

The Chaos Ladder

Episode 7 - Walking in the company of those who came before us

[Podcast intro]

Hi, I'm Steve Flowers and you're listening to The Chaos Ladder-- a podcast that explores how the Bible is not a gaping pit waiting to swallow us but a ladder for us to climb.

[Episode intro]

The Bible is much more than those stories and sayings that give us a spiritual anchor or comfort. Its content ranges from the miracle of raising a dead man to the outlandishness of a talking donkey to the supernatural acts of exorcising demons to unthinkable acts such as a father sacrificing his child to fulfill a promise to honor God.¹ And whatever your view of biblical inspiration is, it must be able to account for such a diversity of presentation.

[Main content]

Did God take control of the authors' minds who wrote the books of the Bible? Or did God's Spirit somehow influence while not interfering with them writing the books as they saw fit? Or did the authors fall into some sort of divine ecstatic state that mentally transported them to directly connect with God's Spirit until they finished writing the book? Or did God speak to the authors through their meditation on their surroundings such as in Jeremiah where God's word was revealed through watching the potter at his wheel?² These are usually the type of questions people wonder when they want to learn more about what it means to say the Bible is inspired. Christians are often more interested in the process that made the Bible inspired. That discussion can be an interesting endeavor but my experience is that the motives for Christians entering it is usually to protect, or determine the reliability of, the Bible.

For me, the more worthwhile discussion about biblical inspiration comes from asking, "What makes the Bible inspired?" As I've asked myself that question, I have come to see a few connected traits.

The first one is when we accept the Bible's invitation to walk in the company of those who came before us. God's inspiration in the Bible can first be experienced by simply listening to what each generation of ancient people thought about God, including not only all the good but at times the bad and the ugly that came with their beliefs.

¹ John 11:38-44; Numbers 22:22-35; Mark 5:1-14; Judges 11:29-40

² Jeremiah 18:1-11

And when we do that, we can hear how the Bible is full of ancient believers who often found themselves *between two stories*. The two stories usually address some aspect of God's nature but they can be categorized the same each time. The first story is a narrative of how God was taught or promised by those who came before *them*. The second story is the one of how they came to experience God for themselves which often differed from the first story. This caused these ancient believers to reassess how they viewed God and ultimately embrace this new story that kept some elements of the first story that they still felt held true while also included changes in their understanding of who God is and what God desires. They then expressed this second story through their reinterpretation or renewed telling of scripture.

And we can see this cycle of individuals and groups finding themselves between two stories repeated throughout the Bible in a myriad of ways-- sometimes within a book itself and sometimes over the breadth of a selection of books, sometimes within one individual's life, sometimes within a community or nation, sometimes within a moment or days and other times over hundreds of years, and sometimes we need the aid of historical background to piece together the two stories. But this second story whether in a small or large way always serves the same function. It reframes their understanding of God to explain how they understand God to be working in their current circumstances. And when we look at the accumulative effect of this cycle happening again and again in the Bible, it reveals an overall progression in how these ancient believers understood God was being revealed to them.

That's a lot of theory and abstract talk to absorb so I'll share a few examples of what I'm talking about.

I'll start with the life of the Apostle Peter because it's a straightforward example of an individual finding themselves between two stories. In several books across the New Testament we can see Peter at different points in his life and see at least twice where he found himself between two stories about how God was working.

In the Gospels, Peter finds himself between the stories of the expected messiah he always heard about growing up and the one of the Messiah who called him to leave his life as a fisherman. When Jesus came preaching that the "kingdom of God has come near," Peter expected Jesus to be the messiah who his upbringing taught would lead the Israelites to overthrow their oppressors and once again rule themselves as a strong nation in God's name. The Gospel of Mark tells us that when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you think I am," Peter answered that you are the messiah. Jesus didn't confirm or deny that but instead continued by explaining to the disciples exactly what *kind* of messiah He was-- one who would be rejected by religious leaders, a messiah who would undergo great suffering at the hands of the government authorities and then killed by them. This was not the kind of messiah Peter was taught was coming, let alone signed up for, so he took Jesus aside and let Him know how wrong He was. Immediately after that, Jesus openly rebuked Peter in front of the rest of the disciples for expecting Jesus to be a messiah that He was not called to be.³

