

# The Fruit of Eden's Tree: The Bride, the Book, and the Water of Life in Revelation

Brandie R. Siegfried

Contrary to its reputation as the book of death and destruction (of symbolic beasts, soul-wrenching judgment, and several ends-of-things), Saint John's Revelation is a book that also dwells, often and with fascination, on various symbols of life. The visionary meshing of images—especially the figures of the New Jerusalem, the bride, the book of life, the tree of life, the water of life—suggests abundance: inheritance not of perishable goods but of eternal goods, books not merely about life but about generation, cities not only restored but new-made and ravishingly reflective of heavenly geometries and their reorienting perspectives, water not only available to quench thirst but freely offered for salving the soul. Jesus's simple declaration "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10) seems to have washed through John's consciousness with a reviving awareness, a budding and wild flourishing of visionary vigor that allowed many of these ancient religious and literary symbols—bride, book, tree, and water—to generate new possibilities for understanding human destiny.

In addition to being highly visual, the book of Revelation is also an echo. Quotations from most of the major books of the Hebrew Bible, as well as paraphrases of key teachings of Jesus from the New Testament, may easily be discerned. Revelation's own strains, moreover, are frequently repeated in the Doctrine and Covenants, providing intricacies of perception and attunement that rely heavily on renewed attention to ancient things, as well as to more recent history. Of special interest here is a particular development from the more recent past: the early seventeenth-century King James Version (KJV) of Revelation. This particular English rendering provides a tapestry of skillful word-weavery and multitone hue; it deserves special attention since it belongs to a category of thought and feeling concerned with translation as the disclosure of what Paul Ricoeur calls "unprecedented worlds."<sup>1</sup> It is a translation self-consciously based on the premise that even everyday language (the vernacular) can pry open startling new spiritual possibilities.

Language has spirit. Ricoeur is helpful for thinking about this:

By the spirit of language we mean not just some decorative excess or effusion of subjectivity, but the capacity of language to open up new worlds. Poetry and myth are not just nostalgia for some forgotten world. They constitute a disclosure of unprecedented worlds, an opening on to other possible worlds which transcend the established limits of our actual world. . . . The adequate self-understanding of man is dependent on [the poetic] dimension of language as a disclosure of possibility.<sup>2</sup>

One of the early readers of the King James Version of Revelation, Sir Thomas Browne, developed a related idea: "Now for my life, it is a miracle of thirty years, which to relate, were not a history, but a piece of poetry, and would sound to common ears like a fable. . . and though I seem on earth to stand, on tiptoe in heaven."<sup>3</sup> Browne here contemplates the "virtue of charity" and concludes that shifting his experience into correspondence with the Bible's poetic or mythical framework provides him with glimpses of something deep within—yet well beyond—his own personhood. Language used this way gives him a tiptoe hold on Jacob's ladder for a revealing peep into the heavens.

Any modern form that takes up Revelation also takes up this special capacity of language to reveal the possibility of transcendence. But it does so, paradoxically, by making time the bearer of miracles. "With all respect to heaven,

the scene of miracle is here, among us,” writes Marilynne Robinson in her meditation on what the New Testament reveals. “The eternal as an idea is much less preposterous than time, and this very fact should seize our attention.”<sup>4</sup> I imagine myself sitting at table with Robinson, Browne, and Ricoeur, conversing with them about the necessity of time as the form from which narrative emerges. Narrative, they suggest, reveals purpose and moral meaning within the variability and vulnerability of human experience. “What is eternal must always be complete, if my understanding is correct. So it is possible to imagine that time was created in order that there might be narrative,” Robinson suggests. “Event, sequence, and causation, ignorance and error, retribution, atonement. A word, a phrase, a story falls on rich or stony ground and flourishes as it can, possibility in a sleeve of limitation.”<sup>5</sup> Robinson’s words nudge us to recognize the way that the book of Revelation, especially in its English avatar, cherishes human vulnerability and plants in our compound nature the seeds of a story that will flourish into a fullness of life. “Certainly time is the occasion for our strangely mixed nature, in every moment differently compounded,” she continues, “so that often we surprise ourselves, and always scarce know ourselves, and exist in relation to experience, if we attend to it and its plainness does not disguise it from us, as if we were visited by revelation.”<sup>6</sup>

In the final chapter of Revelation, there are two scenes particularly striking in this regard. However, before going directly to them, I want to use three verses from a previous chapter as a telescope for viewing details within the broader landscape of which that final chapter is part. In Revelation 21:7–8, a dramatic juxtaposition forms a narrative hinge on which the door to a more expansive view of the New Jerusalem swings open. The divine throne viewed earlier in the vision is now linked to inheritance, and God insists, “He that overcometh. . . shall be my son.” If there are any doubts as to what is to be overcome, the list in verse 8 gives specific examples, all of which contrast starkly with the theme of abundance: “But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.” These contrasting images represent ways of limiting, distorting, or outright ending life’s potential, and they collectively constitute a “second death.” This death is in turn metaphorically constituted as a “lake which burneth with fire and brimstone,” an image set off against the freely flowing water of the fountain of life. The juxtaposition of the fountain of the “water of life” and the “lake which burneth” implies that there are moral implications and consequences for how and why we thirst. Given that thirst sometimes refers to spiritual seeking and sometimes to those who stand in material need, and that frequently scripture suggests that one is satisfied in attending to the other, it begins to look like the New Jerusalem must be conceived as something more than a complete ideal resting at the end of time. We are invited to understand the New Jerusalem as also being fully present in any material case where life is made more abundant. In this sense, the kingdom of heaven is “at hand” or in the doing.

In verse 9 the vision moves from the prospect of inheritance back to “the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” In the following verses this bride is revealed as the “holy Jerusalem,” and again we are invited to blend two images into one. The bride’s capacity for regeneration is framed in terms of holy beauty, and the city’s splendor is likewise developed in terms of incandescence. In short, the graphic but relatively simple metaphors of the living fountain and the burning lake give way to a more spectacular, more complex series of symbols in verses 9–27. To say the least, this is the point in the vision where the theme of abundance becomes mind-boggling in its splendor, requiring our imagination to stretch if it is to accommodate the full breadth and depth of the grandeur. Yet it is also the point in the narrative where we sense a fine equipoise between abundance and thirsting, between narrowing intimacy and broadening inclusiveness. The desire to “worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” (1 Chronicles 16:29; Psalms 29:2; 96:9) is perhaps a good place from which to view the elaborate images attending this spectacular reintroduction of the bride. Elaine Scarry reminds us that beauty prompts in us a desire to orient ourselves more fully toward it, and then urges us to somehow replicate it; we are also inspired to magnify rather than diminish the

beautiful. To put it another way, the beautiful “fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself.” As Scarry further explains, “But simultaneously what is beautiful prompts the mind to move chronologically back in search of precedents and parallels, to move forward into new acts of creation. . .to bring things into relation, and does all this with a kind of urgency as though one’s life depended on it.”<sup>7</sup> To worship God “in the beauty of holiness” is thus to reorient, create, search, and connect people and events across time. The bride is a symbol for this mode of holy beauty, and reminds us of what Thomas Aquinas movingly wrote: that charity presupposes rather than excludes the erotic, a point to which I will turn in a moment.

