

DEVOTIONAL

LIVING THE MYSTERIES:
LOVING THE QUESTIONS

By Frances Lee Menlove

ARE YOU A “without-a-shadow-of-a-doubt” believer? A 100-percenter for all Church teachings? A possessor of great quantities of certitude?

If your answer is, “Well, not really,” do not despair. Hold your head up. If you are rife with questions, you have two heavyweight Biblical champions in your corner. Two tag-teamers who, like you, wrestled with questions bigger than they were—and came out bearing the prize of mystery.

There are two stunning minority reports in the Bible, the Book of Job and the Book of Ecclesiastes. The writers of these two wisdom books are both dissenters from orthodox positions, and they both claim personal experience as their authority. They both take the mystery of existence seriously.

Job strikes out at the conventional wisdom of his day (and often of ours), the wisdom that insists if you are good, good things will happen to you. As woe after woe tumbles down on Job; as he loses everything, family, goods, health; as he sits in a pile of ash and scrapes the boils on his skin with shards of pottery, his friends explain patiently to him that all his suffering is fair. But Job will have none of it. Then his wife advises him to “eat dirt and die.” Not very helpful. In fact, Job holds God responsible for the great cruelty being done to him. Job demands to know where God is and when Job will have his day in court. “I would speak to the Almighty,” he declares. “I desire to reason with God” (Job 13:3, NRSV).

God does finally show up, but the Almighty is completely uninterested in reasoning with Job. God is here to talk on his own terms and, instead of a reasoned argument, delivers a stern litany of questions.

Out of the whirlwind, with sound and fury, God asks Job:

Who is this that darkens counsel

by words without knowledge?
Have you commanded the
morning and caused the dawn to
know its place?

Where were you when I laid the
foundations of the earth?

Have the gates of death been
revealed to you?

Where does light dwell?

Has the rain a father?

Do you know the ordinances of
the heavens?

Can you send forth lightnings, so
that they may go and say to you,
“Here we are”?

Who has put wisdom in the
inward parts?

Who has given understanding to
the mind?

Do you give the horse its might?

Do you clothe its neck with mane?

Is it at your command that the
eagle mounts up and makes its
nest on high?

And my favorite:

Where is the way to the dwelling
of light and where is the place of
darkness? (Job 38–41, selected
verses, NRSV)

The interrogation goes on, verse after verse, as God raises all the important questions: the origins of consciousness and wisdom, humanity’s relationship with the universe, the nature of death. What God holds up for consideration is creation, all of creation, its vastness and its detail, its complexity and its beauty. God accounts for himself not by logic or reason, but by simply enumerating the mysteries and wonders of this existence. “Everything you need to know is there in the vast mystery of my elegant world,” he seems to say.

The sheer awesomeness of this vast mys-

tery was brought home a few years ago by what someone dubbed, “the most important picture in the history of the world.”

Try to take this in: The Hubble telescope, over the course of four hundred orbits around the earth, took eight hundred exposures of a core sample of the universe. The images were taken of a region of space where no stars could be seen. In other words, the Hubble was contemplating nothingness. But instead of a dark image, which many expected, the telescope found galaxy upon galaxy. Nearly 10,000 galaxies, each one a community of a hundred billion suns.

When my grandson and I were exploring the Natural History Museum in New York City, we came upon a statement designed to boggle the mind: “The universe has no center and no edge.” And if that is not enough, physicists tell us that most fundamental processes of the universe occur outside space and time. We abide in a place utterly inhuman in scale. If every person on earth got to name an equal share of the stars, we would each get to name more than a trillion: ten thousand galaxies, each one a community of a hundred billion suns. I like to imagine that somewhere Galileo, who got in fierce trouble in his day for re-imagining our solar system, is smiling as he watches our struggle to re-imagine our universe yet again, to situate ourselves in a story grander than our imaginations.

Job’s God is trying to tell us that God is beyond all of our categories, beyond all language. And Job finally gets it. He throws himself down before God and admits his presumption. “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (Job 42:3, NRSV).

Then, for good measure, God tells Job’s three friends, these representatives of conventional wisdom, that they have it all wrong as well. Whereas Job stays rooted in the integrity of his experience, the friends defend their worldview where everything makes sense; they force the facts into that worldview.

“Know then,” insists one friend, “that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves” (Job 11:6). “Is not your wickedness great? There is no end to your iniquities,” insists another of Job’s “miserable comforters” (Job 22:5).

But God cries foul. Speaking directly to one of the friends, God declares, “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7).

