

## Meeting God in Scripture: The Imagination at Work

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Let me start by saying that I do not consider myself a Biblical scholar. My Ph.D. is in Psychology, and my academic affiliation was as Associate Professor of Psychiatry in the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine before going to seminary. For the past twelve years, I've been an ordained Episcopal Priest with a concentration of training in theology. So that's the background I bring to this paper.

Let me begin by defining what I mean by the imagination. In my own work, *Imagination and the Journey of Faith*, I described the imagination as a power or capacity – expressed as early as 18 months – a genetically based power, dependent on our brain and its neurological networks. The imagination is the power which allows us humans to transcend the concrete given, to imagine the unseen; the power to draw on elements of past experience, combine or bundle them in new ways, creating new meaning for ourselves. It's the power to envision a future which is not yet, to express new meaning through ritual, symbol and linguistic metaphor.

In short, the imagination is your and my creative, embodied power to make meaning in our lives ... in community with one another.

So my first point here is that all of our meaning-making arises out of this imaginative core. In addition, this creative, imaginative power is shaped in terms of content, depth, and width, shaped in turn by life experience – again by the state of your biological equipment – including what you genetically inherit – and by your social and cultural world which surrounds you ... by the books you read, the movies you see, the music you listen to, and importantly, by the conversations you have with others. (So beware who you marry!)

And finally, and importantly for our purposes here, I believe that through your imagination – this God-given power – you and I can engage Transcendence. That is, the attuned imagination, open to God's impingement, is your and my conduit for Divine engagement. It's our human capacity to receive and respond to God's revelation in our everyday lives. And thus – and this is my point – the imagination ... yours and mine ... lies at the very core of religious belief.

And then, specifically for the purpose of this paper, the imagination is our creative capacity to meet God and glimpse some Truth for us in Scripture. So that is the subject matter of this paper.

## II

On page 15 of my book, *Imagination and the Journey of Faith*, I quote William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. And in his concluding remarks, James says, "I only translate into ... language what I may call the instinctive belief of mankind; God is real since He produces real effects. ... We and God have business with each other." And James says, "In opening ourselves to (God's) influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled. And it is this "business that we have with God – mediated by our perception and creatively filtered through our imagination – it's this business that draws us into the reading of Scripture ... with its stories which have the quality of "frictionality," to use David Jasper's words – "irritating qualities which drive us to scratch and read again – aware that there are traces left which never yield to any final or fixed form."

So let's turn to the imagination at work.

Now much of this will be familiar ground to some of you, but at least let's start off on the same page together. Sandra Schneiders, in her *The Revelatory Text*, distinguishes between the world behind the text (that is, the historical setting in which it was written, the author's intent in writing, the intended audience in that historical period, etc.) ... so the world behind the text, versus secondly, the world within the text (the literary elements of the written piece – the genre, e.g., poetry, prose, wisdom, philosophy; and if narrative, the shape of the plot, the character development, etc.) ... so the first world behind, and the second world, within the text, versus thirdly, the world before the text.

Now this last world before the text is the imagined world projected in the reader's mind, a new world imaginatively created out of the experience of engagement with a great work of art. Schneiders observes that sometimes this imaginative world created by the reader sitting before the text is short-lived. So once the book is shut, that world disappears from sight. But sometimes that world created by the imagination in response to that work is so absorbing and pivotal that the self becomes transformed in the process. She says you can walk out of a particularly affecting play or movie, or read the final paragraph of a gripping novel ... depressed and in tears... or elated and renewed in hope. She says "one has lived a different life, in a different world, and returns to the reality of everyday life (profoundly) changed in some way."

So the imagination plays a central role in our encounter with stories – including the stories of the Bible – feeding our understanding – nourishing our appropriation of their meaning – in the process of spiritual growth. Thus, I think the imagination is the gateway where human and Divine truth – glimpsed through a good story's symbols and metaphors – human and Divine truths intersect, transforming you and me in the process.

Now turning to the Bible specifically, Robert Alter has referred to it as "historicized prose fiction," because it is both history as well as art. I mean the Bible is based on history – to a certain extent at least, e.g., the Jews probably were slaves at some point in Egypt, there was a Galilean named Jesus, born at the time of Caesar Augustus, etc.

But of course the stories in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are also fictionalized works of art, aren't they ... written imaginatively by authors for certain purposes. Of course, these authors did draw from historically based traditions that had been handed down to them. But they also created "history" by drawing on symbols, metaphors, myths, fables, and legends that were part of their culture at the time. And so they filled in the historical gaps, supplying dialogue and narrative interpretation out of their own rich imaginations to convey some revelatory truth as they saw it.

So again ... reading these stories in the Bible as you would read any other stories – you can look at character development, plot, story transitions, heroes and villains, scene shifts and plot climaxes, tension and background tone, narration versus dialogue, etc.

I just finished reading Jack Miles' book entitled *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God*. And if you remember, that book came out a few years ago as a sequel to his *God: A Biography* – Miles' treatment of the character of God across the grand Hebrew Bible saga – for which I believe he won a Pulitzer prize if I'm not mistaken. Anyway, this second work of Miles – his completion of the narrative through the twists and turns of the New Testament – this work was met with controversy on various grounds which we don't need to go into here.

