

ISSUE 8 | VOL 1 | WINTER 2018

Fellowship & Fairydust

The

MIDDLE EAST

*Fellowship
&
Fairydust*

Editor-in-Chief

Avellina Balestri

Assistant Editor

Sarah Levesque

Cover by

Byrnwiga

Graphic Designers

See page 96

Questions?

Comments?

Want to read more?

Check out our
website and blog at

**Fellowshipand
Fairydust.com**



Table of

Christmas Morning - Ana Lisa de Jong - 8

A Light to the Nations - Hannah Vincent - 10

The Timeless Need for Forgiveness -
Safi Kaskas - 13

Lady Judith - Sarah Levesque - 16

Photo Collage of Oman - Bard Judith - 24

Rumi, Religion & Beyond Religion
- Ya'qub Ibn Yusuf - 25

The Hajj - Arusha Afsar - 28

Laden with Fruit & Always Green
- Avellina Balestri - 31

Maimonides - Robert Rosenwald - 34

Nativity Poem - Ruth Asch - 36

I Saw Santa Punching Arius
- Ian Thomas Wilson - 38

Vayeshev: Heaven & Hell from a Jewish
Perspective - Yosef Serebryanski - 41

Magic in the Sand - T.K. Wilson - 44

A First Christmas Reflection
- Ashley Wengerd - 48

CS Lewis and the Calormenes
- Avellina Balestri - 51

Contents

Jihad In Islam: What Is The Meaning Of It?

- Katie Quirk - 55

Mandrakes - Hannah Kenner - 60

God Jesus Ministry: An Outreach for the
Christian Community of Pakistan

- Christopher Hope - 63

The Christ - Timothy Mather - 66

Listen to the Feminine

- Jeremy Henzell-Thomas - 67

Christos Razdajetsja! Christ Is Born!

- Christopher Woods - 70

Can Piety & Creativity Co-Exist? An Islamic
Perspective - Veronica Polo - 74

Oh, Ye Lovers - Avellina Balestri - 77

Can We Get Away With Our Sins?

- Mostafa Tarek - 82

Meeting in the Black Forest

- Amanda Pizzolatto - 84

There's No Santa Claus Without St. Nicholas

- Anna Trotta Githens - 89

Thank You Mother - Kashif Qaimi - 93

Our Next Issue - 98

Fellowship & Fairydust

All articles and artwork belong to their respective creators and may not be copied without permission.

We lay no claim to franchises or characters from franchises mentioned in this magazine; each is copyrighted by its own publishers and/or studios. All are used here for entertainment purposes only. See page 82 for more information and go to our website for complete disclaimers.

Image credits may be found on pg 97

"This world is not a permanent place, it's a passage"

The Middle East has served as the womb and nurturer of the world's three largest monotheistic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As such, all of us who follow these faith traditions share an integral spiritual kinship with each other, for each of them took root amidst the same harsh climate and stark surroundings, where mountains and deserts bespeak something greater than ourselves and the thirst for Living Water stings the throat and strains the eyes in search of an oasis. We are all seekers and finders of something that defies description, something that flourishes in spite of the elements.

Perhaps it is this atmosphere that helped to strip our forefathers down to the bone so they might hear the voice of God upon the wind, and be drawn ever deeper into the raw reality of our dependence upon the Essence of Reality for survival and sustenance. Perhaps beyond this is the riveting humanity and brokenness of it all, the cry of psalm and nasheed alike, that we might not be forgotten in the darkness of the pit but delivered from destructive forces, and that we might end this bitter era and begin a new life, face to face with our Creator who has called us so often, even if we rarely listen. We know what it is to pray, beg, prostrate ourselves, pour ourselves out in tears and lamentations before our God and King.

And yet it is when we have nowhere else to turn and our tears run wild that we find ourselves able to return to our starting point, our ultimate origin and destination. It is then we plead for, and often receive, a passage of light to guide us through this passage of life. And the Lord of the Worlds promises that He will respond. For we are all called to remember our impermanence on this earthly plain, and to prepare for the day of our final return to the Source from which we came. We are all part of the same caravan, a ribbon of white across the swirling sands, all weaving our tales around the same sparkling fires, reminding each other that lovers never sleep, but stay awake to tell stories to God.

We all share a subconscious common ground, caught in the current of a spiritual bloodstream which binds us and which will never be broken. Though our histories have often been torrid, and our current realities are still often fraught by misunderstanding and enmeshed heated debate over our doctrinal differences, we are all still the children Abraham/Ibrahim, and have collectively brought to the world the unique revelation of the oneness of God and His direct interaction with and intervention for His creation. Perhaps this is also where we inherit our passionate natures and strong wills, our fierce fervor and dedicated devotion. We have inherited the faith of our father.

For this reason, among many others, even our struggles with one another often take on the characteristics of family fights, pulled up around the same table, partaking of the same heavenly bread, yearning for the same

'S NOTE

, a road on which you are passing.” ~ Imam Ali (AS)

same divine Beloved. The *Surah Noor* captures the essence of this common vision, something which as a Catholic, I was blessed the stumble upon the first time I opened a Quran in a bookstore, seeking my Lord in all things:

*God is the Light of the heavens and the earth.
The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp,
The lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly white star,
Lit from the oil of a blessed olive tree,
Neither of the east nor of the west,
Whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire.
Light upon light.
God guides to His light whom He wills.
And God presents examples for the people,
and God is Knowing of all things.*

It is my hope and prayer that this issue, focusing on the spiritual and cultural traditions of the Middle East and its religious diaspora, may inspire deeper understanding and empathy for one another, as well as an appreciation for the stories we all have to share. It is no mistake that it is being released for the Christmas season, for Christians like myself the world over sing of the birth of our Savior in a small town in Palestine, and remember our spiritual homeland, a holy land, one that is forever present in our hearts and souls and for which we pray God may show His mercy, bring His justice, and grant His peace.

Shalom aleichem שלום עליכם

As-salamu alaykum السلام عليكم

Pax tecum

Peace be with you

Avellina Balestri, Editor-in-Chief

**The staff of Fellowship & Fairydust Publications
would like to wish you and your family
peace, joy and blessings this Christmas Season
and throughout the New Year.**





MORE THAN MEMORY

Tolkien Spiritual Conference

*A conference celebrating the spiritual imagination
& artistic legacy of J.R.R. Tolkien*

25-26 MAY 2019

Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford

SACRAMENTALIMAGINATION.COM

Christmas Morning

By Ana Lisa de Jong

God came to us.

His journey began as a seed.

The smallest treasure, placed by the mightiest hand
into the secret place of a daughter of Adam,
that we in good time may receive.

God came to us.

The longest journey.

Thousands of years, universes spanned,
waiting for a time ordained from the time of Eve,
to patiently grow from the smallest seed.

God came to us.

On a donkey's back, in a warm dark womb enveloped.

He came in humility, in vulnerability
and borne by love enacted in obedience,

He was carried to His destiny, to outwork His mighty plan.

God came to us.

And like a giant apple tree,
hewn from the smallest pip He grew,
as a babe in need, in total dependence, in Mary's womb.
Until it was our time, our turn, to make Him room.

God came to us.
But there was no room.

The inn was full and not one would let Him in.
As though there was a flaw in His mighty plan,
which may be, if not for the rightness of His humble
origins.

For God came to us.
Not only as a King, but as a servant.
And only a stable, which opened wide its doors
could serve as the birthplace of a babe,
who was both King and ransom to us all.

God comes to us still.
In the form of gracious, humble, sacrificial love.
In the form of His precious one and only Son.
The gift of Christmas, that has never stopped giving,
since that first wondrous Christmas morn.

A Light to the Nations

By Hannah Vincent

*“The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
Upon those who lived in a land of gloom
a light has shone...”*

Isaiah’s prophetic voice shouts amid a dark, gloomy, and torn world. Instantly he makes use of the word “light”, not skimping by mentioning it just once, but twice. We’ve all experienced it – walking down the road at night without lampposts to guide the way, waking up in the early hours of the morning to get ready for work, or driving down a highway with nothing but your miniscule headlights to offer a smidgen of illumination. We’ve all experienced darkness, whether it’s in the literal, figurative, or spiritual sense. There’s a physical darkness, the absence of light that causes our eyes to dilate and struggle to see so we can find our destination. Figurative darkness can be present in our mind in our effort to find answers to questions we have daily. Spiritual darkness (perhaps the bleakest of all), can occur when we do not know the truth of God’s love or when we experience the cross of desolation. In the beginning of this passage, Isaiah’s words could include any of the forms of darkness in which we humans can be involved.

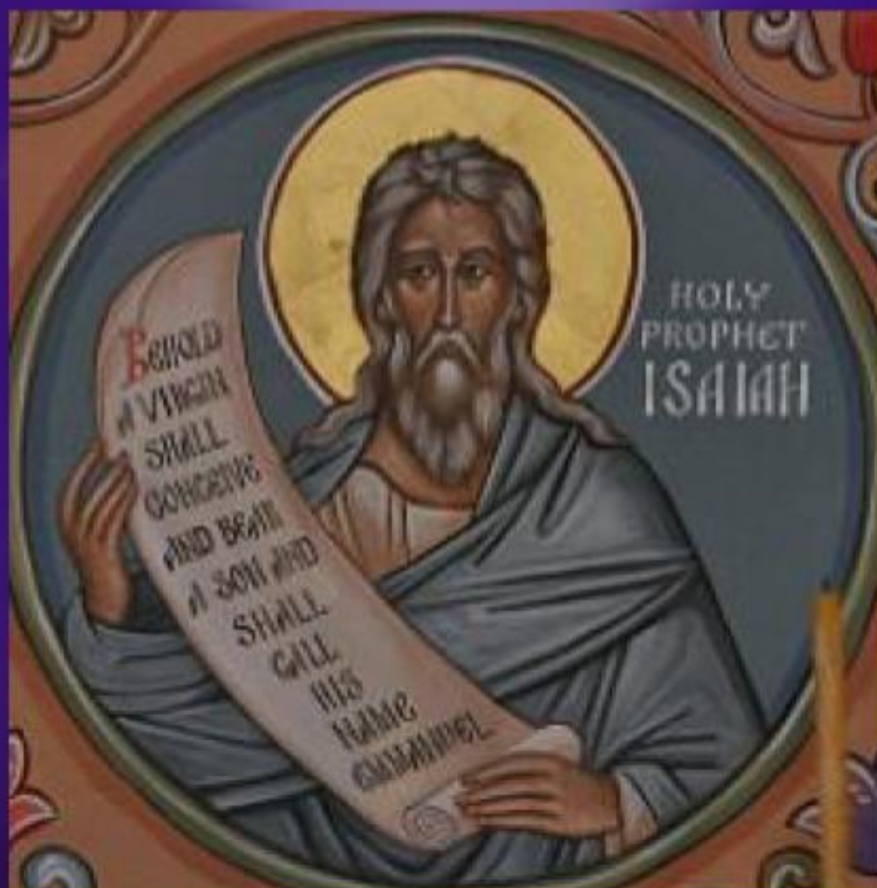
*You have brought them abundant joy
and great rejoicing;
They rejoice before you as people rejoice at harvest,
as they exult when dividing the spoils.*

Not many of us can say we know the feeling of harvesting; that’s what grocery stores and markets are for, nowadays. Finding and buying food is convenient. We don’t have to prepare and till the field, plant, tend, and harvest our food once it’s grown in a span of several months. The majority of us simply drive to a store and find the best deal on food we want. Since it’s easy and we don’t manually labor in the process, I suppose we’ve lost a sense of appreciation for the food that appears on our tables. Most of us don’t truly work for our food. We don’t know what it’s like to toil side by side with family, friends, and neighbors to bring forth vegetation to nourish us. But of course, this was the reality for a number of individuals and still is today, depending on where you live. Numerous factors come into play when harvesting – rain, sun, environment, wildlife...imagine the joy families felt when a bountiful harvest

came in, ensuring survival during cold months and the knowledge their bellies would be full. They are glad to share their riches of the harvest with others, wanting to spread the goodness and spoils. Isaiah speaks of a joy that rivals the joy of an ample harvest, which few things on earth can compare to it.

*For the yoke that burdened them,
the pole on their shoulder,
The rod of their taskmaster,
you have smashed, as on the day of Midian.*

Burdens. Weights. The cares of the world. All the to-do lists and chores that never seem to end. They can make everyday life daunting at times. For some more than others, it's a struggle that consumes their entire being. Once more, Isaiah speaks not only of literal yokes, poles, and rods, but the binding worries that seek to entangle our lives. The taskmaster he mentions doesn't have to be the daunting man with a snapping whip, but simply the dark clouds of stress, worry, and anxiety. Isaiah's words spark hope again into the darkness of our lives, filling us with the expectation of the One who will gladly take our burdens from us, whatever they may be. If we are brave enough to surrender control, the constant thoughts and worries plaguing our minds will be smashed with God's peace.



*For every boot that tramped in battle,
every cloak rolled in blood,
will be burned as fuel for fire.
For a child is born to us, a son is given to us;
upon his shoulder dominion rests.
They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero,
Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.*

All of the control we thought we had turns to ashes in the presence of God. All of the effort kingdoms, princes, and lords put into winning wars and conquering the world is for naught in the end. When it is done simply for personal gain at the cost of the lives of others, where is the meaning? At the end of it all, was it worth it? Isaiah points out that worldly mementos, be it a country, a house, or food, are hollow when compared to the glory of God. The world is given the greatest gift of all – not wealth, not pleasure, not possessions, but a son. A Wonder-Counselor. A Hero. A Father-Forever. The Prince of Peace. In one sentence this promised Savior shows He will not only be a defender but an advocate; he will bring harmony and justice, and will love tenderly.

*His dominion is vast
and forever peaceful,
Upon David's throne, and over his kingdom,
which he confirms and sustains
By judgment and justice,
both now and forever.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this!*

These words contain a promise – God will reign and govern with a sure and mighty hand, seeking to perfect and sustain the human race. Isaiah utilizes a powerful word in the last sentence: zeal. Zeal! That is having passion, ardor, energy, and enthusiasm for an object or cause; the coming Savior, Jesus, will have a zeal for His kingdom, which includes us! We are His kingdom, we are the Body of Christ, we are the Church on earth. Isaiah calls to that innermost recess of our hearts – get ready. God's love will sweep the earth and make it new, despite any obstacles or setbacks. Even though we stumble and fall amidst our personal darkness, there will always be a light ready to guide us home.

The Timeless Need for Forgiveness

By Safi Kaskas

Just as it is important to believe in God's mercy and forgiveness, it is also necessary to base our relationship with others on forgiveness. To expect God's forgiveness, we should forgive those who do wrong to us. Forgiving a friend, even forgiving one's enemies is one of the most important teachings found in all scriptures. In the Qur'an, God has described the Believers as "those who avoid major sins and gross indecencies, and even if they become angry, they will forgive" (42:37). And in another verse: "Those who give in good times and in bad, suppress their rage and forgive other people - God loves those who do good deeds" (03:134). In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus taught: "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) taught: "You don't do evil to those who do evil to you, but you deal with them with forgiveness and kindness." Yet, at the same time he was teaching all of us to forgive and be kind, he was teaching us to ask God for forgiveness. He prayed: "O God, You are the Most Forgiving, You love to forgive, so forgive me" (At-Trimidhi & Ibn Majah). Such are the teachings of Prophet Muhammad to his followers—forgive others before asking God for forgiveness. A believer usually knows that he/she always falls short of God's expectations. We can fall victim to our own ego. We can be very abusive when others try to abuse us. We need God's mercy and forgiveness all the time. It is wrong to assume at any time that one will find eternal salvation without God's forgiveness and grace.

Your birth is God saying that you matter, that you have an indispensable contribution to make to the world. Since your contribution is essential, no problem should impede you from achieving the purpose for which you were created. You should rise above the pain others have caused you and find the love and strength to forgive both the other and yourself.

Many people however, have misconceptions about what forgiveness really means. Forgiveness is not about finding excuses for the offending person's behavior or pretending it didn't happen. Forgiveness is a process through which you need to become consciously aware of what happened, why you are hurt, and who caused you to hurt, and you need to consciously decide to free yourself from that predicament by building the confidence necessary to declare that you will no longer remain locked in that situation as a victim; that you will no longer perpetuate negative life patterns through blame and anger; that you will instead access the love God gives each one of us in order to fulfill the unique and singular purpose for which each one was created.

God gave each one of us direct access to Him, to seek shelter in Him every time we are hurt, to seek help to overcome pain caused by others, to heal from every hurt or abuse. But above all, God gave us the ability to forgive. It is one of the resources that God has given each one of us. But it is up to us to use it.

We will begin to heal when we let go of past hurts, forgive those who have wronged us and learn to forgive ourselves for our mistakes.

Hence, we should free ourselves from the hold of our own injured ego and forgive. Forgiveness is freedom. But freedom from what? Freedom from the bondage of an injured ego, from seeking revenge, from blaming others instead of total submission to God's will.

Forgiveness is not a gift to the other as much as it is a gift one gives to oneself. It reconciles us with people and with our Creator. So watch yourselves. "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them" (Luke 17:3-4).

A group of people who do not forgive their oppressor will always be in bondage to their desire for revenge. Haven't they heard the Qur'an reminding them: "You will always find deceit in all but a few, forgive them and forget (their oppression). God loves those who honor Him by forgiving" (5:13). "Do not say, "I will repay evil"; Wait for the LORD, and He will save you" (Proverbs 20:22).

By the same token a nation that does not forgive its enemies will always be in bondages to pain and guilt. Its guilt will always stalk it, until that nation builds enough courage and good sense for reconciliation with its enemies. "Good and evil are never equal. Repel evil with good, and your enemy will become like an intimate friend" (41:34). This is a principle that applies to all of us, whether

as individuals or as states.

The wars we are witnessing today are simply based on selfishness and a lack of empathy. They are driven by a desire to rob and abuse other nations, by egocentrism and selfishness that is leading them to aggression, whereas God teaches us: "but do not be aggressors, for God does not love aggressors" (02:190), "and let not the enmity and hatred of others make you avoid justice. Be just: that is nearer to piety" (al-Maa'idah 5:8).



Lady Judith

By Sarah Levesque

"Holofernes is coming! Nebuchadnezzar's general is invading! He's got a huge army of Assyrians with him!"

A man ran past the house, calling his terrifying news out into the early morning air. He startled me so much, I dropped my mistress' meal and it went all over the floor. Of course it had to land where the chamber pot had been spilled earlier - now it was inedible! I cursed under my breath in Egyptian - my native language. Deborah, the housemaid, would have my head for this!

Hurriedly I scooped up the bread and meat, throwing a towel over the spilled honey so no one would step in it. Tossing the plate of ruined food onto the table, I hastily grabbed another plate and filled it. I took the stairs carefully - only last week I had broken three dishes and a tray by tripping on the staircase. I gained the roof without incident and, waiting outside the tent that took up most of the space on the flat roof, spoke to alert my mistress of my presence.

"Lady Judith?"

"Come in." Her voice was low and musical, as beautiful as she.

I entered the tent. Though it was harvest time, the tent was dark, hot, and stuffy. Don't ask me why, but Lady Judith had lived here year-round ever since her husband, Manasseh, died at the barley harvest three years before. She only used the house on feast days and only ate on the Sabbath and the day before. She amazed me by this - how could one who ate so little stay so beautiful? But today was the Sabbath, which was why I was bringing her food. I set it down on the small table before her and waited, hands clasped, eyes down, as befitted a slave, waiting to tell my news.

"Well?" Lady Judith said.

I took this as permission to speak. "Holofernes is coming! Here! To Bethulia! Now! Ma'am," I added quickly.

"And who is Holofernes?" she asked.

I gaped. How could anyone not know who Holofernes was? Then I remembered - she stayed in this tent nearly all week, just praying, and she heard none of the news or the rumors.

"He's Nebuchadnezzar's general! You know, Nebuchadnezzar of Assyria? Holofernes has already marched against



Damascus and razed it to the ground, and now he's here!" I said, all in a rush.

"Hmm," was my mistress' only answer. She was eating the food I had brought for her, but this was not the answer I was looking for.

"They say he's gonna raze Jerusalem, too!" I added.

"He has to get there first," Lady Judith said calmly. "And who is 'they'?"

"Everyone!" I said, exasperated at her lack of emotion. "It's all over how an Ammonite leader named Achior told Holofernes that your God will defend you Jews, and how Holofernes had him bound and brought him to your wall - the guards went and rescued him, and he's dining with Lord Uzziah tonight!"

"Perhaps this man will give us some advice on how to defeat Holofernes," Lady Judith said practically.

"Why? Won't your God protect you?" I asked sarcastically.

"Even David had to fight Goliath with his sling - the Lord needs your cooperation."

"Wait - your omnipotent God needs my cooperation?" I was treading a thin line and I knew it - I had been sold many times for my sassiness. But my mistress did not react to my tone.

"Nothing good will come to you if you don't cooperate with Him," she returned.

"I suppose that's why I'm a slave," I grumbled under my breath.

I helped Judith dress, then brought her empty plate and tray back to the kitchen. The towel on the floor reminded me of my earlier disaster, and I cursed under my breath again - honey makes everything so sticky! And that plate of ruined food - what would I do with it to keep Deborah from finding out? Looking around, I realized the plate was nowhere in sight.

Just then Deborah came into the kitchen. "You!" Her mean eyes glinted at me craftily. "So the high and mighty Mara thought she could keep a plate of the mistress' food for herself, did she? A slave girl like you doesn't need such food!"

My mind was racing - what would my punishment be?

"What did you do with the food?" I asked the question aloud before I could stop myself - another trait that had gotten me into trouble many times.

"What do you think I did with it? I ate it!" the housemaid said, ready to relish my despair at losing a plate of fine food.

Noticing this, I acted as downcast as I could, but I was seething with inner laughter. Not getting the reaction she looked for, Deborah stalked out of the room. I burst out laughing, covering my mouth the best I could so she wouldn't hear. Naomi, the kitchen girl and my only friend in this house, had been watching, and she came over to see what had sent me into such spasms of mirth.

Gasping for air, I told her, "I spilled food on the floor where I dropped the chamber pot earlier, and Deborah ate it!"

Naomi nearly fell over with laughter. As soon as we got control of ourselves, she helped me to clean up the spilled honey, and she kept telling me how lucky I was that Deborah hadn't known what really happened. Little did I know that in only a few weeks anyone would have been glad to eat that spoiled food, for the siege started that day. No one was allowed in or out of the city - Holofernes' huge army of Assyrians killed everyone who tried.

Five weeks dragged by. The food ran out and the cisterns went dry. There was a large spring outside the city, but Holofernes' men were camped around it. The lack of food didn't harm Lady Judith - she barely ate anything to begin with. But I could see that the thought of the starving children of the city was bothering her. So I went straight to her when I heard the news about Lord Uzziah, the town leader.

"Lady Judith! Lord Uzziah had promised the people that he will surrender in five days!"

Lady Judith looked up from her prayers - the woman was always praying!

"What?"

"Lord Uzziah's gonna surrender in five days!" I repeated. "What's gonna happen then? Will they raze the city?" My real question was "what will they do to me?" but I didn't ask it. How would they know that I'm just a slave girl who had no part in it?

"Mara!"

I snapped back to Lady Judith, realizing it was the second time she had called my name.

"Yes ma'am?" I answered meekly.

"Go to Lord Uzziah's house and ask him to dinner. Then go to the houses of the elders Chabris and Charmis and ask them to dinner, too. Tell all three that I would like to see them about Holofernes. Then come back and help me to dress."

"You want Lord Uzziah, Chabris and Charmis here?" I asked, astounded. "You're gonna have them to dinner? But you never give dinners!"

