



**Thoughts  
About This**

**Thoughts  
About That**

**Robert A. Haaf**

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## Unknown

The weapons,  
rusty and unused on the field of battle,  
lay at the foot of the hill.  
The warriors bold, when questioned,  
parroted those gone before,  
"Unknown remains untouched."  
Then darkness fell.  
The path up the hill,  
dim lit, unseen, remained.  
And God, still loving, looked down.

R. Haef

## We All Know about Noah and the Flood, or Do We?

R. Haaf

What was the sign that God showed to Noah after the flood, a sign that God would never again destroy the earth by flood? A review of 21 translations/versions of Genesis 9:13 (with the help of a computer) produced the following: according to 7 versions it was a rainbow, but 14 others simply describe it as a bow. OK, maybe *bow* is a shorthand replacement for *rainbow*.



Or maybe not. Genesis was originally written in Hebrew, and the Hebrew word in question, *qesheth* (thanks, computer), can be translated as *bow*—as in archer's bow. Hmmm! Why would God hang an archer's bow in the sky?



God sent the flood to destroy humankind; God the creator was now God the destroyer, and an archer's bow is an agent of destruction. Was God telling Noah that He, God, was now hanging up His weapon of destruction—the archer's bow—never to be used again?<sup>1</sup> That's a promise worth hearing.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Craig R. Koester, Luther Seminary

## The Garden of Eden and the Tower of Babel

R. Haaf

Early in the book of Genesis, God created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were given dominion over everything, with one exception—they were not to eat the fruit of the tree that was in the middle of the garden. God set a limit for the humans He created and, as we all know, the humans tried to reach beyond that limit. With the knowledge of good and evil there would be nothing they could not do; they would no longer need God. The result? God disrupted the humans' plans, punished them, and expelled them from Eden.



Genesis 11 tells that the humans wanted to build a tower that would reach to the heavens so that they could be like God and no longer need Him. Once again humans tried to reach beyond appropriate limits. The result? God disrupted their plans; He punished them by confusing their language so they could not understand one another. And He scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth.

See the parallel? In both of these stories humans were arrogant and wanted to do without God; then He disrupted their plans and punished them.<sup>1</sup>

But don't forget that the Bible tells a love story. Read the book of Genesis and you'll learn that God still loved humans even after the Garden of Eden and the Tower of Babel.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Craig R. Koester, Luther Seminary



## The Bible Is the Inspired Word of God

R. Haaf

The Bible is the inspired word of God. Does that mean we must interpret the Bible in a literal, word-for-word fashion? No and yes. One can interpret words literally or in terms of their meaning. Someone once said, "I'd kill for a Snickers candy bar," The words *literally* indicate a murder was being planned; their *meaning*, however, is quite different. No, the words of the Bible, themselves, cannot always be interpreted literally. Yes, the Bible is the inspired Word of God—by which we understand that its meaning can transform us. One might say that the Word of God in the Bible is literally true, but the word is not always true [Pay attention to capitalization: Word vs. word].

Consider and interpret the following Biblical passages, passages which represent different styles, or forms, of writing.

**A PARABLE.** A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up....Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. (Matthew 13:3–8 ASV)



**HISTORICAL REPORTING.** Now it came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be enrolled.(Luke 2:1 ASV)

**POETIC FORM.** Why satest thou among the sheepfolds, To hear the pipings for the flocks? At the watercourses of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. (Judges 5:16 ASV)

**PERSONIFICATION.** For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing; and all the trees of the fields shall clap their hands (Isaiah 55:12 ASV)



**A FABLE.** And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade; and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon. (Judges 9:15 ASV)

**AN ALLEGORY.** Thou broughtest a vine out of Egypt: Thou didst drive out the nations, and plantedst it....Why hast thou broken down its walls, So that all they that pass by the way do pluck it? (Psalm 80:8–12 ASV)

**IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM.** they shall be afraid of that which is high, and terrors shall be in the way; and the almond-tree shall blossom, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail (Ecclesiastes 12:5 ASV)



# The Bible in English: A Multi-Century Journey

R. Haaf

People often take for granted that the Bible they use represents authentic words and teachings of Jesus Christ and His Apostles—and authentic descriptions of events in the Old Testament. But there was a time when the Bible, as the collection of writings we know, did not exist. The development of our Bible came about over a long process of many, many centuries.

## The Timeline

Yes, the Bible is the inspired word of God. However, that does not mean that God dictated the Bible's books word-for word. It does not mean that a scribe followed Jesus' every move, taking dictation and reporting His activities—nor does it mean that what appears in the Old Testament comes from audio/video recordings.



There was a time, of course when what we now know as the Old Testament did not exist in written form. Originally, what came to be the books of the Old Testament were told and heard. *In telling and re-telling the stories, changes probably occurred over time.* It was not until around 500 BC that all original Hebrew manuscripts which make up the Old Testament were completed.