With these earlier segments of Revelation in mind—one that contrasts an abundant life with a second death, the other that asserts the special spiritual capacity of beauty—we return to the two scenes in Revelation 22 that are the main focus of this discussion. The first of these is when the panoramic view of the New Jerusalem’s dazzling geometry narrows to a close-up shot of a surprisingly garden-like street scene:

And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1-2)

Despite the KJV’s awkward description of the tree being “on either side of the river,” one thing is clear: it is central, and it is plural. (The 1526 Tyndale translation stresses that plurality: “In the midst of the street of it / and on either side of the river was there a wood of life”—the river is surrounded by a *forest* full of life.)<sup>8</sup>

In the second scene—in the same chapter and approaching the very end of the book—the tree of life and the water of life make a final appearance, but this time they are explicitly linked to the advent of Christ and to the welcoming call of a compelling couple:

And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. . . . I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.

And the Spirit and the bride say, Come.

And let him that heareth say, Come.

And let him that is athirst come.

And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. (Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17)<sup>9</sup>

Who is this welcoming bride? Where previously she was an iteration of the beautiful new city, here she is within that city. Perhaps she is the potential for more world-making; perhaps she is a reflection of the feminine Wisdom of the Old Testament. She might embody *shekinah*, God’s glory. But at the very least, we should consider her as one of the brackets to the Bible in its entirety, the bride of Revelation as a bookend to the bride of Eden. They are less reflections of one another than reinscriptions—prologue and epilogue to the tale of life.

Both figures give us the possibility of new worlds. “When Eve bit into the apple,” writes Barbara Grizzuti Harrison,

she gave us the world as we know the world—beautiful, flawed, dangerous, full of being. [She] planted in my blood and bone and flesh a variable human love. . . .The mingling, melding, braiding of good and mischief in every soul—the fusion of good and bad in intent and act—is what makes us recognizable (and delicious) to one another. . . .She set in motion the wheels of salvation.<sup>10</sup>

To put it another way, with Eve's first act of longing—to be like God—humanity became both actual and potential. The double-trunked nature of Eve's tree—two kinds of knowledge (good and evil) and two strands of reality (actual and potential)—may be an instructive pattern for the centrality and plurality of the bride's tree of life in Revelation. This makes sense if the tree of knowledge was a euphemism for intimacy (and thus life-making, a tree of life) before it was a symbol of peril and precipitous fall. Perhaps Eve's first *knowing* embrace of another—Adam—only later became a metaphor for humanity's departure from paradise and entrance into the revelatory mode called time. If so, the knowing embrace might be seen as the grounds of revelation.

Certainly the divine word on divine nature suggests that, had Eve been content to remain in that snug nest, heaven would have had to resort to other means for humanity's departure. To be "the apple of [God's] eye," we are told, is to be like a fledgling encouraged to fly: "As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them upon her wings: So the Lord. . .made [Israel] ride on the high places of the earth" (Deuteronomy 32:10–13). The image of the she-eagle rousting her offspring out of the nest, forcing them to develop the capabilities they had inherited from her, spreading her wings under them when their own strength fails, and rejoicing when at last they "ride upon the high places of the earth" suggests that Eve's will mirrored the divine will. The new worlds that came of humanity's first embrace—an encircling of similitude and difference reflected in both the watchful gyres of the she-eagle and the entwined forms of knowledge and life brought about by Eve—are amplified in the New Jerusalem. In the five embraces that follow, we return to the notion of translation as world disclosure, an amplification that relies upon the specific forms (root and branch) of English.

### First embrace: Sacred history and the genealogical tree

The 1611 King James Bible was produced by a nation defined by the Reformation—a movement in part driven by a desire to make the word of God available in the vernacular (that is, in a less exalted tongue). Although the scholars of the KJV were not particularly concerned about the masses, William Tyndale, who in the late 1520s and early 1530s heroically translated the Bible into English despite the threat of a death sentence, insisted that even a ploughboy should be able to read the word of God. In response to a cleric's declaration that the Pope was a better lawgiver for the people than God, Tyndale exclaimed, "If God spare my life, ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the scriptures than thou dost!"<sup>11</sup> As Tyndale would have it, scripture was to be remade in the image of common folk, in the language through which farmers and merchants, shipwrights and playwrights, lived their lives. Almost a century later, the translators of the new KJV imagined that the Bible would be the source for fundamentally refashioning individuals, societies, the world—but there was no getting around the fact that its power to do so would be enhanced, paradoxically, by refashioning scripture in the workaday languages of those individuals and their societies.<sup>12</sup> In short, a vernacular bible meant that the Holy Word would be embodied in the language of shoemakers, a further manifestation of the divine Incarnation by which Deity was born into mortality and walked the earth as a carpenter.

In addition, the dawning moments of the Reformation coincided with a growing interest in Hebraic knowledge. Lore from the rabbinical tradition was collected and printed in, among other sources, the *Magna Biblia Rabbinica* (Venice, 1516).<sup>13</sup> This meant that from Tyndale's early translation to the King James Version's authorized rendition, the English Bible was attuned to rabbinical commentaries and custom, as well as to nuances and

inflections buried in both Hebrew and Greek scripture. This is not to say that the English translations were without fault (far from it), but it underscores the degree to which the creed *sola scriptura* always included nonscriptural branches of reading and commentary attached to the main body of scripture. For the sake of intelligibility in translation, there was simply no getting around the fact that human understanding and experience would gloss the divine book. The reform, then, was more than simply dispensing with Latin (a linguistic ease-of-access issue) or shunning ecclesiastical assertions of doctrine not found in scripture (a matter of clearing out the theological debris). It was just as deeply rooted in the radical notion that even ploughboys ought to study and understand the most valuable words available in print—and that those words, in the common tongue (connoting common experience as the further touchstone of spiritual understanding), were more worthy of reverence than the icons of the traditional church.

With root and branch in hand (that is, with the Bible and its history of branching commentary as the focus of theological attention), Protestants flirted with the notion that the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life were, if not actually one and the same, provocatively entwined. This vision of entangled trees came about for a variety of reasons (including a rabbinical tradition that depicted the tree of life flowering from the Torah's scrolled knowledge), but one is of special interest here. Reading the Bible, it turned out, meant discovering that genealogies had always been part of sacred writ. As delineated in the Bible, lineage is both an expression of divine *intention* as well as worthy of continuous divine *attention*. Indeed, divine creation in Genesis quickly gives way to family history. The book carefully and consistently traces family lineage (who begat whom), a lineage that in turn bears the fruit of family history (who did what and why), and so on. In other words, scripture traces the continuous process of emergence into life and the experience of moral awareness about *being* in that life. For this reason, by the 1550s the old distinction between an elevated spiritual eternity and a mundane material perpetuity was seriously called into question. In short, for early Protestants, scripture presented a narrative in which the tree of knowledge (family history as the repository of the knowledge of good and evil) is tightly twined with the tree of life (the family tree, by which the materiality of eternity is divinely anticipated—and articulated—via posterity).