"That's true," my mistress admitted. "But my husband was good friends with all three. Besides, the Lord told me to ask them, and I believe they will come."

"Your God told you to invite the town leaders to dinner?" I was openly skeptical - how could a god talk to anyone, and why a woman?

"Yes, He did," Lady Judith said simply. "Run along, now."

So I did. First I went to Lord Uzziah's large house, to the servant's door. It was opened by an old woman.

"My mistress, Lady Judith, wife of Manasseh, has bidden me to tell Lord Uzziah that her God wishes him to join her for dinner," I told the old woman.

"Humph," she answered.

"I'm to wait for a response," I added - I was sure Lady Judith would want one, though she didn't ask for one.

The old woman grumbled, muttering under her breath, "Oh you are, are you?"

She turned around and ordered a maid to pass on the message and get an answer. I waited, and after about fifteen minutes the maid came back and spoke to the old woman. She harrumphed again.

"Well?" I asked. The old woman's sluggishness was annoying me, and she reminded me of Deborah - neither seemed to do anything.

"Lord Uzziah will dine with Lady Judith tonight, as it is the Lord's request," she answered grumpily.

I quickly spoke my thanks and a goodbye and left. Next I went to Chabris' house, then to Charmis', and both said that they would come. As I walked home, I saw gaunt children sitting like old men, too weak to play, and I realized why Uzziah had promised to surrender. *But how many will die before the five days are up?* I wondered grimly. *And how many will the Assyrians kill when we surrender?*

I reached the house and went to tell Naomi that she'd have three extra people to cook for.

"Where am I going to get the food?" she wondered aloud.

I left her trying to scrounge something to serve while I went to the roof and told Lady Judith the news. She seemed like she already knew they would come, which I thought odd. But maybe her god had told her this, too.

I brought her washing water, and helped her into a dark dress for dinner. Why great ladies needed help to get dressed was beyond me, but I did as I was bidden. Once she was dressed, I ran back down stairs - almost falling headlong - to open up the dining room. It was unused but not dirty, since Deborah insisted that it be cleaned once a week, a job that usually fell to me. But it needed a quick dusting before it was ready for company, especially company as important as the leader and the elders of the city.

After the dining room was spotless and the food was ready, Deborah sent me upstairs to change into my clean dress to serve the food. Lady Judith looked beautiful in her dark dress in the candlelight. She was speaking earnestly to the men, but I was too occupied in trying to serve the food without incident to pay much attention. I only heard snatches of the conversation, which was mainly one sided: "Why have you tempted God? ... All Judea will lie waste... Go to the gates and I and my maid will go forth..." These phrases scared me, especially the last. *Where is she going?* I wondered. *And why is she bringing Deborah with her?* I stood behind the door, trying to hear more, until Deborah caught me and shooed me away. But she took up my position, the hypocrite. Not one of the men ate much, and Lady Judith ate nothing. When they were finished with what they did eat, I cleared the food away, hiding it before Deborah noticed. I took part of it to feed Naomi and myself, and the rest I planned to give to the starving children I'd seen earlier - the food would go bad soon anyway, despite the work Naomi had put into it. Eventually, near midnight, the men left, and Lady Judith called my name.

"Mara, bring all the coals in the fireplace up to my tent."

This command confused me, but Naomi explained that devout Jews wore sackcloth and threw ashes on their heads when they really wanted something from their god. This made no sense to me, but I shoveled coal into a bucket and brought it up to the rooftop. Lady Judith had already taken off her dinner dress, leaving only her sackcloth undergarment, proving that she did not need my help to dress. She had let down her beautiful, long, dark hair, and she was lying face down on the floor. I set down the bucket and left the tent quietly. I went to clean up the dining room and close it up again. Then I tiptoed up to the roof - Lady Judith

was crying, praying aloud. Feeling bad for eavesdropping on her prayer I crept back to the house, to my bed.

Before sunrise I was up, looking for the children I had seen the previous day. When they came out, I gave them the leftover food from the banquet. They gobbled it up quickly. As soon as it was all gone, I returned home and brought Lady Judith her washing water. She was still lying face down on the floor, softly praying aloud.

Noticing me, she ended her prayer, stood up and said, "I need your help."

The next few hours were spent in helping my mistress realize all her great potential in beauty. She had a bath, and we washed and brushed her long, dark hair until it nearly glowed. Then I put her hair up in the latest fashion, with a tiara she found among her jewelry.

Deborah had Naomi wash and iron Lady Judith's best dress from before her husband died - it was a light blue color, made of a lightweight cloth imported from Egypt by the rich Manasseh. The dress still fit her, and she looked beautiful. She put on a tasteful necklace and matching bracelet, rings and earrings. Then she pulled out a basket full of fine makeups I hadn't seen since I was kidnapped from Egypt. I clapped my hands when I saw them, and I carefully applied them onto Lady Judith's face - not much, just enough to complement her natural beauty and bring out her dark eyes. We finished when the sun was nearing its peak. I was so hungry that my stomach growled loudly.

Lady Judith turned to me and said, "Perhaps we should eat before setting out."

I was embarrassed, but my mistress just laughed. I hadn't heard her laugh before, but it was as beautiful as her voice, and it was infectious. Soon we were both giggling like children, though I couldn't help but wonder how I was even allowed to laugh aloud, not to mention with my mistress - I'd known girls who were beaten almost to death for laughing quietly in a corner while their mistresses were laughing.

When I got my breath back, I ran down to the kitchen ahead of my mistress. "Naomi! Quickly - Lady Judith is coming downstairs! Into the kitchen!! For food! Hurry - find something for her to eat!"

Lady Judith was not far behind me. She swept into the room and sat at the worn table.

"You needn't set anything fancy," she told Naomi. "Just some bread will do. But set out enough for each of you, as well."

Naomi obeyed, but she looked at me, mystified. I shrugged my shoulders, just as confused. Naomi set out a loaf of bread and a jar of honey. Lady Judith cut the bread into large slices and, spreading a liberal amount of honey on each, handed two slices to me and two to Naomi. She took one for herself and bit into it. Naomi and I stood, holding the bread, wondering at the odd circumstance - not only was Lady Judith breaking her habit of only eating on the Sabbath and the day before, but she was eating at the kitchen table, with slaves!

"Go ahead - eat it!" she said, smiling at us. "And sit down, both of you!"

We obeyed automatically, sitting at the plain wooden table and eating our bread. It was very good, considering it was rather old - flour was nearly nonexistent in the besieged city.

Just then, Deborah passed the door to the kitchen. She backtracked and stood in the doorway in such a way that she could see both Naomi and myself, but not Lady Judith. She was outraged at the sight of us sitting down together and eating.

"What do you think you're doing," she asked, "eating perfectly good bread and honey? That is for Lady Judith! Have you even brought her washing water, you lazy girls? What would she say if she saw you making free with her good food?"

"I said that they can have as much as they want, Deborah," Lady Judith put in.

Deborah's jaw dropped, and she opened and closed her mouth a few times, like a fish in the Nile does when it's caught.

"Lady Judith!" she finally managed. "I didn't see you there! Please excuse my outburst - I thought that they... That..." she trailed off.

I kept my eyes on my bread, knowing if I looked at Naomi I'd burst out laughing.

"I suppose that you don't think that they should be eating with me, or that I should even be here," Lady Judith said. "It is unusual, but I see no harm."

"Of course not, my Lady," Deborah answered meekly.

"I see no reason why these girls, who do most of the work, shouldn't get as much good food as you do," my mistress added bluntly.

"Yes, yes, of course," said Deborah faintly.

"Oh, and Deborah? I would like you to find Mara's prettiest dress and iron it. No, wait..." She sized me up with a glance. "Go into my room and find one of my old dresses and iron it - I think she'll fit into them perfectly. And while you're there, get two or three for each of us, though you do not have to iron the others."

I gasped, realizing what this meant. "My Lady... surely you can't mean... you're letting me... Are you serious?" I stuttered.

She laughed again. "Yes, I'm serious - I want you to wear one of my old dresses - we both need to make a good impression."

She made a flicking motion with her fingers at Deborah, who went off in a huff. There would be trouble ahead for me because of this, I figured.

"An impression on whom?" Naomi asked, even more confused than I was.

"On Holofernes and his men," Lady Judith answered.

"Holofernes? You can't be serious!" I squeaked, my voice cracking in my amazement and horror. "Why?" I added.

But she was serious, and she wouldn't say why. I wondered if this had to do with the events of last night. But soon I had forgotten this again, as I looked down at myself in Lady Judith's gray dress. Naomi had pulled my hair up and put sandals on my feet.

"So this is what being rich feels like," I said quietly to myself. I returned to the kitchen to find Lady Judith waiting.

"You look lovely!" she said to me.

I was surprised, and went to look at myself in the water bucket. I wasn't as beautiful as my mistress, but I didn't look like plain old Mara the slave anymore. I turned back to Lady Judith, and she handed me a large leather bag.

"Here," she said. "This has our extra dresses and our food - I can't imagine what unlawful things they eat in that camp." She shuddered.

I realized she really was bringing me - me, not Deborah! - with her, wherever she was going. I wondered about the enemy soldiers and why we were going to their camp, but Lady Judith said no more, and I was afraid to ask. I shouldered the heavy bag and she led me to the city gate where three men were waiting. I recognized Lord Uzziah, Chabris, and Charmis, and I almost laughed aloud at their surprise - they barely recognized my beautiful mistress, and I knew they didn't recognize me. I thought they'd fall down and worship Lady Judith, but they managed to compose themselves, though they were still wide-eyed. They had a brief conversation, then they blessed her, the gates were opened, and we walked out of the city.

We traveled without saying anything, and soon we heard the pounding and jingle of an approaching cavalry troop. Lady Judith kept walking until we reached the spring. There the troop of more than one hundred Assyrians overtook us and surrounded us. They were all typical Assyrians - tall, with dark curly hair, much like Lady Judith. I put down the heavy food bag as the leader - a captain - spoke.

"Who are you, and why are you here?"

He, as well as his soldiers, was obviously taken with my mistress' beauty. I felt their rough gazes pass over me, but I stood as firm as my mistress.

"I am a Hebrew," Lady Judith told him. "I'm leaving Bethulia because my people have been unfaithful to God by eating unlawful foods. He will punish them by allowing you to demolish them. God has told me to seek refuge with Holofernes so I will not be harmed. I can show you the passages through the mountains, but you have nearly starved the people out, and you will soon be able to take the city without a fight."

"You will not be harmed - you're much too beautiful!" the captain exclaimed ardently in rough Hebrew. I wondered if he realized how backwards his statement was as he finished, "We will bring you to Holofernes and you can tell him your story yourself."

He dismounted from his horse and helped Lady Judith up, himself mounting behind another man. My mistress did not sit astride, but she sat well in the saddle, and I realized she must have ridden before, unlike me. Suddenly I was grabbed under the shoulders. I found myself sitting sideways on a horse in front of a young Assyrian. He smiled cheerily, his brown eyes merry. Unable to regain control of the situation, I turned my head away. He laughed and, taking one of my arms, snaked it around his neck. I automatically grabbed one hand with the other as the horse moved.

"My bag!" I cried, as he seemed to be leaving it behind.

"Someone grabbed it," the soldier told me. "Hold on tight," he added, laughing into my ear.

The horse picked up its pace, and I had no choice but to listen to his advice. I closed my eyes tightly and wondered how my mistress was getting on by herself. Had I opened my eyes, I would have seen her galloping the captain's horse expertly, rejoicing in the exercise.

After a short ride at breakneck speed, we slowed down. I heard a challenge and an answer, and knew we had arrived at the camp. We soon stopped moving entirely, and I opened my eyes. We were in front of an extra-large tent, much larger than the one on Lady Judith's roof. The captain got off the other man's horse and helped my mistress to dismount. The man behind me disengaged my arms and slid off the horse, and without his support I almost fell off. But he took me by the waist and swung me down off the horse, steadying me for a moment before letting me go and standing back.

"There you are," he said simply. His voice was deep, and his Hebrew was better than that of his captain, I noticed.

"Thank you," I replied in the same tongue. "And my bag?"

Another soldier dropped it at my feet. I went to shoulder it again, but the man I had ridden with took it.

"I'll give it back after you see Holofernes," he said.

"Thank you," I said again, and joined my mistress.

I hoped the soldier wouldn't go through the bag, but he didn't seem like the kind of man who would. Not that I was sure of that – I had only known him for a few minutes, and we had spoken all of six sentences.

The captain announced us, and we entered the tent, I two steps behind my mistress, as is fitting. The inside of the tent was dark, lit only by two silver lamps held by slaves. The man before us could have only been Holofernes, but he had obviously just gotten out of his magnificent bed. His blankets, hair, and clothing were mussed, he was blinking rather quickly and he had to stifle a yawn. *What kind of man is asleep after noontime?* I wondered.

Lady Judith lay face down on the ground in front of Holofernes, and I followed suit. Another slave - one without a lamp - helped her to get up, and I scrambled to my feet to stand behind my mistress. Lady Judith repeated to the general the story she had told his captain.

"You will be safe here," Holofernes said in an oddly high voice. "I've never hurt anyone who served Nebuchadnezzar!"

"God will accomplish something through you," Lady Judith said. "Achior the Ammonite was right when he told you about my God. But my townsmen have decided to eat what is forbidden, and He is angry at them. He will use you to punish them." She continued to butter him up until he invited her to dinner.

"My maid and I will eat our own food, but thank you," she answered sweetly.

"Oh, yes. You can't have your god mad at you!" said Holofernes.

I thought I detected sarcasm in his voice, but I couldn't blame him – why would a god care what his people ate? Holofernes gave us a good-sized tent on the edge of the camp, and the captain and my horseman escorted us there, leaving their horses with the other men. When they had gone away, Lady Judith gave thanks to her God that things had gone according to plan. As I fell asleep that night, I wondered what the next part of the plan was.

The next three days went by pretty quickly. Lady Judith would pray all day, leaving me free to go where I pleased. Each night, we would go to the spring. I stood guard while Lady Judith bathed, praying and purifying herself. My mistress offered to stand guard so I could bathe, but I felt too exposed. Then we went back to our tent and slept. I spent those days talking with the women of the camp - the wives, concubines, maids, laundresses, and the others. I noticed that I had an extra shadow most of the time - the soldier who I had ridden with seemed to be making it a point to know my whereabouts. He was pretty stealthy, but once you notice that someone is following you, you keep an eye out. He wasn't doing anything obvious, just talking with other men, but he was there. On the third day, I decided to figure out what he wanted - after all, I didn't know how long we were going to be here, though there was only one more day until Lord Uzziah surrendered.

I walked straight up to the soldier and bluntly asked, "Why are you following me?"

He looked at his feet, then looked me straight in the eye and said, "You make me think of my sister, and I wouldn't want her wandering around a camp full of soldiers alone, no matter whose soldiers they were and what their general had said."

"Do you think Lady Judith is in danger?" I asked him, worried.

"Holofernes keeps a guard near her tent, though you may not have noticed," the man answered, smiling again. "My name's Tigran, but the way."

I decided I liked his smile, and I smiled back. "Well, Tigran," I said, walking towards Lady Judith's tent, "thank you for all your help. My name is Mara."

"My pleasure," he answered, walking with me.

"Do you ever stop smiling?" The question was out of my mouth before I could stop it. "Sorry, that was rude," I apologized, embarrassed.

Tigran just laughed. "I don't mind," he said. "But yes, sometimes I do stop smiling - when I'm worried, or going into battle."

"I hope there won't be a battle," I said. "Why can't your army just leave us in peace?"

"Nebuchadnezzar had a war against King Arphaxad of Media two years ago," Tigran said. He was no longer smiling. "The people of Judea, Damascus and Syria would not join his war, so now that the war is over he wants to give you a lesson."

"So, he's punishing us for not doing what he wants? He's just a big bully!"

Tigran laughed grimly. "You think Nebuchadnezzar's a bully, try being around Holofernes! He's the real bully."

"Why do you fight for him, then?" I asked, confused.

"For much the same reason as you serve your Lady Judith," he answered. "Because I must."

We arrived at Lady Judith's tent, and I said goodbye. I thought about our conversation until I fell asleep.

The next day I once again spent talking to my new friends - the women of the camp - and to Tigran. We talked about his childhood and mine - how he had grown up on the Tigris River with his sister and his brother, and how I had grown up on the Nile with my older brothers. We tried to forget that he was here to destroy my town - for that was how I had come to think of Bethulia - and that I was here to keep him from it, though he was unaware of this.

I went back to our tent in time to prepare dinner for Lady Judith and myself. Soon after we had finished eating, a voice came from outside the tent.

"Excuse me, Lady Judith?"

I opened the tent door to see a man I recognized as Holofernes' personal attendant.

"How can I help you?" I asked.

"May I speak to Lady Judith?"

"Let me ask her." I turned and looked at my mistress, who nodded. She went to the door.

"How may I serve Holofernes?" she asked.

"Lovely lady," the attendant said, as if reciting a prepared speech, "the general invites you to his tent for some drinks. Come and enjoy yourself like the Assyrian women who serve in Nebuchadnezzar's palace. This is a great honor."

"I shall be glad to accept," Lady Judith answered. "How could I refuse? I will remember this happy night as long as I live."

I thought she was laying it on a bit thick, but it made the servant happy. He gave me some lamb skins for Judith to sit on in Holofernes' tent and left.

"This is good," Judith said. "Now, I must be dressed as seductively as possible, though dressing immodestly, especially for the likes of this general, is disturbing. Perhaps we can layer it a bit, so I can take off a shawl or something to get his attention."

"Why?" I asked.

"You shall see."

Lady Judith would say no more, so I helped her dress in silence. Soon she was again dressed in a ravishing outfit, complete with jewelry and makeup. As she had requested, she had a shawl she could remove to show off her neck and arms. Then, I went to Holofernes' tent to lay out the lambskins his attendant had given to my mistress, and to prepare my lady's wine, so she would not have to drink the "unclean" wine of the Assyrians. The tent was well lit with many lamps, and there were already many men there. I looked for Tigris, but he was not among them. It seemed to be the end of a banquet for ranking officers.

Soon, Lady Judith entered the large tent. The talk ceased abruptly, as all the men turned to ogle her. Holofernes rose and went to greet her, but had trouble speaking.

Finally he spoke, slurring slightly, as if he had already had too much wine. "Join us for a drink and enjoy yourself."

"I'll be glad to, sir," my mistress replied. "This is the happiest day of my life."

She walked towards me and sat down on the lambskins. I served her wine that we had brought from home, and she drank

little while appearing to drink much. The men all around drank copious amounts of Holofernes' wine. I tasted it, and it was strong and bitter. It was not surprising that the men who were not already drunk soon were. Holofernes could not take his eyes off my mistress, and he got so drunk he was practically drooling over her. He kept trying to sweet talk her, which would have been repulsive even if he had been sober. Finally, when it was late, the officers started stumbling off in twos and threes until we were the only ones left. Even the servants had left, which was no loss, as they had been uncouth and rough, making coarse jokes and lewd references. Holofernes stumbled to his bed, tried to invite my mistress to join him, and began snoring.

"Thank the Lord," Lady Judith sighed. "I thought this banquet would never end. Now, Mara, find the food bag, go outside the tent, and empty it."

Confused, I obeyed silently. The bag was already nearly empty, and it took two minutes to take out what little remained. Lady Judith soon came out of the tent holding something I couldn't immediately identify in the dark.

Then I realized it was Holofernes' head!

She put it into the bag and gave it back to me. I felt sick - severed heads are nasty things. Then we walked back to Bethulia. I wished Tigran would come by with his horse, but we had to walk the whole way. Which was probably a good thing, considering he would have been duty bound to give an alarm.

When we finally reached Bethulia, Lady Judith cried, "Open the gate! Open the gate! Our God is still with us. Today he has once again shown his strength in Israel and used his power against our enemies!"

The gates opened, and we were soon surrounded by the townspeople, who looked gaunt after only being around well-fed soldiers for a few days. Naomi found me, and gave me a huge smile and a great big hug.

She asked me what had happened, but then our mistress shouted, "Praise God! He has used me to destroy our enemies!" She held up the head of Holofernes, and everyone gasped. "Here!" she cried. "This is the head of Holofernes, the general of the Assyrian army, and here is the mosquito net from his bed, where he lay in a drunken stupor. The Lord used a woman to kill him. As the Lord lives, I swear that Holofernes never touched me, although my beauty deceived him and brought him to his ruin. I was not defiled or disgraced; the Lord took care of me through it all."

I had been tired when the gates had opened, but now my adrenaline was racing and I was as awake as anyone else. They all bowed down and prayed.

Then Lord Uzziah turned to my mistress. He praised her and their god. "May God reward you with blessings, because you remained faithful to him and did not hesitate to risk your own life to relieve the oppression of your people," he finished.

Then some men brought Achior to Lady Judith to identify the head, and he fainted at the sight of it. When he came to, Achior bowed to my mistress in respect. Then, Lady Judith told the whole story of how she came to be holding Holofernes' head. I nearly fell asleep against Naomi, as hearing the story was not nearly as interesting as living it. Besides, I had had a very long day. Finally, Lady Judith finished, and Achior professed his belief in the God of Judah as the only god. I still wasn't sure that he was the only god, but I figured he was the most powerful one.

Then, Lady Judith gave the severed head to Lord Uzziah. "Hang it on the wall, and at sunrise, march out to attack the Assyrian outpost. Without Holofernes, they will be routed."

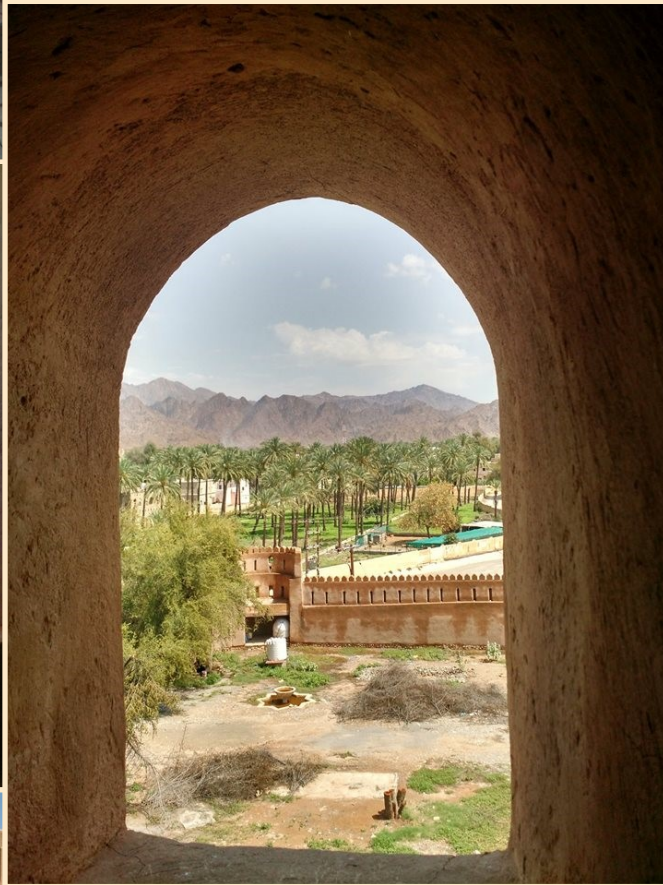
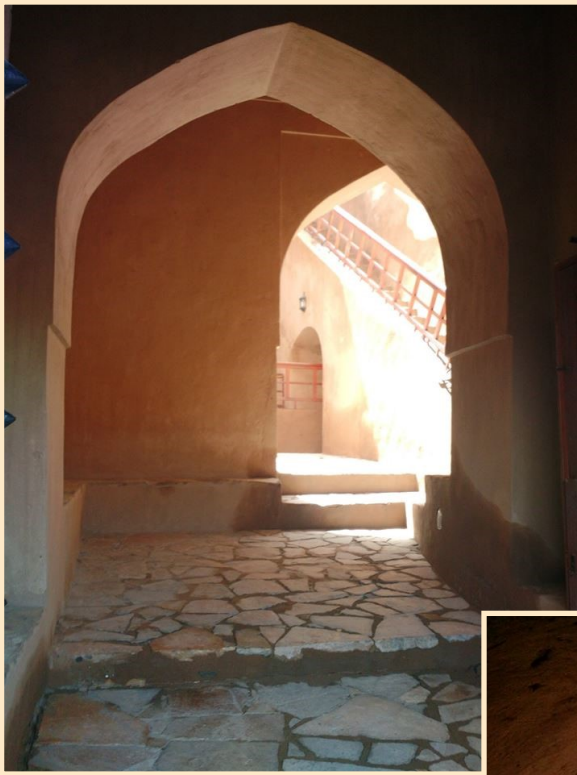
At last, we got to go home. And oh! I slept so well that night, safe in my own house, in my own rough bed.

