made vows inviolable. And dangerous, too—a matter of life and death. And eternity. A matter of honor, something once thought more important than life and death. Hard to believe we ever thought that way. We've come a long way, baby. Toward what I'm not so sure.

Zee and I started hanging out more often in the fall two years ago, after that summer when the young woman was killed at New Directions and they sent J.P. away. We went from being willing to see each other to making excuses to see each other. I was the one making up the most excuses, some quite creative. Like asking her to help me pick out new glasses for Judy, or her asking me to help put up "Al Gore for President" posters.

Zee was cautious, but she mostly said yes when I proposed something, so I took that as a good sign. I knew by Thanksgiving of that year that I wanted us to live together again and I purposed quite consciously to show her that I was now exceedingly Normal, almost Predictable, approaching Dependable.

I've been in fairly good shape for a while now. Not robust, not exactly flourishing, but maybe . . . I don't know, homeostatic. Yes, that's a useful word—homeostatic. A self-regulating feedback system, like a thermostat, that adjusts in concert with changing conditions. Monitoring myself,

responding to little crises before they become code red, modulating, getting along, hanging in there, measuring out my life in coffee spoons. At least there are no dead bodies showing up in my life these days. Okay, just the one. Two at most.

Getting this editing job at Luxor House was part of my campaign to re-woo Zee. It had all the appearance of a real job and it boosted my credibility. We started talking that winter about possibly giving it another try. She sometimes made it sound like it was a choice between death by hanging and death by firing squad, but I could tell even before she said “yes” that the tide was flowing in my direction. I went so far as to say short prayers about it a few times, suggesting to God that if he was so big on marriage and vow-keeping and all, he should do something to get this particular marriage back on track. Not that I really believe in a universe so constructed, but, if God was there, I wanted him to feel a little pressure from a former customer.

Finally, a year ago last summer, Zee caved. Even insisted on living on the boat with me rather than at her place or a new place. I wondered at the time if she simply wanted an easier escape path, moving out of my boat being simpler than getting me out of her place or a new, shared place. But then I thought maybe there was actually something attractive to her about being on the river. With me.

Of course there were some immediate changes. Empties for instance. Instead of seeing empty beer cans as decorative accent pieces, they were now symbols of slovenly indolence, tangible sins against order and mental health. All smoking was moved outside to the deck at least, better yet the boardwalk, or, best of all, standing in the river. And the insides of the refrigerator took on an entirely new look. Green leafy things overflowed the bins, frozen pizzas disappeared, and milk substitutes unknown to anyone before the moon landings crowded together: soy, coconut, almond. (Can radish milk be far behind?)

During the first manifestation of our marriage, any of this and much more would have been fodder for head shakes, snarky comments, and feelings of persecution. But I think we both want something different this time. We both want each other’s company, each other’s support, maybe even each other’s love, and so we choose not to let minor irritations define our lives together. We aren’t Eloise and Abelard, but we don’t have to be Ralph and Alice either (think *The Honeymooners*). Come to think of it, things didn’t

work out so well for the first two either. Abelard—ouch. Are there any un-doomed lovers in lit or history?

Considering it now, I wonder if both of us aren't simply looking for home. Not *a* home, but the idea and feeling of home. A place where you fit, where you know who and how to be, where what comes natural doesn't feel like a threat.

I don't want to say Zillah feminized the boat—she's a little touchy about any implication that she, or any woman, is inherently domestic. But she brought a sort of direction and coherence to it that I not only was incapable of but didn't even realize was desirable. Of course, she had done the same in the other places we lived before she left me, but I think I was too, let's say, occupied to notice. (Not preoccupied, simply occupied.)

I'm pretty sure I'm not occupied any longer. It's been almost three years since the voices went away. They tell recovering cancer patients that five years with no recurrence is a good marker. Maybe I'll use that for myself. Three down and two to go, more or less. Three more Christmases. Three more times of the baby God in the manger and Papa God on his big gold throne—a mystery and metaphor it's perhaps better not to inspect too closely.

Zillah gets a kick out of me being on this Bible project. Says it's karma for a kid who grew up thinking the Bible was parachuted in directly from heaven, ink not yet dry, the Official Rule Book for Human Life and Lesser Species. Now I'm forced to deal with folks like Sprung, whose website quotes him as saying, "The Bible infected western civilization with every form of prejudice, superstition, and bigotry, and we are only now starting to kill the infection with the antibiotics of reason and tolerance."