While the tree of knowledge often had been juxtaposed with the cross (as the tree of life) in Christian iconography, the cross was now more closely related to Christ's genealogy—so carefully recorded in the New Testament—and hence to humanity's ultimate source of ancestry.<sup>14</sup> This was not merely a fashionable theological premise that flared momentarily and then quickly died. A good example of its enduring grip on Protestant thought is found almost a century later in Thomas Browne's writings on the virtue of charity (from the same piece cited above). Browne notes that he felt compelled to help beggars, irrespective of off-putting "scenical and accidental differences between us," because under the "miserable outsides" was a "soul of the same alloy with our own, whose genealogy is God as well as ours."<sup>15</sup>

This tree of knowledge/life was used to illustrate a variety of manuscripts and books. In several instances, chronicles, commonplace books, theological treatises, essays on natural philosophy, marriage agreements, and books on husbandry all sported the blazon of the twin-trunked tree. In the interest of space, one image will have to stand for the many in which this twining of tree symbols is graphically illustrated. In this particular example, the saintly Ludwig is portrayed as the root of a double-trunked tree, branching off in two family lines. Imbedded as it is in narratives of good and evil, yet marking the literal history of creation's continual regeneration, one's lineage (or family tree) is always, this print suggests, both a tree of knowledge and a tree of life. Note the background scenes of historical strife and eventual union of the kingly heirs at the top of the page: evil as well as good are clearly imbedded in the family line. The woodcut posits that spiritual salvation and political salvation are twined and require the embracing of the doubled trunk. Both the tree of knowledge and the tree of life are rooted in ancestry (in this case, embodied by the reclining Ludwig who is "sleeping" in death and "dreaming" a vision of the future

union), embraced in the present by the symbol of legitimacy, with an eye toward a future kingdom of peace and tranquility (the kings at the top are swearing to each other by their scepters).<sup>16</sup>

In fact, legitimate authority is visually defined as the embrace of that doubled tree, paradoxically proving the heir's right to life and inheritance and saving him from the evil of his own history. The two kings who share ancestry with the Roman figure representing legal order and fealty are meant to see that their common roots should promote brotherhood. Moreover, the illustration takes for granted an audience familiar with the popular debates about the "divine right" traditionally understood to undergird Christian monarchy—and here, clinging to the tree of life is portrayed as *prelude* to the exercise of the divine right of kingship. Browne's observation about charity being bound up with an awareness of our divine genealogy, and this further image of an heir's "right" to inheritance emerging from the embrace of the twining trees that make up such genealogy, together suggest a clear theological orientation: rightful power and authority must always bend to support a practical goodwill that orients action toward those in need.

With this notion of divine right linked to divine genealogy, we return to the throne imagery in Revelation where we are meant to hear the echo of the rebuke given to Jehoiakim in Jeremiah 22. There Jehoiakim is seen as being misguided in his attempts to recover the glory of Solomon through elaborate building projects supported by means of uncompensated labor and restrictions on freedom.<sup>17</sup> His is not a righteously conceived nor divinely approved city. Jehoiakim is thus enjoined to emulate his father, Josiah, whose throne was based on a true and faithful form of righteous sovereignty: "Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. *Is not this to know me? says the Lord*" (Jeremiah 22:15–16, emphasis added).<sup>18</sup> Scripture defines the true rights of inheritance in telling terms. A divine right is the correct use of wealth, power, and privilege in righteousness, which in turn is to correctly judge or see to the cause of the poor and needy. Keep this image in mind when, in a moment, we turn back to the book of Revelation to consider what it might mean to have right to the tree of life.

To conclude the first point: The translation of the divine word into the common vernacular was seen, in the years leading up to and well beyond the translation of the King James Version of Revelation, as an appropriate reiteration of the Incarnation. The Bible itself seemed to reinforce this parallel thematically: family trees unified the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. In both vernacular and genealogy, spiritual and moral awareness are given material expression.

### Second embrace: Nature, scripture, and the alphabet of man

In the early seventeenth century, Francis Bacon wrote, "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."<sup>19</sup> Thomas Browne, penning related thoughts several years later, would turn Bacon's notion inside out to reveal a theological core. "There is surely a piece of Divinity in us, something that was before the elements, and owes no homage unto the sun," Browne tells us. "Nature," he writes, "tells me I am the image of God, as well as scripture: he that understands not thus much, hath not his introduction or first lesson, and is yet to begin the alphabet of man."<sup>20</sup> Where Bacon sees a literary feast of ideas requiring the discernment of a gourmand, Browne sees a humanity trying to write itself back into its divine heritage.

Bacon and Browne both had in mind the English translation of Saint John's Revelation when they penned their respective observations. More particularly, they had in mind a passage cherished by seventeenth-century Protestants of all stripes:

And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire: And he had in his hand a little book open. . . . And I went unto the angel, and said unto him, Give me the little book. And he said unto me, Take it, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey. And I took the little book out of the angel's hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter. (Revelation 10:1-2, 9-10)

In previous passages, the command to eat has been associated with the tree of life (Revelation 2:7) and hidden manna (Revelation 2:17), cuing us to see these comestibles, spread out in a larger symbolic feast, as related to the edible nature of this sweet-as-honey book. The full savor of fruit, manna, and little book (sweet and bitter) was to be found in the earlier stories from which they were plucked: the books of Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus, as well as the subsequent Wisdom literature, histories, and prophecies that added the flavorful spices of continued relevance. For Bacon, however, to “chew and digest” Revelation would be to savor its various morsels in combination with different bites from *all* other books, but most especially in the study of the other divine “book”: Nature. Bacon is most famous for advocating a new scientific method (inductive and experimental, in contrast to Aristotle's “old” deductive and syllogistic method), but there is another practice he advocated, one which many of the most famous members of England's scientific Royal Society would later espouse: the two divine books (the Bible and Nature) should be used to interpret one another, and neither could be fully understood without reference to the other.

Browne's alphabet of man, on the other hand, is a response to Gregory Nasianzen's assertion that “speculation. . . if it be not stayed with the bridle of fear to offend God, is dangerous.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, Gregory's point had been quoted and elaborated upon at length in English by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in his preface to the Great Bible (1540). An influential essay, the preface forcefully asserts Gregory's notion that “the fear of God must be the first beginning, and as it were an ABC, or an introduction to all them that shall enter to the very true and most fruitful knowledge of Holy Scriptures.”<sup>22</sup> Fear, according to Gregory, leads to obedience, and then to the “cleansing of the flesh,” until finally there is “the illumination of the Holy Ghost, the end of all our desires, and the very light whereby the verity of scriptures is seen and perceived.”<sup>23</sup>

Browne rejects Gregory's placement of fear as the ground for cleansing and illumination, replacing it with *recognition*: we are the image of God. The *purpose* of cleansing and the *kind* of illumination that emerge from recognition are more in line with his idea of charity than with fear. Moreover, when he writes that “Nature tells me I am the image of God, as well as scripture,” he could be saying simply that both nature and scripture tell him he is the image of God. That is, nature and scripture, tree and book, testify of the same truth. But the ambiguity of Browne's wording sets up a parallel possibility. He could also be saying that nature tells him that he is in the image of both God and scripture. In this second sense, nature reveals to him that he is somehow both the writer (as God is author of creation) and the written (as scripture is history-made-poetry via divine direction). He further explains that

there are mystically in our faces certain characters which carry in them the motto of our souls, wherein he that cannot read A.B.C. may read our natures. . . . The finger of God hath set an inscription upon all his works. . . . By these letters God calls the stars by their names, and by this alphabet Adam assigned to every creature a name peculiar to its nature.<sup>24</sup>



For Browne, we come into the world already attuned to the divine alphabet, to a givenness of meaning in the phenomena around us and in “the motto of our Soules.” We are both already inscribed and inscribing.