Both Job and the friends are powerless to understand the Mystery, but Job stays honest.



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WILLIAM BLAKE, "WHEN THE MORNING STARS SANG"

"And I'm standing here talking about God?" writes Richard Rohr, a Franciscan, author, and retreat master.

I'm presuming to understand with this little head? It's inconceivable. We're one little planet in one galaxy in the midst of billions of galaxies, and we dare to presume to understand what's going on. And then we get righteous about our theologies. I'm saved if I do this. I'm saved if I do that. If you don't get dipped totally in the water, you're not saved. If you don't call God by the right name, he won't like you. It's hard to believe people can be that lost in their own little world and their own private importance. God does not allow Job to make that mistake.¹

God frees Job from a place of small certainties and opens the door to a life of wonder.

THE second maverick in the Bible is the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, another book that honors the questions and makes peace with not knowing. Scholars often begin the study

of Ecclesiastes with the question of how it sneaked into the canon in the first place. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," it declares right off the bat, causing us all to shift uncomfortably in our seats. It's strange, existential stuff, but the book was too beautiful, too wise, and (yes) too pious to leave out. Work, study, rejoice in your labors, seek wisdom, but don't assume the battle goes to the strong or riches to the learned. Time and chance happen to us all.

Like Job, Ecclesiastes is almost free of ideology. It's more like a self-help book, advising its readers to focus on the day-to-day, the here and now. It has an almost Buddhist mindfulness quality to it. Accept the world and what it brings. Love what is. There is nothing to do but rejoice, do good, and be grateful.

The advice is so beautiful and comforting it feels good just to hear the words. Listen to what, in translation, is some of the most beautiful English prose ever written, framed as words from the Teacher. It comes from an oral culture. It was written to be spoken out loud.

To every thing there is a season,
and a time to every matter under
the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to
die;

A time to plant, and a time to
pluck up that which is planted,

A time to kill, and a time to heal;

A time to break down, and a time
to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to
laugh;

A time to mourn, and a time to
dance;

A time to cast away stones, and a
time to gather stones together;

A time to embrace, and a time to
refrain from embracing;

A time to seek, and a time to lose;

A time to keep, and a time to
throw away;

A time to tear, and a time to sew;

A time to keep silence, and a time
to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate;

A time for war, and a time for
peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

Maybe the Teacher is trying to teach us that we ought simply to be glad we are alive. We ought to stay awake and pay attention. The Teacher tells us we live in a world of staggering complexity and beauty. The world is a mystery. But though we don't know how the world works, we do know that it is and that it is splendid. Try to stay awake.

Ecclesiastes is not about pursuing rewards but about living in the present. Live right here, right now, in the complex, beautiful present. Wake up!

A. J. Jacobs learned that lesson from Ecclesiastes in a rather unique way. Jacobs grew up as a secular Jew, but in 2005, he decided to devote one entire year to living the Bible—literally *living the Bible*. He was set on finding the original intent of each biblical rule or teaching and following that to the letter, including the often neglected rules.³ He began by putting away his clothes made from mixed fibers.

On Day 91 of his project, he was sitting on the crosstown bus reading his favorite book of the Bible, Ecclesiastes. Not just reading it, but studying it intently. By now, he had a black bushy beard and therefore looked "more religious."

"I'm concentrating hard," he reports:

Too hard. I feel a tap on my shoulder. I'm annoyed. I don't like strangers touching me. I look up. It is a 50ish man. "Excuse me, this lady is feeling sick. Could you give her your seat?" He points to a tall brunette woman who was standing right in front of me. How did I miss this? The woman looks horrible. Her face is sallow, nearly the color of lima beans. She is doubled over. And she is weeping. I get up in a hurry with mumbled apologies.³

Living in the present is a lesson from the Teacher of Ecclesiastes, but that is exactly



WILLIAM BLAKE, "GOD CREATED ADAM"

what Jacobs wasn't doing as he sat on the bus, his full concentration focused on his Bible. As he ruminates about this encounter, he draws a lesson, namely:

To everything there is a season,
There is a time to be born and a
time to die,
There is a time for reading and a
time for getting off your butt.⁴

I think that would make a splendid refrigerator magnet.

