

An Assortment of Study Slides for Discussing

Brian D. McLaren's

***A New Kind of Christianity***

Part III: The God Question

(Comprising Chapters 10 and 11)

Presenter: Nathan Nelson

## The lead-up to Chapters 10 and 11:

- **Ch. 8: the Bible as “community library” rather than “[legal] constitution”**

We have plenty of scholarship that grows from the assumption that the Bible is a divinely inspired constitution. And we have plenty of scholarship that reads the Bible as a collection of human literature and scholarship that reads the Bible as a collection of human literature and nothing more, devoid of inspiration altogether. I’m advocating a third approach. I’m recommending that we read the Bible as an inspired library [that] preserves, presents, and inspires an ongoing vigorous conversation with and about God, a living and vital civil argument into which we are all invited and through which God is revealed. (83)

- **Ch. 9: the Bible as between-the-lines revealer of truth about the living God, turning the literary conversation into theological revelation**

To say that the text is inspired is to say that people can encounter God—the real God—in a story full of characters named Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, the Satan, and even *God*. Through stories like this, gathered in a library like this—not articles and amendments, enumerated in a constitution—God can self-reveal, so that the Word of God, the speaking and self-revealing of God, can burn like fire in the branches, twigs, and leaves of the text. (95)

## The lead-up to Chapters 10 and 11, continued:

- **Ch. 9: the ultimate sufficiency of the Bible**

[I]f we want the Bible to be a constitution, it isn't enough. It isn't at all. Nor is it enough as a road map for successful living, as a set of blueprints for building a life, institution, or nation, or as an "owner's manual" with handy-dandy information guaranteed to make your life run smoothly, all at your fingertips, as easy as one-two-three, yes-sir-ee. But as the portable library of an ongoing conversation about and with the living God, and as an entrée into that conversation so that we actually encounter and experience the living God—for that the Bible is more than enough. (96)

## On Chapter 10: “Is God Violent?”

- **The Bible shows God’s progressive revelation of God’s self to the Hebrews, initially, and later to non-Hebrews.** (See pp. 99-100).

“El Shaddai” → “the Lord” (Exo. 6:3)

“Master” → “husband” (Hos. 2:16)

“Master” → “friend” (Jn. 15:12-17)

Binding lawgiver → freeing Spirit-infuser (Gal. 3:23-26)

## “Five specific lines of evolution in the biblical writers’ understanding of God”:

<i>God’s uniqueness</i>	From <b>assumptions of polytheism</b> to <b>understandings of monotheism</b>
<i>God’s ethics</i>	From <b>assumptions of concern for religious perfectionism</b> to <b>understandings of concern for practical expressions of social justice</b>
<i>God’s universality</i>	From <b>assumptions of tribal exclusivity or favoritism</b> to <b>understandings about a loving Creator of all</b>
<i>God’s agency</i>	From <b>assumptions of magical interventionism alone</b> to <b>understandings of the mysterious working of the Spirit “in, along with, through, or even in spite of events” (101)</b>
<i>God’s character</i>	From <b>assumptions of violent, retaliatory, unfair, and heartless inclinations</b> to <b>understandings of peace-loving, patient, fair, gentle, kind and reconciliatory inclinations</b>

## “So the God of the fundamentalists is [. . .]”

- F1: “a competitive warrior” who is
- F2: “superficially exacting,”
- F3: “exclusive[istic],”
- F4: “deterministic,” and
- F5: “ultimately violent,” a vengeful punisher.