This Edenic alphabet (God’s letters, which are also the source for the alphabet of man) reveals to humankind its own double movement as both root and branch, inhabiting simultaneously inward-oriented and outward-reaching worlds of meaning. To understand this, according to Browne, is merely to *begin* the introduction to what he calls the alphabet of man. Our first lesson, as Browne suggests, is that we are always, first and last, related to the meaning of divinity, and in that sense we are utterly bracketed in the alpha and omega of God’s embrace.

### Third embrace: Protestant midrash and the fecundity of interpretation

In the act of embracing the word of God in their own language, the English also took to heart the ideal of midrash: not merely the third-century collection of Hebrew glosses on the Hebrew Bible, but the *technique* of interpretation that it exemplified. Indeed, midrash itself might be seen as the twining of the tree of knowledge and the tree of life in terms similar to those mentioned above. Steven Marx explains that sixteenth-century readers were profoundly influenced by “rabbinic authors of the Midrash as well as St. Augustine and other patristic commentators [who] held that multiple interpretations of the same text, developed by earnest readers, gave evidence of the divine fertility of the original.”<sup>25</sup> Protestant reformers devoutly believed that vernacular versions of the Bible significantly amplified the potency of such divine fertility. Simply put, English scripture would bring to light things that might have remained obscure in the Latin. Tyndale’s preface to his 1526 translation frequently makes this claim, stressing the various new forms of love, emerging from English, which will germinate and flourish in the reader’s heart.

The translators of the King James Bible pushed this notion further, insisting that readers need not be satisfied with the interpretations proffered by the famous and learned such as Jerome or Augustine: scripture “is not an herb, but a tree, or rather a whole paradise of trees of life, which bring forth fruit every month, and the fruit thereof is for meat, and the leaves for medicine.” After elaborating on the sheer feast such readings yield, the translators insist that the English version is “a fountain of most pure water springing up unto everlasting life” and the “fruition of an inheritance immortal.”<sup>26</sup> Hence, translation could be seen as a kind of midrash since it necessarily participates in a practice of interpretation that expands and elaborates the biblical narrative (almost inevitably, thanks to extended connotative possibilities in the new language). In that sense, translation is made up of both root and branch. The roots of ancient language must be carefully, denotatively, preserved in new soil, even as the new language will provide further figurative grafts of meaning via its own wealth of connotative associations.

The term *midrash* derives from the Hebrew verb meaning “to study” or “to search out,” and as Joseph Heineman explains, it signifies a “way of delving more deeply than the literal meaning,” an “instrument for imparting contemporary relevance to biblical events.”<sup>27</sup> The extensive marginal glosses and illustrations of the Geneva Bible, for instance, are evidence of the vigor with which reformers set about amplifying scripture. Like new-formed branches growing from the original tree, these glosses were experienced as fruit-bearing expansions of the main text (and not always, as modern readers often mistakenly assume, an attempt at hedging meaning). Though Tyndale and the King James translators frowned on interpretative skirmishing that grew out of pride, they were exuberant about the unifying prospects of interpretative efforts emerging from devotion to God and love of neighbor. Tyndale would insist that charity was the ultimate key to unlocking scripture, even in complicated theological questions regarding divine law. “For only love and mercifulness understandeth the law, and else nothing,” he writes, “and he that hath not that written in his heart, shall never understand the law, no, though all the angels of heaven went about to teach him.”<sup>28</sup> Using various analytical techniques, the midrashic glosses in Tyndale’s New Testament (Lutheran in flavor) and the Geneva Bible (Calvinist in savor) carefully unfold symbolic



meanings latent in the scriptural texts, “linking the various parts of the Bible together by the discovery of typological patterns, verbal echoes, and rhythms of repetition.”<sup>29</sup>

The Talmud refers to such analysis as “a hammer which awakens the slumbering sparks in the rock,” for it generates new stories, dense revisions of the original, and more symbolic expressions that warrant further explication.<sup>30</sup> A phrase peculiar to Protestant writing emphasizes this point: scripture is “the lively word of God.” “Lively” underscores the spark of life found in the Bible, with connotations of vigor, joy, and dance. Although the 1611 KJV would eliminate many of the glosses and the illustrations of the earlier English bibles in an effort to curb such exuberant generation, the early embrace of midrash remained firm throughout the seventeenth century.

A good example of rabbinic midrash revived by sixteenth-century readers is “the first midrashic comment on the first word of the Bible [which]. . .links the word *bereshit* (‘in the beginning’) with the word *reshit*. *Reshit* signifies Wisdom, which is personified in the feminine speaker of Proverbs 8:22, ‘God created me as the beginning of his way, the first of his works of old.’”<sup>31</sup> In classical Hebrew, Wisdom is also synonymous with Torah, or the scriptures. Midrash thus discovers the Bible within the Hebrew letters of its own beginning, the beginning of the world.<sup>32</sup> The Gospel of John begins with a similar midrash on Genesis in Greek: “In the beginning was the Word. . .” Jesus himself made midrash a central feature of his teaching. He often used one parable to explain another, and made wordplay, storytelling, and interpretation come together in ways meant to liberate scriptural knowledge from narrow tradition; in this sense, Jesus made scripture lively to his immediate audience. In short, midrash is creative exegesis, a way of imparting contemporary relevance to biblical events.<sup>33</sup>

A further feature of midrash intrinsic to the book of Revelation and given special verbal attention in English translation is a design principle in which wonder is developed in a dialectic of revealing and concealing. In a sense, it is as if one steps through one door only to see that there is another for which a key is required; once that is opened, still another door is seen and another key required. In Revelation, there are brackets (within brackets [within brackets]) whereby meaning goes ever deeper. In literature, these moments are often visible in clusters of symbols. Such “nested discovery spaces,” as Marx calls them, appear frequently in the book of Revelation, as a door in the heaven opens in 4:1, the seal of a scroll is opened in 6:1, the temple in heaven is laid open, and the ark of the covenant is seen inside it in 11:19 (upon which, as Richard Cohen suggests, the cherubim embrace),<sup>34</sup> and finally, the gates of the city of God are thrown open in a gladsome greeting to all who wish to enter. In fact, in that final scene, when the gates to the city open to reveal that a tree and a river are nested at the heart of the New Jerusalem, we as readers are explicitly invited to embrace the divine fertility of scripture by way of robust interpretation.

#### Fourth embrace: The roots and branches of English

In thinking of books and trees, we are reminded that words have roots peculiar to their people. Much of the language used in the King James translation is derived from Latinate roots, but key words that flesh out the final scene at the gates of the New Jerusalem are rendered in simple terms derived from Old English. It is worth tracing their lineage to see what fruit they were meant to bear. It should be borne in mind that the words considered here held their various meanings from the early 1500s until at least the late 1880s.

And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. . . I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.

And the Spirit and the bride say, Come.

And let him that heareth say, Come.

And let him that is athirst come.

And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. (Revelation 22: 12–14, 16–22)<sup>35</sup>

The series of three purely Old English derivations to which I will give special emphasis here—namely, *behold*, *come*, and *offspring*—are part of the answer to the translators' rhetorical query: "What may we bestow," they ask, comparing translation to good husbandry, "nay, what ought we not to bestow upon the vine, the fruit whereof maketh glad the conscience of man, and the stem whereof abideth forever?" Choice spiritual fruit deserves careful word choice. "And this is the word of God," they explain, "which we translate."<sup>36</sup> Even the simplest words plucked from the workaday language of everyday people might yield a theology true to the roots of the vine.

