The Great Spiritual Migration;
writer: Brian D. Mclaren

Chapter 6;
The Bible in Labour

I was in New Zealand recently, speaking about the great theological migration we considered in the previous chapter. In one lecture I focused on the Bible's role in upholding violent and supremacist understandings of God.

After my talk, a woman named Fiona came up to me and told me a story. Her family had moved to a new city a few years earlier and had trouble finding a church. For a while they did 'home church', which gave the whole family a chance to develop a shared weekly worship experience together. One Sunday her daughter Lucy, then about nine years old, offered to prepare a sermon. Fiona thought I would be interested in the sermon, and offered to send it to me if Lucy was agreeable. A week later, the sermon arrived in my inbox. Lucy was ten now, Fiona said, and would probably word a few things differently, but she still felt good about the basic message of her sermon and was happy for me to read it and share it with others.

The sermon was poignantly short and perfectly designed to achieve her rhetorical intent, as expressed in the last sentence. Here's what she said:

> When I think about God I think of a person who would never murder or kill anyone. But when you think about it you wonder because wasn't it God who swept the angel of death over Egypt? It makes you think, doesn't it? Is God against it or is he not? I mean what had the boys done to die? It was the Pharaoh wasn't it? Now do you realise how little we know about God? I hope this made you think, thanks for listening.[1]

It took me a long time – at least thirty years longer than Lucy, in fact – to confront the paradox she already sees: that the Bible presents God as violent in many places, while in many other places it presents God as someone 'who would never murder or kill anyone'.[2] I may have had misgivings like Lucy's when I was younger, but I didn't dare voice them. I saw it as my job to be satisfied with any and every version of God presented to me in the Bible. If the Bible said it, it was my job to accept it and believe it, and that settled it.

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[1] You'll notice that Lucy's short sermon contains one statement followed by six questions – a wise ratio to 'make you think'.

[2] Contrary to what is often said, the situation isn't simply a tension between the 'Old Testament God' being violent and the 'New Testament God' being non-violent. One can find support for both views of God throughout both Testaments. In fact, the whole Bible can be seen as a library containing documents that show different views of God interacting and evolving together, serving as an invaluable record of human theological development. In this light, the Bible should not be seen as a ceiling or road block inhibiting further progress, but rather as a launch pad or an open road from the past from which each generation launches into the future.

My inherited understanding of the Bible motivated me to learn and grow, to mature and work hard, seeking to love, serve and please the God of the exclusive we. Well into my twenties, this biblical orientation helped me become a much better husband, father, friend, church member and citizen than I otherwise would have been.[3]

But in my thirties I began to feel a clammy sense of spiritual claustrophobia. The air was growing stale; the windows seemed shuttered, the doors locked tight. For starters, I didn't feel right about how my inherited approach to the Bible was influencing my behaviour towards my neighbours. When I met a gay person, when I interacted with an atheist, an agnostic or a person of another religion, even when I met a fellow Christian who understood the Bible differently, my Bible-quoting inner fundamentalist seemed to whisper in my ear,'Don't trust them. Don't open your heart to them. They are not safe. They are not one of *us*. Don't fully love them. If they're open, you should try to convert them, but otherwise keep your distance. Come apart from among them and be separate!' I started to feel that my inherited way of reading the Bible was making me a less open, less loving, less generous person than I otherwise would have been.

For a long time, I felt torn. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't face the kind of questions nine-year-old Lucy asked. In my early years as a pastor, like Gavin the seminarian, I felt constrained by the Bible to hold on to and even defend a vision of God that was gracious towards *us* and hostile towards *them*, even though I was beginning to see how dangerous that view had been and could be again.

Why couldn't I change? Because all my life I had been taught that a patriarchal God issued the Bible as a kind of constitution or social contract between himself and his exclusive tribe, and the consequences for questioning that constitution were dire. To question the Bible was to risk being forever banished from *us* and condemned to suffer forever among *them* in an un-airconditioned prison.