The original written Old Testament was hand-written on scrolls. In ancient synagogues the Hebrew scripture itself was read from a scroll, followed by a translation into Aramaic or Greek given by a translator. The translation was never read from a scroll—nor was it written down—because the Jews were determined not to give any version such an illusion of authority; the translation had to be memorized or done extemporaneously.



Even after the books comprising the Old and New Testaments were put into book-like form they were, for centuries, copied by hand. Copying and translating scrolls and books was a laborious process, a process that could easily produce errors as well as editorial changes by the one doing the copying—*“Maybe this could be said more clearly!”* the one making a copy may have believed.

In 1455 AD Gutenberg invented (re-invented?) the printing press; books could then be mass-produced in identical form, instead of individually hand-written. The first book ever printed is Gutenberg's Bible, in Latin. Did the printing press eliminate the possibility of errors being made in producing copies of the Bible? Probably not. Type-setting was a slow laborious process, done by hand—letter by letter. The Bible contains approximately 800,000 words, composed of approximately 3.5 million individual letters. *Error proof?*

## Translations

Today there are over 200 translations/versions of the Bible in English (as well as thousands in other languages). And the 200+ of those in English differ from one another in their wording. For example, see *Why Compare Different Translations?* No wonder they differ: different translators use different sources; original sources, in many cases, no longer exist.

## The Bottom Line

OK, so what are we to believe. Obviously, the words of the Bible, themselves, cannot always be interpreted literally. Nevertheless, the Bible is the inspired Word of God—by which we understand that its meaning can transform us. One might say that the Word of God in the Bible is literally true, but the word is not always true—pay attention to capitalization: Word vs. word. And take another look at *The Bible is the Inspired Word of God*.

## Why Compare Different Translations?

R. Haaf

The Biblical verses John 3:3-5 are very familiar: Jesus said to Nicodemus, unless one is *born again* he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus found this confusing and asked: How can a man be born when he is old? Jesus added a clarification: unless you are born of water and the Spirit you cannot enter into the kingdom of God.



These passages can be confusing and ambiguous, even hundreds of years later. I doubt that Jesus intended to obfuscate<sup>1</sup> when He used the phrase *born again*. Instead the ambiguity may be attributable to the scholars who translated the Bible into English rather than to Jesus Himself.

Thanks to the wonders of the internet it is possible to compare 31 different translations/versions of these verses from the Gospel of John. And what should appear? Six different wordings:

Wording	Frequency
"born anew"	8
"have a second birth"	1
"from above"	6
"born from above - out of this world, so to speak"	1
"born again"	14
"born again, born anew"	1

OK, even the learned scholars grapple with the phrase in question. However, by adding a comparison of different translations/version to Jesus' clarification what may have seemed problematic becomes less confusing, less ambiguous.

Remember that Jesus did not speak in English—nor do we have audio/video recordings of His words. To understand the Story of the Bible: compare translations.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *obfuscate* means "to make obscure, to throw into a shadow."

## Who Is Jesus?

R. Haaf

Who is Jesus? Of the many ways this question is answered in the Bible we can point to three examples of how it was asked and answered in the Gospels.

Matthew (16:13-20), Mark (8:27-30), and Luke (9:18-20) describe Jesus asking two questions. First, when He asked, Who do *people* say that I am? His disciples answered that some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say one of the prophets. Second, when He then asked, Who do *you* say that I am? Peter answered, You are the Messiah (in some translations, "the Christ").

In John's Gospel Jesus provides a twist by providing an answer to the question, Who do you say that I am? The answers are sometimes described as *The Seven I Ams of Jesus*:<sup>1</sup>

I am the bread of life....I am the light of the world....I am the gate.....I am the good shepherd.....I am the resurrection and the life.....I am the way, the truth, and the life.....I am the true vine.

And for good measure He added: I am the Son of God (John 10:36).



OK, now let's turn back to Jesus' second question and make it personal, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Before you answer too quickly, take a good look at yourself while remembering that Jesus also said we should keep His commandments (John 14:15) and that we should feed His sheep (John 21:17)—to which 1 John (3:18) adds that we are to love in *actions*, not just in word or speech.

How do you answer Jesus' question, Who do you say that I am? In both words and actions?

<sup>1</sup> John 6:35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12, 58; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 14:6; 15:1, 5.

## Does God Change His Mind?

R. Haaf

**ON ONE HAND** there are several Biblical passages indicating unambiguously that God does not change his mind: Numbers 23:19, Malachi 3:6, James 1:17.

**ON THE OTHER HAND** there are passages that suggest otherwise—that God does change His mind: Genesis 18:16-19:17, Exodus 32:14, Jonah 3:10, Jeremiah 26:3, Matthew 15:21-28, John 7:1-10.