SO IF you find yourself a little twitchy, surrounded by a sea of certainties (often conflicting), open your Bible to Job or Ecclesiastes and let them tell you, occasionally forgetting their indoor voices, that your small human brain just can't get it and that you shouldn't expect it to. And God might add that those singing their chorus of certainty around you don't get it, either. I

Marcus Borg, my professor of New Testament in seminary, told us the following story. While he was professor of religion and culture at Oregon State University, students would frequently speak to him privately, admitting, "You know I really don't believe in God." Borg's invariable response was, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." Generally the God they described was some variation on the wise old man in the sky. After they had finished explaining, Borg's usual response was, "I don't believe in that God, either." The students were somewhat shocked, because they knew he affirmed the reality of God.

He was, of course, suggesting that his students revisit their understanding of God, rather than simply jettison the whole idea. He was inviting them to become part of the Great Conversation, to feel no obligation to defend images of God that quake under

on civil unions.

- The god I *don't* believe in says we are living in the last days so there is no need to take care of our planet.

- The god I *don't* believe in blesses wars.

Something else I was taught as a teenager fits right in. Joseph Smith said: "I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammled."⁶ Seek truth wherever it can be found. Relish the mystery. Relish the awesomeness. And remember, mysteries are not like problems. Problems call out to be solved, but mysteries are best enjoyed as mysteries

Albert Einstein—the same Einstein who tells us that gravity bends space itself—seems to be echoing Job as he says:

[T]he most beautiful and deepest experience a man can have is the



know that seems rather rascally of God, but it's right there in the Bible.

I must have had some nascent penchant for mystery as a young teenager. I remember our 33rd Ward Sunday School teacher telling us about the nature of God—a male with a body, parts, and passions—and then, to emphasize the beauty and clarity of this view, contrasting it with what he labeled the Catholic view of God. (At that time, knocking Catholicism was quite fashionable.) "The Catholics believe," he said, "that God is large enough to fill the universe and small enough to dwell in the human heart." Clearly this summary was meant to be derisive, but I found myself preferring it to the "God is a man" view. Now I see in this paradoxical definition an attempt to articulate the tension between God's immanence and transcendence; but back then, I just liked the way it articulated the mystery and bowed to the truth that God is beyond the human mind's ability to understand or explain.

scrutiny. Perhaps, he would suggest, they were not rejecting God but a caricature of God. As he frequently said, "It is hard to give your heart to something your head rejects."

In fact, the Bible itself does not paint a static or consistent picture of God. As one scholar recently pointed out, "The book of Exodus paints God as a violent, murderous, genocidal land thief."⁵

I know my idea of God has changed over the years. I've thought about the god I don't believe in.

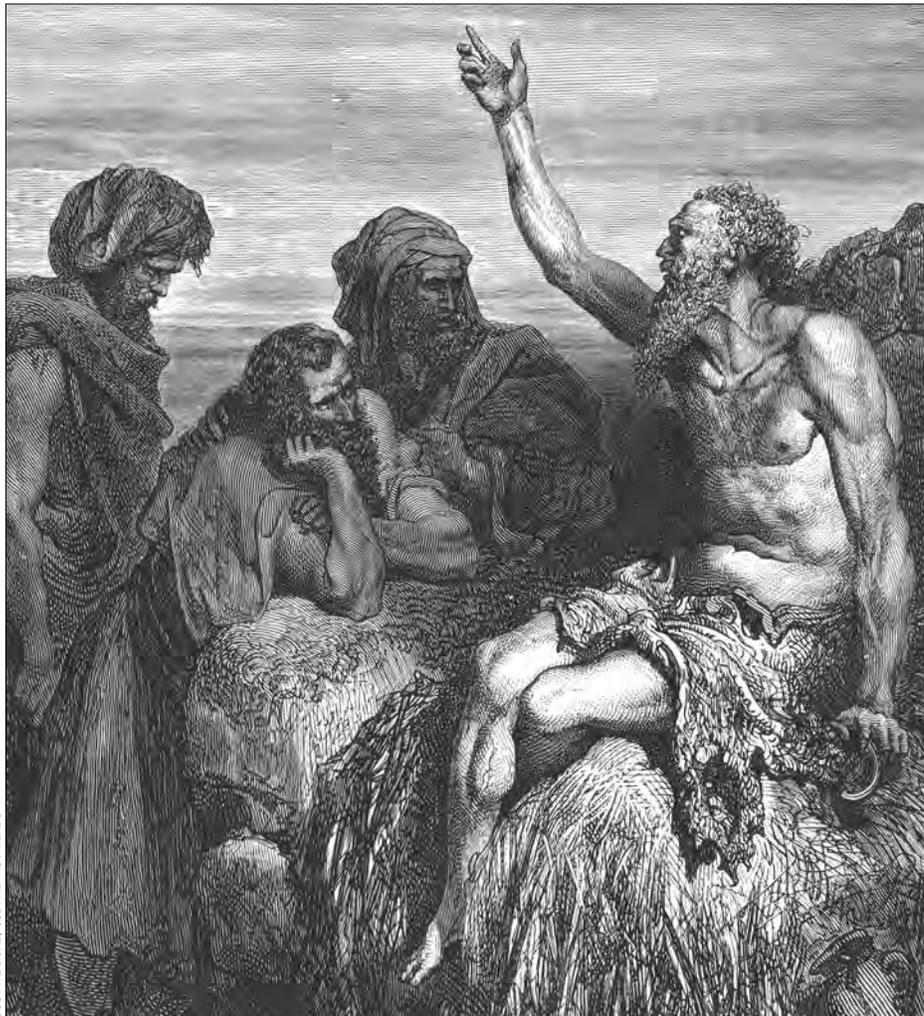
- The god I *don't* believe in is the god who has a few chosen people on this planet and a gazillion un-chosen people.