Like many conservative Christians, I had been taught that there were only two ways of reading the Bible – our way and the wrong way. We alone held to a 'high view of scriptural authority'. We alone 'took Scripture seriously', which meant we 'read it literally' and believed in its inerrancy. Here's the kind of thing I frequently heard among my tribe of conservative Christians. *If the Bible says the whale swallowed Jonah, I believe it. If the Bible says Jonah swallowed the*

[3] The theological term for my inherited orientation to the Bible is *biblicism*, defined by the theologian Peter Enns as follows: 'the tendency to appeal to individual biblical verses, or collections of (apparently) uniform verses from various parts of the Bible, to give the appearance of clear, authoritative, and final resolutions to what are in fact complex interpretive and theological issues generated by the fact that we have a complex and diverse Bible'. It is expressed in 'a tendency to prooftext – where the "plain sense" of verses are put forth as final and incontrovertible "proof" of a given theological position'. See http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peterenns/2015/06/what-biblicism-is-and-why-it-makes-baby-jesus-cry/

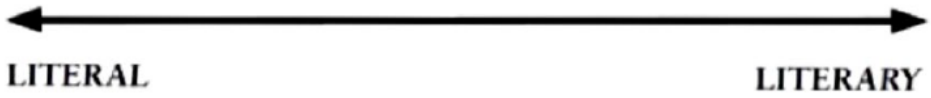
whale, I'll believe that too. What the Bible says, God says, and any child can understand it.

The only alternative to our *literal* approach, we were told, was a *liberal* approach. Liberals, according to our teachers, put the authority of human reason above the authority of the Bible, which meant (in our view) they put themselves above God. They 'demythologised' the Bible, and like a person peeling an onion, when they peeled away what they called myths, there would be nothing left but tears. If there was one thing I didn't want to be, it was *liberal*! So I felt trapped between an unacceptable conservatism and an equally unacceptable liberalism.

Beyond 'literal' and 'liberal'

Gradually, through a lot of reading, a lot of pastoral experience and a lot of pain (including my theological meltdown in front of the palo verde tree), I realised that this stark binary between conservative and liberal was neither accurate nor fair. I began to see a wide range of possible approaches to the Bible, which can be plotted on a simple matrix.

First, instead of contrasting two distinct buckets, one conservative and one liberal, I thought in terms of a spectrum that stretched between two ways of reading the Bible, *literal* and *literary*.[4]



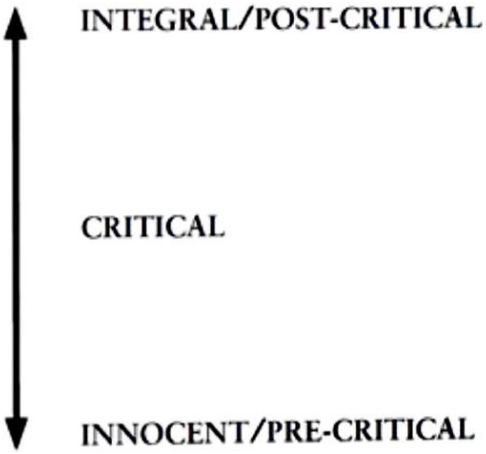
A literal reading begins with the assumption that the Bible is intended to be a source of factual information, the kind of information we would expect from a science, maths or history textbook. In contrast, in a literary reading, the Bible is a collection of literary artefacts intended to convey meaning, whether through poetry or story, law or proverb, fiction or non-fiction. If a literal approach looks for *accuracy* and *factuality*, then a literary approach looks for *artistry* and *meaning*. If a literal approach seeks *information* as raw material for a belief system, a literary approach seeks *formation* of the imagination, the soul, the character. If a literal approach seeks *metaphysical truth* – objective facts about the spiritual world – then a literary approach seeks *metaphorical truth*, an understanding that comes through imagination and intuition, reaching through what is seen and understood towards what is unseen and beyond human understanding. If a literal approach seeks *universal and unchanging absolutes*,

[4] Theologically astute readers will sense a resonance between my use of the word *literary* and the word *poetic* in the term *theopoetics*. For more on theopoetics, see http://theopoetics.net/what-is-theopoetics/definitions/.

then a literary approach seeks *timely insight* and is sensitive to *changing cultural and historical contexts*.