Zee thinks it's hilarious. I worry about waking up sleeping dogs.

I once complained to Zee about how Sprung twists words and concepts like a circus clown making balloon wiener dogs.

Zillah smiles.

"We did a lot of word twisting in the church I grew up in. We were just as sure that God was a progressive—or would be if he were thinking correctly—as the fundies were sure that God has a special place in his heart for America. I liked the things we said about God, but eventually I concluded from what I was hearing that God wasn't a required part of the transaction. The atheists and agnostics said they also believed in love and mercy and justice—and even offered that to folks the church people shunned—and

they supported a higher minimum wage to boot. God was an unnecessary variable in the equation. Occam's Razor and all that."

I love it when Zee gets philosophical. Very sexy.

"I asked my rector about it. 'Why do we need God to be good?' He thought for a while, then said, 'Well, we really don't, I suppose. But the concept is helpful to a lot of people. Simplifies things you might say. Gives folks comfort.' That was the best he could do. A comfortable and comforting god. If that was all there was to God, I didn't see the point. I was gone from church in six months and I haven't been back."

Judy got in on a couple of these conversations. I remember trying to explain to her what a translation is.

"People don't all speak the same, Jude."

"That . . . that is most . . . most certainly true, Jon."

"So the Bible was written in a different language than you and I speak."

"Oh?"

"Our job is to use the words that we speak instead of the words that they spoke back when the Bible was written, so that people like you and me can understand the Bible today."

Judy thinks about that for a moment.

"Do you . . . that is, do you understand the Bible, Jon?"

Out of the mouth of babes—and Specials.

"Well, I understand the words most of the time. But, of course, that doesn't mean I understand everything it says. There's a lot that's hard in the Bible, you know."

"Oh, I . . . I most definitely know that. But Sister Illuminata says, if . . . if you do not under . . . understand, then pray to Jesus. He will help you."

Who couldn't see that coming? Come what may, with Judy it's always Jesus.

Zee and I are not only back together, we're even talking kids.

"You've breached your forties, Jon. I'm only a few years behind. The body is remorseless when it comes to the window for women having children. I want a child. More specifically, I want *us* to have a child. Together. You and me. It's important."

I know this is a time for Exactly the Right Response. I've blown these opportunities too often in the past. Fortunately, I've been anticipating this, so I'm pretty much ready.

“You think so?”

Mmmm. Could have done better.

“Yes, I think so, Jon. I just said so. What do *you* think?”

I recover, using my cat-like reflexes.

“If you think so, Zee, I think so, too.”

Perfect. I’m getting this down.

“Well, with that ringing endorsement, Mr. Enthusiasm, what do you say we get pregnant?”

Pregnant. Now there’s a word for you. A word that has one meaning in a dictionary and another when it shows up in people’s lives. And now it has the potential of materializing in my own, which is to say, ours.

It’s a hell of a word and, some think, a hell of a condition. I looked it up later. Various etymologies, from simply “before birth” to “loaded, full, swollen”—as in the sixteenth-century synonym “gravid.” Let’s see: “My, my Zillah, you are looking particularly gravid this morning.” Maybe not.

At the time of her pep talk, I’m as supportive as I know how to be.

“That sounds good, Zee. No, better than good. That sounds wonderful. Let’s do it. Let’s have ourselves a baby. A big, fat baby! A big, fat, wonderful baby.”

This, of course, is a huge prevarication—from the Latin “walk crookedly”—on my part. It doesn’t sound wonderful. It sounds positively, paralyzingly, incapacitatingly frightful. Creating a child, a new creature, a new consciousness. Most frightening of all, a new responsibility, a new person in the universe who one is likely to disappoint. A new reminder of one’s inadequacies.

Let’s see, how have I failed in life, let me count the ways—failure as a child, as an adolescent, as a soldier, as a grad student, as a husband (on the first try), as a believer, as a brother, as a detective—now a chance to fail as a father. Who wouldn’t think it wonderful?