I'm simply going to cite one passage in this book as a wonderful example of the imagination at work ... creatively engaging the Biblical text in a way which captures the imagination of the reader ... me in this case ... who then co-creates new meaning out of a very familiar passage.

Now the text in question is familiar from John's Gospel – the story of the adulteress brought to Jesus in the Temple. As Miles points out in an aside excursus, this is a very late addition to the gospel of John with a particularly weak claim to historicity. But he says it's also just impossible to exclude it from the imagination and therefore impossible to exclude this scene from a literary reading of this episode.

Now dipping into a little history first; as you may know, in those days, any married or unmarried but betrothed woman caught having sexual relations with another man – according to Mosaic law – offended not only the husband or betrothed, but principally offended God, and was therefore to be stoned to death. And as many of you know, stoning in those days was purposely designed to include the community. So there was no designated executioner, but the men of the community, including the wronged husband or betrothed, participated in the killing.

Apparently the only exception to this general rule of group stoning was in the case of apostasy. That is, if someone was witnessed to have uttered statements of unbelief, the witnesses themselves would be the first to cast the stones. But according to Miles' imaginative reading of the text, Jesus in this scene, despite the fact that the sin was mere adultery and not apostasy, Jesus – as God Incarnate – intensifies the Mosaic law, requiring someone ... the wronged husband? ... someone to throw the first stone: "Let him among you who is without sin cast the first stone at her."

Now Miles imagines that perhaps, from the point of view of Jesus' Divine/human character, Jesus here employed the strategy of shaming by paradoxical hyper-agreement. "Go ahead stone her – if you dare!" Aimed perhaps at the young husband who, despite wanting to see his wife die in a hail of anonymous rocks couldn't quite bring himself to be the first one to fling one ... so Jesus shamed him ... and them ... into self-reflection.

Now the key point for Miles is this. His primary conclusion in this scene, as well as his argument across his whole book, is that the God of the Hebrew Bible – stern, just, at times merciless, as well as at times merciful – has here, as God Incarnate in Jesus, changed His mind ...changed His mind and has now espoused passivity, mercy, and a whole other way of achieving final redemption for not just the Jews, but for all of creation.

So back to the scene – when left alone with this presumably guilty woman taken in adultery, with the opportunity to say whatever He would wish to say to her, what does Jesus say? Miles says strikingly that Jesus says nothing either to affirm her innocence or to diminish the gravity of adultery as a sin. In fact, He chooses not to condemn her at all, even privately.

And if you consider the whole sweep of the Biblical story, if you consider that the Mosaic law of stoning was God's own law which He himself had established, here Jesus, as God Incarnate, now breaks His own law!

So Miles concludes that with Jesus' words, "Neither do I condemn you," these words reflect the fact that God Himself has changed his mind and grown more merciful ... at least as Miles imaginatively reads it.

Now whatever you may think about Miles' treatment of the overarching scriptural narrative, or

how he imaginatively sees God's character developing across the whole saga, the fact is that his creative engagement with the story drew out my own imaginative response into a co-creative dialogue with him in the process. And so aspects of Miles' creative portrayal struck me in sometimes a profound way ... in fact found its way into a sermon or two of mine.

And as Schneiders and others see it, once our imagination has been so touched, once our vision has been transformed, there may be no going back.

### III

#### Imaginative Engagement with the Bible

Now one of the criticisms of Miles' handling of the scriptural story is that his literary focus is almost totally on the character of God in the story and its development over time. So let's stand back and take a fresh look at the imaginative engagement of the book as a whole. And perhaps one way to view the Bible's story told from Genesis to Revelation is to see it as the story of God's dealing with humans whom God created as free agents ... more or less! ... at least free within cultural, biological, and social limits.

And so God's purposes with his creation are deeply complicated by human disorder, conditioned freedom, and finiteness. And reflecting on this human "vortex of greed, ambition, jealousy, lust, piety, courage, and compassion," the biblical writers creatively tell our human story through imaginatively drawn cases and characters playing out within complex plots and scenes.

And as I pointed out in chapter three of my book, these inspired authors wrote fictionalized history for readers who also could respond in only finite ways to ultimate and infinite mystery. And assuming it's yours ... that Revelation, through the prism of our imagination, is ultimately God's revelation of God's self to humans, you might agree with Robert Alter that the author of the Bible is ultimately God. But within the pages of the written and the read, given our finite minds as they contend with God's mystery, there remains ambiguity and paradox.

So my point here is that fiction fundamentally serves the biblical writers as a means of fine insight into all the "abiding perplexities of the human's creaturely condition" ... playing out against the background of God's purpose. And so along with many others, I also conclude in my work that in the last analysis, the Bible is a book about us. 'Cause we imagine ourselves in the fictionalized characters that we meet there – the farmers and fishermen, the thieves and the traitors, the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, the servants and the scribes.

In short, we see women and men of all sorts and conditions, who manage, like us, to be both good and bad, sometimes wondrously ... sometimes disastrously so. But the Central Character, of course – harking back to Jack Miles – the Central Character, as well as the final Author, hovering over and behind the text, – that central character is of course God. As someone has said, "The Bible without God is as unimaginable as Moby Dick without the whale."

This is finally God's book, the One who's not seen directly but who's glimpsed in the lives of the characters who encounter Him, and in the imaginations of those inspired to set down these stories that shaped their lives ... and that ultimately, through the power of our own imaginations, our own.

Thank you.