

Bizarre Bits of the Bible

The Bible isn't exactly a book you can read from cover to cover, indeed some sections of it don't make very easy reading at all. Apart from some of the better-known episodes from the Old Testament and the gospel stories of the New, there are probably huge swathes of the Bible that most people have never ventured into and therefore may have missed some real "gems" that are well worth a read. Without (for the most part) including an explanation of their literary or theological context or purpose¹, here are just a few examples that I've come across over the years. Some you may know, but any you don't you may like to read for yourself in more detail. The first two come from the book of Tobit which is well worth a read in its entirety.

Just Like Whitby Really

Tobit is a devout, law-abiding man known for his charitable works including burying the dead. He has just buried the body of one of his clan and has taken a bath after dinner and, it being a hot evening, he decides to take a rest in the cool of his garden. Unfortunately some sparrows happen by and do what all birds do and their hot droppings fall into Tobit's eyes resulting in an infection that causes him to lose his sight – not exactly an episode you would expect to find in the scriptures! Equally strange are the circumstances by which he is cured. His son Tobias encounters the archangel Raphael (though he doesn't know that's who it is) and Tobit hires him to accompany his son on a journey to recover some money loaned by Tobit twenty years previously, money the family needs now that Tobit is unable to work because of his blindness. On the way, they camp beside the river Tigris and Tobias is attacked by a huge fish as he bathes his feet in the water. At Raphael's command, Tobias grabs the fish and pulls it onto the river bank and then cuts it open and removes the gallbladder. When they eventually return home, Tobias applies the gall to his father's eyes and his sight is restored.

And You Thought Your In-Laws Were bad!

In the middle of the book of Tobit is the wonderful story of the marriage of his son Tobias to Sarah, daughter of his kinsman Raguel. It would appear that Sarah had already been promised to a succession of potential husbands, seven in all, but each one had died on their wedding night – killed by a demon. However, Raphael tells Tobias that it is his right to marry Sarah and that he should ask Raguel for her hand. Her father - who doesn't know that Tobias knows her track-record and isn't about to mention it of course – agrees at once. On their wedding night, Tobias insists that they first pray together to be kept safe from the demon. Meanwhile, Raguel and the servants are outside in the garden digging a grave! However when morning arrives it is discovered that all is well

¹ And it's not understanding that context that makes them appear bizarre.

and Tobias is very much alive. (It doesn't say whether Raguel had the grave filled in quickly before Tobias noticed it.) But then his in-laws insist that they now have the wedding breakfast – presumably they hadn't wasted any expense on festivities straight after the wedding because they were actually expecting there to be a funeral – and this goes on for several days before Tobias finally persuades everyone that it's about time he took his bride home to meet his parents – who felt sure he was dead because they knew of Sarah's reputation and the delay in the couple arriving only fuelled their fears of what had happened. There was, of course, a double celebration: firstly because all was well with Tobias and his bride and, secondly, because Tobias cured his father's sight with the gall that he'd brought with him.

He Should Have Seen It Coming (1Sam 28)

Following the death of the prophet Samuel, Saul begins to panic because the Philistines are threatening to attack his kingdom and, having banned “wizards and necromancers”² from his kingdom, he has no prophet and no one else to turn to in order to seek advice. Of course in all things it should have been God he turned to and that is the lesson he is about to learn. Someone tells him that there is still a witch living at Endor and that maybe she can help and so Saul disguises himself (badly as it turns out) and sets off to find her. His request is that she should try to conjure up the spirit of Samuel so that he can ask him how he should deal with the Philistine threat. Samuel is not best pleased and accuses Saul of disturbing his rest by conjuring him up and tells him that not only has God abandoned him, but that Israel will fall into the hands of the Philistines and that “tomorrow you and your sons will be with me” – not the news he was seeking, but no surprise given his choice to turn from God and instead consult the spirits.

What a Relief (1Sam 24)

For various reasons that make sense only to Saul, he develops a burning jealousy for David, and on a number of occasions actively seeks to kill him in order to get rid of the threat to his power that he imagines David poses. On a number of occasions also, David, for his part, tries to convince Saul that he means him no harm. One such occasion was particularly bizarre. David was hiding with some of his men in a cave as Saul passed by on his way back from fighting the Philistines and, it says, went into the very same cave “to cover his feet” – a biblical euphemism for answering the call of nature! So there's David and his men hiding at the back of the cave, and there is Saul relieving himself. David manages to cut off a piece of Saul's cloak which, we assume, he had left on a rock while he was otherwise engaged. Saul then leaves the cave and goes on his way. David follows him and, presumably at a safe distance once again, calls to Saul and shows him the piece of his cloak. All other embarrassments

² Those who conjure up the spirits of the dead.

aside, Saul supposedly realises that if David had wanted to kill him, he had had the perfect opportunity in the cave. Unfortunately the lesson was soon forgotten and David became the object of Saul's insane jealousy once again.

