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The Tower of Babel – the famous painting by Bruegel

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In 1917 an excavation where Babylon used to stand found a stone with an inscription supposedly written by Nebuchadnezzar saying “ Etemenanki the Ziggurat of Babylon, I made it the wonder of the world I raised its top to heaven and I covered it with bitumen and bricks” there was also a floor plan inscribed. Earlier in 1880 a cylinder was found inscribed with great detail of a tower or Ziggurat, how it was built and stating bitumen was used and that the writer’s son Nebuchadnezzar had assisted in the construction. In 2011 a further stone was discovered , inscribed again with details of this building – the stone dates from around 600BC when Nebuchadnezzar ruled. This is a reproduction of the tower based on the plans.

Nebuchadnezzar ruled around 600 BC when the book of Daniel was written, and Genesis is thought to have been written a thousand years earlier. Tar was well known to the Israelites – Moses was put in the river in a papyrus basket made waterproof by tar.

So either the story of the Tower of Babel was added to Genesis based on Nebuchadnezzar’s tower, which we know existed, or it is a far more ancient story.

Towers were built on a grand scale in Mesopotamia around 5000 BC. These Ziggurat towers were constructed for the Gods to live in, they were never lived in by people. The Genesis story of the Tower of Babylon is thought to be set around 5000BC. So this ties in nicely.

Tar does not seem a sensible thing to use as mortar in a hot country, but it has recently been discovered that bricks can be mortared with a mix of bitumen and nano clay which can be formed when clay is suspended in water. This mix is hard and stable even in hot climates. So bitumen was possible as a mortar, since the bricks were made with clay and dried in the sun.

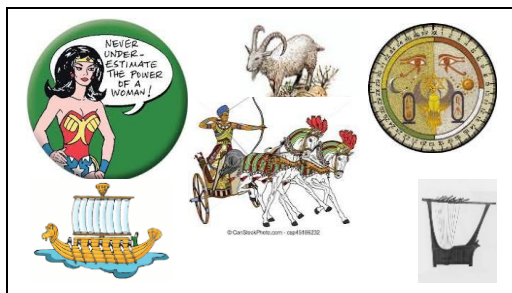
So it is perfectly possible that in 5000 BC there was a tower of Babel as described, and that the tradition of such towers was handed down and used by Nebuchadnezzar much later on.

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The ancient Mesopotamians were a complex and cultured race. They lived along the Tigris Euphrates river system in an area that is now Iraq, and Kuwait and parts of Syria, Turkey and Iran.

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Women in Mesopotamia had virtually equal rights to their male counterparts. They could own land, divorce, and even have their own businesses with an ability to enter into their own contracts. This advanced civilization developed the wheel, tools, weapons, the chariot, beer, wine, irrigation, domestication of animals, and sailboats. They are also responsible for separating time into hours, minutes, and seconds. So not only were they united by a common language – they were very inventive and had an advanced social structure. They were very ambitious and built the amazing Ziggurat towers – the towers of Babel because Mesopotamia morphed into Babylonia.

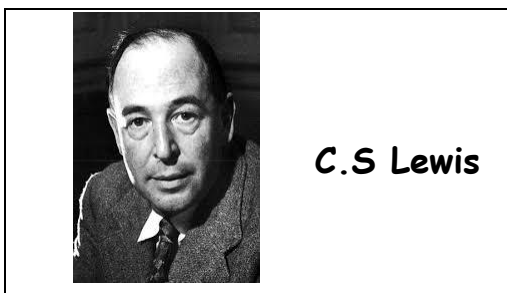
And the story tells us that because they were becoming so powerful, God created a babel of languages to confuse them and destroy their ambitions.

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So this is where I start being puzzled of Tring. Why would God make them speak different languages? **Were** they only speaking one language? At the time of this story – around 5,000 BC they were speaking at least five languages. A lot of the Bible puzzles me like this. And so I will share some of my thoughts with you. However a health warning. These are my personal thoughts. They are not Baptist theology, or any other theology. They are my personal very flawed thoughts. However I felt strongly guided to follow these thoughts through for this sermon.