³ Mark 8:27-33

After that conflict, the books of Acts and Galatians tells us that after Jesus was resurrected and ascended, Peter would again find himself between two stories. Peter became a renowned and respected apostle, preacher, and healer among the early Christians in Jerusalem. But as Christianity grew outside of Jerusalem, Peter struggled to fully include and affirm non-Jewish people as fellow Christians. He found himself between the story of his traditional upbringing and the one of how Paul and Gentile Christians were experiencing the gospel.⁴

I want to share one other example in detail because it's illustrative of an obscure episode of ancient believers finding themselves between two stories over a long period of time.

Deuteronomy and Leviticus have explicit laws that prevent all males whose genitals are severely different, damaged, or have been removed to have a voice in the ruling citizen body or to be a priest.⁵ These conditions could have resulted in various ways including birth, war-time atrocity, accident, or service as a eunuch for another nation. The thought process behind these laws was that the ability to reproduce and have descendants was both a gift from God and an important part of being part of God's promise through one's descendants. Anything that made a man physically unable to participate in this essentially made him a *lesser* man and thus in the minds of these ancient believers also made such men *less than* in the eyes of God.

But then we find in Isaiah a very direct message specifically to eunuchs. God states emphatically that if eunuchs follow the covenant that they are not just equal in the eyes of God as those men who do have descendants but that God "will give them an everlasting name which shall not perish."⁶ Scripture is now "reassuring eunuchs that they do have an enduring future in the sacred community."⁷ This seeming ambiguity in how eunuchs and others were viewed by God is illuminated when given historical context. The laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus originated at least 100 years before the Babylonian exile and the Isaiah passage was written shortly after the Babylonian exile.

The Babylonian exile took place almost 600 years before Jesus was born when (Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, burned) down the Temple, and (brought) the Davidic dynasty (that had lasted 400 years) to a (humiliating) end.⁸ King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon forcibly took tens of thousands of Israelites into captivity that included all of the kingdom's cultural, political, and religious elite. Forced deportation of those who had been conquered was used by ancient empires to both control political dissent and to leverage skills and knowledge which the empire needed. The exiles were forced to live in Babylon for as much as 60 years. This period cannot be emphasized enough for the crucial watershed experience it was which transformed the ancient Israelite view of God, because when they returned to Jerusalem, they brought the scrolls they had written while in exile which were the "bare bones" of what is today's Old Testament.⁹ That's a tantalizing tidbit that will have to sit there because the exile needs much

⁴ Acts 5:12-15 and 10:1-11:18; Galatians 2:11-14

⁵ Deuteronomy 23:1; Leviticus 21:16-23

⁶ Isaiah 56:3b-5

⁷ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible; Second Edition*, p. 878

⁸ *The Jewish Study Bible; Second Edition*, p. 2114

⁹ *The Bible: A Biography*, p. 30

more time than we have here to understand its impact. For now I just want you to have some awareness of it for this example.

While in exile, the Babylonians forced a number of the male Israelites serving the court to become eunuchs, forcing them to have their genitals crushed or removed. Upon return to Jerusalem, the experiences from the exile were a catalyst for revisiting old ways of thinking. One of the experiences was the number of Israelites forced into service as eunuchs. Those returning to Jerusalem as eunuchs would find their joy dampened by now being subject to those old laws which forced them to live on the margins of participation in ancient Israel life. But they had done nothing wrong, they had not chosen to be eunuchs, and, most importantly, they remained faithful in their covenant to God. Isaiah doesn't overtly repeal the laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus but it does give evidence of speaking for a people who found themselves between two stories. After the exile they are now more thoughtful of and perhaps beginning to change their stance on those who God's law previously condemned or sought to alienate.