The next day was one of great rejoicing - the Assyrian army had gotten up to find their general headless, and they had all run away from Bethulia's little army, just as Lady Judith had said. The armies of the surrounding areas fought the Assyrians as they ran, and inflicted heavy losses on them, as we learned when our soldiers came back. I hoped Tigran got away safely.

The whole town went down into the camp to gather all the valuable things the Assyrians had left behind, but we didn't find everything until more than a month had gone by. Lady Judith received the largest portion of the spoils. She decided to dedicate all of Holofernes' property to her god. We filled up lots of wagons and went to Jerusalem, along with lots of others from Bethulia. My mistress led the procession, singing and dancing and praising the god of Israel.

* * *

Not long after, Lady Judith set me free, but I continued to work for her for a few years, until a certain tall Assyrian with dark, curly hair and brown eyes came back and once more swept me off my feet and sat me in front of him on his horse.



**Photos of
Oman by
Bard Judith**

RUMI, RELIGION & BEYOND RELIGION

BY YA'QUB IBN YUSUF



Here we are, not just in the season of Chanukah and Christmas and various other festivals, but in the season of the “Urs” of Mevlana, Rumi’s “wedding” night on December 17, when he passed away from this world and returned to his divine Beloved. I want to share some short poems of his, and to invite us to consider what Rumi had to say in relation to religion.

Ibrahim Gamard is an American Mevlevi dervish, a follower of Rumi whose path in Sufism led him to embrace Islam. In 2004, he wrote a book called ‘Rumi and Islam’ in which he explains many Islamic references that are part of Rumi’s work but were left out of most of the popular English translations. In 2008, Gamard, collaborating with a Persian scholar originally from Afghanistan, published a careful, annotated translation of *The Quatrains of Rumi* (there are nearly 2000!). It’s now plain to see that in Rumi’s four-line poems there are many references to Muhammad, the Quran and to Islam... and also direct references to Allah, which simply means “the Divine” or “God” with a capital G. Most of these have been interpreted away in the popular English translations by Coleman Barks and others. On the other hand, a universal-sounding phrase which often pops up in Gamard’s translations is “the religion of love”. Soon I’ll present some of Gamard’s translations, which I’ve polished slightly. Some of these point to Islamic concepts, and some point us beyond Islam, or any religion. But first let’s have a look at how “the religion of love” appears a little earlier, in this poem by an important Sufi thinker whom many consider to be “the greatest Sheikh” of Sufism, Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi:

My heart has become able to take on all forms.
It is a pasture for gazelles, for monks an abbey.
It is a temple for idols, and for whoever circumambulates it, the Kaaba.
It is the tablets of the Torah and also the leaves of the Koran.
I believe in the Religion of Love,
Whatever direction its caravans may take,
For love is my religion and my faith.

And here’s one of my favorite Rumi poems, which I’ve translated into English from the Hebrew translation by my friend Alexander Feigin, based upon the original Persian. It appears in Rumi’s ‘Diwan’, a collection of both short and longer poems by Rumi that I published in Hebrew in Israel back in 2005:

My beloved! This is our connection, yours and Mine.
Wherever you walk, there I’ll be beneath your feet.
How strange the rules of the Religion of Love!
Can it be? I see Your world, but I don’t see You!

In the English we have to choose which words to capitalize, identifying them with God, and which to leave in lower case. The Hebrew, like the Persian, is more ambiguous. But I think that, upon reflection, we can see that this poem is a dialogue between God and the human being. At first God gives us the answer... and then we discover the question! I learned many years ago, from my teacher Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, that the key to understanding all kinds of esoteric texts is often to reconstruct the question that the text proceeds to answer!

And yet, for all of his proclamation of “the religion of love”, we also find poems in which Rumi speaks explicitly of the Prophet Muhammad. Let’s proceed now with some of the poems that Gamard has made available to us. In the following poem Rumi describes how the creation, and more specifically the attributes of God that sustain the creation (like Mercy, Compassion, Wisdom, Light, Life and Truth), return to their source in the divine Essence through a Complete Human Being such as the Prophet Muhammad:

The spirit that was bound within the form of the attributes,
returned to the Essence by way of Muhammad Mustafa (the Chosen).
The moment it started to go, it said in joy,
“Blessings on that joyful spirit of the Chosen!”

In another poem, Rumi states his devotion to Muhammad and to the Quran in no uncertain terms:

I am the servant of the Quran, for as long as I live.
I am the dust on the path of Muhammad Mustafa.
If anyone derives anything but this from what I say,
I am fed up with him and outraged by these words!

That’s quite a strong statement! And yet there are other poems in which Rumi speaks out strongly against identifying with being a Muslim:

Know, truly, that the lover is not a Muslim.
In the path of love, there’s no belief or unbelief.
In love there is no body, no intellect, no heart, no soul.
Anyone who hasn’t become like this, is not such a one.

One shouldn't get attached to believing this or that, and one shouldn't get attached to not believing. The path to which he is pointing goes beyond all kinds of outer and inner intellectual and emotional identification. This leads us to the well-known poem. This version, based on Gamard, reflects the Persian original:

Beyond Islam and heresy, there is a field.
For us, there is a yearning within that expanse.
The Knower who reaches there will prostrate.
There, there is neither Islam nor heresy, nor any “where”.

This is a powerful poem. Beyond the concepts of “Islam” and “heresy” and attachment to them, there is an open space... of yearning. And yet the knower or gnostic, the attained mystic who reaches this wide-open space, continues to prostrate to God. Of course we are aware that prostration is an essential feature of Islamic prayer. Yet there’s nothing at all to suggest Islam in the popular version of this poem by Coleman Barks, which I also like as well:

Out beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing,
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
things are too full to talk about. Concepts, ideas...
even the phrase “each other” doesn’t make any sense.

Coleman's version of the poem fits a world which is not "Islamic" – or, I might add, "Jewish" – a traditional world in which religion defines not just a set of beliefs but the totality of one's relationship with one's environment. Islam and Judaism aren't belief systems – they have much the same belief(s) about God. So it made sense that in Alexander Feigin's Hebrew translation he continues to say, "Beyond Islam and heresy..." My sense is that here in Israel we can better understand the original text. In America, Islam looks like some kind of exotic religion. Here we are more familiar with Islam, and we can see it being, like Judaism, a total world-view. Now Rumi is saying that we have to go beyond becoming fixed even in such a view, so as to become true "Knowers" of the Divine. It's not that we stop practicing our religion, as a response to the Divine. But we stop thinking of it as defining our identity and enter the broader spiritual "field".

I like to suggest, as an alternative to the first line, "Beyond religion and secularism, there is a field." Indeed, we live in a world in which the "secular" alternative stands opposite religion, and it too is a world-view and identity to which people may become attached. I do respect religion, especially Judaism and Islam, but I don't really think of someone who doesn't believe or practice a particular religion as a "heretic". That's a word which is only meaningful for very religious people! Like many of us these days, I am secular in some ways and in some ways I am religious. And if you want to tell me that I have to go beyond all that, beyond both sides of the equation... well, that makes sense to me.

Although he doesn't speak of "secularism" per se, in the next poem Rumi pairs "heresy" not with Islam, but with the more general term "religion". I'm happy to see that! This poem certainly fits the occasion when we celebrate the death of Rumi as a kind of "wedding":

I am heresy and religion, pureness and dregs.
I am old and young, and also a small child.
If I die, don't say about me, "he's dead."
Say, "He died, came alive, and the Friend took him."

In the following poem, we continue the theme of going beyond religious concepts, as well as other kinds of archetypal distinctions:

On the path of Oneness, what is obedience or sin?
In the tavern lane, who is a beggar or king?
What if the face of the wandering dervish is bright or black?
On the highest heights of heaven, what is moon or sun?

And finally, we come to the last poem that I want to share. My feeling is that while Rumi might mean himself, he more likely meant that it is his uncompromising friend Shams who has "returned to hurl a sharp flame." In any case, I think the "sharpness" of this poem will make more sense now that we've paved the way for it:

I have now returned so that I might hurl a sharp flame
at repentance and sin, wrongdoing and abstinence.
I have brought a flame that commands,
"Everything that is other than God, get off the road!"

One can be obsessed with religion in general, or in particular with sin – what we see in others, or what we see in ourselves. While striving to discipline ourselves, we can become obsessed with ascetic practices. We can get hung up about all kinds of things, and I think that Rumi is speaking against getting caught in all the kinds of obsessions and distractions that may arise on the way to opening ourselves to the Divine.

May each of us find our way to turn from darkness to the light!



The Hajj: My Reflections and Revelations

By Arusha Afsar

It's been eleven long, interminable years since I traversed land and sea, crossed oceans and sand dunes, and embarked upon the most sacred journey a Muslim can possibly make: the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) in Saudi Arabia. As newlyweds, my husband and I decided to opt out of spending a ridiculous fortune on the lavish traditional honeymoon most couples fork out for and felt that there would be no better way to start off our journey in life together than to journey on Hajj together, in order to seek the blessings and forgiveness of God for the long road of life ahead of us.

I had spent the last five years of my youth saving up a substantial enough sum of money to invest in our first house, and decided that life was too short to wait until eighty to make the journey, so I redirected my funds to pay for our trip. As Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam and pretty much a once in a lifetime dream for most Muslims, it is also obligatory on those who can afford to make the arduous journey, so we decided "why not, it's now or possibly never." With that intention we both packed our bags, booked three weeks off work, got vaccinated for tetanus and set off for Saudi!

We arrived in Jeddah and after eight hours of grueling passport stamping, visa checking and coach rides, finally arrived in Mecca late into the night to catch our first glimpse of a very illuminated sacred mosque known as Al-Haram, which houses the Kabah (black cube-like structure around which Muslims circumambulate during the Hajj). I remember being blown away by a sea of white – pilgrims scurrying from one place to the next, some handing out water to other pilgrims, some carrying their mothers on their backs, some pushing wheelchairs, some handing out dates, some sleeping on the sides of the street corners because they had travelled by foot, or donkey, or car from faraway lands and distant places. It felt as if I was in a beehive, with the buzz of all the pilgrims clustering around the mosque and Kabah area chanting in unison, "Labayk Allahuma Labayk, Labayk La Shareeka Laka Labayk, Innal Hamda Wannimata laka walmulk Laa Shareeka Lak," the meaning of which is "Here I am my Lord I respond to You, there is none worthy of worship save You. All praise, grace and dominion belong to You. You have no partners."

Saying this in unison with the other pilgrims who were of every race and every color was humbling for me, and an excerpt from Malcolm X's letter came flooding into my mind of his own Hajj journey where he described, "there are Muslims here of all colors and from every part of this earth. During the past days here in Mecca while understanding the rituals of the Hajj, I have eaten from the same plate, drank from the same glass and slept on the same bed or rug – with Kings, potentates and other forms of rulers ...with fellow Muslims whose skin was the whitest of white, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, and whose hair was the blondest of blond – I could look into their blue eyes and see that they regarded me as the same (brothers)."

Here we were, droves of people, all from different backgrounds, races, languages and cultural heritage, rich and poor, kings and paupers, yet we were one in front of God. None of us knew each other, none of us was better than the other, we just knew we were all there for one reason and that was the sheer love of our creator and sustainer. We were lovers of God, who at some point in our lives realised he was enough to make the



difficult journey for, he had given us countless blessings and we were compelled to congregate and display our gratitude. That in itself was a feeling of being one with everyone else in unity.

So, unity and collective brother/sisterhood was something that stood out to me from this experience as we came together to declare our praise of one single creator. People who had so little were giving what they had or inviting others to come and eat from their plate. On one occasion, whilst sitting on the steps of the mosque admiring the swarm of activity around the kabah, a young Iranian girl covered fully from head to toe in black garb came and sat next to me and offered me the most delightful tasting mini figs I have ever encountered. As I expressed my delight, she handed me over the entire bag, and although she could only speak Farsi and I could only converse in English, somehow we managed to communicate for a while and express love and gratitude through the language of souls. There were many such incidents where I encountered similar beautiful gestures.

Sometimes in the 40 degree Celsius heat, a random hand out of the crowd would stick out holding a bottle of water just for me to quench my thirst with, or a man on the road would strip back a piece of bark (known as Miswak) and hand it out for pilgrims to clean their teeth with, always with a smile, always with love, saying, “Ya Hajja/Hajji, Hajj Mabroor,” “Oh blessed pilgrim, may your pilgrimage be accepted.” Such goodwill from unknown strangers in a world where, generally, goodwill must be scavenged for.

The white attire known as the Ihram that we donned for the duration of the pilgrimage was also very symbolic in many respects. It was almost as if each of us were stripped back to just the bare minimum of who we were, and it taught me that simplicity can lead to a content soul. We live in societies where generally things are centred around amassing more and more wealth to feel happier and more fulfilled, but the reality is that we find ourselves the polar opposite, becoming more depressed and disgruntled as we acquire more material possessions. We may have the latest cars, opulent mansions and snazziest gadgets, but it never really ends, as that lavish lifestyles requires constant maintenance and upgrading. To do that one is required to run on the never-ending hamster wheel to generate more and more wealth.

To me, the simple white robe, which was not so white after a few days of walking dusty roads and muddy mountainous paths, was a surreal sort of attachment to God; they were simple, but did the job of clothing me from the smoldering heat. Although rough and rugged now, I was reminded of the saying of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings upon him) narrating about God, “Allah, Most High, mentions before the angels about the pilgrims, saying, ‘Look at My servants; they came to Me, disheveled and dusty, from every deep ravine. I make you witness that I have indeed forgiven them.’”



Therefore, no amount of wealth can fulfil the inner void of the soul like what a bit of simplicity and connection with God can do. Sometimes, stripping off all the glitz and pomp reveals more about you than you would expect.

Finally, my pilgrimage to Mecca taught me about the concept of sacrifice. After all, the Hajj commemorates the willingness of Prophet Abraham to sacrifice his son for God as a supreme act of faith, and due to this, God had mercy upon him for his obedience, as his son was then replaced with a lamb. As a pilgrim, I can safely vouch for the fact that sacrificing your luxuries and even basic needs becomes second nature to a person by the end of the Hajj. Whether it's sacrificing your prayer spot for the dribbling, rather elderly, crippled lady who comes and virtually sits on top of you during the morning prayer, whether it's sacrificing your sleep to make sure you fulfil all the rituals on time, or your food and water so you can feed the local cats, or your patience and basic necessities as you brush your teeth with whatever liquid you can find, as all the taps have been broken!

It's all a bit of a boot camp to test your patience to extreme levels. The strangest thing about it all is that under normal circumstances it would be pretty difficult to not throw an outright tantrum over some of the experiences, but because it's for the love of God, it's the most spiritually-awakening, heart-opening experience of sacrifice you could possibly encounter. Eleven years later and with each year that passes by, I watch the pilgrims on my TV set undergo each ritual again and observe them circulating the kabah just as I had done, chanting to God that they are there out of his love and I, too, wish I was right there next to them.





**Laden with Fruit & Always Green:
A Meditation for Christmastide**

By Avellina Balestri

**I step through the wood of my soul, hushed by the breathless winter
pre-dawn, gray as geese wings, touched by the softest whisper of a star's light,
shining unseen beyond the snow clouds.**

**Is it the ageless light of angelic faces?
Shall we see them brighten the sky's lofty ceiling?
Shall the glory of the Lord be seen once more upon our mortal plain?**

**I step to the fringes of my soul, where the swaying ferns once grew,
and the white stag once grazed, and the lips of June once kissed
the lips of our inner Eden, our paradise lost...**

**Where is the guardian with his flaming sword?
Is he not within myself, splitting me down the center?
Where is the binding for my grievous wound?**

**I stand on the hill of my soul, setting common cares aside,
as the frost licks the grass blades, immersed in wondering and foreboding,
knowing that the longest night has begun to prepare for the sun.**

**Shall it rise upon our dancing day?
Will our Beloved beckon us to His great wedding feast?
We dream our infant dreams...**

**I stand by the river of my soul, its running brooks frozen
like the blood of frightened animals when the hunters are upon them,
hunters come to rob us of life through cold's clinging.**



**And is this cold so unlike our icy hellfire, that we ourselves created?
Is not the bitten apple the mirror of our broken worlds?
We still search for the fairest of them all...**

**I stand at the crossroads of my soul, the liminal line,
the knowledge of good and evil my parents deigned to choose for themselves,
which I am too often drawn to mimic.**

For is not evil a shadow of a good, a deception of reality?

**A proclivity, a condition, a crack, a coil,
a curse that may yet turn to blessing, a happy fault?**

**I stand in the meadow of my soul, that winter had won,
and hear a silence more lovely than music unfolding from the center of all things,
through which all things hold together.**

**Where will the dusty road lead the wandering pilgrim?
Where will the cobbled street lead the pining lover?
Is any path so far it cannot lead us home?**

**I stand in the city of my soul, and Bethlehem's bread is the innocence
we have long forgotten, long cast aside in our smug assurance,
though inside we are only lost little children.**

**Dare we hope for some comfort and joy?
Dare we hope the fractious power itself will be torn asunder?
And grace streams down upon the blind, the lame, the sore-stained?**



**I stand at the stable of my soul, and find a mother exhausted from birthing,
lying in the straw, bringing forth the incarnate Word as light through glass,
singing into the heart of creation a ballad of love.**

**And is that a wounded knight I see, as a newborn?
Is the blood of birth but a shadow of the flood to come?
The crimson wine that will melt the ice?**

**I stand beside the manger of my soul, and the image of my God takes
fleshly substance, that He might be emptied out, all-vulnerable,
shape of every tomb a womb.**

**Shall I bring a lamb to bleat, or my drum to play?
Shall I bring cheese, butter, and honey for the Lady's pleasure?
Shall I bring gold for a king, incense for a god, or spices for a corpse?**

**I stand at the tree of my soul, springing up like the thorn bush, prickling like poverty, then
sprouting emerald leaves and bearing scarlet fruit, and it is a tree of life and death and life re-
stored...**

**O Noble tree, what fruit may be thy peer?
Sweetest wood, may my lips adore thee with a kiss?
And let winter-wearied hearts give birth to spring...**

Maimonides: What Lessons Can He Teach Us Today?

By Robert Rosenwald



I am an Agnostic man of mixed Hispanic and Ukrainian Jewish background, but I have long been fascinated by the illustrious figure of Maimonides. Here I want to explore what a returned Maimonides would teach us modern Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Agnostics interested in the Middle East and religion around the world this holiday season.

I think Maimonides would be shocked that in the 21st century there is so much seemingly religious conflict around the world - fundamentalism as well as hostility to religion in the West. He had lived in a time of change in which the Catholic West was trying to conquer the Holy Land from Muslim control, an era with other hot spots like Al Andalus and Byzantium. The three religions were trying to make sense of newly rediscovered texts by Aristotle and others, as well as the Hindu-Arabic numerals that would pave the way for the Renaissance. Maimonides would notice how we are living in a time of change, in which religious institutions in democracies are having to deal with mass secular culture and the increasing spread of scientific knowledge as well as immigrant groups with different cultures, or even moralistic intervention, due to globalization.

I think Maimonides would remind us that the Abrahamic religions are fundamentally Middle Eastern migrating siblings, like Abraham himself, including the roots of the West; that this is not the first time of mass movements of Christians or Jews or Muslims, newly independent states, or time of conversion; that what is important is equality and tolerance in society; that all religions teach us to love God and love thy neighbor as thyself, and teach forgiveness; that if one wishes to understand God, one should study philosophy and the sciences (knowledge of God's creation) first; that philosophy is also important for science; and that historical true religion has always been rationally debated and pragmatic, not fundamentalist.

He also would want us to remember the lessons of the Crusades, that all sides suffered and all sides had some members that showed nobility (see Francis of Assisi), from Ashkenazi Jews on the Rhine to Orthodox Christians to Shia Muslims; and we must all heal from “an eye for an eye” as in Hammurabi, just as Maimonides as a doctor treated all; and for western interventionists to remember how no religion is better than any other. He'd say religion and culture must ever evolve, and that we must better understand how to make a better world for everyone. He was not familiar with notions of the social contract, whether you consider it in God's plan or not.

And to Atheists he'd say: yes, people have done awful things in the name of religion, but religious organizations and individuals have done profound things throughout time, and if you demonize one Abrahamic religion – such as Islam – as evil, you demonize them all, and if one Abrahamic religion can be rational and loving, so can the others. Maimonides would warn that Muslims may fear that political intervention is an Atheist war on Islam. He would also point out that some of the worst anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, anti-black sentiments and even anti-Catholic sentiments, have come from something he'd never seen in his lifetime. White supremacist eugenic atheism has sadly reemerged with the alt right of recent years, counter to all reason, reason of which Maimonides was a master. We must come together in this age and remember Maimonides.

Nativity Poem

By Ruth Asch

Oh Jesus; God in a manger,
Almighty power behind the universe
and infant's breath.

I love you; cannot understand you –
yet want to give you all my life;
even my death.

For you are Love's perfection,
you are Beauty, Justice, Peace,
sweet Mercy wild –
and a simple, domestic thing:
breast-swelling, eye-dewing
baby child.

The dance of galaxies,
the singing silence, throbbing suns,
the quantum leap,
are far away, yet hid in you;
wrapped in your milky smile are all
the tears we weep.







I see a crumpled skin,
a fluffy head and fingerlets
which grope and curl.
Yet for you the deep waves brew
their storm, bright rainbows arc,
meteors hurl.

Tiny one, I offer you
my little love. In your own heart
lock it away;
humble then from infancy,
with you grow it wise in grace
to strength one day.

Awe and passion fighting,
humans are fickle, weak, and I
am selfish, proud.

But, small-for-us Eternal one;
Faith alters everything and Life
springs from a shroud.



I Saw Santa Punching Arius

By Ian Wilson

Santa Claus, good old Saint Nick, the bringer of yuletide joy throughout Europe and North America. The historical figure behind Santa is the Christian saint and bishop, Nicholas of Myra. He was born sometime in the 4th century in Patara, in modern day Turkey (then known as Asia Minor) and he served the city of Myra, also in Asia Minor.

Nicholas was raised as a devout Christian by well-to-do Christian parents. After their death, Nicholas gave away his inheritance to the poor, and took a vow of poverty. He was imprisoned for his Christianity by the ruthless Roman Emperor, Diocletian. Nicholas was eventually released from prison, and he attended the Council of Nicaea. At the council, a very unusual event took place, which is the topic of this article.