Those simple moves – from two discrete buckets to a spectrum, and from conservative/liberal to literal/literary – helped me understand how people from my conservative background were most comfortable at the left end of the line, but could occasionally move to the right, such as, for example, when we read one of Jesus' parables.

Then I added a vertical axis stretching from *innocent* to *critical* to *post-critical* (or *integral*).[5]



At the *innocent* end of the vertical axis, readers of the Bible ask few or no questions about its sources, development, internal tensions, biases, historical or scientific accuracy, or literary genre. They don't concern themselves much with the history of how a text has been interpreted over time and in different cultural contexts, nor are they sensitive to the vested interests of writers and interpreters. They spend little if any energy exploring ways a passage from the Bible may be similar to or different from texts in other religious communities. They may consider questions about these matters irreverent or inappropriate, or they may simply never have been given the opportunity even to entertain such questions. For them, the Bible is God's Word, God's timeless Instruction Manual, God's Law or Constitution, and that's all they need or want – or are allowed – to know.

As readers move towards the centre area of the vertical axis, they are given more and more permission to think critically about the Bible. They not only gain freedom to ask questions about the Bible's sources, development, internal tensions, and so on; they see it as their duty to do so. No question is outlawed and no answer is predetermined. For critical readers, to 'take the text seriously' means applying their most rigorous critical analysis to it. If critical thinking leads them to identify inaccuracies or misinformation in the text, so be it. If critical thinking requires suspicion about how the text plays a role in power dynamics, that's an asset, not a liability. If critical thinking leads readers to see

[5] In my *A New Kind of Christian* trilogy (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001; *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, 2003; and *The Last Word and the Word After That*, 2005), I simply wrote of operating 'above the line'.

how texts evolve over time, or how texts wrestle in dynamic tension with one another, or how texts change the conditions they were meant to address – thus creating new conditions that will require new texts to speak – that's what *taking the texts seriously* requires. Although critical reading was scary for people from my tradition, it was the pinnacle of biblical scholarship for others.

Beyond that critical zone lies territory that is much less familiar to the average Christian. We might call it a post-critical zone or an integral zone – a zone of *second naïveté*.[6] In this zone, having applied all their critical skills to 'deconstruct' the Bible, readers now try to put the pieces back together, to get a fresh vision of a text in its wholeness, and of many texts in concert. If critical analysis meant we took things apart, this second naïveté or second innocence means we seek to see things whole again.

We are like art connoisseurs who have critically examined a painting up close, analysing each brushstroke with a magnifying glass, understanding each convention followed and broken by the artist. We have located the painting in its genre and in the larger history of art. We have identified similarities and differences between it and other paintings by the same artist, and by other painters of its era. We may even have studied the chemical composition of the paints chosen by the artist. But now, we step back to take in the painting as a whole again, letting the work of art once again work its magic upon us. We don't just study and analyse the text from an objective critical distance; having sought to understand it, we now render ourselves vulnerable to it again, letting it speak to us, touch us, move upon us.

This end of the vertical axis is, in this sense, *post*-critical. We might also call it *integral* in that it integrates the personal vulnerability of an innocent reader who 'stands under' the text with the more objective curiosity of a critical reader who stands over it, subjecting it to scrutiny. We might say that post-critical or integral readers stand imaginatively inside the text, trying to see the world through its window. Or we could say that integral readers let the text enter them, getting under their skin, enriching their vision. Either way, readers move through uncritical submission and through critical distance to a new and intimate space of post-critical engagement.

Obviously, people can locate themselves at any point along the vertical axis, and over time they can move, becoming more or less innocent, and more or less involved in critical and post-critical thinking about the Bible.