Ok, no more detailed examples of God's people finding themselves between two stories but the Bible is so full of them in a variety of ways that I want to share a few more but only in very broad strokes. Each of these examples deserve much more time than I'm giving them here but, again, I'm doing this to help emphasize the prevalence and importance of this trait in the Bible.

Broad-stroke example #1 - In the beginning of their story ancient Israel believed God was the greatest of many gods who fought as a warrior for Israel to conquer Canaan.¹⁰ Scripture reveals this belief in some of ancient Israel's earliest writings such as the line from the passage in Exodus called The Song of Moses which asks "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods."¹¹ This is an example of monolatry which is the belief that there are many gods but that capital G God is the greatest of them. There are other examples in the Old Testament of monolatry which I'll footnote here in the essay version of this podcast.¹² But the breadth of the Old Testament reveals that ancient Israelites progressed from monolatry to monotheism by coming to see God revealed as the one and only God. Isaiah speaks to this change plainly when it's written that God says "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god."¹³

Broad-stroke example #2 - All of the books of the Old Testament prophets are arguably variations on the prophets preaching a second story of how God is to be understood in contrast to the first story of how many Israelites were treating God. The prophets were calling the people in a variety of ways to stop viewing God as an occasional religious obligation while they prioritize their own endeavors. Instead, they are to embrace that their relationship with God is measured by how well they treat each other, such as when the prophet Amos states, "Take away from me the noise of your songs... But let justice roll down like waters."¹⁴

¹⁰ Lawrence Boadt, Revised and Updated by Richard Clifford and Daniel Harrington, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction; Second Edition* (Kindle Locations 6772-6787)

¹¹ Exodus 15:11

¹² Other examples of monolatry: Exodus 12:12, 20:3; Deuteronomy 6:13-15, 10:17, 17:2-3; Joshua 24:15; Judges 10:6; Psalm 89:5-7

¹³ Isaiah 44:6-20

¹⁴ Amos 5:21-24 (see also Isaiah 1:17; Hosea 12:6; Micah 6:6-8)

Broad-stroke example #3 - Paul completely reframed the entire set of plainly stated Old Testament laws which do not even hint there's a process for amending them. Two in particular he repeatedly addresses, because they were major sources of conflict between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, were the laws of circumcision and eating unclean food. Jewish believers strongly held the observance of both was still mandated to demonstrate they were God's people.¹⁵ But as one scholar noted, "Paul argued tirelessly that these badges of honor... are not what identify people as children of God. They may have at one time, and they served their purpose. But now faith in Jesus and love of others are [what Paul says are the real] badges of honor."¹⁶

Final broad-stroke example - I would argue that the stories of every single person Jesus interacted with in the Gospels were literally people finding themselves between two stories about God-- the one they were told and the one standing before them. You could also argue that every letter in the New Testament is a response to a community of believers that is finding itself amidst conflicts because of different ways believers were told how God is and how they were experiencing God for themselves.

So the Bible is replete with opportunities for us to walk in the company of all the ancient believers who came before us. And when we do, it allows us to listen to where it was they found themselves between two stories and how they came to embrace the second story as closer to reflecting their experience of who God is and what God desires. But walking in their company is not just looking back to what already transpired. Each such story also offers points of entry for us today as we weigh where in our own lives and in our own community of faith we, too, find ourselves between two stories.

In the next episode I'll talk about the second trait I see when answering the question "What makes the Bible inspired?"

Just a quick reminder that the citations for referenced scripture and for sources I've used can be found in the footnotes of the essay version of this episode located on StoriesFromAVillage.org.

Thanks for listening to The Chaos Ladder. Hope you'll join me next time. Take care.

[Outro statement]

The Chaos Ladder is part of StoriesFromAVillage.org, a podcast and essay ministry of Stone Village Church in Columbus, Ohio. You can find a transcript of this podcast on the web site.

¹⁵ Genesis 17:1-14; Leviticus 11:1-23 and Deuteronomy 14:3-21

¹⁶ Peter Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works*, pp. 222-223