First, some more background on the Council of Nicaea. Even before the Great Schism, where the Western Church and Eastern Church made their split, the Early Church had shown clear signs of a distinction between East and West. We in the Western Church tend to have a more “legal” view of Christian Theology. Now, I don’t mean “legalistic”; that’s a different matter. We tend to use legal terms and ideas when we discuss theology. “Adoption”, “election”, “sacrament”, and “justification” are all terms adopted from Roman law. The East, meanwhile, tends to view theology as more mystical. What we call “sacraments”, they refer to as “mysteries”, where one thing is hidden in another. This has led to a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding between East and West.





At that time, the Greeks tended to see the world more in terms of dominance hierarchies. God is at the top, with angels below Him, then humans, then animals, then plants, then non-living things like rocks, and so on. And there are hierarchies within this hierarchy: there are different ranks of angels, higher and lower animals, and even different ranks of people. Greeks, of course, were at the top, Romans below them, then barbarians, and so forth. This was simply the Greek mindset at that time, not a criticism of the Eastern Church. This view was tolerated by the Eastern Church, but necessarily endorsed by it. The Eastern Orthodox people that I know would not hold to this view. But at that time, it wasn't much of a jump for the ancient Greeks to start thinking of the Trinitarian Godhead as a hierarchy, and that's where the trouble started.

A bishop of the Eastern Church named Arius began preaching that Christ was not coequal with God the Father, but was instead a creation of God the Father. The first and greatest creation of God, but a creation nonetheless. Most of the Eastern Church as well as some in the West affirmed this doctrine, and there was nothing to really stop them from thinking this way; there wasn't a credal statement to tell them that they were wrong. There were many, however, who spoke out against Arius, and this threatened the integrity of the Early Church.

It's worth mentioning that at that time Christianity had only very recently become legalized. It was not the state religion, yet; that wouldn't happen for quite some time. On paper, the Imperial Cult was still the state religion of the Roman Empire. Emperor Constantine was favorably disposed to Christianity and had placed the Church under his personal protection. I can imagine he was baffled over this dispute, only having recently professed something resembling Christian faith.

The stakes were high; if the Church got this wrong, it would affect its doctrinal development for centuries to come. Preaching false doctrine could mean eternal damnation. A church schism would be simply disastrous at that time, just when Christianity was beginning to stand on its own two feet. It was vitally important that they get this right.

So a Church council was called to the city of Nicaea. Attendees included Emperor Constantine, St. Athanasius, and of course, St. Nicholas and Arius. All listened as Arius made his arguments for why Jesus Christ was not fully God, but a "lesser God". The council, including Nicholas, listened intently. When he heard as much as he could stand, Nicolas stood up and punched Arius dead in the face.

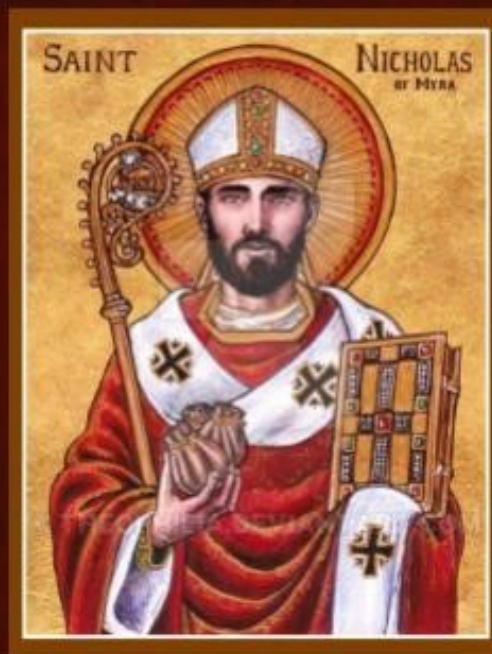




By now you're thinking "That's not very saintly". And you'd most likely be right. However, even the greatest saints have off days. Some of the most saintly people I know lose their tempers on occasion, and this was one of those occasions. I'm sure he realized his mistake after he made it, as so many of us with anger issues do. In his place, I would very likely do the same thing. And it's not as though the rest of the council members thought this was acceptable behavior; Nicholas was promptly asked to leave until he could compose himself.

To me, this incident reminds us that everyone loses their temper on occasion. The Church Fathers, though virtuous men, were not perfect. They had flaws. This event does in no way eclipse the acts to service that defined the life of St. Nicholas. His zeal for Christ compelled him to perform these acts. In a way, his clash with Arius was an overflowing of that passion.

When I look around at myself and my fellow Christians, what I often see is a lack of passion. If more Christians today (and I do include myself here) followed Nicholas' pious example, I believe that Christianity would look very different today. I'm not saying we should physically fight people who disagree with us; what I am saying is that we should hold to our beliefs as strongly as the Church Fathers did, to be willing to fight and die for our faith. We should be concerned with living out our faith through service to God and our neighbor, and then we won't need to throw a punch.



Vayeshev:

Heaven and Hell from a Jewish Perspective

By Yosef Serebryanski

Delving into the past can be useful in helping us to better understand our identity, especially in regards to the derivation of our attitudes, beliefs, emotions and thoughts. When our curiosity about our past, as well as our future, is balanced, we can use the information that comes our way as guidance and a stabilizing force for motivation and growth.

Yet, our desire to know the future (as well as our pre-occupation with the past) is often so extreme that it tends to distort our perception and behavior. The Torah (Bible) singles out specific stories of ancient times and elaborates on them to the extent that it is needed for our future, the future of Israel and that of the Jewish people.

Regarding the pursuit of the future and discussion of the past, there is an elaborate description of its origin (and the journey of the Jewish people) in the story told about Yosef (Joseph) and Yehuda (Judah.) There is much discussion about a future Messiah from Yosef and Yehudah. It was their father, Jacob, who continued the legacy of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 37:1). “Yaakov (Jacob) settled in the land of his fathers.”

The place was Hebron (Chevron) as mentioned in Genesis (35:27 and 37:14). According to Yonason ben Uziel, Jacob’s sending of Yosef to visit his brothers came by advice of (the spirit of) Abraham. Jacob walked with Yosef from Chevron to the valley (Emek Chevron) in order to see him off on his journey. During this walk they had a discussion. Many years later it was by virtue of a description of the contents of that discussion that Yosef was able to assure his father via the message sent with his brothers, that he was still alive and flourishing as a ruler in Egypt. The Hebrew word that is used to tell us that Jacob settled is *shev* and not *gor*. The word “shev” has a connotation of being a peaceful action. Additionally, the verse uses the word “*megooray*” to say the place his father had lived.

Megooray has a variety of meanings. Residence, young animal (Ezekiel 19:2, Lamentations 4:3), as semblage (Ezekiel 21:7), granary (Haggai 2:19), fear (Psalms 31:14, Jeremiah 6:25), terror or a hole that has plaster smeared within to hold something. In Aramaic it also means fall (Genesis 49:17, Ezekiel 39:3). Rearranged, the letters of the word megoor becomes *gemoor*, which means finished or cut off as the Aramaic translation in Job 23:17. It is a word that does not hold the same peaceful feeling as the word “shev.”

A child derives peace and comfort from the knowledge that parents and family arrange to take care of his

or her needs. Adults also want to have the feeling of security and safety. Despite these general definitions, there are people who want to live as far away from their parents as possible. This is often due to pain and discomfort that is a result of extreme disharmony between them.

Although Jacob wanted to dwell in comfort, he ended up becoming distraught over issues that were associated with his children. Jacob's life became torturous. First, his most beloved wife died. A while later her son disappeared. While it is common to use the terms heaven and hell as referring to conditions after death, it can also describe the living conditions that some people suffer during their time here. When everything is comfortable and going smoothly, a person associates it akin to living in heaven. When things go very wrong, causing a person's daily experiences and feelings to be shaky and unbalanced, the person may associate that feeling as being akin to "living in hell."

On a less tangible plane, when the energy or consciousness of a person leaves the body, it is dead. Yet the energy that is associated with the body of the deceased is not dead. When it is stuck in the physical place it inhabited while alive in the body, it is not free to pursue its spiritual journey. It then experiences the torture that people refer to as hell. When that energy is released, the soul can progress to its proper place, which is called heaven.

The terms heaven and hell have been used for millennium to appeal to the fear factor that controls people and their behavior. Leaders have wrongly created a definable system of reward and punishment in order to set their own standards and dictates of behaviour. There is often a very thin line between wanting to guide people to behave properly in their connection with the Creator, and wanting to affect behavior that is either self-serving or just easier to calculate and create pat methods to handle.

Being a leader is not easy. Leaders and role models must learn that while they may set the tone for many, there are those who must do things that they are here to do in the mode that befits their gifts as well as their purpose. A mold does not, and cannot, fit every person in the same way. Although today we are not sure of delineations, we must at least bear in mind that there are some who do not fit the "all or nothing" mode because they are specifically in tune with their identity and needs. This is a concept that needs to be explored, since for years some of our most revered Kabbalists and teachers have known the wisdom of this but have kept a closed silence on the issue.

The word for hell in Hebrew is *Gehenom*. It is the name of a physical place, "*Gey ben Henom*" (Kings 2 23:10). Joshua 15:8, 18:16 mentions the name *Gey ben Henom* and then repeats it as *Gehenom* without the word *ben*. Nehemiah 11:30 mentions the place *Gehenom*. It was a place of fire and death. In Jeremiah 7:31, "They built the altars of Tofes that are in the valley (Gey) of the son of Henom, to burn their sons and daughters in fire ... (7:32) ... days are coming when it will be known as the valley of killing." Chronicles 2, 33:6 states, "He passed his sons through the fire in the valley of the son of Henom... he was profuse in doing that which was evil in the eyes of God, to anger Him." And in Zohar 1:254a, "In the land of Gey is the width and breadth of *Gehenom*." "The land of Gey is called *Gey ben Hinom*."

In Jewish traditional texts there are descriptions of seven worlds, one of which is called Gey. A description and analysis of these realms is beyond the scope of this page. The Hebrew "*Gehenom*" is composed of two words "Gey" and "Henom." Gey is a valley. "He buried him (Moses) in the valley (gey) opposite Beth-Peor" (Deuteronomy 34:6). "And the valley (gey)" (Yehoshua 8:11) "For it is a day of turmoil and trampling and confusion... in the valley (gey) of vision" (Isaiah 22:5)"

Gey also means ego. *Geyha* (Hebrew letters gimmel yud hey) mean "brightness" or "shine". *Nom* means "sleep" or "speech". *Henom* means "they are". In the Talmud Eruvim 19a, *Hinom* is used to refer to acts of vanity.

Gehenom is associated with physical death and negative action. Hell is a physical place of death and destruction. It was a physical place on earth. Apparently during the course of time, the understanding of it became transposed to mean a terrible place that one goes to after they die. At some point it became used to scare people about what could happen to them if they did not behave in a certain manner during their lifetime. The success of this fear tactic encouraged its use within most religious and social beliefs. It became key into frightening people about what would happen when we die. It was easy to replace the unknown with definition for people who fear the unknown above many things.

If you look at the words and imagination that people use for life after this world, they are not spiritual, but all based in their limited physical perception. For others, their vision of the spiritual is based on the physical energy they have created and that is how they experience the spiritual.

It is interesting to note that the gehenom (or hell) that is described to scare people about what could happen after they die is never mentioned in the Five books of Moses, the Prophets or the Scriptures. The word first was used to refer to negativity in the physical and lower world. Following that, people also used the term in relationship to the spiritual realm.

There has been similar misuse of the word *Shomayim* being translated as “Heaven.” The word *shomayim* is composed of two words, *Shom* (there is) and *Mayim* (water.) This would indicate that the word *Shomayim* refers to the sky from which rain falls. An alternate way to understand the words is to see the words *aish* (fire) and *mayim* (water) within the letters. “*Ohr* and *Choshech* (light and dark) were combined by the Holy One Blessed is He and *Shomayim* was brought forth” (Zohar 2,164b). The *Shomayim* made of *aish* and *mayim* was solidified through *Ruach* (spirit) (Zohar 1,77a).

Thus, *Shomayim* possesses complete balance. As a result, it came to be used for the word heaven. Yet the original understanding was not meant as the “heaven” that people envision as a place that rewards them for good behavior upon their death. Precise balance is a wonderful thing but that does not make the word transferrable to present the concept that man has invented to attach comfort to our understanding of what is beyond death. When people limit themselves trying to attach esoteric knowledge to the physical, they might connect with the terminology on a personal and physical level. Yet it does not help them if they do not understand the concept of the spiritual realms to which these terms truly apply. This brings greater limitations in their attempt to have a direct connection with the Source of Life, the Creator of all existence.

We have reached an age when it is critical to understand that it is incumbent upon mankind to explore and learn, use the gift of understanding that we are given. It is time to remove the blockages that were planted over the centuries through words that serve to block our personal connection with the Creator. It is time to reverse the abuse of those who thought they alone were allowed to learn on behalf of others and then dispense whatever information they felt appropriate.

In today’s age of information and exchange there is simply *no* reason that people cannot do some personal research or find themselves a teacher who will help them take responsibility for their knowledge and its applications. Doing so will go a long way to erasing some of the negative energies that have influenced our “just” societies and caused horrific results. This can be an opening to restore balance to humanity.

Jacob represented a person who was aware of the potential for balance in each moment. Although he too was blocked for many years, he never gave up the endeavor to achieve that balance. We must all learn from his example *not* to give up. We must learn to mold ourselves to that flow and balance, and leave man-made perceptions behind, as we unwittingly crippled ourselves with vivid imaginations that are loosely associated to reality. Armed with truth, we move forward as one...

Magic in the Sand:

A Fan's Retrospective on Disney's *Aladdin*

By T.K. Wilson



I don't remember the first time I saw Disney's *Aladdin*. It just seems like it's always been in my life. It became my favorite Disney movie, after *The Little Mermaid*, and it remained so even after I outgrew *The Little Mermaid*. I don't even know why it's my favorite!

Of course, the Genie was a big part of it, as any Disney fan knows. Robin Williams' spastic comedy stylings won him a place in the hearts of many children after seeing *Aladdin*. The lovable Genie, with his big personality and desire for self-determination, was the heart and soul of the original film. "To be my own master! Such a thing would be greater than all the Magic and all the treasures in all the world!" But he believes he'll never be free, until one true friend gives him what he desires most.

The friendship of Aladdin and the Genie is the heart of the movie. It's never about just the magic, it's about the friendship that forms between these two radically different individuals. They are both willing to sacrifice for the sake of the other, which is something that I treasure in my fictional characters.

I learned later that Genie's behavior was atypical of traditional jinni. I no longer take Disney's word for matters of folklore, as they are notorious for sanitizing and bowler-izing folktales, just as they sanitized the entirety of *Aladdin*. Did you know that in the original story, Aladdin kidnaps Princess Jasmine? True story!

And Jasmine's original name is Badroulbadour. It means "full moon of full moons," which is lovely, but can you imagine trying to print that on a doll box?

After *Aladdin's* rousing success, Disney set out to make a franchise surrounding the characters, creating two direct-to-video sequels, *The Return of Jafar* (1994) and *Aladdin and the King of Thieves* (1996), along with a very successful animated series. This ran from 1994 to 1995, with reruns playing on Toon Disney (now Disney XD) into the early 2000s. According to the Disney Wiki, it continues to be played on Disney channels around the world, and was actually quite popular in the Arabic world, more than likely because of the series' heavier reliance on folkloric tropes common to the Arabic world.

In *Aladdin the Series*, we meet another genie, a green genie by the name of Eden. She belongs to a young homeless girl named Dhandi, who at first dreams small. She wants a sandwich, the poor little thing! When Eden prompts her to ask for an end to her hunger for the rest of her life, Genie is impressed with Eden's generosity. Genie and Eden fall in love with each other and dream of a life together. When an ill-spoken wish keeps them apart, Genie and Eden promise to be true to each other. In *Disney Descendants*, Aladdin fans meet their daughter, Jordan, who loves to cook, design clothes, and plan parties, just like Mom and Dad! Jordan's origins aren't as obvious as the other kids, since she prefers gold and purple to blue and green, but you can see a nod in her ponytail and the blue gem in her head chain.

Princess Jasmine spoke to me on some level, and to this day I appreciate her compassion and bravery. Jasmine doesn't want a man, doesn't need a man, really. She wants adventure. She wants to see the world beyond her castle walls, she wants to do more and be more than the daughter of a sultan.



In the later *Aladdin* franchise entries, Jasmine encounters more adventure than she bargains for. In episodes of *Aladdin the Series* like “Do the Rat Thing” and “Bad Mood Rising”, she explores how the other side lives and learns about how privileged she is. After these adventures, she devotes her time to the betterment of her people, though she already knows that as a Princess it is up to her to seek the good of others before herself. On several occasions, Jasmine is referenced to by her people as the beloved princess, and constantly thinking of ways to help them. Jasmine’s drive to see the good in everyone is one of her most positive traits.

Outright villainy in *Aladdin the Series* was represented by the wizard Mozenrath. Most of Aladdin’s other foes were more of annoyances, easily outsmarted and outmaneuvered. Not so much with Mozenrath. He was clever and calculating. He was willing to do literally anything for magical power. On Mozenrath’s right hand, he wears a leather gauntlet which is infused with magic; it’s the source of his powers, but it has a very ugly side effect. Under that gauntlet is nothing but bone! The magic Mozenrath so relies on has been eating away at his humanity and flesh for years, and soon, the series predicts, there’ll be nothing left of him. Pretty heavy for a Saturday morning cartoon show! It’s a rather graphic metaphor for greed and power-lust that has stuck with me all this time.



My favorite episode of the series, though, was “Garden of Evil.” In this episode, it is explained that the Sultan took the most beloved flower of an ill-tempered nature wizard named Arbutus (the voice of Ron Perlman, one of my favorite actors) intending to give it to his bride. They came to an understanding, however: in twenty years, the wizard would come and claim something dear to the Sultan in exchange for the flower. Arbutus claims Jasmine as his prize, because he loved the flower just as much as the Sultan loves Jasmine. This exchange follows:

Jasmine: I'm not one of your creations! I'm not a thing!

Arbutus: A thing!?! How typical!

Jasmine: Arbutus, I'm not a flower you can keep in your garden! I need my family and friends.

Arbutus: Ah, yes, human needs. Like you need to hack down my gorgeous trees and chop them into lumber!

Jasmine: It's not that simple!

Arbutus: Indeed! You burn them for warmth creating smoke to block our life-giving sun!

Jasmine: We don't do that on purpose!

Arbutus: Is it an accident when you rip and pluck my flowers, condemning them to a slow death in a vase!?

Jasmine: Slow death?

Arbutus: Your kind! You're all the same! You treat my beautiful, living creations as things! Why should I treat you any differently?

*Jasmine: Arbutus, I... I think I understand. **

The presumption of humans on his territory was what drove Arbutus to demand such a high price from the Sultan. Jasmine reiterates during the inevitable battle that the wizard won't hurt them if they don't hurt him. Jasmine's understanding would have won the day, if both sides had stopped to listen to each other – a classic series of rash actions played out before my young eyes that resulted in tragedy, and told of the importance of communication and understanding of others. The final line from this episode is now Jasmine's quote from the "Dream Big Princess" ad campaign, "If you look hard enough, you can see how much we're all alike."

Aladdin: A simple movie that had a deep impact on me. I can safely say that I wouldn't be the writer I am today without it. The humor, heart, and fantasy has inspired me in more ways than one and helped me find an escape hatch when things were stressful. When I was a child, Jasmine inspired me to be brave and curious. As an adult, I was inspired to create a world for children and teens similar to *Aladdin* and other Disney movies I loved. Giving children a place to explore and have adventures is important to me, and *Aladdin* was one of the biggest in my life. I only hope I can fill those mighty big shoes.

* Special thanks to Heather H. at AladdinCentral.org for the transcription from "Garden of Evil."

A First Christmas Reflection

By Ashley Wengerd

Hello, everyone! I can't believe it's that time of year again. Festive Christmas music plays, decorative lights twinkle brightly, and people are out eagerly buying gifts for their loved ones.

But I don't mind. It's my favorite time of year. I love the music, the decorations, getting gifts for my family, and eating the delicious goodies that we are treated with.

In addition to all that, I also like to reflect over the year. It's coming to a close, and like every year, it had its up and downs. What did I accomplish? What do I want to accomplish next year?

I don't know about you, but as each year comes to a close, I always strive to do better next year. I want to be proud of myself. I want to be able to look over my achievements and feel satisfied.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ this holiday season, I wonder if He ever felt that way. He knew that His purpose for coming to earth was to die for our sins. But I often wonder if He ever looked back after each year, and felt dread for each next year that lay ahead. Dread because each year closer meant a horrible, painful death.

Did He ever wish that He wasn't born? Did He ever have times where He thought to Himself, "I know my dying for So-and-So's sins will be worth it, but I wish I didn't have to go through with it?"

How did the conversation up in Heaven go? The Bible says that God existed in the beginning, and Jesus *is* God, so obviously Jesus knew that He *had* to come down to earth for us. I don't know how they measure time in Heaven, but I've often wondered how Jesus felt, knowing that someday He would leave the beauty and glories of Heaven, and come down to a fallen, sinful world. Born as a helpless baby boy, learning how to walk, talk, feed Himself, be potty-trained, dress Himself, go to school, read, write, grow up, all to die for us. For our sins.

But it was worth it. Jesus rose from the dead three days later. Defeating death. Defeating the devil. The veil in the Holy of Holies was torn in half by God, meaning that now, *everybody* could speak with God, Jew and Gentile alike, not just the High Priest who entered into the Tabernacle. No more

sacrificing of animals. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice. All of the old laws were now gone. Jesus fulfilled the law.

I also think about Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Bible says that she found favor with God. How? What was it she did, that she earned His favor upon her? Why did the Lord choose her? How did she choose to tell people that she was with child, knowing that they wouldn't believe her? I'm sure she prayed fervently and braced herself for cruel scorns, gossipy whispers, and possible shunning.

In Luke 1:48, it says that the Lord took notice of His lowly servant girl, and I wonder if that's why Mary had favor with God. She was lowly, humble, and a servant. Exactly what Jesus was going to be. Jesus came to serve others. He was lowly and humble, always praising His Father in Heaven.

I wonder about Joseph. Why was he chosen to be the earthly father of Joseph? Was it his occupation? Was being a carpenter a lowly job?

Perhaps it was because of his character. When he heard that Mary was with child, the Bible says he did not want to make her a public example, but decided to quietly break off the engagement. I'm curious if Mary was shy. An introvert who hated the spotlight and attention. Was that why he decided to quietly break up with her?

He was going to break off their betrothal so as not to humiliate her. He probably knew that she had already been embarrassed enough. I'm guessing he heard the rumors floating around that she was pregnant. At any rate, he decided to show her grace. My pastor brought that out this past Sunday, that Joseph decided to show Mary grace.

And that's what Jesus shows to sinners: grace, and mercy. I like to think that this was why God chose Mary and Joseph to be the parents of Jesus. One was a lowly, humble servant, and the other was full of grace and compassion.

I also speculate about the angels. Did God have *all* the angels from Heaven come to the shepherds, and announce Jesus' birth? And what about Gabriel? Why was he specifically chosen to tell Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus?

At any rate, when I think and reflect over Jesus' birth this holiday season, I think of His reason for coming. He came from the splendors of the heavenly places, down to a broken, hurting world, to die for you and me. He came

down and had a humble, lowly birth. Born in a manger in a smelly stable. Grew up to become a lowly, humble servant. Washing other's feet, healing the sick, and raising the dead. Showing grace, compassion, and mercy to sinners.