The progression of this scene in Revelation is worth noting: we are asked to "behold" Christ coming; that coming is swift and brings reward; the "I" or *character* of the one who comes is defined in terms of brackets—"Alpha and Omega," "beginning and end," "first and last," "root and offspring." Writing, time, order, and generation are linked by their ability to embrace what is between their bracketing being. In this regard, the simple command *behold* is especially interesting, since it, rather than *look* or *see*, is frequently used throughout the King James Version. Why? Because in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English, the command to behold was not taken as merely directing one's attention to something. *Behold* is, rather, a curious term that links seeing with the hand, with grasping. The Old English *bihaldan*, from which *behold* derives, is made up of two elements: the intensifier *bi*, which means "thoroughly" or "completely," and *haldan*, which means "to grab or embrace." To behold is to embrace completely, to grasp or clasp firmly or fervently. There is an extended bodiliness here that *see* or *look* simply could not have captured. The emphasis, note, is not on eyes at all, but on perceiving with the hands. It is no surprise that *behold* was so frequently preferred for describing the intensity of regard between lovers, wherever seeing with the eyes is linked to touching, embracing, and the intimate emotional and physical bonding that intensifies mutual understanding. Interestingly, this fully physical knowing of the lover would lend itself to the more abstract meaning of "seeing with full comprehension." Moreover, partly based on the word *behold*'s common use as a directive for facing another ("behold me" means "regard me" and presupposes clasped hands as two look upon one another) and its equally common use as meaning "to orient" (for instance, to "behold unto shore" meant "steer the ship to shore" and implies holding the rudder firmly against misdirecting waves), the word weds love to wisdom. All of these meanings are invoked by the translators when they explain that the Bible requires listening, reading, and answering "Here am I" when God "stretcheth out his hand and calleth."<sup>37</sup>

Christ's command is not simply *look*. As the early English version would have it, the divine "I" to be clasped fervently has just been defined in paired terms embracing modes of expression, time, order, and generation. The command is to embrace these things as embraced by God. But what does this mean? Perhaps the answer is woven with the thrice-repeated *come*, another word whose etymological vines were once laden with more connotative fruit than current usage intimates. For instance, it was a common verb for both "reaching toward" and "becoming present at any point or place." If to behold is to firmly embrace what follows, Christ mirrors what he commands by declaring that he is reaching toward us, becoming present to us at particular points of expression, time, order, and generation. "I come," then, is more than merely an announcement of arrival (he is not saying, "I'll be in the City of God at 10:00 tomorrow"); "I come" has to do with *emergence* from within the brackets of alphabets, with *arising* out of being embraced by time, with *being born* of harmony's ordering of diversity, and with *being manifest* in a life that

is lived both deeply (a root) and outwardly (like a flowing spring). Indeed, at the risk of too much wordplay, even the change of modifier to “quickly” (Tyndale has “Behold I come shortly”) could have been taken two different ways in the KJV’s lexicon of meaning. It might describe the rapid flow of time, but “quick” was just as commonly used to mean “life” or “the living” (as in the phrase, “the quick and the dead”). “To come quickly,” then, could mean both “to arrive swiftly” *and* “to emerge lively or full of life.” That all of these things culminate in an image of the “bright and morning star”—the kind of light that is most clearly seen in darkness, is used for orientation in a dimly gleaming world, and then gives way to the birth of a new day—is suggestive of much more than the posting of a divine itinerary. The King James rendering, “And, behold, I come quickly” would thus mean something like “The more you fervently embrace what divinely embraces, the more present and alive I will become to you.”

There are worlds within words, and this becomes astonishingly apparent when other familial meanings of *come* are resurrected to our understanding. Indeed, many of the simplest archaic meanings richly layer the scriptural text with thematic possibility. For instance, the verb form of *come* evolved out of nouns having to do with agricultural concerns, the kinds of things with which huswives and ploughboys were preoccupied (and harks back to the first couple’s shared labor, “to dress the garden” in Eden). The part of a sprout that is ready to be plucked was referred to as the “come,” and it signified that the plant was ready to finish maturing.<sup>38</sup> The verb *come* in this regard means to sprout, blossom, or flourish. If we turn back to the closing scene of Revelation and hear the bidding of the bride to “Come,” we might now hear evocative echoes of Christ’s language of quickening that just preceded it. The bride is not merely saying “Enter the city” or “Present yourself at the throne.” The translation is not simply “Step forward,” nor is it “Proceed.” To those who worked with seeds and soil, she is inviting entrance, but with the declarative connotations of “Flourish!” and “You’ve thrived, progressed, and are ready to bear fruit!”

Even more commonly, the word *come* was used to refer to the froth of items that had been immersed in water and thoroughly cooked. In the cookery section of John Worlidge’s book on husbandry, for instance, we find instructions for boiling peas that are inedible because they have been dried and stored for the winter. “Let Pease be taken and steeped in as much Water as will cover them,” we are instructed, “till they Swell and Come, and be so ordered as Barley is for Maulting.”<sup>39</sup> According to this passage, one knows that the peas are done by the fact that they have produced froth, just as barley does in the beer-making process. The froth was greatly prized and carefully gathered off the top because it was thought to be a distillation of the fruit’s “virtue”—that is, a condensation of the power by which the plant grew and flourished, an extract thus thought to have special healing and strengthening properties. This is an especially good example because it illustrates how a common mode of preparing food, distilled into one simple word’s common usage, may become a metaphor for preparing the soul. Things as hard and unyielding as dried peas are softened by immersion in water heated by fire. Made new again, they can subsequently sustain and strengthen life. In short, when the bride says “Come!” in the closing scene of Revelation, the English Bible weds this beckoning gesture to homely usage. She might just as well be saying, “Relent, yield, and let your life’s experience of good and evil flow out from your softened state and provide a strengthening and healing cordial for others”—an important gloss, for English speakers, on what it means to be baptized by water and by spirit.

The connotative prospects of ripening crops and boiling peas in the King James Version also has the overall effect of softening the angularity and bejeweled grandeur of the New Jerusalem developed in Revelation 21. In fact, these rural images ring with the familiarity of Jesus’s parables of vineyards, lost coins, mustard seeds, and the shepherd’s all-too-common anxiety over sheep that have wandered. How strange that in the act of remembering the roots of the scripture’s *adopted* language, the form of Jesus’s teaching—everyday experience made parabolic—bears new fruit. Perhaps the success of such grafting should not surprise us since language is where we transform

bodily experience into moral insight. The roots of language may be traced through the bodies and experiences of real persons, and, as leaves on family trees, these persons constitute pages in the book of life.

“I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright and the morning star.” We are now in a position to appreciate the intricate lacing of connotative meanings the King James Version develops via another simple choice of words: *offspring*, not *heir*, *posterity*, *child*, *progeny*, *descendant*, or *successor*. The reason is simple: *offspring* echoes the several meanings discussed above. It literally means “the branch that flows off from a root source” (with connotations of gushing up out of the earth, leaping or shooting up with vigor). Those in darkness can be as thirsty for light as those in a desert are for water: the “root and the offspring” in conjunction with “the bright and the morning star” set water and light together, and the desire for both are recognized in the subsequent invitations: “And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” The power at the heart of this city is the generative power of love (root and offspring) and is again explicitly linked to wisdom (light).