## What McLaren is NOT saying:

- A. that the Bible never shows God to be F1-F5 (103)
- B. that God's *actual* character changes (103)

I am not saying that the Bible reveals a process of evolution within God's actual character, as if God used to be rather adolescent but has taken a turn for the better and is growing up nicely over the last few centuries. (103)

## What McLaren IS saying:

### **A. that the Bible's F1-F5 passages are not “the last word on the character of God”**

I *am* saying that human beings can't do better than their very best at any given moment to communicate their successive best understandings about God. As human capacity grows to conceive of a higher and wiser view of God, each new vision is faithfully preserved in Scripture like fossils in layers of sediment. (103)

### **B. that reading the Bible “as a cultural library rather than as a constitution” sets us “free to learn from that evolutionary process [in human understanding of God]—and, we might even add, to participate in it.” (103)**

## Two Analogies (pp. 103-07):

### Math Education

Generally speaking, grade-appropriate math textbooks are necessary to prevent student confusion and distrust as the teaching and learning process goes forward.

### Time-Travel Talk Show

A spiritually and morally advanced human society in 3013 exhibits shock when told that many Christians in our time approve of just-war theory, meat-eating, and use of dirty energy.

**The upshot: revelations of God must happen in stages to produce a valid, reliable theological education.**

## On Chapter 11: “From a Violent Tribal God to a Christlike God”

- **The Noah story is actually more theologically progressive than the Gilgamesh story (110).**
  1. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* describes a polytheistic universe in which “one merciful deity competes against all the other more capricious ones”; the Noah flood-story “shows us one God whose character integrates concerns for justice and mercy.”
  2. In the *Gilgamesh* account, the gods commit genocide merely because “human beings are too noisy, keeping the gods from getting a good night’s sleep.” In the Genesis account, the genocide is triggered by “humanity’s inhumanity and injustice” (109).
  3. In *Gilgamesh*, “the gods get frightened by the flood, as if they’ve unleashed something that even they can’t control”; they also need animal sacrifices because “their normal food sources [have been] destroyed by the flood they [have caused].” In Genesis, “God is neither frightened nor dependent on sacrificed meat to survive” (110).

## On Chapter 11: “From a Violent Tribal God to a Christlike God”

- **Narratives descendant from the Noah story continue to show the biblical library as “the record of a series of trade-ups, people courageously letting go of their state-of-the-art understanding of God when an even better understanding begins to emerge” (110-11).**

Consider the question of the character of God in the Baby Moses narrative and in the narratives about Jesus, “who seems, in episode after episode, to turn old stories [and understandings of God and human beings] on their heads” (110).

- **Jewish people are not to adopt or tolerate idols because “idols freeze one’s understanding of God in stone, as it were” (111). We need to avoid adopting a “conceptual” idolatry.**

“Although few of us today are tempted to freeze our understanding of God in graven images, we may too quickly freeze our understanding in printed images, rigid conceptual idols not chiseled in stone or wood but printed on paper in books, housed not in temples but in seminaries and denominational headquarters [. . .]” (111).

- **It is backward to try to define Jesus by means of old understandings of God. Christian scripture tells us that God can be understood most fully by coming to know Jesus and to understand his way(s): “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9 NRSVUE).**

NOT THIS . . .	BUT THIS . . .
<p>Long ago God spoke to our ancestors [. . .] by the Jewish prophets, but in these days through the Christian apostles [. . .]” (cp. Heb. 1:1-2).</p>	<p>“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds” (NRSVUE).</p>
<p>“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became the Scriptures and was published among us . . .” (cp. John 1:1).</p>	<p>“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God [. . .]. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (NRSVUE).</p>
<p>“The Bible is the light of the world.” Whoever has understood the Bible has seen the Father . . .” cp. John 8:12).</p>	<p>“Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life’” (NRSVUE).</p>
<p>“Whoever has understood the Bible has seen the Father “ (cp. John 14:9).</p>	<p>“Jesus said to him [. . .], ‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.’” (NRSVUE).</p>
<p>“The Bible and the Father are one” (cp. John 10:30).</p>	<p>“I and the Father are one” (NIV).</p>
<p>“The Bible is [. . .] the way, and the truth, and the life” (cp. John 14:6).</p>	<p>“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’” (NRSVUE).</p>
<p>“If you know the Bible, you will know my Father also” (cp. John 14:7)</p>	<p>“Jesus said to him, ‘If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him’” (NRSVUE).</p>

## On Chapter 11: “From a Violent Tribal God to a Christlike God”

- Quaker scholar Elton Trueblood on God’s character:

“The historic Christian doctrine of the divinity of Christ does not simply mean that Jesus is like God. It is far more radical than that. It means that God is like Jesus.”