This Christmas season, let's do the same. Serve and take care of one another. Show each other grace, compassion, and mercy. But instead of limiting it to the Christmas season, let's do it all year. That's the true Christmas spirit.

Merry Christmas to you and yours this blessed holiday season!

C.S. Lewis and the Calormenes: A Critique of Narnia's Arabesque Baddies

By Avellina Balestri

Stereotyping all things “other” has been something of a given in the history of humanity since the first concepts of tribal, religious, and territorial distinctions emerged. The East and West divide between Christians and Muslims is certainly no exception, hammered home by centuries of wars and rumors of wars, spurred on by the instinct to simplify the complexity of anything perceived to be a threat, creating cardboard cut-out images defined by certain aspects or attributes, usually overblown, taken out of context, and spun to the eternal negative.

Of course, this tendency is exacerbated in time of open conflict, when both sides seek to validate their cause by demonizing their opponent in favor of bedtime stories and campfire tales. For example, during the Crusades, while European mothers frightened their children into behaving with stories of bronze-featured, thickly-bearded men with turbans and curved swords, while Middle Eastern mothers reared their children on blood-curdling tales of clean-shaven, pale-featured, armor clad giants with battle axes and broad swords. Neither party seemed particularly eager to focus on the effect the sun had in distinguishing human features in various parts of the globe, and preferred to spin their sagas about the differences as they pleased.

Indeed, one anecdote tells how, at war's end, a Frankish nobleman came to negotiation with the sultan Saladin, and was ushered into his private quarters by a skeleton-crew servant staff. He happened to stumble into the sultan's youngest son, age seven, who completely freaked out and leapt behind his bewildered father for protection, believing a monster or madman had entered their home turf, given that his blue eyes were seen as a sign of possession and his shaven state as a sign of insanity, for what normal man could possibly want to emasculate himself?

Centuries later, in the world of children's fantasy literature, C.S. Lewis would carry on the not-so-noble pursuit of stereotyping huge swaths of “others” in his Chronicles of Narnia, where he created the Calormenes, fantastical Muslim boogie men, with turbans, curved swords, spicy food, crescent-marked coins, slavery, abusive would-be husbands, a code of stiff courtesy (which is being used for devious purposes, of course), a sophisticated mercantile system (also intent solely on infiltration), and exotic poetry (which, according to Lewis, is fairly pointless because the girly romance jazz is down to a drip). Oh, yeah, and there's also this multi-headed vulture god thingy they worship and sacrifice people to ever and anon, for flavor. And their locale is hot, like really hot...denoted by the name “calor”, which means heat in Latin!

It's safe to say that Lewis was a world culture nut, and was combining elements of multiple different Imperial regimes throughout history, most especially that of the Ottoman Turks and their undeniably brutal imperial conquests. But in the true style of an Edwardian Brit enmeshed in a society somewhat familiar with brutal imperial conquests, he enjoyed the cultural alphabet soup-slurping on his own terms. While there was likely no malice intended, it was this shallow type depiction of the Arab world, bereft of contextual nuance or putting oneself in another's shoes, that continued to feed into a phobic attitude that had been cultivated since the time of the Crusades and continues to the present day.

Lewis seems to have ripped off whatever exotic little morsels suited his purposes and then just made up the rest to enhance the villainous effect, like the vulture god, Tash. While it might be argued he was picking up on

some pre-Islamic pagan Arabic deities, it seems more likely he was trying to wedge an imaginary super-gap between the Christian and Islamic understandings of God. In fact, the plot-line of the last book in the series involves the misguided attempt by many characters to conflate Aslan with Tash as being “the same”, reminiscent of the ongoing discussions about whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Incidentally, this conflation also ushers in the apocalypse for the Narnians, which fits rather well with the modern Evangelical interpretations of the Book of Revelation. If Lewis had really wanted to do an analysis of the Christian and Muslim theological gap, he should have had both groups worship “The Emperor Across the Sea”, and then have differing views on Aslan, whether he is worthy of worship as divine, or simply worthy of respect as a messenger.

But Lewis wasn't in it for accuracy as much as to spin a colorful yarn that stoked the imaginations of mostly Western, Christian children. And if the spine-tingling savagery and exotic delights of far-flung locales could add flavor, more power to them. What he could not have predicted was the extent of Islamic immigration that would come to the UK in the aftermath of the British Empire's collapse, and how a whole generation of young Muslims would fall in love with and then become disillusioned by his fantasy works.

One young Pakistani boy, struggling to get through the British school system amidst relentless prejudice, wrote that he initially found some comfort and escapism in the world of Narnia. He even became emotionally invested to the point of getting crushes on some of the girls in the stories and crying when anyone special to him, especially Aslan, died. But then, some books down the road in the series, the Calormenes showed up in all their stereotypical, eye-sore-inducing glory, and they brought along with them an identity crisis for the young reader who found various Islamic norms splattered everywhere in the most unflattering of fashions.

This was most striking the case when “May he live forever!” was inserted as the magic catch phrase for Tash that sounded quite a bit like “Peace be upon him!” as used by Muslims at the mention of Muhammad. If this wasn't incriminating enough, given they were fast becoming the arch-baddies in the series, his fellow classmates, also reading the series, began to pick on the school's lone Muslim student as a Calormene. Eventually, one of his teachers revealed to him in a rather haughty fashion that the whole series was really an allegory for Christianity vs. “the forces of darkness”, something that he had ironically not realized the whole time.

This sort of story is not an isolated incident, and spawned a small movement of “Concerned Muslim Mothers of the UK” to discuss whether or not Narnia was suitable reading material for their children, or was simply going to send them over the edge into a state of theological confusion, self-loathing, and possibly hunger strikes over spicy food...which Lewis had subliminally convinced them was an omen of evil. In essence, it proves reminiscent of the “Concerned Christian Mothers” movement over the Harry Potter series.

As a fascinating side-note, some Muslims who encountered Narnia found parallels between Aslan and a famous figure from Islam, Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, the cousin of Muhammad who went on to marry Muhammad's daughter, Fatima, called the Queen of the Women of Paradise. Famed both for his skills as an incomparable warrior and as a wise sage, symbolism associated with Ali includes Arabic calligraphy in the shape of a lion underscored by his trademark double-pointed scimitar. His poetic and ethical writings set the standard for much Islamic literature to come, and he considered by many within his society, and even some admirers beyond it, to be the ideal of manhood, able to balance both military prowess and the finer arts. After serving as Caliph (ruler), and well-regarded for his justice and generosity, he was killed while at prayer in the



mosque by an assassin's poisoned sword, thus making many come to view him as a martyr. This is yet another reason why he might be seen as a "type" of Aslan for readers approaching the story from an Islamic perspective. "People are of two types," Ali famously said. "They are either your brothers in faith, or your equals in humanity."

In recent years, when ISIS was wreaking havoc in Mosul, Iraq and pressing all inhabitants of the area to convert to their fanatic interpretation of Islam or be killed, the Shiite Muslim shrine where Ali is buried took his quotation to heart and offered shelter to fleeing refugees, whatever their background or belief, including the beleaguered Christian community. Muslim families also opened their homes to displaced Christians while recounting the historical story of a band of Muslims that were led by the brother of Ali, Jaffar, finding safe refuge in Christian-controlled Abyssinia. To this day, some Orthodox Christians join in the annual pilgrimage walks in remembrance of the death of Ali and his sons Hussan and Hussain as a sign of solidarity and gratitude for the help in their utmost hour of need. So perhaps this association of Ali with Aslan has merit after all.

I do find it interesting that the first Narnia book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, which I believe to be the most clearly Christian of the series, seems to have been universally accepted and beloved. It was almost always the later books in the series that became increasingly overbearing and affronting for non-Christian readers, particularly Muslim readers. Perhaps this is because the first book was, by its very nature, an allegory about the struggle between a universal good and a universal evil, personified through Aslan and the White Witch, whereas later installments focused on allegories for real-world international power struggles and culture slashes, slanted towards the bias of the author himself.

This, I feel, undermined Lewis' intent to teach his readers about the Christian understanding of life and spirituality in a creative and captivating way, which he achieved so well the first time but tumbled down the tubes in successive installments that he shot out to his publishers over his summer holiday breaks. With *LWW*, you didn't need to be Christian in order to find some common thread in it that could apply to all readers of goodwill, nor even to appreciate the Christian worldview for what it is. The trouble came not in retelling the Christian story, but in distorting the Muslim one. Even worse, perhaps, is the patronizing tone he chose to take in examining another world which he could not hope to properly understand.

Lewis chose to settle for an Arabesque fantasia meant to prop up the notion that European civilization has always been inherently more human and humane than anything that the East could produce, ignoring the reality that even the Crusaders themselves took many aspects of Eastern culture to help skyrocket their own to new heights, both technologically and artistically. Both universes certainly had their fair share of historical atrocities and intolerance of the "other", but also their fair share of triumphs and moments where coexistence actually was reached. The real trouble came in when neither side wanted to give each other credit where credit was due.

Practically the only thing Lewis could manage to say vaguely "nice" about the Calormenes is that they were good storytellers, but even then there's a stinger, in that the poetry of the Narnians is portrayed as being more exciting and humanistic than the moralizing maxims and ubiquitous language of the Calormenes. In essence, the former is painted as being more honest, straight-forward, and hearty (like "Roast Beef of Old England" and all that) and the latter is painted as being magicians, tricksters, and conjurers (like Salaam and snake in the basket).

This is a nice pat on the back from one Englishman to all others, but falls pretty short of the mark. During the time of the Crusades, the actual art of poetry was largely an Eastern specialty, and the development of the tradition in Europe had much to do with Western contact with the East. The different peoples of Europe obviously had their own Pagano-Christian storytelling and mystical traditions to draw from (see "Dream of the Rood" and the works of St. Hildegard of Bingen), but the artform as it flourished in the Frankish courts was greatly influenced by the Sufi tradition that spawned the likes of Rumi, Hafiz, and Ibn Arabi.

The main difference was that the flowing, almost liquid sensuality used to describe encounters with the divine was changed to describe earthly, courtly love. Basically, what started as a soul-rending ode to the love of and longing for Allah, the Source of all Reality, ended as a half-baked attempt to woo some curvaceous

girl named Suzette down at the baguette shop...

Yeah...anyway...*coughs*

Granted, I'm glad both Eastern and Western literary traditions flourished in their own right as they did, but it's almost as if Lewis is pulling his own teeth trying to give his "others" a compliment on something, anything! Even in his introduction of Arabs as storytellers, their sole purpose becomes one of keeping a western audience mused or entertained, while at the same time having little or no personal story themselves. They are the exterior reality, while the Anglo characters are the interior reality. In essence, it's all about using people as eye-candy.

But these "Turkish Delights" have now faded out of favor with modern readership sensibilities, and readers are taking a more critical look at Lewis and his depictions. Some more extreme variants have even called for Narnia to be removed from reading lists due to racist content. My personal opinion on this is that it would be as much of an overkill as the depiction of the Calormenes themselves. Lewis was undeniably imperfect, and his perspectives could be archaic and offensive, but that is the case with almost all classic authors. Purging them in total would just be a disservice, and also a form of whitewashing the past instead of learning from it.

Hence, my recommendation would be to add a nice little disclaimer page to the beginning of each of the questionable Calormene-centric volumes to let the "Concerned Muslim Mothers" (and any parents concerned about racist connotations infecting their children's perception of others) know what's ahead. Having said this, if I were actually planning some sort of school curriculum, I'd keep it to LWW as mandatory classic reading and then abandon ship (or should I say Treader?).

On a concluding note, there is something else lasting that came from the Calormene inclusion in Narnia, and that has to do with the character of Emeth, who appears in the final book in the series, *The Last Battle*. Through him, we find Lewis indicated his own hope in the universal possibility of salvation, based upon good deed and sincere intent, even including those for whom he is not very sympathetic. For Lewis was a high Church Anglican, and therefore more closely aligned with positions held by Catholicism than Evangelicalism, even though the latter have tended to embrace him as their own. Indeed, there has been no small amount of controversy over Lewis' assertion that God, personified as Aslan, will accept all good services, and reject all bad services, regardless of the name used or even doctrines held.

Aslan is depicted as beautifully telling Emeth, in words worthy of Rumi: "Beloved... unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek."

Emeth replies in kind: "My Happiness is so great that it even weakens me like a wound. And this is the marvel of marvels, that he called me Beloved..."

Perhaps, in spite of all the twists in the road, C.S. Lewis and the Calormenes have left us with some small seed of unity after all.



Jihad In Islam: What Is The Meaning Of It?

By Katie Quirk

Jihad in Islam. Just looking at those words alone without any context stirs up so many different ideas in people.

For people in the west, jihad in Islam seems scary. The concept creates fear.

People see jihad in Islam as a danger to the west. They view it as a threat to national security, freedom and democracy.

You'll often hear other words (often incorrectly associated with jihad in Islam) thrown in by the media and politicians as well: Extremist. Islamist. Terrorism. Radicalism. Infidels. Holy war. Jihadist. ISIL.

It gets people asking all sorts of questions.

What is jihad in Islam? What is the difference between radical and non-radical peaceful Muslims? What is the reason for Islamic jihad or holy war?

I'm not a scholar of Islam, but I hope I'm able to shed some light on these questions for you.

Literal Meaning of Jihad in Islam

First of all, let's put all of the ideas that we might have about jihad in Islam aside. The word Jihad comes from the root word jahada, which means to struggle. In Islam, this struggle is in the way of Allah.

JIHAD: From the Arabic root meaning "to strive," "to exert," "to fight"; exact meaning depends on context (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam).

The Best Form of Jihad

It isn't jihad in war that's the best form of jihad. It's jihad by telling the truth. It's fighting evil through one's words rather than through violence. It was narrated from Tariq bin Shihab that, "A man asked the Prophet, when he had put his leg in the stirrup: 'Which kind of Jihad is best?' He said: 'a word of truth spoken before an unjust ruler'" (Sunan an-Nasa'i).

Take non-violent action by speaking out against injustice and oppression against people.

Write letters to the government. Use your social media platforms and create petitions to make change.

صَلَّى
عَلَيْهِ
وَسَلَّمَ

or pbuh means "Peace Be Upon Him"

Narrated Abu Sa'id Al-Khudri:
“Somebody asked, ‘O Allah’s
Messenger! (ﷺ) Who is the best among the
people?’ Allah’s Messenger (ﷺ) replied ‘A believer
who strives his utmost in Allah’s Cause with his life and
property’” (Sahih al-Bukhari).

According to Islamic teaching, those who strive in the way of Allah are
the best of the Muslims. They live their whole lives according to Islam. True
Muslims pray their obligatory five daily prayers and give zakah (charity) to the
poor and needy.

Jihad Against Oneself

This form of jihad is all about fighting the evil desires within oneself.

We are constantly at battle with the evil whispering of the Shayatin. A Shaytan can refer to a human, jinn or animal that is evil, harmful and defiant. The goal of the Shayatin is to lead mankind astray from the worship of Allah.

“And thus We have made for every prophet an enemy – devils from mankind and jinn, inspiring to one another decorative speech in delusion. But if your Lord had willed, they would not have done it, so leave them and that which they invent” (Qur’an 6:112).

Inner jihad can also relate to the struggle involved in improving oneself.

Here are some examples common to Muslims: Learning to recite the Qur’an in Arabic. Forgiving those who have wronged us. Raising pious and righteous children. Finding the time to pray at work. Wearing hijab for the first time. Being patient during difficult times. Accepting the decree of Allah. Stopping haram habits.

Jihad Through Giving Da’wah

Giving da’wah (spreading the message of Islam) is also a form of jihad in Islam.

Jihad through giving da’wah can be verbal (e.g. telling friends, family and neighbours; delivering a khutbah; making YouTube videos etc.). It can also be written (e.g. writing books, blogs, essays on Islam etc.).

Today there are 1.6 billion Muslims globally. Without da’wah, it’s unlikely the message of Islam would have spread beyond a small corner to the Arab world to be the second largest religion in the world.

Treating Parents Well

‘Abdullah bin ‘Amr bin Al-‘as (May Allah be pleased with them) reported: “A man came to the Prophet (ﷺ) of Allah and said, ‘I swear allegiance to you for emigration and Jihad, seeking reward from Allah.’ He (ﷺ) said, ‘Is any of your parents alive?’ He said, ‘Yes, both of them are alive.’” He (ﷺ) then asked, ‘Do you want to seek reward from Allah?’ He replied in the affirmative. Thereupon Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, ‘Go back to your parents and keep good company with them’” (Riyad as-Salihin).

Go on, go and have a cuppa with your parents (if you can)! Spoil them and give them gifts. Be kind to them.

Islamic Conditions of War

War is certainly a form of jihad in Islam. But certain conditions must be met before Muslims can go to war with others.

In Surah Al-Baqarah, Allah commands Muslims to react to violent opposition by fighting back. “Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors” (Qur’an 2:190).

In the following ayat of Surah Al-Haj, Allah gives the People of the Book (Jews, Christians and Sabians who worship Allah) the right to defend themselves when being fought against.

“Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged. And indeed, Allah is competent to give them victory. [They are] those who have been evicted from their homes without right – only because they say, ‘Our Lord is Allah.’ And were it not that Allah checks the people, some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of Allah is much mentioned. And Allah will surely support those who support Him. Indeed, Allah is Powerful and Exalted in Might” (Qur’an 22:39-40).

Allah defends the People of the Book by giving them the ability to defend themselves. If He didn’t do so, their places of worship would be destroyed.

Hadith from Sahih Muslim

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) had specific instructions for the Muslims during war. These were to be practiced once a war was permitted to take place.

It has been reported from Sulaiman b. Buraida through his father that when the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) appointed anyone as leader of an army or detachment he would especially exhort him to fear Allah and to be good to the Muslims who were with him. He would say,

“Fight in the name of Allah and in the way of Allah. Fight against those who disbelieve in Allah. Make a holy war, do not embezzle the spoils; do not break your pledge; and do not mutilate (the dead) bodies; do not kill the children.

When you meet your enemies who are polytheists, invite them to three courses of action. If they respond to any one of these, you also accept it and withhold yourself from doing them any harm. Invite them to (accept) Islam; if they respond to you, accept it from them and desist from fighting against them.

When you lay siege to a fort and the besieged appeal to you for protection in the name of Allah and His Prophet, do not accord to them the guarantee of Allah and His Prophet, but accord to them your own guarantee and the guarantee of your companions for it is a lesser sin that the security given by you or your companions be disregarded than that the security granted in the name of Allah and His Prophet be violated.

When you besiege a fort and the besieged want you to let them out in accordance with Allah’s Command, do not let them come out in accordance with His Command, but do so at your own command, for you do not know whether or not you will be able to carry out Allah’s behest with regard to them” (Sahih Muslim).

The Muslim Shouldn't Wish to Meet the Enemy

The Prophet (ﷺ) also advised against looking to fight enemies.

Narrated by Abu Huraira: “The Prophet (ﷺ) said: ‘Do not wish to meet the enemy, but when you meet the enemy, be patient’” (Sahih al-Bukhari).

Abu Bakr's Commands in War

Abu Bakr was Prophet Muhammad's (ﷺ) closest sahabi (companion). He was the first man to accept Islam after the Prophet (ﷺ) first received revelation. After Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) passed away, Abu Bakr assumed the role of the first caliph (leader of Muslim community). He instructed the Muslims to act justly in war.

It was narrated that Hudhaifah bin Yaman said: “The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: ‘I do not know how long I will stay among you, so follow the example of these two after I am gone,’ and he pointed to Abu Bakr and Umar,” (Sunan Ibn Majah).

Hadith from Muwatta Malik

“Yahya related to me from Malik from Yahya ibn said that Abu Bakr as-Siddiq was sending armies to ash-Sham. He went for a walk with Yazid ibn Abi Sufyan who was the commander of one of the battalions. It is claimed that Yazid said to Abu Bakr, “Will you ride or shall I get down?” Abu Bakr said, “I will not ride and you will not get down. I intend these steps of mine to be in the way of Allah.”

Then Abu Bakr advised Yazid, “You will find a people who claim to have totally given themselves to Allah. Leave them to what they claim to have given themselves. You will find a people who have shaved the middle of their heads, strike what they have shaved with the sword.

I advise you ten things: Do not kill women or children or an aged, infirm person. Do not cut down fruit-bearing trees. Do not destroy an inhabited place. Do not slaughter sheep or camels except for food. Do not burn bees and do not scatter them. Do not steal from the booty, and do not be cowardly.” (Muwatta Malik).

The Qur'an on Those Who Have Surrendered

In the Qur'an, Allah makes a prohibition on Muslims killing those who have surrendered in war. “Except for those who take refuge with a people between yourselves and whom is a treaty or those who come to you, their hearts strained at [the prospect of] fighting you or fighting their own people. And if Allah had willed, He could have given them power over you, and they would have fought you. So if they remove themselves from you and do not fight you and offer you peace, then Allah has not made for you a cause [for fighting] against them” (Qur'an 4:90).

“And if they incline to peace, then incline to it [also] and rely upon Allah. Indeed, it is He who is the Hearing, the Knowing” (Qur'an 8:61).

Be Good to the Prisoners

Allah orders the Muslims to be good to the prisoners and feed them: “And they give food in spite of love for it to the needy, the orphan, and the captive, [Saying], ‘We feed you only for the countenance of Allah. We wish not from you reward or gratitude’” (Qur’an 76:8-9).

Jihad for Women

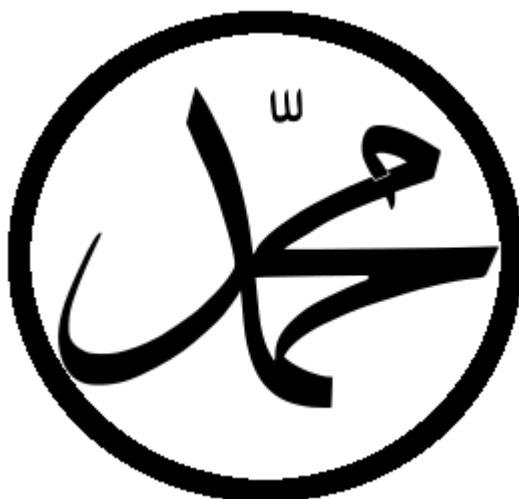
The best form of jihad for women is Hajj and Umrah (pilgrimage to the Holy Ka’ba).

It was narrated that ‘Aishah said: “I said: ‘O Messenger of Allah, is Jihad obligatory for women?’ He said: ‘Yes: Upon them is a Jihad in which there is no fighting: Al-Hajj and Al-‘Umrah’” (Sunan Ibn Majah).

At the time of Prophet Muhammad, (ﷺ) women participated in war through providing medical assistance. Narrated by Ar-Rabi’ bint Mu’auwidh: “We used to take part in holy battles with the Prophet (ﷺ) by providing the people with water and serving them and bringing the killed and the wounded back to Medina” (Sahih al-Bukhari).

Final Thoughts

Terrorists who do evil deeds while claiming they are “fighting in the cause of Islam” have got it all wrong. At the same time, Muslims correctly practicing the religion encounter Islamophobia from strangers on the street. But the world doesn’t need a blanket ban on Islam. It also doesn’t need people spreading hatred towards Islam online. What it does need is proper education about the background and nuances involved in the Islamic concepts of jihad. Good education starts with good parenting and proper schooling. We need to encourage others to consult with people of knowledge and be ready to enter into dialogue about these topics with Muslims and non-Muslims alike.



Mandrakes

By Hannah Kenner

Based on Genesis 40:13-16



Genesis 30: 14-16

One day, during the wheat harvest, seven-year-old Reuben found some mandrakes growing in a field and brought the berries to his mother, Leah.