Two shall become one and that one shall become three. That’s the Genesis formula anyway—cleave and multiply—though we’ve added the right for three to become two again if three gets in the way of what one or two desire. Especially if three is a Judy. But we’ve already been through all that.

At the very least, three will probably mean the end of living in a houseboat on the Mississippi. The end of a lot of things and the beginning

of a lot of others. If, as some think, babies are a gift from God, they are a gift that keeps on giving. Or taking.

Nevertheless we're trying to have kids, to contribute one more micro black hole to the billions now sucking the life out of our planet. Or so some would have you believe. I think many people crossed a line somewhere, not long ago, in which other humans are now seen not only as polluters, but as themselves pollution. Six or seven billion contaminating units of pollution, the elimination of most of which would render the place a beautiful and pristine rock orbiting a minor star. As long as it's the *other* folks and their kids being eliminated.

I mean, we went in a flash from made in the image of God to better not to be made, or to be snuffed out just after being made. But best not to be too sanctimonious about the shift. One of the reasons it happened so fast was because the image of God folks didn't act like they believed it themselves. Tell the Indians about image of God, or the slaves, or the children in the mines. If we nip them in the womb now, maybe it's because the good church people helped pave the way. After all, religious folks have always found a way to dance to the prevailing tune. ("I give that song a nine, Dick. It's easy to dance to." Judy and I loved *Bandstand*.)

Luckily, Zillah slid into the world a few years after me. Her biological clock is ticking, but the buzzer is still a ways off. And I, the male of the species, can procreate until kingdom come. I can make contributions to an overstuffed world for decades. My green colleagues are not amused.

Actually, I'm of two minds—just an expression—when it comes to having kids. Part of me is excited about the prospect of bringing another sentient being into existence. (Forgive the sentimental language.) Think about it. First there is nonbeing, then two people get together for a few minutes, and, voilà, a process commences that results in a thinking, feeling, acting, created, and creative bundle of awareness. And it's cute too, which may be the main reason we take care of it.

Then again, do we really have the right to do that? Especially if our own lives have not been happy? As in my own case. Am I a product of a bad gene mix—RNA bumps awkwardly into DNA resulting in a physical specimen designated "Jon"—that is not quite adapted to its environment?

Or was I okay out of the chute but happened, randomly, to land in a slightly contaminated social context—too much religion, too much Uncle Lester, bad luck with losing track of my parents—which distorted what

had been a perfectly fine set of nucleotides? Or, heaven forbid, both? Bad biology plus bad childhood equals bad Jon. Not morally bad—no curse of responsibility—but defective, which is to say disabled, which is to say unhappy.

Zee and I made sure this kind of replication didn't happen our first time around. Now we're giving Loki Fate an open invitation to mess with our lives. We could conceive an Einstein or a Judy. (Was Einstein happy? As happy as Judy?) I imagine it now as a television game show:

"Today's contestants are Jon and Zillah. That's quite a name you've got there, Zillah."

"Thank you, Stu. I like it."

"Are you two ready to play The Great Genetics Gamble?"

"We are, Stu."

"Then let's spin the Giant Genetic Roulette Wheel! Where we toss in your genetic material and see how it combines! You know our slogan, audience. What is it?"

The audience chants together, "RNA plus DNA means something new every day!"

"That's right. And everyone's a winner! Or not! Ha, ha, ha!"

No, I can't quite shake a fear about this responsibility one accepts in creating a new creature. The responsibility of meeting the physical and even psychological needs of another human being is not so bad: put food on the table and tell them you love them—I can do that. But bringing into being a mind, maybe even a soul—someone who can suffer, who can hate their life—even suffer *after* this life—well, that's almost more than I can bear. And like I said, what if the kid arrives as or becomes damaged goods—like Judy? Like me?

And it doesn't help all that much that I'm past believing in God or souls or afterlives. No big G God to haunt me any longer. But now I'm looking at playing small g god myself. That's *my* face now on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, reaching out my finger to touch a new little Adam or Eve Mote. And it worries me. Without God to blame, then it's all my fault. Our fault. For all the messed up choices. For everything.

I bring myself back to Zee.

She sees the question marks in my eyes.

DANIEL TAYLOR

“We can do this, Jon. We can do this together. We can have a child, raise it well, launch her or him into the world, giving our lives and our marriage just that much more significance. Why not, Jon? Why not?”