A Barbecue On Mount Carmel (1Kings 18 v20-40)

There was to be a show-down between Elijah the prophet of God, and King Ahab and some 400 prophets of Baal to prove who was truly God. The people of Israel gather on Mount Carmel, and the stage is set. The prophets of Baal prepare their altar and on it they lay the bull of sacrifice and they then spend all morning dancing around the altar calling on the name of Baal to send down fire to consume the offering. Elijah spends the time basically making fun of them, urging them to call louder in case Baal can't hear them, or he's busy doing other things, or maybe he's on a journey or has fallen sleep! And so they dance all the more and cry all the louder until evening time, but nothing happens. Then it's Elijah's turn. He invites the people to come closer so they don't miss anything of what he is about to do. He prepares the altar and puts the bull of sacrifice on it and then he does something rather strange – he has four jars of water poured over it, and another four, and then another four until everything is absolutely soaked and the water has filled the trench around the altar. He was clearly trying to make it as difficult as possible for God to burn up the offering with fire by making sure it was well and truly soaked – but at Elijah's prayer the fire comes down and burns up not only the bull but also the altar and all the water in the trench around it. Proof positive.

A Case For Short Homilies (Acts 20 v 7-12)

In the evening of the day of assembly, the community in Troas gathered to hear Paul preach before he left for Miletus. His sermon, it says, went on till the middle of the night – perhaps several hours therefore. There were lamps lit in the upstairs room where everyone was assembled and so perhaps it got a bit warm and stuffy. Anyway there was apparently a young man called Eutychus who was sitting on the window-sill, perhaps to benefit from a little fresh air, but nonetheless he managed to fall asleep as Paul “went on and on” (it says) and fell out of the upstairs window! Everyone assumed that he was dead, or at least badly injured, but Paul held the boy to him and (whatever injuries there might have been) he recovered. Paul then very casually went back upstairs where he broke bread with the people and then carried on from where he had left off and preached until his departure at daybreak. !

Great Expectations (Mk 11 v 12-14 & 20-25)

We recently had the gospel account of Jesus cursing the fig tree, and one or two people asked me later why Jesus seemed to vent his anger on the tree when the account clearly states that it wasn't the season for figs – which Jesus would have known. This story does need some explanation and my source is *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*. It would appear that what Jesus did was actually

an action with a message – a sort of allegory in practice. The fig tree, as elsewhere in scripture (Jer 8 v 13, Hos 9 v 10, Joel 1 v 7, & Lk 13 v 6-9), is a symbol of Israel, and Our Lord’s curse symbolizes God’s judgment against a nation that has failed to bear the fruit he expected. It wasn’t the season for figs but, the account says, the tree was in leaf, the symbolism being that Israel had the appearance of religion but without the reality. They claimed to be God’s people, a people of faith, but Jesus hadn’t found many signs of that faith in practice. Our Lord’s words in the gospel are addressed to Israel not to the tree. Interestingly in Mark’s account the tree is found withered next morning whereas in Matthew’s account (21 v 18-19) it withers instantly. Perhaps this is meant to connect with Our Lord’s parable in Luke (13 v 6-9) in which the landowner wishes to cut down the barren tree, but the gardener pleads for it to be given a second chance: “It may bear fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.” The implication of either version of the gospel is that Israel wouldn’t bear fruit no matter how many chances they were given.

Straight From The Horse’s Mouth (Num 22 v 1-35)

And perhaps most bizarre of all is the conversation right there in scripture between the pagan seer Balaam and his donkey! It is, we need to make clear, a popular piece of folklore which the writer fits in between v21 and v35 for the theological purpose of highlighting the providence of God.³ Balaam is setting off on a mission contrary to God’s instruction and so God sends an angel to block his way. The donkey is the only one who can see the angel and so, on three occasions, Balaam beats the animal because it won’t go where he wants it to. God opens the mouth of the donkey who demands an explanation of Balaam as to why he is beating her. The text is worth a read just for the conversation alone! “What have I done to you? Why beat me three times like this?... Have I ever failed to serve you?” Strangely there is no reaction from Balaam to his donkey suddenly having a voice and he simply answers her! Finally the angel intervenes in defence of the donkey and to open Balaam’s eyes to God’s will.

Bizarre as each of these episodes from scripture may seem (and there are probably many others) they intrigue us and that intrigue hopefully lead us to a deeper encounter with the word of God.

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³ And again I referred to *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*.