Leah's sister, Rachel, begged Leah to give some of them to her. But Leah angrily replied, "Isn't it enough that you stole my husband, Jacob? Now will you steal my son's mandrake berries, too?"

Rachel replied, "I will let Jacob sleep with you tonight in exchange for the berries." So that evening, as Jacob was coming home from the fields, Leah went out to meet him.

"You must sleep with me tonight!" she told him. "For I have paid for you with some mandrake berries my son has found."

And so, Jacob slept with her.

The mandrakes had a song, one that started with the world on the third day. They sang of secret places, where the seeds sprouted, where the young would grow. Reuben had heard the song, and reached for the berries. They sang of sadness then, wanting to stay in the ground, not wanting to meet their destiny, but still he took them. For the boy knew that his mother was the unwanted one, and he wanted to gift her the mandrake berries to help lift her sadness.

When Leah accepted the berries from her son, they sang to her.

“What will you do with us?” they asked.

“I will eat you, sleep with my husband, and conceive,” she replied with determination.

“Does it prove you are loved that you eat us and sleep with your husband?” They whispered.

Leah only sighed. “I know that I am loved...if not by him, nor by you, then by God.”

The berries laughed. “Your sister is the one he loves.”

“Do you think I don’t know that? I need to bear children,” she said. “And my sons will be great men, this is our song always, but they will be like stone statues standing forever and I will not touch them.”



“You wish you could bear sons who were not chosen?” they asked.

“Perhaps I do. Perhaps I do not like losing them to destiny. As for Rachel, I do not know what she wants.”

“You, yourself, will be great,” they said.

“For some it will seem that way,” Leah replied. “Because they will not know how I cried when I held my babies and knew that they were chosen.”

“You will be The Mother,” they insisted.

“I will always be the one who was unwanted, who was second, who loved a man who did not love her. No one will know what I really was, that I had other thoughts besides Jacob and my sons.”

“Your sister wants us, be fair, give us to her. She too will have great children.” The berries whispered.

Leah was crying openly now. “Perhaps I only want to spare her the pain of bearing the twelve sons?”

“Give us to her!” They insisted.

And so Leah gave the mandrake berries to Rachel. Still crying, she told her sister that in doing so, she only thought of Jacob. But in truth, she thought of the sons, who would always love God more than her.

Leah and Rachel each had their nights with their husband, but Leah was the one who prayed for a daughter.

And the song went on.



*God Jesus Ministry:
An Outreach for the Christian Community of Pakistan
By Christopher Hope*



God Jesus Believer's Ministry is working for orphans & poor children in Pakistan, especially within the minority Christian community. The ministry helps assure these children have access to meals and educational opportunities. The ministry also reaches out to the community during Christmas, distributing food and giving gifts to the children and brings a smile to their faces. We also have a Christian prayer group that meets from home to home.



Each child needs education for his/her personal and public development, as well as their growth as Christians keeping the faith often against the odds. Jesus Ministry has a Sunday school and is striving to give Christian children the best education possible, involving both social and religious studies. We teach them the Bible and how to live a good Christian life.



The Ministry is also working to aid widows who are struggling to survive, particularly those in the Christian community. We try to help these women with the food items and other necessities, especially during the seasons of Christmas and Easter.



Pakistan is a Muslim country and the Christian minority community, while permitted to exist and to practice their religion, deals with various social and economic difficulties as a result of marginalization. In some areas, they have also experienced local persecution, violence, and scapegoating. They struggle to find meaningful employment, and are not given priority in any departments. In fact, it was announced only 5% of all jobs are filled by Christians. These struggles, among many others, curtail the freedoms of Christian citizens and cause them to suffer from economic poverty and societal pressure to give up the faith. While the government has been supportive of their plight at times, it is often hard for individuals to even make contact with government officials who might be able to help.

A high-profile trial has recently brought the Pakistani Christian community worldwide attention. For the last 8 years, a Christian Pakistani woman named Asia Bibi has been facing the death penalty for being accused of blasphemy against Muhammad in the aftermath of the workers' dispute. Recently, riots broke out across the country in reaction to her potential release and the situation remains unresolved. In Pakistan, there are many blasphemy cases of this nature, affecting Christians and non-Christians alike, though such cases rarely get much attention.

In 2018, the Pakistani TV channel GEO created a drama (play) with a negative portrayal of Christian believers. Promotionals were posted on YouTube under the name of “Maria Bint Abdullah”, and they showed a Christian woman giving up her faith in order to marry a Muslim man. The Pakistani Christian protests against this play succeeded in convincing the GEO to cancel its release out of respect for the concerns of the community.

The God Jesus Believer’s Ministry is requesting all overseas Christians to keep the Pakistani Christian community in prayers and support them in any way possible.

To sponsor or donate to the God Jesus believer’s Ministry, or to suggestion any other forms of aid or business opportunities for the Christian Community in Pakistan, please get in touch using the contact information below:

Chief of Ministry: Mohsin Youhana

Prayer group Leader: Hizkiel Patrick

Email: gjbministry@gmail.com

Website: godjesusministry.wixsite.com/website



THE CHRIST

By Timothy Mather

*I am the abundance and fertility of the Earth
I am the Water of Life that quenches thirst always
I am the Word spread to the four corners by the wind
I am Fire in the Head and infinite Love
I am the World Tree of Life Everlasting
I am the Caretaker of my flock, it is I who leads to the milk of life
I am the wisdom and truth of my word
I am the door left open to enlightenment
I am the answer to Life's Riddle
I am the hidden gem found within
I am the beautiful Soul of a child
I am the uncompromising steel of the Soul
I walk the path of the broken and the Light
I am the maltreated and exiled
I am the three fold way, Sister, Brother, Self
I am the Servant
I am rich in spirit although without wealth
I am comfort to those beyond solace
I am patience and without anger and release of ego and pride
I follow the spiralled path of life
I am compassion and the Law of Hospitality
I am the transparent flawless heart
I am the calming influence over the storm
I am the Peaceful calling
I am the Christ*



Listen To the Feminine

By Jeremy Henzell-Thomas

It has always seemed presumptuous, even somewhat preposterous, to me for men to pontificate in an authoritarian manner about the role of women in Islam as if the feminine principle is something which needs to be rigidly confined or patronisingly relegated to a narrow domain of activity. This can be especially jarring when it is comes from hectoring male figures who show no evidence of the psychological and spiritual integration which depends on the development of the feminine principle within themselves. To remind myself of the dangers of male authoritarianism, I collect magnetic stickers which I give to my wife to post on our fridge. My favourites are: "Everyone is entitled to my opinion," and "How many roads must a man walk down before he is lost."

I say this not in the least because I want to uphold a unisex agenda which obliterates the precious differences between the sexes, for, as the Qur'an says, "*everything have We created in pairs*" (51: 49), and "*We have created you all out of a male and a female...*" (49:13). It is this elemental polarity underpinning the whole of creation which is the most obvious expression of divinely ordained diversity. The dance of this polarity is the excitement we call "love", for "*...among His wonders is this: He creates for you mates out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you: in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who think!*" (Qur'an 30: 21).

Yes, "vive la difference", but at the same time the Qur'an tells us that diversity is ordained for us so that we may come to know one another, and this applies not only to nations and tribes but also to the realm of gender relations. So, what does it mean for men and women to know one another? My approach to this is a psychological one, because we need to realise that no human being is complete unless he or she has integrated what is complementary to his or her own sex. It is this integration of what is complementary which is the deepest kind of "knowing" of the "other". Integration can never arise from a distanced kind of "tolerance", still less of course from the denial of the worth of the other, but arises from active and direct engagement with and profound respect for the creative principles which the "other" embodies.

Let me express this in a more concrete way. It is often said that the kind of man who is particularly attractive to women is the warrior-poet, that is, the man of distinctly masculine qualities, notably courage, who yet has a poetic soul. Conversely, the kind of woman most treasured by men is the woman of spirit who displays actively intrepid qualities without sacrificing her softer feminine nature. To integrate himself, the man weds to his innate quality of "spirit" a "watery" element of soulfulness, and the woman weds to her innate quality of "soul" a "fiery" element of "spiritedness". Neither takes too much of the "other", for this would unbalance the authenticity of what it means to be a man or a woman. Too much "soulfulness" for a man can make him languid and effeminate (we have all seen those pictures of effete Victorian poet-aesthetes languishing on couches) and too much "spiritedness" for a woman can make her insensitive and strident (and we have all

exemplars of the new breed of women who believe they have to sacrifice their positive feminine qualities in order to succeed as “managers”). But a man with no taste of the feminine soul is in the grip of a masculine one-sidedness which distorts positive strength into negative aggression, domination, brutishness, and an inability to relate; and a woman with no taste of the masculine spirit is in the grip of a negative feminine one-sidedness which makes of her a “handless maiden”, passive, fragile, swooning, limp and dependent. In Aristotelian terms, these vices arise from an excess or defect of an essential virtue. For perfect exemplars of integrated people who embodied the golden mean, we need look no further than our Prophet Muhammad and his first love, Khadijah.

I suggest that one of the most pressing needs at this time is for a new breed of ambassadors who can find the points of convergence between the best of all traditions. The key quality that such a task demands is the ability to relate, and this underpins all these qualities: emotional maturity, psychological insight, social intelligence, communicative competence, aesthetic awareness and inter-cultural sensitivity. We could add to this the quality of empathy.

I also suggest that these relational qualities are typically developed not through those occupations traditionally valued by Muslims as a means to acquire money and status, such as engineering, medicine, computer science, and law, but through an education rich in the Humanities. Studying literature, for example, is a good way to develop understanding of human character and relationships, humane values and the moral consequences of actions. The cognitive, social and affective benefits of music education, drama and other creative pursuits are well documented by research. All such activities promote a sense of connectivity. Of course, the ability to relate is also nurtured in the home and wider society through a network of family and social relationships, and this is a strength of Muslim society as a whole, so I am not in the least suggesting that Muslims without an education in the Humanities are incapable of relating effectively to other people or other perspectives. But what I am saying is that there is a particular need at this time to bring out those essentially feminine, relational qualities in a climate which has dangerously overvalued the masculine and therefore threatens our capacity for integration, both within ourselves and within culture and society.

And let us be clear that this imbalance, while so easy to see in authoritarian perversions of Islam rooted in fear and hatred of women, is very much present in Western society too. This may sound surprising, because we associate Western civil society with female emancipation and gender equality. But I am not making a point about legal rights to “equality”, absolutely fundamental as these rights are to any decent society, whether based in Western concepts of civic society or in the Qur’an itself. There are blatantly evident imbalances and injustices in the Muslim world which need correction through legislation, but the imbalance in the West is not essentially a legal matter; it is a *psychological* problem caused by an over-valuation of a masculine outlook, and to remedy it we need psychological insight. It is not difficult to see that the relational and affective mode which I associate with the feminine principle is increasingly at risk in a culture which gives such eminence to thinking, managing, and controlling over feeling, cooperating and nurturing. The bias towards thinking over feeling in Western culture, especially in corporate and business environments, is well known by occupational psychologists who use the MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Inventory) to produce personality profiles. MBTI practitioners are trained to make corrections for it in scoring questionnaires.

Increasingly dominated by an unbalanced masculine managerialism, we go implacably about our business, striving, competing, achieving, performing, multi-tasking, outwitting, texting, phoning, e-mailing, upgrading, optimising, ratcheting up standards, modelling best practice, driving forward the agenda, pushing the envelope, managing risks, managing time, planning short-, medium and long-term goals, strategising, formulating policies and putting them in place, imposing sound commercial disciplines, meeting targets and deadlines, building cohesive teams, brainstorming, giving power-point presentations, rooting out dead wood, appraising, inspecting, evaluating, assessing, monitoring, testing, improving efficiency, providing quality assurance, specifying performance indicators, checking tick-boxes, defining outcomes, imposing systems of accountability, pressurizing, oppressing, bullying, fast-tracking, networking, and of course, *delivering*. Brian Thorne, Professor of Counselling Studies at the University of East Anglia, has written about some of the casualties of this culture who increasingly populate his consulting room for therapy, and my oppressive list of frenetic activities and judgmental processes is an extension of his. Have we forgotten that to “deliver”, in its original meaning, is to “set free”, not to enslave either ourselves or others?

Even teachers these days no longer teach; they “deliver” a curriculum, or a policy. We should resist not only the kind of language which reduces education to a kind of soulless managerialism, but also the kind of

language which equates education with the postal service. Are teachers only there to “deliver” programmes of study, as if they were pre-packaged one-way parcels, mere items of content to be transmitted into letterbox brains? In authentic spiritual traditions, the teacher is not only responsible for the instruction and training of the mind and the transmission of knowledge, but also with the education of the whole being. Such traditions never divorced the training of the mind from that of the soul. In the Islamic tradition, for example, the teacher is both a *muallim* (transmitter of knowledge) and a *murabbi* (nurturer of souls).

Nancy Kline, in her book *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind* compares a ‘Thinking Environment’ with what she calls ‘Male Conditioning’. In the Thinking Environment, people Listen; in the environment controlled by Male Conditioning, they Take over and Talk. Familiar territory? Have you ever been to a conference where, despite the request of the Chairman that people restrict themselves to short comments or concise questions, someone (usually a man) stands up and launches into a twenty-minute monologue? Let’s explore the other dichotomies Nancy Kline sets out. Here they are: Ask Incisive Questions/ Know everything; Establish quality/Assume superiority; Appreciate/Criticize; Be at ease/Control; Encourage/Toughen; Humanize the place/Conquer the place; Create diversity/Deride difference. It’s pretty obvious which pole of each dichotomy belongs to the Thinking Environment and which to Male Conditioning.

In the epilogue to his remarkable book, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, Richard Tarnas affirms his belief that the resolution of the crisis caused by the over-valuation of the masculine in Western culture is already emerging in various movements which reflect an epochal shift in the contemporary psyche, a fulfilment of the longing for a reunion with the feminine, a reconciliation between the two great polarities, a union of opposites. This can be seen in the “tremendous emergence of the feminine in our culture...the widespread opening up to feminine values by both men and women...in the increasing sense of unity with the planet and all forms of nature on it, in the increasing awareness of the ecological and the growing reaction against political and corporate policies supporting the domination and exploitation of the environment, in the growing embrace of the human community, in the accelerating collapse of long-standing and ideological barriers separating the world’s peoples, in the deepening recognition of the value and necessity of partnership, pluralism, and the interplay of many perspectives.”

I would add the important caveat that we are now at a point of maximum intensification of those negative aspects of masculine consciousness, as they attempt to forestall the impending paradigm shift described by Tarnas. This rearguard action, a typical occurrence as old paradigms redouble their efforts to prevent change, includes the co-opting into the masculine camp of a new legion of women who have embraced an unbalanced masculine *modus operandi* and have themselves abandoned the emerging feminine values which Tarnas sees as the main hope for the epochal shift in the contemporary psyche. Similarly, alongside the increasing awareness of the ecological is a potentially catastrophic acceleration in the assault on bio-diversity and in climate change; alongside the growing dissolution of ideological barriers separating the world’s peoples, we have the pernicious doctrine of the Clash of Civilisations which threatens to engulf the world in catastrophic conflict; alongside the deepening recognition of the value and necessity of partnership, pluralism, and the interplay of many perspectives, we have the resurgence of dangerously divisive forms of unilateralism, isolationism, nationalism, patriotism, militarism, machismo, supremacist ideology, triumphalism, and other forms of narrow identity politics. In all of this we can see the common thread of an autonomous solipsism which destroys *relationship*, and which has reached the stage where it has assumed a pathological character, a kind of societal and cultural autism or malignant egophrenia.

Never has the need been greater for a concerted effort to challenge those “corporate and political policies” which sustain the old paradigm. And it seems to me self-evident that the gift for *relationship* at the heart of the feminine psyche needs to guide this effort, whether that gift is offered by women or by men who have integrated it into their own being. This endeavour goes beyond the task, important as it is, of presenting Islam with a human face; it can help to transform not only the perception of Islam in the West, so that Islam is no longer misrepresented as inimical to women, but can also contribute to the transformation of Western society itself through the rediscovery of its own soul. This is the challenge for us: to go beyond our own solipsism, our own absorption in our own community, and to reach out with all our gifts to improve the society in which we live for all its people. In that task, intrepid Muslim women who honour their living connection with the feminine can guide us all.

CHRISTOS RAZDAJETSJA!

CHRIST IS BORN!

A LOOK AT CHRISTMAS THROUGH A BYZANTINE LENS
BY CHRISTOPHER WOODS

Christ is born; let us glorify him. Christ comes down from heaven; let us go out to meet him. Christ lives on earth; let us exalt in joy. All you faithful, sing to the Lord, for He has been glorified.

So begins a series of the most beautiful poetry in Byzantine worship. It is fitting that such a great feast should be blessed with the best words men have to offer. Christmas is one of the twelve largest feasts on the Byzantine calendar, and even among those twelve, is among the top three. Most people get excited for the lights and the carols and the presents—I get excited for the poetry. This poetry.

The melody (which I wish I could share) is not overflowing with joy, such as “Joy to the World” or “Angels We Have Heard on High”. It’s more solemn, yet no less joyful. The Byzantine view of Christmas can be encapsulated like this: yes, the Christ Child is absolutely adorable, like all babies. Even more so, since He doesn’t cry. But at the same time, this is God lying in the manger: the Creator, the Savior of us all. He’s done so much for us that we spend our entire lives trying to repay Him—and we all inevitably fail, because of our sinful nature. Incredibly, He still loves us, despite all the wrong we’ve done, all the good we’ve failed to do. Some people say that they find Christianity hard to believe, it’s just too good to be true. I’ve got to agree with them, to a point. No human could have ever thought of a God who loves us despite everything, who encourages us to be perfect as He is perfect, and to become one of us so He can show us how it’s done. None of the pagan gods and goddesses come close to such levels of absolute love. This first verse is a herald’s call: the King is born! Come and see for yourselves! God has truly come down from heaven! The lyrics themselves are so simple, I find it hard to expound any more on them. Christ is here. We’ve been waiting a long time, but the wait is over.

To Christ our God, who is the only-begotten Son of the Father before all ages, and in these latter times has become flesh of the Virgin without seed, let us cry aloud: You are our strength; glory to You, O Lord!

The second major verse (there are a few minor verses in between each major one) fleshes out the details of the Incarnation. The adorable baby in the crib is truly the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. “Only-begotten” means He is of the same substance as the Father. A man creates a sculpture, but begets his son. While Joseph is the lawful husband of Mary, he is not the biological father of Jesus. Mary conceived without seed. Another set of incredible concepts!

I will focus more on the Virgin birth in the next verse. For now, I will point out the brief phrase “in these latter times”. If you take the fundamentalist view of creation, and the world is six thousand years old, Christ was still born in latter times. Four thousand years before Christ’s birth, as opposed to only two thousand years after. Or, you could take the modern scientific view, which makes these words even more striking: hundreds of millions of years before Christ’s birth, as opposed to only two thousand years after. Regardless of how you look at it, Christ’s birth was relatively recent. It’s not something that happened back then, but something that’s happening now, that affects us directly.

O Christ, You have come forth from the Virgin as the rod of the root of Jesse and the flower that blossomed from his stem. You became flesh from her that know not wedlock, from the Mountain overshadowed by the forest; O God, you are not formed from created substance. Glory to Your power, O Lord!



This verse refers to the Incarnation in terms of Old Testament symbols. Aaron, the brother of Moses, had a staff which flowered, contrary to the laws of nature. There was no seed in the staff, no way for the flower to begin growing. And yet, it did. In just such a way, it was impossible for Mary, a virgin, to conceive and remain a virgin. And yet, she did.

Why? Why was it necessary for Mary to conceive in a miraculous

manner, and not in an ordinary manner? There are numerous Old Testament prophecies that refer to it. Isaiah even goes so far as to tell King Ahaz directly that a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and name him Emmanuel. In order to show the Israelites and everyone else that He was Who He said He was, Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies in the Old Testament. He humbled Himself further to be circumcised (a very painful process); and then He humbled Himself further to be baptized, even though He, sinless, did not need it. And He humbled Himself so far as to die. He didn't have to do any of it. There was no need to create all of us sinners in the first place. And yet, He did.

Since You are a God of peace and a Father of mercies, You have sent Your angel of great counsel to us to bring us peace. Thus we are directed towards the light of the knowledge of God, and at the night vigil we glorify You, O Lover of Mankind.

We are God's creation, God's work of art. A persevering artist doesn't abandon his work, but slowly perfects it more and more over time. And, of course, we need peace. We all yearn for it, but so few realize that we'll only have it when every knee bends and every head bows to the Lord. Christ is here to bring us to His Father, to bring us peace in Him.

Taking pity on Jonah, the sea monster that took him kept him safe, like an infant from the womb. The Word, which inhabited the Virgin and took flesh, came forth from her and kept her incorrupt. He underwent no change, and kept intact the one who bore Him.

Again, the poetry refers to the Incarnation in terms of the Old Testament. When an animal eats something, the enzymes in the mouth and the acids in the stomach break it down to gain the nutrients. But Jonah was not consumed or corrupted in such a way. He remained fully alive and unchanged. Christ also did not change while in the womb of His mother. He is completely God and completely man. No one else could claim such a ridiculous lineage. The pagans have dozens of demigods, heroes whose mother was a human and whose father was a god, or vice versa. The hero ended up half-man and half-god. They were greater than men, but less than gods. Christ is not one of these pagan heroes. He is God; we offer Him worship, which we do not give to created things. And He is a man, able to share in all joys and sorrows, even the greatest sorrow of death.

Christ is not the only one unchanged. In all Eastern Christian depictions of the Virgin Mary, three stars adorn her robe: one on each shoulder, and one on her hood. This is to show that she was a virgin before, during, and after birth-giving. She was kept pure, because she was the chosen vessel of Christ. God freed her from original sin, as is taught by the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. But He did not take away her free will. She is known as the new Eve. Like Eve, she was sinless when she was created; unlike Eve, she remained sinless, and chose always to do God's will. God kept her pure, because the conception and birth of Christ were unlike any other.

The youths, brought up together in piety, despised the order of the impious king. Undaunted by the threat of fire, they stood in the midst of the flames and sang this hymn: Blessed are You, O God, of our fathers.

The furnace cooled like dew, miraculously, foreshadowed a great marvel, for it did not burn the youths it received, nor did the fire of divinity burn the Virgin's womb by entering it. Therefore, let us strike up a hymn and sing: Let all creation bless and exalt the Lord forever.

The sixth and seventh major verses form two parts of a story, the story of Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego. They were Israelite youths in the time of the Babylonian exile, who refused to worship a huge idol forged by the king of Babylon. For this, they were sentenced to be thrown into a furnace—and in the flames, they gave praise to God. The fire didn't harm them in the least, but burned the torturers standing too close. This is another prefiguring of the Incarnation, as the seventh hymn details. Christ remained fully God, and having the Creator of all inside the womb of an ordinary, sinful woman would undoubtedly result in catastrophe. That is why God kept Mary pure from the beginning—so the story would end with eucatastrophe. The fire did not consume the Israelite youths, nor did the unabridged divinity of Christ consume the Virgin Mary.

I see a strange and marvelous mystery: heaven is a cave; the cherubic throne, a virgin; the manger is the place in which Christ, the incomprehensible God, lies down. Let us praise him and extol him.

This eighth and final verse may very well be the basis of Byzantine church architecture. The four walls form a square, while the ceiling rises as a spherical dome above it. The square represents earth, and the sphere, heaven. The church is a thin place, where the two of them merge. “We did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth”; such was the report of Prince Vladimir's ambassadors when they visited Hagia Sophia, the greatest church of the Byzantine Empire, in the tenth century.