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[6] The term *second naïveté* is often associated with the twentieth-century philosopher Paul Ricoeur. See Dan Stiver's *Theology After Ricoeur* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001) for a helpful introduction to his work. Before Ricoeur, the American sage Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr spoke of the *second simplicity* beyond complexity. And before Holmes, the Romantic poet William Blake spoke of a state of innocence followed by experience, after which one may encounter a state of second innocence or higher experience.

If we put the horizontal and vertical axes together, we create a matrix that clusters these approaches in six zones, and the dotted lines remind us that these are porous zones, not discrete boxes.

INTEGRAL	**Integral/Literal:** The Bible is valued as a multi-layered and complex whole. Objective/factual information and academic interpretative approaches (Marxist, Jungian, etc.) are preferred.	**Integral/Literary:** The Bible is valued as a multi-layered and complex whole and as a potential source of wisdom and guidance for individuals and groups today.
CRITICAL	**Critical/Literal:** The Bible is subject to scrutiny and challenge. Factually false meanings are exposed. Historic and scientific analyses are preferred.	**Critical/Literary:** The Bible is subject to scrutiny and challenge. Multiple dimensions of meaning are permitted and multiple interpretive approaches are allowed.
INNOCENT	**Innocent/Literal:** The Bible is accepted without question as authoritative; objective and factual meanings are favoured.	**Innocent/Literary:** The Bible is accepted without question as authoritative; subjective and personal meanings are favoured.
	LITERAL	**LITERARY**

Conservatives or fundamentalists like me were raised to read the Bible with a fervent *innocence*. Most of us were innocent literalists who focused on a text's objective literal meaning ('What does the text say?'). Those of us with a more pietistic and charismatic bent were innocent/literary readers, who habitually searched the Scriptures for subjective, personal meaning ('What does

the text mean to me?').[7] We liked to extract inspiring verses and promises, often memorising them and putting them on cards and plaques. We cared about the original context or meaning of a passage, but only as a means to the end: letting God speak to us personally, with inspiration, warning or encouragement. Many of us learned to move adeptly back and forth between the two lower zones, using the innocent/literal approach for doctrine and argument, and the innocent/literary approach for devotion and inspiration.

Our arch-enemies, the 'liberals', read the Bible in the critical/literal zone. They dared to say that the Bible's information was scientifically, historically or metaphysically inaccurate. They imagined it developed over time rather than being revealed by divine fiat, or that it was simply a primitive collection of fables, myths and other untruths. The critical/literary readers weren't much better. They made the claim – irrational to us – that a text could be literally false in terms of historical or scientific fact but true in terms of literary meaning. Ventures into this critical zone were seen in my tribe not as courageous steps up into enlightenment but as dangerous steps down a slippery slope that would end in chaos and despair.

Texts in travail

Frankly, in my conservative Evangelical days, I almost never encountered anyone who read in the upper post-critical or integral zones, especially in the upper-right integral/literary zone. I think the same was true for many of my liberal Christian friends, who tended to look down on literalists without imagining that anyone could have climbed to a higher vantage point where even more could be seen. One author, however, seemed to lead in a post-conservative and post-liberal direction: C.S. Lewis. I think Lewis became so popular for many Evangelicals because he was conservative by nature and shared our antipathy towards the liberal critical literalists, yet he opened the way for us to bring imagination and literary sensibilities to the text, letting the Bible speak to us in a post-critical way. You might say he drew us further up and to the right, allowing innocent literalists like myself to rush quickly over the critical phase that we felt was so dangerous and distasteful.[8]

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[7] The monastic practice of *Lectio Divina* guides people into an innocent/literary approach to the text, and for this reason has been useful in helping many innocent literalists explore possibilities outside their accustomed box. I would also put preachers from the 'positive thinking' genre, from Norman Vincent Peale to Joel Osteen, in this innocent/literary zone. Strange bedfellows, perhaps, but they share the goal of personal inspiration rather than objective explanation.