I can think of a Grand Canyon-full of “why not’s.”

“Why not indeed, Zee. Let’s go for it.”

It seems right, even predetermined. The call of our genetic codes, I guess. But I’ve been worrying lately about my ability to make Zee happy. Now I face the prospect of doubling my territory.

FIVE

THESE MEETINGS MOVE AROUND from place to place, usually somewhere at least mildly attractive. Why we're this time gathered in an isolated lodge in northern Minnesota on the cusp of winter, I'm not sure. Maybe for therapeutic reasons. Perhaps chosen by a Minnesota tree hugger at Luxor rather than by anyone in the New York office.

The facility has a strangely biblical name, Mt. Carmel Lodge, though there's nothing nearby that would pass as a mountain. (Like Mountain Lake, Minnesota, with neither mountain nor lake.) It's not only twenty plus miles north and east of Ely, itself a fairly isolated town, it's also a good three miles of dirt road off a two-laner called Echo Trail that snakes from just north of Ely all the way to Orr, through parts of the world that even God has trouble remembering.

The posted history of this place says it was a logging camp in the nineteenth century, a Works Progress camp during the Depression, a hunting camp in the 1950s and 60s, and now a refurbished, supposedly upscale "spa and retreat center." It certainly has the "retreat" part down, advertising itself as "The Most Remote Drive-in Resort in the Midwest," but I haven't spotted the spa part as yet.

Perhaps the publisher wanted it remote because they knew this session was going to be messy—there were landmines on the agenda—and they wanted any prying eyes far away. Like Bismarck said of the law and sausage, it's better if people don't see how their Bible translations are made.

As I sit here waiting for Zee and Judy and our Excellent Walk in the Woods, my mind wanders to a dark place—of which it has quite a collection. Our last translation meeting, more than ten months ago now, was a reminder that life is tenuous.

Because it was January, we met in San Diego, a choice Green engineered to keep us happy and himself warm. It even prompted Adam Corinth's wife, Nadine, to join us for a couple days. Spouses didn't usually come to working meetings, but being on the beach at the Hotel Coronado was more than Nadine could resist. Cate DeAngelo, on the other hand, comes to all the meetings, and even sits in on every session. Mostly knitting, if you can believe it. An unacknowledged presence.

It was the afternoon session on the second day in San Diego. Adam Corinth had complained about not feeling well during lunch and said for us to start the afternoon session without him, indicating that he'd lie down for a few minutes and then join us. And so we did.

We started on the book of Isaiah and came soon to 7:14—a verse with a history, you could say, in a passage as explosive as nitroglycerin in an ox cart. In the absence of our Hebrew expert, Sprung has seized the floor.

"The Hebrew word, of course, is *almah*. It appears six other times in the Hebrew Bible." Sprung, and all the other scholars except Stone, always refer to "the Hebrew Bible" instead of calling it the Old Testament, and Sprung usually puts an emphasis on the word "Hebrew." (Myself, I'm sticking with what I learned in Sunday school. So sue me.)

"And the word in all those cases can be translated 'young woman.' None of the other uses requires the concept of 'virgin.'"

Stone knows this is coming and has stockpiled his ammunition.

"And all of them are also perfectly consistent with the understanding of 'virgin.'"

Sprung does not like being interrupted.

"Even when used of Dinah in Genesis 34 *after* she has been raped?"

"*Especially* after the rape of Dinah, because Moses uses the word to highlight the enormity of her violation—not only has a woman been raped, but a *virgin* has been raped! I thank you, Dr. Sprung, for bringing up that example."

Stone slipping in Moses is an indirect but widely understood response to Sprung's use of the term Hebrew Bible. Everyone knows Sprung doesn't believe Moses, if there was a Moses, had ever written anything in the Bible.

People are getting a bit nervous—maybe "resigned" is a better word—because they have seen these two bucks clashing antlers before and they know what we might be in for. Martin Douglas, studying his computer screen, points out that both of them are wrong.

“The word describing Dinah in Genesis 34 is not *almah*; it’s *yaldah*, an equally ambiguous word for young woman that does not clarify her sexual history.”

Sprung is only slightly deflected.