The same sentiment of overwhelming awe and wonder permeates this verse. Earth and heaven come together in this moment. The dark, slimy walls of the cave are transfigured into the endless vaults of heaven. Mary is more glorious than the cherubim, for who among the angels has born God Himself? And in His utter humility, Christ desires no bed better than a manger, a bunch of dry straw. I can't imagine it could have been very comfortable, or very clean. But Christ did not come to surround himself with the most comfortable, cleanest portions of His creation. He came to enter into the worst parts of it, to perfect them through His example.

There are many more verses than the ones I showed here. Each major verse has three or four minor ones after it, all inspired by the same theme that the major one introduces. Together, they examine the event of Christmas from various viewpoints—and they still don't exhaust all the possible ways of meditating on this glorious feast.

Can Piety and Creativity Co-exist?

An Islamic Perspective

By Veronica Polo



Humans have a great capacity for creativity and manifest their creative capacities in a myriad of ways. Simultaneously, religion enjoins us to be pious. Does religion stifle creativity by codifying personal and societal rules and, in effect, lock people into rigid ways of being and thinking? Or are pious people demonstrating their true primordial human nature (*fitra* in Arabic) by embodying that they were created for (the worship of God)? What role do creativity and piety play within an individual and a community, and how might they be complementary, or at least be non-conflictive?

Muslims are sometimes looked down upon for being very traditional, perceived as being too rigid in their ways of thinking and not deviating from certain social-religious expectations. Does this reveal an inherent flaw in Muslim ‘thought’? Or are Muslims, in an attempt to preserve what they understand to be God’s laws, just finding it challenging to balance piety with rapidly changing secular societies that seem to value individuality over communal cohesion and religious obedience?

In Islam, piety (*taqwa* in Arabic), is usually understood to be the quality someone has when they are restraining themselves from disobeying God’s commands [1]. The word hints at self-control and abstinence. In a general sense, a pious person is understood to be surrendered to the will of God. Since the definition of ‘Muslim’ is often defined as being exactly this, that is, someone surrendered to the will of God, we can surmise that piety is an integral part of being Muslim.

So, how exactly do we define ‘creativity’ and whether creativity diverges from the idea of a pious life? When we speak about creativity, what we are talking about is, on the one hand, thinking outside the box, of doing or thinking of things in a different way. On the other hand, we are talking about being true to ourselves, of finding ways of channeling our unique talents and skills in a way that is fulfilling to self and may be appreciated by others as

well. Today's economies prize innovation, and throughout most of history, thinkers, inventors and scientists have shaped the way we understand and operate in the world [2]. Just in the 20th century alone, scientific and technological leaps such as space exploration and the digital and communication revolutions have demonstrated the vast potential of human creativity. Muslim cultures were at the forefront of science and philosophy during what was known as the 'Islamic Golden Age', but today, because science and technology are seen as mostly prospering in non-Muslim majority countries, Islam is seen as antithetical to progress. Unfortunately, most people have a very short view of history.

We might consider that Muslims have needed to play a specific role within humanity, that is, to preserve a tradition which counterbalances a certain heedlessness and forgetfulness of the Divine that comes with a focus on worldly development, that Muslims have been entrusted to hold the torch of Remembrance in a world that has become overly-materialistic. Simultaneously, it could be said that not all Muslims feel good about the real or perceived lag in achievement, and that they have indeed struggled to balance their role as God's servants (which would require conformity) with the possibility of being trendsetters in a worldly setting (which would require non-conformity).

Perhaps the real friction occurs NOT when we talk about creativity in terms of problem-solving and intellectual pursuits. The tension seems to lie between piety and creative self-expression, when that creativity is channelled through dress, artistic or musical expressions. Creative people are seen as those who make beautiful things, like in the way a musician might compose a heart-stirring piece of music, or an artist might produce a thought-provoking or beautiful painting. It is these individuals who often push the boundaries of what is acceptable or established in a society by providing new ways of looking, hearing, or understanding things.

In the West especially, art and music have flourished, leading to wide-ranging and unexpected forms. European art, from the more conventional styles in the medieval period to the inspirational explorations of the Renaissance, all the way to the explosive and dizzying Modern Art movements (Impressionism, Expressionism, Surrealism, etc.), has allowed artists and audiences to evolve their understanding of themselves in relation to the world. Music in the West has also been very prolific, and in the 20th century alone, we saw a vast array of styles develop (Blues, Disco, Hip Hop, Rock and Roll, etc.).

Islamic cultures have been much more reserved in this regard. In Muslim cultures, beauty has been expressed with a reverence for the Divine. No one can deny the subtle and refined beauty of Islamic architecture or the ethereal splendor of Arabic calligraphy, for example. Islamic geometric patterns play with the language of God, that is, mathematics. Designs that use symmetry are reminders of the balance in creation, while complex mathematical tessellations suggest the concept of infinity. In this way, Muslims express beauty by serving as echoes of the Creator.

Through this lens, are 'modern' Western expressions of art and music any less valid? Dogmatic thinkers might consider these expressions to be devoid of value, time-wasting or even dangerous. But is this really the case? Is God not continually expressing Himself through His Creation? Should not the criteria for worthy expressions be that they 1.) inspire, 2.) evoke feeling, 3.) reflect beauty, 4.) be thought-provoking, and 5.) promote positive social change? The dimensions of creativity to be avoided could include heedlessness, darkness, or intentional harm to self or others. But even this criteria can shift as times and cultures change, and can be affected by the perception of the individual taking in that expression (a dictator for example, is unlikely to appreciate the talent of a musician who rallies against the regime). Whatever the case, one must tap into their own wisdom to gage whether acts of self-expression fall under the category of a learning experience or, if being shared, is having a positive impact on those around them.

Could God intend both piety and creativity for us? Let us look at this from a metaphysical perspective. God is at the source of all of creation; all things come from Him and return to Him [3]. He is the ultimate Creator, capable of making something out of nothing. The universe, that which we can see and that which we cannot, is full of wonders. Within our planet, every kind of conceivable life form seems to exist, from the single-celled to the complex. Beauty and complexity is on full display throughout the variety of mammals, birds, insects, reptiles, and every other life form present. When we look at the night sky, there is a bedazzling array of astral bodies, which have become more wondrous as technology has allowed us to penetrate deeper and further into the visible universe. It is hard to imagine how, when creation is so varied and prolific, humans, who have been given certain faculties of appreciating and building upon creation, would not be encouraged to serve as vessels for creation. When creation itself is based on growth, diversification, and trial and error (evolution), would it not make sense for humans to also evolve

intellectually and to be prolific in our contributions to the world? Would it not be praise-worthy to celebrate and amplify the beauty that we perceive around us in the natural world? As an oft-quoted hadith goes, "*God is beautiful and loves beauty.*"

And yet the entire universe is subject to the laws of physics, some of which we can discern and some of which remain a mystery. There is a subtle point here. Humans have been given certain faculties of reasoning, of expressing, of feeling, of contemplation; with these, we can create. Yet, we are subject to certain laws ourselves, not only the physical, but the moral, the communal, that which will serve as a container to operate in this world. It seems then, that piety can serve as a counterbalance to the possible excesses of creativity leading to narcissistic individualism.

Now let us look at the roles that piety and creativity have played through the human behavioral lens. Children are naturally creative: they are full of ideas, they ask questions, and they take risks and experiment. This innate inquisitiveness serves as a way to learn about the world. Piousness is not an attribute we associate with children, nor would we necessarily desire it for them. Perhaps we would use adjectives such as "innocence" and "purity". Children are not yet searching for God in the way an adult would, nor are they capable of pious self-restraint. There are stages a human must go through, and piousness comes with age. If a person has the seed of God planted in them, then they will experience a growth in spiritual capacity over time, and piousness will be the natural consequence. If they are adherent to the practices of Islam, praying and fasting will serve as the intended tools for inner purification.

Ultimately, piety and creativity need not be at odds; they are two qualities that naturally manifest within human beings. Preferably, individuals will have a holistic approach by excelling in whatever disciplines and duties they are called to outwardly, while pursuing spiritual excellence inwardly. In fact, by being in touch with God, we may better understand ourselves, what our needs and talents are, and what we have to offer to the world. And if we are in need of inspiration, we have the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as a role model, a man who reached the heights of spiritual perfection, and yet performed countless outer duties for the betterment of his community, which included frequent problem-solving. It is also helpful to remind ourselves that we are more inclined to creative explorations and acts of individual self-expression earlier in life, and that piety becomes increasingly relevant later in life, as we play out certain scenarios before making our journey back to God. Therefore, we should be wary of placing false external expectations of piety on self or others since everybody's journey is different. Likewise, as we get older, we need to check that our creative exploits are not just ego-centric distortions that are leading us away from our center. Creativity and piety should coexist. A human being who can balance these two qualities will hopefully lead a life rich in learning and expression that will eventually transition inwardly back to *Al-Muqtadir*, the Creator of All Power.

Notes

[1] Here the word 'God' is used instead of 'Allah' in order not to perpetuate the commonly mistaken idea that the God of the Qur'an is other than the One and Only God referred to in the Torah and New Testament. There are many paths to the Creator, but only one Being that rules over all of creation, and all humans in spite of creed.

[2] Here the concept of innovation is not the same as the Islamic concept of bid'ah, which is referring to religious innovation, for example, straying from established principles of worship.

[3] God does not have a gender, nor is God a person, nor is God quantifiable or describable in normal human terms. Due to linguistic constraints, 'He' is used here, in spite of its unfortunate patriarchal connotations, to represent THAT which is the pulse behind all living things, in the third person. The Quran itself jumps around from third person singular 'He' to first person plural 'We' to first person singular 'I', perhaps as a mechanism to deter humans from trying to linguistically fixate on that ephemeral concept of the Divine.

This article was first published on www.exploring-islam.com

Oh, Ye Lovers!
A Meditation on Mawlana Rumi and St. John of the Cross

By Avellina Balestri



**“THE PEOPLE OF THE CITY, YOUNG AND OLD
WERE ALL LAMENTING, CRYING, SIGHING LOUD
THE VILLAGERS AS WELL AS TURKS AND GREEKS,
THEY TORE THEIR SHIRTS FROM GRIEF FOR THIS GREAT MAN.
‘HE WAS OUR JESUS!’- THUS THE CHRISTIANS SPOKE.
‘HE WAS OUR MOSES!’ - SAID THE JEWS OF HIM...”**

-A contemporary account of Mawlana Rumi’s funeral

**“WHAT A WONDERFUL THING IT IS
FOR TWO SOULS TO UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER,
FOR THEY NEITHER LACK SOMETHING TO SAY,
NOR GROW TIRED.”**

-St. Theresa of Avila on her friendship with St. John of the Cross



Oh, ye lovers, dance! Whirl as the petals of the rose unfurl and find the Center of all Longing, the Oneness of all Being. Spin as the seasons turn, color melting from one shade to another, ever deepening, as ink upon the parchment forms poetry, formed deeper yet by the pattern within. Let every every pen be broken save for the feather of Reality's Breath, fluttering in our chests, blowing through the hollowed out reed, playing the music divine...



Oh, ye lovers, taste! Drink of the sweet spiced wine beyond all earthly grapes, that intoxicates only with the divine visitation! As the thorns prick the flesh and the drops of blood fall, so shall the red leaves fall and fade into winter's bleak countenance. And yet beneath the face of death, the heart beats warm, and beneath the silent earth, the roots are down there riotous. The shell and the seed, the blossom and nectar, the comb and the honey, the case and the jewel, all meet in the returning to the One...



Oh, ye lovers, blush! The redness of eve converses with the paleness of the morn, and your honor is drowned in your amazement, as the cup send down by unseen hands that overflows, dazzling beyond mortal words. Let the yearning drain you of all you ever were, the pulsing of secret desire, and set you aflame as the moths are consumed by the lantern they court. Is the *masjid* of your soul ablaze, and the doors broken in? Can the heat ever be cooled or the thirst ever be quenched?

Oh, ye lovers, see! View all the worlds as only you can, with the eyes of essence behind the eyes of form, as the self becomes like melting snow, and the moon beams turn all to silver glass. The soul is taken up by her, translucent as her light, and none might see the depths of her journeys. Yet you see now as you have never seen before. Let the gawkers gawk on; wear the shirt of blame and embrace the naked secret! The sun squanders itself a thousand times over so the moon

might draw breath, and a new tale might be woven,
and a new bead upon the prayer string pulled along.
And so we soar, ever closer to the Source and
Summit...

Oh, ye lovers, fly! Journey as the flaming arrow,
cutting through the night sky with smokeless light,
Circle as the birds that must descend and let the wind
carry them upwards again! Make your nests in the
mountains, on the lonely and far, distant isles. Follow
the footprints along the shore to the bridegroom's
chamber. Let it be as your chapel cell, and draw prayer
around you as the silken perfume that stains the
hands of your Beloved. The wind will brush His hair
against His brow, and the chains of His curls have
enraptured you! Let the atoms of your being dance in
the ecstasy of non-being before the Self-sustaining
One, the All-in-All! Oh, how He wounds my soul with
His softest sighing...

Oh, ye lovers, hear! Listen to the voice within you that
calls you so often, the will between seen and unseen
that reveals itself through all the senses, and yet is
beyond them all. Kiss and be kissed by the wind, for it
is softer than any lips, and fear not when the kiss ends
and lips grow dry. You will pray until they bleed, and
believe yourself forsaken in the dark night of your
soul, crossed between heaven and hell in exile. And
yet you will hear, in your own voice echoing, the
sound the Beloved beckoning. You may wander the
desert as Majnun seeking Lela, as Solomon seeking
Sheba, as the Magi seeking Jesus, and emptiness must
be your consolation. Wisdom seeks beauty, and beauty
clothes wisdom...

Oh, ye lovers, cry! The time of union has come, and
the tears will flow into a saving oasis in a world of
aridity. The universe will encompass your moaning
and swallow the sound of music into the abyss of
silence. Come see, all you pass by, what love has
wrought! Is there any sorrow so great as she brings?





The cloud of unknowing has descended, as over Sinai when the bush burned unendingly, and the darkness of God protects the soul from itself. The veil has fallen, and yet the veil shall be parted, and the face of the Beloved shall be glimpsed...

Oh, ye lovers, touch! Feel the rain upon the garden of the soul, watering it with the yearning that would drive you to madness. Let it drive you down, to your knees in the churches, or prostrate, foreheads to the ground, in the mosques, and let in your returning, let the Gentle One show gentleness to you at the threshold of your love. The humble poet speaks his lines, and the Noble King knows the meaning beyond the barrier of language, for it is the King who inspires the poet and compels the pen to write. It is the Great Song that sings through countless manifestations, geometry as intricate as the spider's web, and were the threads that veined through all creations, the worlds would suffocate of their own ugliness.

Oh, ye lovers, die! Kiss the goblet that brings death's bitter mead. Abandon oneself as a child in its mother's arms, as a lover embracing, losing herself in the heartbeat of her mate, and the two becoming one, dissolving like the stars in the pearl of the dawn. It starts with only a grain of sand, grating within the shell, and yet when the oyster's mouth opens, the gleam is realized. Be as the vanishing form that leaves no shadows! We do not fall into a monster's abyss, but arrive at the doorstep of belonging. The grave is the curtain of paradise, where the mouth closes and the eyes open to a wordless world, even as the ground your knees or foreheads touched will mourn for you. Abandon all you ever sought to be, and in dying, let your spirit be released from its tower cell!

Oh, ye lovers, be reborn! Let your cares fade in the morning's mist and dim amongst the fairness of the lily's caress. Be like the womb of the Virgin Mary, the enchanted lady, who nurtured truth in the pure boy Jesus, the dome encasing the spirit, the lamp nurturing the flame within the niche, the natural birthing the miracle. The caravan has set out across the dunes to the origin from whence it came, to whence it all began. Let the bucket be lowered in the well of Abraham, only to rise upon filled with Living Water! The time has come to end a harsh and scarce era and start a new life...ah, the sheer grace!

Oh, ye lovers, in the evening of life we shall be judged by love! Love on, love on, for Love is all there is!



Can We Get Away with Our Sins?

An Islamic Perspective

By Mostafa Tarek

I'd like to start off by saying that none of the thoughts I will express here belong exclusively to me, it's the accumulation of discussions & reading from various people, scholars and books.

As a Muslim, I've always been impressed with the first story ever in Islam, when we believe it was revealed to Muhammad, peace be upon him, that he would be a messenger from the Almighty God as Abraham, Noah, David, Moses and Jesus, peace be upon them and upon the rest of the Prophets. Such an event was the key to everything else that followed. It is the starting point of a nation of 1.7 Billion Muslims who live today in every corner of the world and consider Islam the source of their guidance, hope & inner peace. One in every four individuals on Earth is a Muslim from the consequences that resulted from that moment. Logically and to me it's the most important event in the history of Islam.



Apart from the consequences, what really impresses me is the reaction of the prophet Muhammad (pbuh) when the Angel Gabriel appeared to him for the first time and informed me that he would be a messenger. He was terrified; he didn't run to the people saying: "Hallelujah! I am a prophet!" Instead, he ran back home, told his beloved wife Khadijah to cover him with more and more blankets because he was shaking, then told her that he might be hallucinating, and kept trying to refute what had happened. The fear that you and I would feel is what he felt in our weakness as human beings.

And then the beautiful soothing reply came from his beloved wife. She told him "You visit the sick, you help the poor, you help people in times of difficulty. God won't let you get lost." That's the reply that we as humans need to hear, but first we need to be good to each other and to those in need, so that when times of distress come, we will have faith that God knows that we try to do good, and He won't let us get lost, "for the meek shall inherit the Earth".

This story is so dear to my heart, the appearance of Angel Gabriel to Muhammad (pbuh) for the first time, the very natural fear that took over Muhammad (pbuh), the aid from his wise and great wife (whom I see as a hero in this story), for his wife is an example of how a woman can be the shield for her man from all troubles and fears, a source of warmth and serenity and inner peace, a constant source of reassurance and love. All of that makes me wish to see a video of this incident.

I've always said to myself that if I made it to paradise, I would ask Allah to grant me one of my wishes, which is to see a recorded video of the very first moments of the beginning of Islam. After all, nothing is impossible for the almighty God, and He is outside of time, as I understand all theists believe no matter what religion they follow. But science also proves that this is possible. Sound travels at a speed of 343 meters per second. If you are talking to someone who is kilometers away from you via a very loud microphone and through a phone, he will hear your voice twice, once through the phone and a second time when your voice from the microphone reaches him.

Similarly there are planet and stars billions of light years away from the Earth, if there are people or whatever on such planets watching us from a telescope, it will take maybe thousands or hundreds of thousands or millions of years for our image to reach them. They might watch Cain killing Abel long after the dust of their

bones and that of their descendants is gone. So in answer to the question I posed in the title, no, I don't think that we can get away with our sins, for the universe as a whole is the biggest camera ever recording all of our deeds.

The angels of Allah can simply break the limits of speed and fly you to anywhere in the Universe on the Day of Judgment so that you could still see your sins from a telescope (or whatever), even the sins that you deny having committed. The Almighty God says in the Quran: "And never is your Lord forgetful" (Quran 19:64). He also says about the universe and the Day of Judgment: "The Day when We will fold the heaven like the folding of a written sheet for the records" (Quran 21:104).

Have you heard about the folding or curving of space before? To me this verse is not only a metaphor of the end of our test in this life but also a description of the true nature of the universe: it's a recording camera, witnessing all of our deeds.

Frankly, I don't want to watch my bad deeds or mistakes ever again. The punishment of God to me does not just consist of hellfire; instead the punishment starts when you are able to see your sins and mistakes that you regret, when God makes you see them again, and you know how you failed yourself and others. That's the punishment I fear the most.

I hope that any goodness I did or tried to do is all that will remain in my records. And I will never lose that hope as long as I read the following verse in the Quran: "And God would not punish them while they seek forgiveness" (Quran 8:33)

I will keep asking for forgiveness as long as I am alive and I will try to undo any mistakes I constantly make by good deeds and asking for forgiveness and begging my Creator. Will I succeed in doing what I am saying now, all the time or most of the time? I am not sure but I am not willing to lose that hope.



Meeting in the Black Forest

By Amanda Pizzolatto

She walked gracefully under the canopy of dark needles, the only thing moving in an otherworldly stillness. She glanced all around. There was a good reason why this wood was called Black Forest. It was not just a reference to the Black Forest on Earth, where a portal lay connecting the two worlds, but also because of the color of the trees themselves. The bark was like ebony while the treetops were reminiscent of dark pine. Between each tree sat a snowberry bush and a shimmering pool. She knew both trees and bushes drank heavily from the pools, but no other living thing could. It looked, felt, and probably tasted like water, but it most certainly wasn't. That sheen on the water would make anyone pause, or, at least it should. She had heard of a couple of tales of somebody drinking from the pools, and were never heard from again. She glanced down at a pool as she passed it. The force of her passing caused a ripple on the surface. But the way that ripple moved made the pool almost seem like it was alive rather than being pushed on by an outside force. She shivered slightly at the thought before tearing her eyes away from the pool and going back to searching for the person she was meeting. She passed a couple more pools before she found him, leaning against a tree that was a distance from any of the pools. She let out a sigh of relief she hadn't realized she had been holding. The sound of it caused him to raise his head and glance at her. Though a smile appeared on his face, his blue eyes showed the sorrow he had to have been feeling. Her heart went out to him as she quickly approached him.

"Matthew, you're alright! And, I'm so sorry to hear about your sister."

Matthew took her hand and kissed it. "I'm glad to hear at least one other person is happy for my safety. And, thank you, Scheherazade, though I am glad that she isn't . . ." He paused as his sad eyes wandered over the pools.

"I'm sorry about your parents too."

Matthew glanced at her with a soft smirk. "But you already told me that."

Scheherazade smiled softly. "It's why I didn't start with it. Besides, we already knew what happened to your parents. We were still in anxious wait for word of your sister. And to hear that . . . is it not still a sorry fate for a genie?"

"A lamp is better than . . ."

Scheherazade nodded as he gave a quick glance to the pools. "Of course, there is still the chance that she may be freed by her master."

Matthew sighed as he sat on the ground. "I don't think that will be possible for these five, not this time."

Scheherazade sat down next to him. "Why? What did you find out? What did Jason do?"

"I don't know what Jason did, or said. He didn't do it. My father did it, before he was destroyed."

Scheherazade gasped. "What? Your father? Why would he do such a thing?"

"To protect them, why else?"

"But . . . that means . . ."

"I'm the king of the genies, the last king of the genies."

"But, if Jason destroys you . . ."

"All genies, except for those five, will be nothing but pools of ether," said Matthew. He glanced at the pools again. "And will be completely wiped from memory." He glanced back at her with a sigh. "Saying it now, it finally seems real, that it can happen."

Scheherazade stood up and placed her hands on her hips with a defiant look. "We can't let that happen, we mustn't, we won't. You can count on the fofi* to be your allies."

Matthew stood and shook her hand. "Thank you, I'm glad of it. So, I should tell you."

Scheherazade blinked. "Tell me what?"

Matthew walked to a pool and waved his hand over it. "While I was on Oruzy, I foresaw some of the future and what would happen if the lamps, my sister's in particular, were to fall into the wrong hands. So I created an order of warriors to protect them. But I also wanted them to be more than just warriors, so I chose a select group of women to do the job." He waved his hand again, and a picture of five women appeared, each woman wearing a dress with a breastplate, a sword, and throwing daggers on their belts. "One from each race." Scheherazade nodded as she glanced at the five. The human was easy to find, she looked like any other Indian woman. It was just a little harder to pick out the others. Scheherazade always got them mixed up.