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I started puzzling about the Bible through reading C S Lewis - C.S Lewis was an atheist, but in 1930, aged 32 he started to believe there was a god. A year later he became a Christian, largely helped by many late night walks and discussions with his friend JRR Tolkien, author of Lord of The Rings, who was a devout Catholic.

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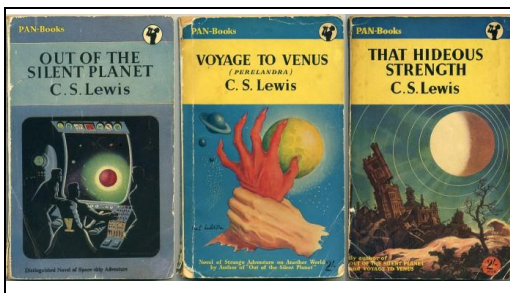
He was a prolific author of many books of fiction, poetry and exposition

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But is probably most famous for his two great books about Christian faith – *The Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity* taken from his radio talks between 1940 and 1944. He was also famous for his *Lion Witch and Wardrobe* children's books written between 1949 and 1954– which were allegories about the Christian life. In these children's books he puzzled out sin, death, redemption and the difficulties of being a Christian – although to children they are just great magical stories. However he went further and between 1938 and 1945 wrote three science fiction books which had a great influence on my thinking

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These are the originals – they have been reprinted many times and a new edition came out just a few years ago.

In these books he imagined that all the planets were inhabited. Each planet had several intelligent life forms who lived together in harmony, guided by a great spirit – it was not clear whether this was an archangel, a God for each planet, or a son of God for each planet. The spirits of each planet talked to each other. Only the silent planet Earth did not take part in these exchanges because the creatures there were at war with each other, did not live in harmony and were ruled by an evil spirit – the Devil if you like.

C S Lewis was trying to work out what was the position of God. Was he God just of the earth? If he was God of the universe then there must be other inhabited planets among the trillions of

planets out there. So was he the same God for them? Was the Bible just for us on Earth? And when I was 18 this started me thinking about, God, the Bible, us in the 20th century, the Church and how it all linked. As a university student I was puzzled.

there was a lot of discussion just after the First World War about God and the Universe. There is a beautiful; poem – Christ In The Universe – written at this time by Alice Maynell. I'll read just the last four verses.

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**No planet knows that this
Our wayside planet, carrying land and wave,
Love and life multiplied, and pain and bliss,
Bears, as chief treasure, one forsaken grave.**

**Nor, in our little day,
May His devices with the heavens be guessed,
His pilgrimage to thread the Milky Way
Or His bestowals there be manifest.**

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**But in the eternities,
Doubtless we shall compare together, hear
A million alien Gospels, in what guise
He trod the Pleiades, the Lyre, the Bear.**

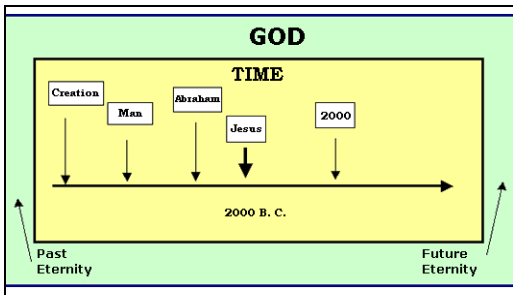
**O, be prepared, my soul!
To read the inconceivable, to scan
The myriad forms of God those stars unroll
When, in our turn, we show to them a Man.**

It was clear to CS Lewis, Alice Meynell, JRR Tolkien and many other Christian philosophers, that God, being infinite had to inhabit the whole universe.

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God does not change, Jesus does not change. That is a central fact for me. But man's view of God seems to change from the Old Testament to the New Testament, and from the early church to the present day church. How is this if God is unchangeable?

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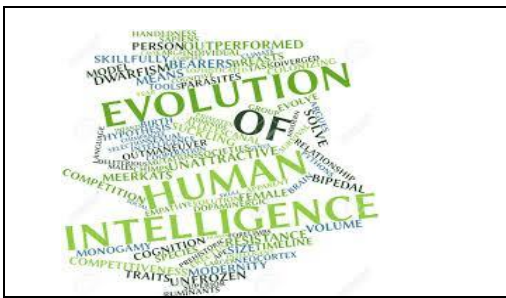


I also think God is outside time. Just as standing here my eye can travel from the left to the right – so God can view the past the present and the future at the same time. God knows what is to happen to me, to our Church, to the world. He sees from Eternity in the past to Eternity in the future.