There is an odd tension, however, between the freely offered water of life, and the preceding declaration, “Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.” The waters are freely available, but the tree’s fruit requires something particular, something akin to a right. The New Revised Standard Version, relying on different authority, begins the verse with “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life.” This alternative suggests a cleansing, a renewal—entering the city and eating the fruit of the tree of life is no casual event, but highly ceremonial. Christians must inevitably read the sacrament of baptism into this verse, and that is a good beginning, especially if we keep the pot of boiling peas in mind. In addition, though, we might combine these two particular textual divergences in a pot of midrash, heat it up, and see what further interpretative froth emerges.

On the one hand, the promise of blessing is linked to the doing of commandments. This doing gives way to the right to the tree of life, entrance into the city, and eventually a special form of freedom with which the poetry concludes. By way of prelude, let’s begin with the Ten Commandments: Israel is invited to be free by means of a divine law without which, and left to themselves, they would fall back into the habit of slavery. Herbert McCabe has called the Mosaic law the “charter of liberation,” beginning with God’s explaining, “I have brought you out of slavery;” and following up with a way to avoid various modes of future enslavement (modes far more subtle and common and easy than their experience under the Egyptians, and therefore more dangerous and immediately destructive).<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in his first recorded sermon, Jesus echoes the liberating framework for the commandments by quoting Isaiah (who quoted Leviticus), saying that he has come to “proclaim release to the captives. . .to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18–19). He is referring to the year of Jubilee when the land rests, debts are forgiven, slaves are released, and everyone begins anew in freedom (see Leviticus 25:8–55). This was an ideal perhaps never realized, but it stood as the antithesis of worldly cities where entire social, economic, and political systems (for John, writing Revelation: Rome) rested on domination of the poor by the rich, the weak by the strong, the humble by those who set themselves up as gods. It was called a day of atonement (or ransom), an extended Sabbath for the people—and the land—“unto the Lord.”

If to “do his commandments” is to forgive others into forms of freedom, as on the Day of Atonement (or Jubilee), then perhaps we should similarly frame the meaning of “those who wash their robes.” Again, a quick glance at the roots and branches of English gives us an added perspective worth contemplating. The coinage that resulted in the word *atonement* (at-one-ment) was *not* first employed for the biblical translation of a Hebrew word; it was already a common phrase in English (“onement,” “at onement,” “to be atone,” and “to put atone,” all referred to a condition of unity, harmony, or agreement). Among other things, it was a customary term for a bride’s role as the mediator between powerful (often warring) factions. The bride brought families together (at onement) by means of unifying

the literal genealogies of both sides, and it was done within the flesh of her own body. This literal at-onement yielded offspring who held recognized rights to the powers and privileges of both lines. Looking again at the depiction of the symbolic prince clinging to a double-trunked family tree discussed earlier, one sees that he is the offspring meant to embody desired at-onement. This is more than mere reconciliation; it is a notion of peace born of flesh, of a realm renewed by a bride willing to clasp to herself, as her beloved, the son of her family's enemy.<sup>41</sup> There is nothing easy or assured about this potentiality, as this example clearly shows, but it stands as a potentiality nonetheless.

"At onement" was also an idiom of immediacy, as in "all at once" or "all in one moment," and suggests a modifier for the bride's role: to unite in such a way that all time is pulled into an all-at-once. In this sense, the English version limns the divine mystery with the holy (yet fully human) capability for transforming, in the present, the meaning of the past. "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have right to the tree of life," when fully modulated by "at onement," invites time into eternity (another name for Divinity). Or rather, a mere sequence of events is reborn as poetry. The bride's robes are the vestments of "unprecedented worlds," suggesting that *what was* and *what is* must be considered in light of *what should be* and *what could be*. These are not abstractions. The emphasis on the bride links spiritual regeneration to flesh-and-blood people and their histories of good and evil. As Desmond Tutu and others have strongly urged, the miracle of repentance and forgiveness is that in tandem, they have the power to transform the past. The facts of the past do not change, but the meaning of the past—its formative effects on the lives of real people—can. It is a gift divinely given. And it is a gift we are invited to give one another.

Precisely for this reason, Thomas Browne's fellow countryman George Herbert would choose to dramatize the welcome at the gates of the New Jerusalem in the humble vernacular of home, where Christ is figured as "Love," welcoming the sinner:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,

Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack

From my first entry in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

If I lacked anything.

"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here":

Love said, "You shall be he."

"I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,

I cannot look on thee."

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

“Who made the eyes but I?”

Truth, Lord, but I have marr’d them; Let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.”

“And know you not,” says Love, “Who bore the blame?”

“My dear, then I will serve.”

“You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat.”

So I did sit and eat.<sup>42</sup>

Herbert weds the English idiomatic expression of at-onement to the vision of the bride in Revelation. Meat is bread, reminding us that in preparation for his atonement, Christ would ask his disciples to remember him by making holy and ceremonial the basic human need for food. The homely answer to human frailty—a simple meal, eaten with gratitude and remembrance—was to be the continued means of divine incarnation. Literally fortified, human hands would then continue the deeds of heaven.

Herbert also helps us to think about the musicality of the final welcome at the gates of the New Jerusalem. Because atonement referred to harmony, it was often used to pun on the idea of “attunement”—finding the right note or chord. For Herbert, commandments and vestments have to do with the attunement of prayer, which he links to an alphabet of musical notation. Prayer is “a kind of tune,” a “heaven in ordinary, man well dressed.”<sup>43</sup> Perhaps the prayerful harmonizing of righteous doing with ceremonial remembering is what we should hear in Revelation’s swelling welcome. It begins with the duet of “Come!” by the Spirit and the bride, and it gathers power as a chorus of “everyone who hears” sings, “Come.” Then, in a significant shift, the “let everyone who is thirsty come”—now heard as the dynamic harmony of Spirit, bride, and hearers—crescendos with the final line, “Let anyone who wishes, take the water of life as a gift.” The clasp of “behold,” the virtue of “come,” and the generative power of “offspring,” all culminate in the bride’s song of welcome.

### Fifth embrace: Another garden, another tree

The harmony that closes Revelation is really the same that opened Genesis. Indeed, the King James Version enhanced the musicality of Genesis, changing the wording of previous translations and, as Adam Nicolson points out, making it “into something larger, more three-dimensional, more operatic, making of these opening words what is in effect a baroque form.”<sup>44</sup>

In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth. And the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.  
(Genesis 1:1)

This is very similar to the Geneva version of the Bible previously available, but with the addition of the word *face*. The word in Hebrew means “surface,” and surface might have been chosen for the King James Version. But *face*, in its physicality, is more stirring.<sup>45</sup> “The spirit of God moving on the face of the waters has a mysterious and ghostly humanity to it which neither the modern translations nor Tyndale’s can match. The face of the waters suggests

that the face of God is reflected in them.”<sup>46</sup> This language would hover in the mind of Joseph Smith when he saw in creation the image of the creator:

The earth rolls upon her wings, and the sun giveth his light by day, and the moon giveth her light by night, and the stars also give their light, as they roll upon their wings in their glory, in the midst of the power of God. . . . And any man who hath seen any or the least of these hath seen God moving in his majesty and power. (D&C 88:45, 47)

The grandeur of the opening lines of Genesis is balanced by the intimacy the image calls up: God is bending close to the elements of creation and remains near throughout. With the culmination of creation in the figure of Eve, that intimacy is extended not only *to* humanity, but *through* it, as Adam joyfully recognizes her as “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.” Moreover, given that the current organization of the Bible constitutes, for its readers, a single narrative, the bride at the end of the book might almost be beckoning to Eve. Another common meaning of *come*, after all, is to enter narrative time, as in “this is where we came in.” To come into narrative time is to give moral meaning to experience, and it is in this sense that genealogy is always also a record of divine intimacy extended through humanity. The moment that Eve—bone of bone and flesh of flesh—came into time was the same moment that bodily experience became capable of virtue, which is both the power to grow and the quality of moral excellence.