Matthew seemed to know her dilemma as he chuckled. "I can tell you which one is which."

Scheherazade smiled sheepishly at him. "Please? Trying to memorize all the races can be a bit daunting."

Matthew smiled. "No kidding. I hope you'll remember them for sure when you meet them, because you do have to act differently around each one."

"I know that, just figuring out which one is which."

Matthew chuckled. "I see. Here, this is the Apsara." A blue light encircled the second woman. She looked like a Thai woman, but she had sapphires in her hair, her long nails looked like they were made of sapphires, and her eyes were as blue as the

stones in her hair. Her ears were slightly pointed, and she appeared to be a very graceful warrior.

“The Vidyadhara.” A blue light encircled the fourth woman. Her face looked Nepali with a beaked nose and parrot-like eyes, her red, blue, and green hair looked like feathers, her knee-length skirt revealed the same colored feathers on her legs, her bare feet had only three toes per foot, and she looked to be flying.

“The Diwata.” The third woman was illuminated. She had golden skin, ridged ears and nose, red eyes, dark brown hair up in a bun, and looked more muscular than the others. She had her right hand on the hilt of her sword and a fierce look on her face.

“And the Ahura.” The first woman was illuminated, and Scheherazade took a double take. She hadn’t noticed it at first glance, but this woman had a third eye in the middle of her forehead. While the other two were closed, the third one was opened to reveal a grey iris. There was a pair of damselfly wings on each of her wrists and on both sides of her neck. Her hands were clasped as if in prayer, and her armour was more elaborate than the other four, studded with a few gemstones, as it were.

“Oh, I see the differences now,” said Scheherazade. She glanced at Matthew with a smile. “It’s always better to see them. I don’t know why.”

Matthew chuckled as he waved his hand over the pool and the image disappeared. “It’s fine. You have more of a writer’s mind than an artist’s, words come more readily to you than images.”

Scheherazade nodded. “True, thank you for showing me. But, why is it important that we know about . . . this?” she asked as she waved her hand over the pool.

“Those women are part of an order called the Zorostyas. Miriam will no doubt send them here if there are many problems. Though, most problems can be solved without needing to come here, including the worst problem.”

“The worst problem?”

Matthew sighed. “Yes, you’ll find out soon enough. Just keep the name Litharil in mind and let them know that my sister’s lamp will never fall into their hands.”

“Why would I have to tell them that? Why can’t you?” Matthew bit his lip. “Matthew, you said that since we are allies, you can tell us anything. Is there another reason for me needing to know all this?”

“Well, there’s . . . there’s a chance that the genies will leave Alixandria.”

Scheherazade glanced at him, searching for the truth. The two looked at each other for a few minutes before she spoke. “Is it really a chance, or is it a part of the future you’ve seen?” she whispered.

He sighed as he waved his hand over the pool again. The image that appeared this time was of a seven petaled flower, each petal a different color of the rainbow while the center looked brown.

“What a strange flower. Where is it from?”

“This is the rarest flower of all, found only on certain secluded areas on Islanra, the shevzel.”

Scheherazade glanced between Matthew and the flower. “Alright, so, why is it important?”

“It’s the symbol of our future,” Matthew whispered, “each petal represents something, I don’t know what just yet. But, I have a feeling I’m going to find out soon.”

Real soon.” He glanced at Scheherazade. “I’m going to leave Alixandria for a while . . .”

“What? You can’t! Not with Jason out to destroy you and your allies, and he’s growing his army!”

Matthew placed his hands on her shoulders. “I know. It will only be for a little while, I promise. There’s . . . I have to prepare myself, and the others. Destroying other genies is no easy feat.”

Scheherazade sighed. “I know, it’s just, the number of deaths keeps growing.”

Matthew closed his eyes tight as his face contorted with pain. “I know. But even more will die if I don’t do this right. Besides, I’m hoping a few of his genies will come over to our side.”

Scheherazade gasped. “Oh! I know!”

Matthew blinked in surprise before he raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Dunyazad has been approached by one of Jason’s genies. She said her name was Hannah.”

Matthew’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yes . . . do you know her?”

“No, we’ve, we’ve never met. It would be nice to, though.”

“Well, how about this, I get Dunyazad to arrange a meeting between the two of us. Miss Hannah apparently wants to convince us to join Jason’s side. Then you come in and try to convince her to join our side.”

Matthew nodded slowly. “That sounds like a good idea. She won’t join our side immediately, though.”

“I’m not expecting an overnight change. We just need to plant the seeds for change.”

Matthew nodded. “Exactly. Well, I need to go. I have a lot of work to do. Oh, and before I forget.” He waved his hand, and a notebook appeared in it. He handed it to Scheherazade with a smile. “Merry Christmas.”

“Oh, Matthew, thank you! I wish I had something to give you!”

“Your friendship, allegiance, and unwavering faith in me is the best present I’ve received in a long time. I shall always treasure it.” He kissed her forehead. “And with the fofi as our allies, we have a chance to make things right.”

Scheherazade sighed. “I still wish I could do more.”



“For now, just be the queen your people need, and be ready for my return. This Hannah will no doubt tell Jason immediately after our little meeting of my return. But for now, don’t worry. If anything does happen, let Charlotte know, she’ll know how to contact me. And I’ll send word to you through her.”

Scheherazade blinked in surprise. “Your cousin? What about Gary, Phillip, Mark...” She paused when he held up her hand.

“I’ve given them assignments off world. Charlotte is technically going to be the only one on my side here. Besides, Jason is more likely to leave her alone than the others. She is a green, after all, and is the best of us at blending in.”

Scheherazade sighed. “Very well. We shall be ready, and waiting, for your return.”

Matthew brought her hands to his lips. “Thank you, Scheherazade, for everything.”

She took her hand out of his and placed it on his face. “You know I’ll never stop...”

He smiled and whispered, “I know.” He took her hand from his face and kissed it again.

“Goodbye Scheherazade, until next time.”

“Goodbye Matthew, be safe.”

“Always, but, it is going to be easier to be safe since I am going to worlds where no one can kill me, so there’s that,” he said with a grin and a wink.

Scheherazade laughed. “That’s true, but still, be careful. You are very important to all of existence.”

“Yeah, I know. One doesn’t think like that until one’s own species is in danger of extinction.”

“Oh Matthew,” she said with worry and sorrow hints in her tone.

“Well, I’m off to save it. Until next time, your majesty.” He bowed. He straightened up and gave her one final smile before vanishing into thin air. Scheherazade stood there for a little while longer, staring at the spot where he had stood. She sighed as her guards telepathically told her it was time to head home and prepare for a meeting with diplomats. She took one final glance at the spot and the pool before turning around and walking back, leaving the Black Forest in its unearthly silence once more.

(*Fofi are a human race that can shapeshift into spiders. There are currently only three kinds of spiders, the Joro spiders, the peacock spiders, and the St. Andrew’s Cross spiders. Each are associated with a certain human race based on the first fofi. Ananse and Aso are the parents of the St. Andrew’s Cross spiders, Arachne and Nareau are the parents of the peacock spiders, and Jorogumo and Iktomi are the parents of the Joro spiders.)

There'd be no Santa Claus without St. Nicholas:

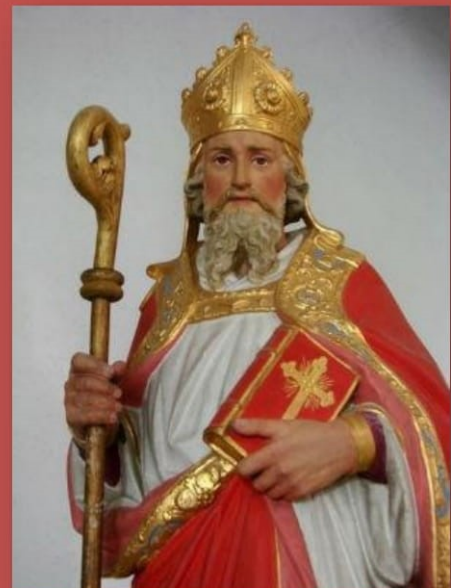
Remembering the Saint behind the Legend

By Anna Trotta Githens

I find it very troubling when someone's legacy is discredited, especially if that someone was a saint who dedicated his life to helping the poor. While it is apparent that secularists have hijacked Christmas, hearing the media speak of good ol' Saint Nick as though he was a myth conceived from a poof of fairy dust is taking things too far.

While Meghan Kelly's description of the mythical Santa is accurate, it did not carry with it an abjuration that one is not free to create one's own mythical Santa-like figure. Anyone has been free to do so since the birth of Santa Claus in America. However, since his story is derived from the real life of St. Nicholas, calling him a myth is inaccurate. It is more fitting to call his story a legend, though over time the lines between fact and fantasy became blurred as Santa took on new and creative character traits.

Even though the creative minds of authors and illustrators over hundreds of years gave St. Nicholas a gradual transformation, his essential attributes have endured the test of time. For instance, St. Nicholas, the real person, lived in A.D. 270 in the Roman town of Myra. He was a beloved bishop who cared deeply for the poor. Wearing a red bishop's cloak and accompanied by a little orphan boy as his helper, he would secretly toss sacks of gold through the windows of the needy, pay for the dowries of impoverished young brides, and deposit coins and treats in the shoes of children.



One story tells of Nicholas's determination to stop a poor father from selling his three daughters into prostitution for lack of dowry. Upon awakening

one morning, the father found a bag of gold that he believed was a godsend but had been left anonymously by Nicholas. Sneaking away one night after his third visit, the father caught him, kissed his feet and said, "Nicholas, why do you conceal yourself from me? You are my helper, and the one who has delivered my soul and my daughters' from hell."

St. Nicholas was canonized after his death, which was on the sixth of December in A.D. 342. He is the patron saint of children, sailors, voyagers, brides, and the country of Greece, to name a few. He is often depicted next to a barrel in which the bodies of three murdered children were hidden but

were restored to life by the saint. His relics exist today in Bari, Italy, after being transferred in 1807. After fifteen hundred years they are still known to heal many illnesses.



St. Nicholas was long revered and his story remained popular for many years. Elaborate feasts were celebrated each year on the day of his death, and small gifts were left in the shoes of children in his honor. His popularity waned only during the Protestant Reformation when the veneration of Catholic saints was suppressed throughout many parts of Europe.

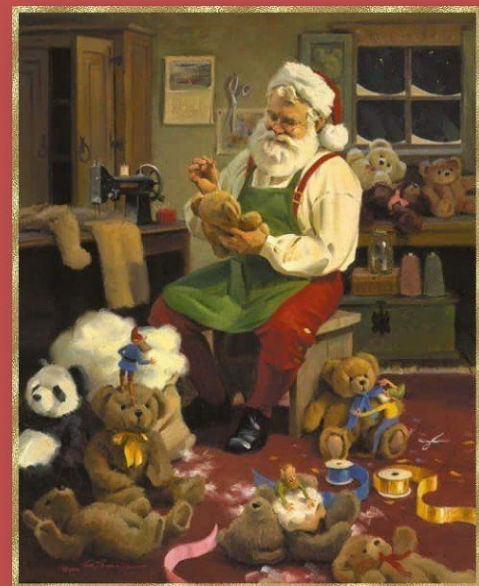
His story was kept alive, however, in the Netherlands, where he was known as "Sinterklaas," or Sint Klaas, which means Saint Nicholas in English. According to folklore, Sinterklaas was a "kindly figure who traveled from house to house on the evening of December 5, leaving treats or presents in children's shoes in exchange for a snack for his horses." In the Dutch tradition, Sinterklaas "wore red bishop's robes, had elfin assistants, and rode his horses over rooftops before slipping down the chimney to deliver the gifts."

It was the Dutch who brought the mythical Santa Claus, along with the Dutch name, to America. Upon landing in the New World in 1642, "Dutch explorers, led by Henry Hudson, built their first church on the island of

Manhattan" and dedicated it to Sinterklaas. In 1664 the British took over New Amsterdam and decided to adopt the Dutch version of Sinterklaas and merge it with their own Father Christmas in observance of the Winter Solstice. Over time, these two merry old gentlemen merged into one, and the name was modified to "Sancte Claus."

Years later, in 1773, Santa Claus was mentioned in a New York City newspaper. In his book published in 1809, *A History of New York*, author Washington Irving described him as "portly and smoking a pipe" instead of as a "lanky bishop." Then in 1822, Clement Moore, an Episcopal priest, wrote his famous poem "A Visit from Saint Nicholas," more commonly known as "The Night Before Christmas" which depicted Santa with a stomach "like a bowl full of jelly" and a magical sleigh with a sack full of toys led by eight tiny reindeer.

Illustrations accompanied these stories. For the first St. Nicholas anniversary dinner at the New York Historical Society in 1810, artist Alexander Anderson was commissioned by John Pintard to draw an image of the Saint. Perhaps the most famous was that of Coca-Cola ad illustrator, Haddon Sundblom, of a 1930's Santa clad in a white fur-lined red suit and black leather boots.



These famous authors and illustrators provided for us the iconic image of the Santa Claus we know and love today. This image became the standard for reasons that are quite simple: a jolly, rosy cheeked, kindhearted, generous, gift-giving soul appeals to people. The unique gifts and talents of the authors, illustrators and poets brought him to life for us.

Habitual charitable acts and monotonous gift giving alone do not make for a beautiful story. "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:7). Why cheerful? Cheerfulness describes the condition of the heart. God wants our hearts to match our actions. The word charity is derived from the Latin word

"caritas" which means "generous love."

I could not imagine, nor conjure up, a life more mystifyingly beautiful than that of St. Nicholas. He lived to help others. How wonderful it must have been for that poor father to find bags of gold, for those impoverished young women to be saved, for those children to find coins or treats in their shoes, all done in secret like a magical mystery.

We cannot evade the fact that the story of Santa Claus is rooted in St. Nicholas. He evolved from genuine people, real cultures, and historical time periods. His character was built on authentic living traditions, rooted in faith. Instead of trying to change others, we would benefit from appreciating the beauty and goodness encased in centuries old traditions.

Credit should be given where credit is due: Santa wouldn't exist if St. Nicholas, the bishop of Myra, hadn't existed. A real self-sacrificing, generous man with a gentle soul: St. Nicholas is the exemplar for the Santa Claus we know and love today.



Thank You, Mother

By Kashif Qaimi

You are supposed to take care of things you need in your daily life routine, but if Mother is there, she will take care of it, all of it.

I was about to leave for Karachi, and my mother was helping me. In fact, I was sitting and she was running here and there packing...

"That's your wallet, your glasses...Oh *han!* Do you have your keys in your bag?" she asked while checking my shirt buttons.

"Jee Ammi! I have it!" I replied.

"The day you arrived, you gave me these documents. Here; take it..." she gave me these documents and started checking my bag again.

"Everything is fine, Ammi, I have everything in my bag. You don't worry," I urged.



"Think again, *beta!* Is there anything else that you gave me? Because that's all I remember you brought home..."

It was the fourth time she asked this question, and she was obviously worried. But I was at ease because I knew that I had forgotten she would remember and to take care of it, as she always had from day one.

What I may need or want if this or that happens, she knows.

Do I need a lunch box during my travel? She will take care of that.

And when I'll be reaching my place? Yeah, she will do the math.

It's as if it's her burden to carry, not mine.

If I need towel, Ammi will find it for me.

My watch, my shoes, my handkerchief... she is there.

Even if my cell phone is not there where it was (or I *thought* it was) last time... I will ask Ammi and she will find it for me.

I smiled seeing her checking all my stuff and making sure that I did not leave anything behind.

"Do you need money?" She asked.

(Oh, my sweet mama, I have everything! Please don't worry and don't be tense! I will be fine...)

That's what I wanted to say, but instead I simply stated, "G Ammi, I have money, I got my ticket, and I have everything." Finally I saw that she was satisfied (or maybe I just *thought* she was...one could hope!).

While on my way back to Karachi, I was thinking about her, how she had always been there every time for everyone, for me, my siblings, my father...for all of us.

And what did she ever ask for in return? Nothing. She never wanted anything for herself. Where on the earth could anyone but a mother show such self-giving love, for his whole life, day and night?

My cell phone started to ring. I checked it: "MAMA CALLING"

I answered it, and she said, "Paani ki bottle le lena rastay main, garmi bohat hy."

"G Ammi le lunga."

Ammi: "Ya phir juice le lo."

Me: "G Ammi theek hy."

Ammi: "Pohanch kr call lazmi krdena".

Me: "G Ammi krdunga."

She even told me in which pocket of bag my belt and other things were located. That's mother.

There is no way to thank her enough for everything she has done. How could I even try? Is there even a way to count out how much she's done for me from the day I was born until now? I don't think there is...

How selfish I am, how very selfish...

And how selfless *she* is...

There is no way I can repay for all the difficulties and hard times she faced raising me. I can't, because no one can.

But I can make her proud by becoming a good son, who cares about her, her daughters, her husband.

And I will, insha ALLAH.

Thank you, Mother, for being there 24/7 and 365. I know I can't even take a single step forward without your support, prayers, and help.

You know what...I need you forever.

I LOVE YOU, MOTHER!



About This Magazine

Fellowship and Fairydust Magazine is a publication of Fellowship & Fairydust Publications. F&F is an online Christian-based literary blog and magazine that aims to inspire faith and creativity and explore the arts through a spiritual lens. F&F came into being when the blog and online magazine The Fellowship of the King merged with the online magazine Ink and Fairydust in January 2017. To learn more, visit fellowshipandfairydust.com.

Copyrights

All articles and artwork belong to their respective creators and may not be copied without permission. Any copyright infringements are purely accidental. The works mentioned within this magazine are owned and copyrighted by their respective publishers and studios and are used here for educational and entertainment purposes.

There's More Where This Came From!

Did you like what you saw here? There's more where that came from! Plus, these are only a fraction of the many fandoms we cover! To learn more, visit fellowshipandfairydust.com and follow us on Facebook at Fellowship & Fairydust Publications and on Twitter @FandFMagazine.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in these articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of Fellowship & Fairydust Publications or its staff.

Graphics Team

Avellina Balestri, Sarah Levesque, Amanda Pizzolatto,
Ian Wilson, T.K. Wilson

Image Citation

Pictures not otherwise cited are from the personal collections of the graphic designers.

Table of Contents: adventuresofilinicki.com/spend-the-night-in-the-sahara-desert/ **Editor's Note:** awol.junkee.com/you-can-visit-this-lush-desert-oasis-irl/10981 **Christmas Wishes:** istockphoto.com
Christmas Morning: n/a **A Light to the Nations:** flickr.com/photos/frted/5692628918?fbclid=IwAR2wE1bIECd10l6pYPFDSkuR5u75IgPA957XGba-5XmOkotJzuDW2rC0r0o **The Timeless Need for Forgiveness:** photo by Bard Juidth from Oman, 2016 **The Hajj:** pbs.org/wgbh/sacredjourneys/content/the-hajj , content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1865298,00.html , aa.com.tr/en/life/muslim-pilgrims-ascend-mount-arafat-in-hajj-climax/897701 , hajjumrahpackages.us/blog/how-long-does-it-take-to-do-the-hajj **Lady Judith:** fbccdeleo.n.org/tentmaker/ **Bard Judith's Photos of Oman:** Courtesy of Bard Judith, 2016 **Rumi, Religion & Beyond Religion:** powerofpositivity.com/15-life-changing-lessons-to-learn-from-rumi/ **Laden with Fruit & Always Green:** nationalgeographic.it/ambiente/2012/09/25/foto/11_alberi_sacri_storia_del_mondo-1276641/5 , repubblica.it/viaggi/2014/12/18/news/se_matera_si_veste_da_betlemme-117055669 , passionforpaintings.com/en/art-gallery/james-archer-painter/the-death-of-king-arthur-oil-painting-reproduction **Maimonides:** maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2015/05/maimonides-on-existence-as-an-accident-and-on-divine-simplicity.html **Nativity Poem:** fineartamerica.com/art/nativity **I Saw Santa Punching Arius:** Theophilia on DeviantArt **Vayeshev:** fineartamerica.com/featured/heaven-and-hell-matteo-leggi.html **Magic in the Sand:** all images from Disney's 1992 Aladdin **A First Christmas Reflection:** worshiphousemedia.com/motion-backgrounds/72029/christmas-silent-night , worshiphousemedia.com/motion-backgrounds/72288/nativity-scene-messiah-is-born-tonight , pinterest.com/pin/40954677837461783 **CS Lewis and the Calormenes:** villains.wikia.com/wiki/Rabadash , clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2015/02/the-last-battle-and-emeth-adieu-by-ron-dart.html **Jihad In Islam:** commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Muhammad_calligraphy.png **Mandrakes:** Pexels Stock Photos, vintageprintable.swivelchairmedia.com/ , Pexels Stock Photos **God Jesus Ministry:** pictures courtesy of the author **The Christ:** celticchristianchurch.org **Listen to the Feminine:** spiralupconnections.com/3-common-myths-about-muslim-women/ **Christos Razdajetsja!** magazine-8.com/topics/pathways/2392-following-in-the-steps-of-jesus.html?fbclid=IwAR2zED2g3vr3dvujprWj4BdjNZKyMunyXX0pMQNTHHC0tHX_5o9f1ZHgGS4 **Can Piety & Creativity Co-Exist?** shutterstock.com/video/clip-10045688-hexagon-fly-loose , the-faith.com/tag/prayer-time-in-islam-channel/ , flickr.com/photos/pedrosimoes7/190673196 **Oh, Ye Lovers:** Heart: liveanddare.com/sufi-meditation , Lamp: , Rose: un.splash.com/photos/C6CVXJMXwqs , Chalice: wikipedia.org/wiki/Chalice_of_Do%C3%B1a_Urraca , Moon: awakening-together.org/classes/mpp-introduction-to-sufi-thought/ , Camels: whitemagickvibes.wordpress.com/tag/middle-east/ , Eye: flywithmeproductions.com/blog/?attachment_id=23389 , Pillar of Smoke: thetruemountsinai.wordpress.com/2012/11/28/moses-followed-a-pillar-of-cloud-by-day-and-a-pillar-of-fire-by-night/ , Spiderweb: pinterest.com/pin/473440979573741203/ , Shell: pinterest.com/pin/134756213822751719/ , Rumi: steemit.com/greatestquotes/@truth-revelation/greatest-quotes-11-jalaluddin-rumi , St John of the Cross: recovery soul.wordpress.com/2012/02/05/st-john-of-the-cross/ **Can We Get Away With Our Sins?** flickriver.com/photos/rikdom/225857248 , souloftruth.com/hourglass-of-eternity , phys.org/news/2018-10-video-robots-merge-universe-d.html **Meeting in the Black Forest:** Photo & artwork by Ian T Wilson **There's No Santa Claus Without St. Nicholas:** catholic.org/news/hf/faith/story.php?id=72463 , amazon.com/German-Children-Original-Vintage-Postcard/dp/B00PCNVSF6 , amisdecussac.canalblog.com/albums/ateliers_deco_de_noel/photos/58497510-floraatelierduperenoel_1622f97.html , amazon.com/Coca-Cola-Santa-Claus-Christmas/dp/B002X8XB1m **Thank You Mother:** Pexels stock photos **Disclaimers & Citations:** wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert **Upcoming Issue:** Artwork by Ian T Wilson

Join us for our next issue...

Tolkien:

The Man of Masterpieces

From his life, to his philosophy, to his works
and beyond, we want it all!

We're looking for

*Facts & fanfiction,
original fiction & poetry,
movie & book reviews,
artwork & more!*

**ALL SUBMISSIONS ARE DUE BY
MARCH 4TH 2019**

Please email final submissions to
editor@fellowshipandfairydust.com