“Fine. Why did they use either *almah* or *yaldah* in this Isaiah passage, both ambiguous? Why did they not use *betulah*, which everyone would have understood without doubt to mean virgin?”

Stone is ready for that one.

“Because *betulah* is also not definitive, there being a distinction between a young *betulah* and a betrothed *betulah*, as I’m sure you know.”

The “as I’m sure you know” is a jab, just the right mix of authority and condescension. And Stone follows up with another.

“The Jews understood it this way themselves. How did the Jews of the Septuagint translate *almah* when they rendered it in Greek? *Parthenos*! Virgin! Unambiguously virgin! And that Septuagint understanding is 250 years before Jesus, an understanding held by Jews, who have no interest in promoting a virgin birth.”

Stone is leaning forward and thumping his open Bible with his index finger. Unlike the others, he eschews the use of a computer and all its fancy research tools.

Sprung says something about the Septuagint originally only translating the Torah and not Isaiah, which was added later, and that maybe there wasn’t really consensus about *parthenos*, but he knows this argument is thin, so he veers over to what I’ve learned is safe cover for all contrarian interpretation—context. (Don’t like how the church has traditionally understood a passage? Invoke context and call in, selectively, the modern scholars.)

“I don’t need to inform you, Dr. Stone. . .”

Meaning, “I apparently need to inform you, Dr. Stone”—and a clear counter-move to the latter’s “as I’m sure you know.”

“. . . that the context of Isaiah 7 is the Arameans and their allies threatening to attack Jerusalem. Isaiah is prophesying to King Ahaz that a child will soon be born to a young woman as a sign that Ahaz will triumph over these Syrians. Centuries later, Matthew is using Isaiah 7 for his own purposes in the Gospels to announce the birth of the one he takes to be the Messiah. That co-opting of a Jewish text for Christian purposes is not an excuse for us mistranslating what the passage says in the *older* Hebrew Bible.”

Then Sprung goes a step too far, inserting a little speech that he's made many times during his career and on this project, one that draws an angry Peter Stone out of his lair every time.

"By insisting on 'virgin' in Isaiah, Dr. Stone, you are making it impossible for a modern reader to believe and value the Bible."

At this, Stone springs to his feet—not usually a good sign when a committee is looking for consensus.

"You, Dr. Sprung, are once again making it impossible for God to enter history! He did and He does!"

Sprung smiles. He knows that once Stone shows anger, he is diminished in the sight of most of the rest of the committee.

"God can enter history all God wants. Just don't pretend that he, to use your pronoun, had a mother and father."

"Gnosticism!" Stone shouts. "Pure gnosticism! You can't stand for God to have taken on a body and become one with us."

"Better gnostic," replies Sprung with a dismissive smile, "than anthropomorphic."

Ouch.

Before anyone can call for a vote, which would be close, Green settles the matter, armed no doubt with some pre-emptive research of his own.

"Let me speak for the company here. The RSV changed 'virgin' to 'young woman' in 1952. That translation was widely adopted by mainline denominations and became an instant abomination to the fundamentalists, who saw it as denying the doctrine of the virgin birth. Since then the attendance at mainline churches has melted like a snowman in June, their large endowments notwithstanding. The fundamentalists have reproduced like rabbits. Fundamentalists and evangelicals buy Bibles, mainliners buy the Sunday Times and lattés. The company cannot have a translation without a virgin birth, accurate or not. This is not an issue on which the company can compromise."

Neither Sprung or Stone look happy. The former does not appreciate being trumped by a functionary, and the latter gets no solace from winning an argument based on sales.

Martin suggests a break.

I have nothing to say during any of these debates, being merely an eye and ear for editorial at Luxor. I'm not even at the conference table, usually sitting just behind and to one side of Dr. Jerry. I could see in this instance

WOE TO THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES

that he tried to follow what everyone was saying but seemed mostly out of his depth. When Stone brought up *parthenos*, he turned back to me and whispered, “That’s the temple thing in Athens, right?” and I give the least offensive response I can come up with: “Sounds like it.”

So when the break is called, I head for the bathroom. And there, on the floor, is Adam Corinth. His tongue bulges from his mouth. His skin looks slightly blue. He isn’t breathing. I stick my head out the bathroom door and yell for help, then turn back and kneel beside him. His eyes are partially opened, squinting at eternity.