**SO, WHAT'S GOING ON—ANOTHER AMBIGUITY?** Can God be both changeable and unchangeable?

1. Perhaps God has long-term goals rather than detailed plans—in which case God may change his mind about a particular matter, but not about basic matters such as faithfulness.<sup>1,2</sup> For example, Malachi 3:6-7 (ASV): For I, Jehovah, change not....Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith Jehovah of hosts.

2. Jeremiah the prophet presents a similar idea, using the analogy of a potter (God) working clay (humans); the texture of clay is variable and the potter must respond accordingly. "Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he was making a work on the wheels. And when the vessel that he made of the clay was marred in the hand of the potter, he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. (Jeremiah 18:3-4 ASV)"



3. Two other passages from Jeremiah portray a changeable God: "if that nation...turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. (Jeremiah 8:8)"; and "if they do that which is evil in my sight...then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them. (Jeremiah 8:10)" But notice that the change is conditional (perhaps, responsive?).

4. If the ways of God, who is omniscient (all-knowing), are beyond human comprehension then we may never be able to resolve the ambiguity. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:9)" "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? (Romans 11:33-34)"

<sup>1</sup> Jodock, D.H., *Lutherans and Politics*.

<sup>2</sup> Fretheim, T.E., *About the Bible*.

Koester, C.R., *Biblical Literature: Genesis to Revelation*.

## Continuities in the Bible

R. Haaf

The Bible was composed by many different authors over a span of thousands of years. Nevertheless, the Bible contains many continuities—themes that encompass both the Old and New Testaments. One theme is *Love Your Neighbor*.

**THE OLD TESTAMENT.** Three passages provide examples of the *Love Your Neighbor* theme—beginning with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5). The first commandments deal with our relationship with God. The others deal with honoring our relationships with one another (honor parents; don't—murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, covet stuff); the same message appears in the book of Leviticus (19: 3, 1-18). And Micah (6:8 ASV) proclaims, "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?"



**THE NEW TESTAMENT.** In Matthew (5:43) and in Luke (6:32-36) Jesus adds that we are not to stop with loving only our neighbors; we are also to love our enemies and those who persecute us. Jesus also commends the Old Testament commandments to a rich young man and adds that he should sell his possessions, and give the money to the poor (Matthew 19:1-21). And when asked to identify the greatest commandment, Jesus said there are two of them: we should love God with everything we are and we should love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28)—a message repeated in Romans 13:8-10, Galatians 5:14, and James 2:8). And in the book of John (13:34-35) Jesus explains: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; *even as I have loved you*, By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another (*italics added*)." How should we love our neighbor? As Jesus loves us.

OK, SO WHAT? The *Love Your Neighbor* theme resounds across multiple Biblical authors and across thousands of years.

Keep in mind that the ultimate objective of reading the Bible is transformation, not just information—what we read must shape our lives. And that requires remembering how Jesus defines "neighbor;" for example, the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

If you are a Christian, must you love your Muslim neighbor?

If you are an American, must you love your illegal-resident neighbor?

If you voted for Clinton must you love your neighbor who voted for Trump?

If you voted for Trump must you love your neighbor who voted for Clinton?

Sounds to me as though the answers are yes, yes, yes, and yes.

## Disagreements about the Epistle of James?

R. Haaf

**Quandary 1: Which James was the author?** James, father of Judas (the other Judas—not Judas Iscariot)? James, father of Alphaeus? James, son of Zebedee and brother of John? James, brother of Jesus? The Epistle itself provides no identification other than, "James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1)." A more important question is whether authorship is an issue worthy of debate. I think not.

### Quandary 2: Did Martin Luther describe James as an epistle of straw?

Yes: "Therefore St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw...."—in part, because of James' emphasis on *works*. (*Preface to the New Testament*, 1522)



Yes, but: This quote appeared only in the original edition of the *Preface*. In four subsequent editions the quote was dropped—with no explanation given. Was this a real retraction? Who knows? Perhaps when the number of angels who can dance on the head of a pin is known, then we will know Luther's intent.

**A Real Issue: Are works important for salvation?** According to Paul, "being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus....We reckon therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. (Romans 3:24–28 ASV)." However, the author of James seems to contradict Paul: "What doth it profit, my brethren, if a man say he hath faith, but have not works? can that faith save him?.... Ye see that by works a man is justified, and not only by faith.(James 2:14-24 ASV)." Hmmm! Let's put these verses into their contexts—contexts which, in my view, complement one another.

Did Paul mean that works play no role in the life of a Christian? Clearly not—read Romans chapter 12 or 13:8-10. My reading of the book of Romans is that salvation comes from God's grace as a gift and leads to what can be called good works. Paul's focus is on God's grace.