Seeing Eve and the bride as prologue and epilogue to the Bible—a literary embrace, if you will, of God’s word—brings to mind another famous embrace of the Word. To conclude, we turn to the story of the resurrection, an account in which the scene of human sorrow, frustration, and confusion culminates in a humorous yet poignant moment of misrecognition (see John 20:1–18). Mary, remember, has come to the tomb where Jesus had been laid after his death but finds the stone that had sealed it is gone. She runs and tells Peter and John, who both race to the sepulchre. John arrives first, abruptly stopping at the entrance where, looking in, he sees “the linen clothes lying.” Peter is just behind and passes John, charging straight into the tomb. We can imagine him closely examining the scene, for now more details emerge: he sees not just the linen clothes, but the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’s head, “not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself.” Peter and John do not know what to make of these signs. Puzzled, they return home.

Now Mary decides to investigate, her grief wrestling with a desire to understand. Where the two previous investigators had been preoccupied with discarded linens, Mary immediately senses the presence of others: turning to them, she beholds two holy messengers. They ask her why she weeps and she responds, but turns away, still seeking the precious body of Jesus, grief overwhelming her wonder. Outside the tomb, another man asks, “Woman, why weepest thou?” Eyes blurred by tears, heart crushed with sorrow, she mistakes Jesus for the gardener and inquires about what he knows. In that error—painfully funny yet gloriously apropos—much is revealed. The hanging moment of suspense in the narrative is not about whether Jesus is really alive; that much the story takes for granted. What we wait for, what Jesus waits for, is the moment of recognition—for we know it will, in that instant, also be the point of transformation: grief to joy, an end to a beginning, time into eternity.

There is no command. No “Look.” No “Listen.” No thunderous pronouncement of death overcome; no authoritative gesture meant to provoke awe or fear; no angelic host singing hosannas and filling the earthly skies with a contrastive heavenly majesty.

Jesus simply says, “Mary.”



The entire story hinges on this moment, and in the speaking of her name, she recognizes him. And we recognize *in* him something that the miracle of the moment might otherwise have elided: his humanity. It is no accident that the scripture asks us to share Jesus's perspective, awaiting with some suspense Mary's moment of recognition.

Robinson puts it this way:

Here is Jesus, by great miracle an ordinary man, except that he carries in his body the marks of mortal injury. From whatever cosmic grandeur the moment claims for him, he speaks to the friend of his humanity with joy and kindness but also with deference, honoring her. When Mary looks at Jesus, knowing who he is, what does she see? A more amazing question—when Jesus looks at Mary, and whenever he has looked at her, what does *he* see?<sup>47</sup>

To recognize, in this account, is to embrace. When Mary responds, “Rabboni,” she immediately embraces Jesus, a fierce encircling, surely, since he must gently disentangle himself with the words, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father” (NRSV; the Joseph Smith Translation renders it “hold me not”). No translation is perfect, but to my mind, this is the scene where the King James Version most fails the ideal expressed in the Gospels, switching out divine intimacy for a distancing sense of authority.<sup>48</sup> Even so, it is worth repeating an earlier point: there are worlds within words. Robinson writes, “When, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, ‘Woman, why weepest thou?’ he is using, so scholarship tells me, a term of great respect and deference.”

“Of course,” continues Robinson,

Jesus, however he is understood, whatever powers are ascribed to him, could only use the words he found ready for use, and this must mean that over generations the culture in which he was to live his life had been preparing a certain improbable consensus about the meaning of this one word, which, in the narrative, is the first one he speaks in the new world of his restored life.<sup>49</sup>

Add to this another point: although we are not told how long Jesus lingered with Mary, or whether they spoke of anything more, we do learn that Mary was to be the bearer (out of the garden and into the world) of this knowledge of new life. On this reading, “woman” is a conceptual synonym for “in the beginning” and suggests that the bride in Revelation ought to be read in similar terms.

The story of Revelation celebrates abundance, justice, beauty, symmetry, and a welcoming triumph—but not callously, not without memory. The jolting images of death and destruction, of wars and blood and fire, are all refracted from our own histories, and the book acknowledges these things with powerful strokes of expression. The vision of Revelation is firm, though, in its commitment to the poetic dimension of language, to the possibility of opening up for us the other worlds which transcend—even as they are threaded through—our own. The mystery at the heart of the book is not that of bafflement, but of wonder. It is the mystery of how love transcends even death—of how, between birth and the grave, a narrative of holy possibility and moral beauty may emerge from the lives of simple people, imperfect and yearning. The tree of life, the book of life, the waters of life: these are all symbols for the divine word made manifest in Christ, with continued incarnation emerging from our own reading (and living) of that word. With the bride beckoning from Revelation, surely this is where we come in.

B. R. Siegfried teaches English Renaissance literature at Brigham Young University. Her scholarly interests include Shakespeare, women writers, and gender studies. Her interest in questions of belief are longstanding, beginning with her 1996 article, "Gambling on God: The Culture of Card Games in George Herbert's Temple," and continuing with a recent coedited volume of essays, *God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish*. Dr. Siegfried received her BA and MA degrees in English from Brigham Young University, an MA in Women's studies from Brandeis University, and a PhD in English and American literature, also from Brandeis University.

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## NOTES

1. See Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 124. The phrase appears in Paul Ricoeur, "Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds: Interview with Richard Kearney," in Paris in 1978. It was first published in the *Crane Bag* 2/1-2 (1978): 260-66.
2. Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 124.
3. Sir Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *Sir Thomas Browne: Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 83. I have modernized the text for ease in reading.
4. Marilynne Robinson, "Gospels," in *Communion: Contemporary Writers Reveal the Bible in Their Lives*, ed. David Rosenberg (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 148.
5. Robinson, "Gospels," 148-49.
6. Robinson, "Gospels," 149.
7. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 9, 29-30.
8. I have modernized Tyndale's English for ease of reading.
9. Although the KJV does not set apart the poetic portion, I have done so here, following the New Revised Standard Version, in order to better emphasize visually the poetic form it is given in the last frame of the vision.
10. Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, "A Meditation on Eve," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Christina BÅ¼chman and Celina Spiegel (New York: Fawcett, 1994), 1.
11. Cited in David Daniell, "William Tyndale (ca. 1494-1536)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online ed., May 2011.
12. As Jaroslav Pelikan so aptly puts it, "The Bible of the Reformation and the Reformation of the Bible became two sides of one coin. For the Reformation of the sixteenth century—whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Radical—is unthinkable apart from the Bible; and the Bible—at any rate as we know it in the realms of Western literature, culture, and faith—is almost equally unthinkable apart from the Reformation." Moreover, thanks to vernacular translations, many came to know the meaning "not only of the Reformation but of *reformation as such*, by the power of the word of God that spoke to them through the Bible." See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Reformation of the Bible / The Bible of the Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 2.