So shouldn't the Bible be one unchanging word of God, the same for Moses as it is for Pope Francis? But it seems to me that the Old Testament paints a different picture to the New Testament. In the Old testament God is sometimes seen as a vengeful God commanding slaughter. In the New Testament he is shown through Jesus to be a God of love.

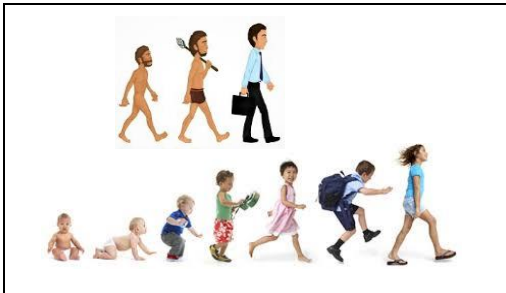
My personal, and I stress it is personal , understanding rests on

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The Evolution of Human Intelligence. All my scientific background tells me this. The intelligence of the caveman was not as developed as the intelligence or understanding of the rocket scientist. The intelligence of the early Israelites was not as developed as the intelligence or understanding of those in our modern Baptist Union. Why do I think that is important to my understanding of the Bible?

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The top picture shows man evolving and I think man's understanding of God evolved as well.

The bottom picture shows a baby evolving to a teenager. You have to use simple words and simple concepts when talking to a baby. Later when the baby reaches about two it understands more – but delights in saying “No” to suggestions. It is testing the ability to say no and rebel. Later on a young child will understand a lot more, but will not yet have developed a full sense of right and wrong and the morals of living life responsibly. In evolving to an adult, the teenager understands well and understands moral codes and how to behave, but may not wish to!

For me this is a link to the Old Testament. Early on the first Israelites had to have simple language and concepts, and understood God in these simple terms. Early Genesis is set just after the end of the stone age – the Neolithic period. Later as a few centuries passed, they delighted in saying “No”

trying out other Gods, rebelling and had not yet understood a full moral code. It was not until much later that God sent Jesus and they were able to understand God’s true love for them. So the Old Testament and New Testament, for me, speak to different stages of human intelligence and understanding.

And I believe that the Church is still finding out more and understanding better – even today

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Paul was quite clear that the man was the head of the household and should be obeyed by the wife. 1 Corinthians 11 v 3
The head of a woman is the man

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He was quite clear in the same passage in Corinthians that a woman’s head should have the hair cut or be shaved so as not to display the glory of her hair – and if she could not do this she had to cover her head to hide her hair. This head covering was normal for a woman attending church until after the second world war. Women wore hats in church. Don’t see any here today! Why not if Paul expressly ordered it? I think it is because we have a different interpretation of how a woman should behave in church today.

Two short videos. The first is fascinating – people leaving a church in 1902. Spot the one person not wearing a hat, and spot the different social classes. Easy to see for the men, less so for the women.

TWO VIDEOS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sW9mNQ-Qy9v0>

The second video is one from Leigh-on Sea Baptist Church – Andrew and Rowena’s church. A complete difference in clothing. Can you see either Andrew or Rowena? I can’t!

<https://youtu.be/hHnK0vdRH9o>

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No church allowed women priests or ministers until to the 19th century. The first woman minister was elected in the United States by the Free Will Baptist church in New England in 1815 – but in the UK we did not have a Baptist one until over a hundred years later when Edith Gates became the first UK female Baptist minister in 1918.. In fact the first woman minister was not ordained in Europe until 1880 when Caroline Soul was ordained in Scotland.

Women in the very early church could be leaders and influencers , but I know of no mention of them being Priests or ministers. Indeed the letters of Bishop Polcarp and Bishop Ignatius written around 100AD specifically refer to Bishops, Elders and Deacons as being men. The early Church considered only men could be priests.