[8] Frederick Buechner has served many of us in a similar way. Like Lewis, he writes both non-fiction and fiction, demonstrating both critical and post-critical sensibilities. This quotation on the virgin birth beautifully illustrates Buechner's integral/literary approach: 'The earliest of the four Gospels makes no reference to the virgin birth, and neither does Paul, who wrote earlier still. On later evidence, however, many Christians have made it an article of faith that it was the Holy Spirit rather than Joseph who got Mary pregnant. If you believe God was somehow in Christ, it shouldn't make much difference to you how he got there. If you don't believe, it should make less difference still. In either case, life is

With C.S. Lewis serving as a kind of gateway into the upper right area of the matrix, we discovered more and more scholars who read the Bible with their critical, post-critical and literary skills and sensibilities intact – from N.T. Wright to Walter Brueggemann, from Jo-Ann Badley to Marcus Borg, from Walter Wink to John Dominic Crossan, from Paul Tournier to Ched Myers to James Alison, from Tom Boomershine to Derek Flood to Barbara Brown Taylor. Their conclusions often differed, but they shared a common aim: not to discredit, ridicule or expose the Bible as false, but rather to find broader and deeper meaning and truth within it. They saw tensions among biblical texts not as contradictions, but as contractions. Like a woman in labour, biblical texts were for them 'in travail', giving birth to new ways of seeing God, ourselves and the world around us.[9]

For example, we read in some texts that the Israelite monarchy was a great gift of God, but in other texts it is seen as a rejection of God as king. We could attempt to subordinate the anti-monarchy texts to the pro-monarchy texts, or vice versa, upholding the idea that the Bible speaks simply and with one voice (an innocent/literal approach). Or we could see the tension as a mere contradiction, discrediting the whole Bible (a critical/literal approach). But an integral approach allows us to see that different voices in the biblical library held opposing viewpoints, and the tension between those viewpoints forces us to see both the wisdom and the weaknesses of both sides.

Seen in this light, the dynamic tensions or contractions that arise among the texts give birth to a richer, deeper and more nuanced insight; namely, that centralised government can indeed be a gift that solves many problems, but it can also become dictatorial and create new problems. Having given birth to this more mature viewpoint, the tensions between biblical texts don't represent a failure in the texts, but an invaluable heuristic device. Like unanswered problems in a maths textbook, they don't simply tell us what to memorise, doling out answers we must accept without thinking. Instead, they challenge us to think individually and grapple with unanswered questions in community. If learning and wisdom are indeed the consequence of thinking rather than rote memorisation, there could be no better way for the biblical library to be designed.

Working in this new space, this new generation of post-critical/literary scholars didn't try to find 'proof' of factual accuracy on the one hand or reduce the biblical texts to the level of primitive superstitions on the other. Nor did they locate divine revelation in this or that isolated statement or story. Rather, they saw revelation arising like sparks in the interplay of passage and passage, story

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complicated enough without confusing theology and gynecology' (*Wishful Thinking* and *Beyond Words*, http://www.frederickbuechner.com/content/virgin-birth-0).

[9] The term *texts in travail* is often associated with René Girard, and it may have originated with him. The Girardian theologian Paul Nuechterlein helpfully explains the term at http://girardianlectionary.net/res/bible_sacrifice.htm.

and story, statement and counterstatement, over time. For them, Scripture wasn't univocal; instead, God's manifold wisdom emerged in the multiplicity of biblical voices.[10] It was a conversation rather than a legal constitution, an art gallery rather than a single painting. In the presence of these scholars and teachers who read the Bible with literary sensibilities and with critical and post-critical or integral understanding, I felt a new freedom. I felt that I was given permission to migrate from the limited universe of the conventional, exclusive and often violent Supreme Being to the ever-expanding universe of a more awesome and wonderful God, all while keeping my Bible firmly in hand.

In that new space, I could allow the Bible to show me a succession of understandings of God. I could see the tension between these understandings as contractions, giving birth to not just a new understanding of God, but more: to a new experience of God as the Holy Spirit of justice, joy and peace, present in Christ, in my own life, in human justice and kindness and in all creation. In short, I could leave the genocidal God of some biblical passages behind and honour the generous God revealed in Jesus.