13. It contained the Bible in pointed Hebrew but the rabbinic materials in unpointed script. Note that the Hebrew Bible had been printed several times before the New Testament was printed in Greek. The first complete Hebrew Bible was produced by the Soncino Press as early as 1488. The one noted here is the first printed Rabbinic Bible (that is, Hebrew Scripture with Targumim, traditional commentaries, and, in subsequent editions, the Massora), printed by Daniel Bomberg under the editorship of Felix Prato. The second edition produced an updated text by Jacob ben Chayyim whose version became the standard form of the Masoretic text for subsequent scholarship by both Jews and Christians.

14. There are earlier, but much rarer, iterations of this unification of the two trees that I trace in a current book project, *The Tree of Life in English Renaissance Thought*. Until the Reformation, Christians typically depicted the two trees as contrasting (or opposing) brackets to the story of redemption.

15. Keynes, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 88.

16. The sequence may seem a little confusing, since the two kings at the top are in the present, even as their unifying ancestor—the Roman figure representing family lines tracing their authority to Rome—is also given a presentist representation. Of course, Ludwig or “Saint Louis” (the only canonized King of France), also in the present, is dreaming forward from the past. This is typical of much art in the period, which often uses simultaneity to emphasize historical links. The historical moment, however, is well documented. The two kings at the top of the page are Catholic Henry III of France and the Huguenot (Protestant) King Henry of Navarre. The Catholic king had originally named the Protestant as his successor to the throne of France. After France was forced to retract the nomination, Navarre waged war against him. Later, following several political twists too lengthy to follow here, the two Henrys made a pact and fought the forces that had originally opposed the nomination. Henry III of France was assassinated shortly thereafter by a Dominican Friar, Jacques Clement (shown in the miniature scene on the left, labeled August 1589). On his deathbed, Henry of France secured his army’s allegiance for Henry of Navarre as heir to the throne.

17. See the notes to Jeremiah 22 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1112–13.

18. I quote from the New Revised Standard Version here because it is much more plainly spoken on the issue of what constitutes a true throne at the heart of a righteous city. England’s King James asserted an ideology of absolute monarchy, claiming power over subjects rather than power on behalf of citizens, and such themes were handled with excruciating caution by the translators of the King James Version.

19. Brian Vickers, ed., *Francis Bacon, The Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 81.

20. Keynes, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 83.

21. Quoted in “Cranmer’s Preface to the New Testament (1540),” in *Documents of the English Reformation, 1526–1701*, ed. Gerald Bray (Cambridge: Clarke, 1994), 242.

22. Quoted in “Cranmer’s Preface to the New Testament (1540),” 242.

23. Quoted in “Cranmer’s Preface to the New Testament (1540),” 242.

24. Keynes, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 68.

25. Steven Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 125. See also David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 24–25.
26. “Tyndale’s Preface to the New Testament (1526)” and “The Preface to the Authorized (King James) Version (1611),” in *Documents of the English Reformation*, 18–25, 420–21.
27. Joseph Heineman, “The Nature of the Aggadah,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 45.
28. “Tyndale’s Preface to the New Testament (1526),” 23.
29. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1966), 262. For examples of traditional midrash, see Samuel Rapaport, *Tales and Maxims from the Midrash* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1971). Modern examples include Frederick Buechner, *Son of Laughter* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993); the essay collection by Alicia Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); and the critical study by Leslie Brisman, *The Voice of Jacob: On the Composition of Genesis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Emmanuel Levinas epitomizes this tradition in key passages of even his most pointedly philosophical work. Similarly, the works of Paul Ricoeur illustrate the same technique as it has evolved in the Protestant tradition.
30. Isidore Singer, ed., *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Ktav, 1964), 8:548.
31. Harold Fish, “The Hermeneutic Quest in *Robinson Crusoe*,” in *Midrash and Literature*, 230.
32. See Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 25.
33. See Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 25.
34. Richard Cohen, “Place, Sacred Space, and Utopia,” unpublished presentation at a symposium on sacred space, held at Brigham Young University, June 3, 2009. For examples of how Shakespeare and others made use of this dialectic, see also Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible*, 131.
35. Although the King James Version does not set apart the poetic portion, I have done so here, following the New Revised Standard Version in order to better emphasize visually the poetic form it is given in the last frame of the vision.
36. “Preface to the Authorized (King James) Version (1611),” 427.
37. “Preface to the Authorized (King James) Version (1611),” 436.
38. The noun forms are important because the declarative “come” of the bride in Revelation is not followed by the usual double-verb construction—for instance, “come and worship,” or “come and enjoy peace,” or “come and live.” When the bride says “Come,” then, many meanings might be nested within one another. Indeed, other relevant and common usages of the verb form of *come* (derived from the noun) include the idea of being in an order (as in to “come under a heading”) or to emerge from a source (as in “this stream comes from the Nile”). More biblically, it can mean “to fulfill in time” (as in “it came to pass”) or be used for “to be born” (as in “to come into the world”). It can

mean “gather” or “be at one” (as in “come together”); it sometimes refers to comprehension (as in “come to an understanding”); and it often expresses the crux of an encounter (as in “to come across”).

39. John Worlidge, *Systema Agric* (London, 1681), 47; also cited extensively in Gervase Markham, *The Husbandman’s Jewel* (London, 1695); and Edward Chamberlayne, *The Present State of England* (London, 1683). For a good example of the common uses of *come* in reference to trees more particularly, see Thomas Tryon, *A New Art of Brewing Beer. . .with an Appendix How to Make Fruit Trees Constantly Fruitful* (London, 1690).

40. Herbert McCabe, *Faith within Reason*, ed. Brian Davies and Denys Turner (New York: Continuum, 2007), 160–65.

41. I am not romanticizing the practice of political marriage in the ancient, medieval, and early modern worlds. Often women born into the powerful elite had little or no choice in the matter. However, the Christian nuances of such arrangements eventually intensified their symbolic power and strengthened the rights of the woman involved. That is, such marriages in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance were much more attuned to the need for legal and social protections for the woman—and in England, the role was given special social status precisely because of the presumed personal sacrifices it entailed. Even so, many of the advice books from 1500 to 1700 encouraged parents to find spouses congenial to their child. Moreover, it was often assumed that in the case of a youthful match, the natural inclinations of desire would pave the way for the more mature affection that comes with time and shared experience. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, derives its excruciatingly tragic power partly from the rival families’ inability to let the natural course of at-one-ment bring them together. The perversion at the heart of the play is found in the parents’ refusal to allow the marriage that would have reconciled the two families in the flesh.

42. George Herbert, “Love III,” in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin (New York: Penguin, 2005), 178.

43. Herbert, “Prayer I,” in *Complete English Poems*, 45–46.

44. Adam Nicolson, *God’s Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 194.

45. Even so, it’s worth noting that some modern translations point out the motherly warmth of the connotations of the Hebrew’s “brooding over the surface of the waters,” or “hovering over the surface of the waters”—a useful note, especially given the mother-eagle imagery already mentioned.

46. Nicolson, *God’s Secretaries*, 194.

47. Robinson, “Gospels,” 148.

48. KJV: “Touch me not.”

49. Robinson, “Gospels,” 148.