The Church’s understanding of God’s plan for women in ministry and priesthood has evolved. I would be very surprised if the Catholic Church does not have women priests in the future – although I will probably not be around to see it!

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Surely the Lords Prayer is unchanging – but no, it is evolving steadily not just with modernised language but with what will be quite different wording.

From the Daily Mail a few weeks ago

“Pope Francis changes Lord's Prayer: Head of Catholic church changes 'lead us not into temptation' line after saying it implies that God can lead followers astray”

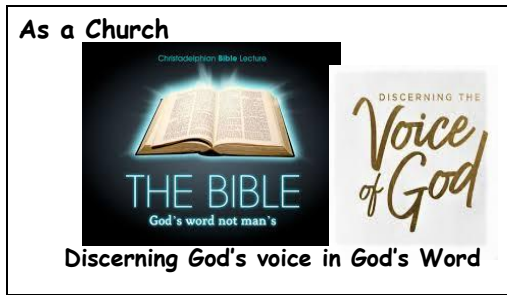
The Pope is saying that our understanding of the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer has evolved over the centuries. He believes it is best stated as “do not let us fall into temptation” As far as I know every translation has a similar line to “Lead us not into temptation” so he is not saying it is a mistranslation.

Apparently the line was added to the Lords prayer in versions of Mathew’s and Luke’s Gospels around 405AD when the content of the New Testament was approved by the Vatican and Pope Innocent 1st.

So Pope Francis is saying that we now have a better understanding of what God wants from us than the 5th century Christians and the wording of the Bible should be altered accordingly.

For me this is an accordance with my belief that our knowledge of God, and God’s love for us has evolved slowly but certainly since 6,000BC. And I am sure it will evolve over the next 8,000 years!

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So to be clear on my **personal** views. I believe the Bible is God's inspired word as understood and written down by man. What we need to do is discern the voice of God speaking through the Bible.

I believe that this is what the Church did when it decided to start appointing women ministers, when it looked at the position of women in marriage, when it considered the wording of the Lord's prayer. In these areas it is discerning what the **voice** of God is saying as it interprets what the **word** of God says.

At this point a couple of weeks ago I really did not see why I strongly felt I was being guided to follow these thoughts through. Then, all of a sudden a few days ago I realised.

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What I realised was that the message was that history shows that the Church's understanding of God's nature, Love and wishes for us evolves. It is really important that we realise it evolves – we should not think that our understanding of what God wants from us will never change. We have to be receptive to hearing God's word in a new way, in studying our Bibles and discerning with an open mind what God is **now** calling us to do. It may be different from what we have done before.

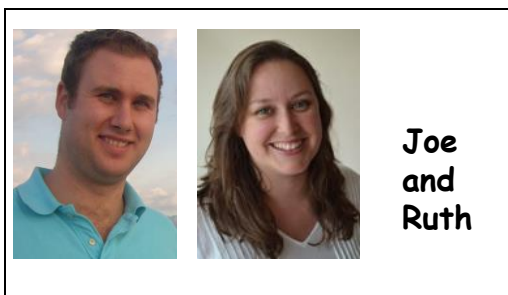
We will shortly have a new situation-

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Ruth and Joe Or is it

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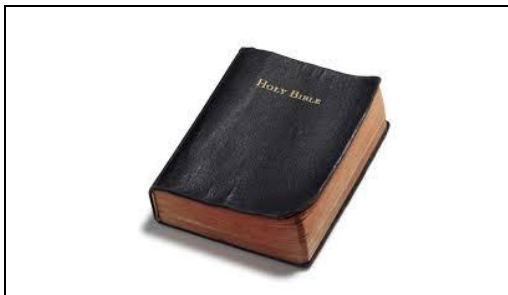


Joe and Ruth!

We have discerned that God wants us to work with two young ministers in a joint ministry – something I have not come across before.

Are we going to come to this new situation with an open mind, willing to discern what God is calling us to do as a Church and as individuals?

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I believe that as a Church it will be our task to work out when our new ministers arrive, what God is **now** calling us to do as a Church, both what we do as individual members of a church family and what we do as a church with the community here in Tring - and we need to do this with an open mind. Not looking at what we have always done, but finding out what God now calls us to do.

AMEN