God's Grace ➡ Salvation ➡ Good Works

In contrast, the focus of the Epistle of James is on faith and the importance of integrity.<sup>1</sup> "What doth it profit, my brethren, if a man say he hath faith, but have not works?(James 2:14)?" A life of integrity requires that one's actions (works) are in agreement with one's beliefs and words. If our attention is on a few verses in Romans and in James, there appears to be a contradiction. However, with attention focused on the contexts of both books, harmony displaces dissonance.

James  
Faith, Belief ➡ Good Works

The bottom line on this disagreement about the Epistle of James? As Shakespeare said, "Much Ado About Nothing."

<sup>1</sup>Source: Craig R. Koester, Luther Seminary

## The Story of the Bible in 179 Words

R. Haaf

Each Sunday we come to church and we hear two or three passages of scripture—a gospel lesson, another passage or two and, maybe, a Psalm; that is we hear fragments of the Bible. However, what we don't hear is the entire *Story of the Bible*.

The Bible contains about three-quarter of a million words but I'm *not* suggesting that the entire Bible be read during worship each week. What I am suggesting is that the *Story of the Bible* is simple and straightforward. In fact, consider the possibility that we can tell the *Story of the Bible* in 179 words:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth....The earth and all it contains is the LORD'S....God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....not to condemn the world, but...that the world might be saved through His Son....Jesus said...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind....And you shall love your neighbor as yourself....For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works....Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action....For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit....In my Father's house there are many dwelling places....And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself.



Genesis 1:1— Psalm 24:1— John 3:16-17— Matthew 22:37 or  
Luke 10:27— Ephesians 2:8-9— 1 John 3:18— 1 Peter 3:18





## From Tree to Tree

R. Haaf



"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Genesis 1:1 (ASV)

"And Jehovah God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." Genesis 2:16-17 (ASV)

"The earth is Jehovah's, and the fulness thereof; The world, and they that dwell therein." Psalm 24:1 (ASV)

"He hath showed thee...what is good; and what doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?" Micah 6:8 (ASV)

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through him." John 3:16-17 (ASV)

"[Jesus] said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." Matthew 22:37 (ASV)

"for by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory." Ephesians 2:8-9 (ASV)

"let us not love in word, neither with the tongue; but in deed and truth." 1 John 3:18 (ASV)

"Because Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God; being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit." 1 Peter 3:18 (ASV)

"In my Father's house are many mansions...for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." John 14:2-3 (ASV)

## What's in a Word?

R. Haaf

Did you ever wonder about the meaning of something you read in the Bible? One passage that has puzzled me is Jesus' final statement from the cross. When Jesus had received the wine, he said: It is finished (John 19:30). Surely He wasn't referring to the wine—but what did He mean, what was finished?



Consulting different translations can be useful for understanding fine points of meaning in the Bible. In this case, here's the result from 37 versions—thanks to Google

<u>Versions</u>	<u>Word Used</u>
33	finished
4	completed/accomplished

Oh! Finished—completed—accomplished. Why had Jesus, the Son of God, come to earth as a human? His task was to show us a still more excellent way of living (1 Corinthians 12:31) and to give His life for our sins.

Wow! Even while experiencing the agonies of trial and crucifixion, Jesus was able to announce the good news that He had accomplished the task.

Thanks be to God.

## Translating Biblical Hebrew into English

R. Haaf

The book of Genesis was originally written in Hebrew, and Biblical scholars, understandably, struggle with translating this book of scripture—sometimes agreeing with one another, sometimes not.

Consider the Hebrew word which is sometimes translated as “Adam” and sometimes as “man”. Do we have to learn Hebrew to understand God’s word? Not with Google at your fingertips—and memory of the English grammar-lessons you struggled through. The answer may be this: sometimes the Hebrew word is preceded by a definite article (in English, the word “the”), other times without the definite article.

אדם

Several sources indicate that *without* the article, as in Genesis 3:17 and 21, the proper translation is “**Adam**.” Comparing 21 translations/versions of the Bible, most translators agree (14 “Adam” to 7 “man” for Genesis 3:17 and 16 to 5 for Genesis 3:21). When that little article is *present* the proper translation would be “**man**,” as in Genesis 2:19 (“man” in 16 versions, “Adam” in only 5). But watch out for the next verse (Genesis 2:20) where the split is 10 to 10 (one version avoids the word).

Translating the Hebrew word				
Translation	Genesis 2:19	Genesis 2:20	Genesis 3:17	Genesis 3:21
Man	16	10	7	5
Adam	5	10	14	16

If this sound confusing re-read the first three chapters of Genesis, preferably in two or more translations, and you may come away with the conclusion that translation-mush doesn’t matter. Why? Because you will learn about God the loving creator.

And for fun. Did a snake offer an apple to Eve? What does the Bible say? Only 3 versions say it was a snake; 18 call it a serpent. 20 versions say it was a fruit and one did not use the word—none said it was a specific kind of fruit.