So yes, Lucy was right: the exclusive-we Supreme Being God of conventional religion can be found in the Bible, controlling, excluding, harming, killing and animating various forms of oppressive human supremacy – religious, racial, political, gender based. But repeatedly, insistently, from Genesis to Revelation, the exclusive-we God is challenged, and a grander vision of an infinitely compassionate, generous and gracious God rises into view, as Lucy said, a God 'who would never murder or kill anyone'. The biblical library brings us through a long night of wrestling to a new dawn, revealing a luminous, life-giving, healing and liberating presence, the generous, gracious and holy Spirit who invites and beckons the arc of the universe – and our lives – towards ever-greater goodness, wholeness, beauty, harmony and aliveness.[11]

That's a small taste of how a more expansive approach to the Bible nourishes a more expansive view of God. It's liberating. Beautiful. All-encompassing. Wonderful. *Good*.

Will Jesus still matter?

Many Christians feel terrified about rethinking their approach to the Bible or their understanding of God because they fear that if they do, Jesus will no longer matter. In their inherited system of belief, Jesus matters supremely because he is the solution to a supremely serious problem. God, in the traditional view, possesses a reservoir of infinite wrath that must be vented on all who are not

[10] This language, of course, evokes the wisdom of Proverbs (11:14; 15:22). John Franke describes this approach in his helpful book, *Manifold Wisdom: The Plurality of Truth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009).

[11] In *We Make the Road by Walking* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014), I offer an integral/literary reading of the whole Bible in line with the insights of this chapter.

perfect.[12] By accepting the penalty of our sinful status and behaviour, Jesus becomes our substitute and allows God's wrath to be satisfied and spent on him rather than us. An angry God is thus appeased – at least for those who hold the right beliefs so they can be considered Christians. It's a very tight formula that has provided an invaluable moral framework for millions of Christians over the last thousand years or so, and although this understanding produces a host of negative unintended consequences (as we saw in the previous chapter), at least within it there's no question whether or why Jesus matters.

No wonder traditionalists would issue a dire warning: *Lose your innocent/literal approach to the Bible, and you lose the angry God it proclaims. Lose the angry God, and you lose the need for Jesus as the shock absorber of God's infinite wrath.*

But the truth is, when we read the Bible from an integral/literary point of view, Jesus becomes even more beautiful, important and essential. Rather than satisfying a wrathful God, we could say, Jesus deconstructs the conventional concept of a Supreme Being who is capable of murder, genocide or geocide. Through his life and teachings, in his compassionate interactions with individuals and groups, in his profound non-violence even to the point of enduring a violent death, Jesus reveals a generous God, a God in profound solidarity with all creation, a God whose power is manifest in gentleness, kindness and love. Through his promise that he would rise and be present in and with us, he invites us to experience God as the holy and creative Spirit of justice, joy and peace, moving through all creation, at work in all human history, present in our personal experience. This vision of God could never send us into the world armed with swords and spears (or guns and bombs), ready to dominate through a violent supremacy. Rather, this vision inspires and empowers us to become non-violent ambassadors of a new way of life, servants of all, ministers of reconciliation, agents of a liberating mission (as we will see more fully in subsequent chapters).

Christians who are afraid that Jesus only matters when the Bible is read from the lower left zone have no reason to fear. When we read the Bible from an integral/literary angle, Jesus disarms both the Bible and our understanding of God.[13] That makes Jesus pretty important!

We can't receive the liberating vision of God and life offered by Jesus if we lock ourselves in the lower left zone of the matrix we've considered in this chapter. We need more space to learn, to grow, to see afresh. We have nothing to fear. We can migrate. If we do, the Bible can become an expansive library of texts in travail that give birth to a new vision of God, a new way of life and mission, and a new chapter in the story of Christian faith.

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[12] For more on this important subject, see Tony Jones, *Did God Kill Jesus?* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), and my book *A New Kind of Christianity* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), chapters 12–13.

[13] See Derek Flood, *Disarming Scripture* (San Francisco: Metanoia, 2014).

To quote nine-year-old Lucy, ‘I hope this made you think, thanks for listening.’