- The god I *don't* believe in says "no" to girls to passing the sacrament, or blessing the sacrament, or becoming bishops, or stake presidents, or apostles, or prophets.

- The god I *don't* believe in is against same-sex marriage and iffy

sense of the mysterious. It is the underlying principle of religion as well as all serious endeavor in art and science. He who never had this experience seems to me, if not dead, then at least blind. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness. In this sense, I am religious. To me it suffices to wonder at these secrets and to attempt humbly to grasp with my mind a mere image of the lofty structure of all that there is.⁷

Two philosophers also champion respecting that which cannot be known. Aristotle's advice is "to seek no more precision on any subject matter than its nature allows." William James adds: "I am no lover of disorder and doubt as such. Rather do I fear



GUSTAVE DORÉ, "JOB AND HIS FRIENDS"

to lose truth by the pretension to possess it already wholly.⁸ Do we miss the point when we try to be clearer than clarity warrants? Is the promise of certitude a promise that cannot be kept?

Listen to the advice the poet Rilke has for us:

Be patient with all
That is unresolved in your heart.
Try to love the questions
themselves
Like locked rooms and books
That are written in a very foreign
tongue.
Do not seek the answers
That cannot be given
Because you would not be able to
live them.
And the point is, to live
everything.
Live the questions now and
perhaps without noticing it
You will live along some distant
day
Into the answers.⁹

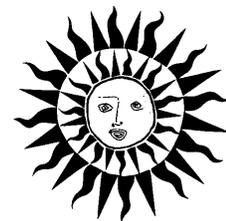
PERHAPS the proper response to our awesome universe is simply gratitude. Gratitude that we have been bequeathed scriptures that are not monolithic, internally consistent treatises, but a compilation from many sources, by many writers who muse on their diverse encounters with the sacred. We have a Bible that is a library, not a handbook. Thus we can take the Bible seriously by embracing its contradictions.

In the end, Job and Ecclesiastes invite you and me to set aside our certainties and our false certainties. They call us to relish those sacred moments when we experience the sheer wonder of what is. Wake up, they urge, get off your butt, and listen to the hum of the stars. ☞

NOTES

1. Richard Rohr, *Job and the Mystery of Suffering: Spiritual Reflections* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 161.
2. A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as*

- Possible* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2007), 118.
3. *Ibid.*, 119.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, "The Exodus is Not a Story of Liberation," *The Fourth R* 21, no. 1 (January–February 2008): 10.
6. *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols., ed., B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 5:340.
7. Michael White and John Gribbin, *Einstein: A Life in Science* (New York: Dutton, 1994), 262.
8. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 334.
9. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York: Norton, 1939)



TORREY PINES BY NIGHT

These trees are old as the idea of Eden rooted on a bluff above the Pacific, sculpted

the way O'Keefe might paint, how inner and outer landscapes nestle together

in memory inseparable: the terrible beauty of their twisted limbs,

this haunting sound heard nowhere else of wind passing over groves recalling

what first brought you here, the one you spoke of love, then, distance

the heart crossed from one dawn to the next. To go back is to invoke

such ghosts. Gates protecting the pines still close at dusk, count on that,

chains dragged across the road. On a moonless night, air heavy with sea,

you still taste in this place a trace of wilderness, the long fall from grace,

a sweetness you'd all but forgotten to crave.

—CHRISTIAN KNOELLER