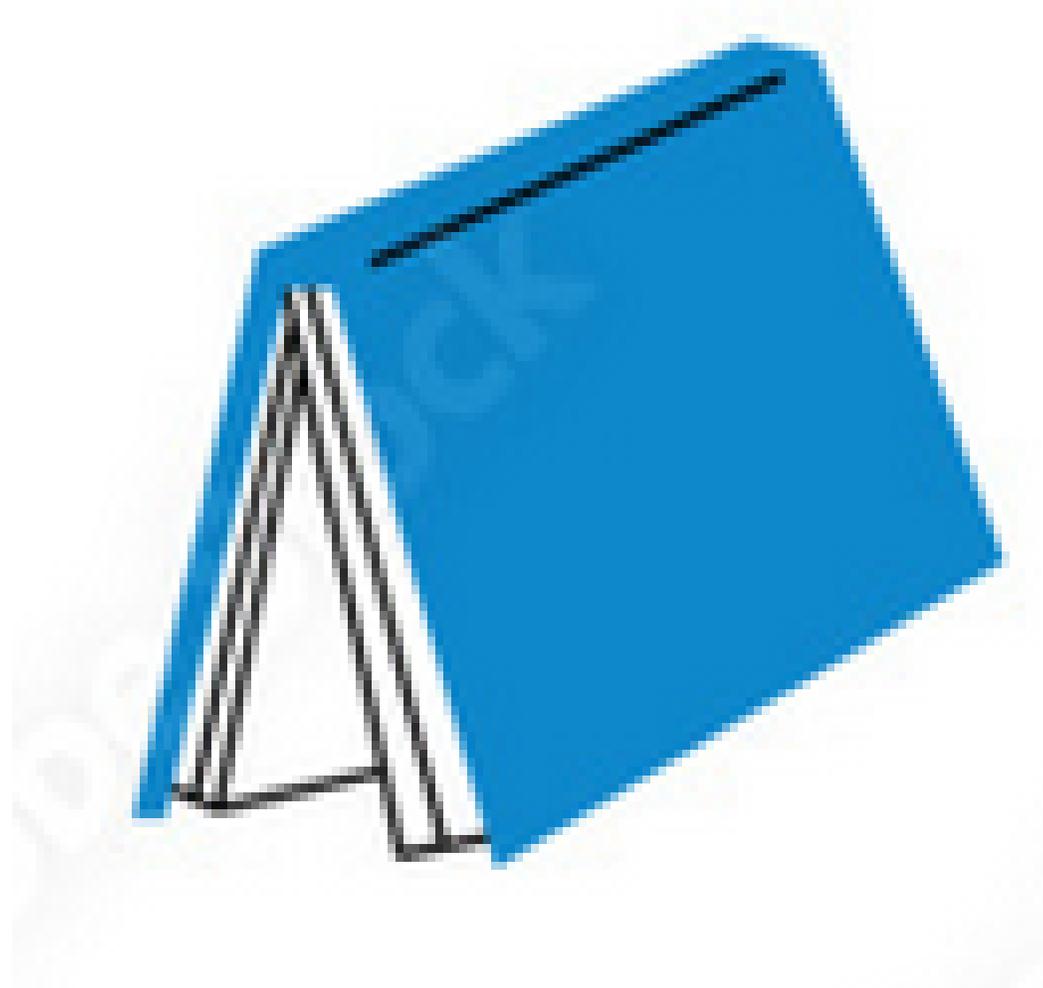
## Three “guiding stars” for confident navigation of the biblical texts toward a mature understanding of God’s character:

1. Make a *narrative* reading—not a legal[istic] or distracted one.
2. Look for a metanarrative plotline having progressive emphasis.
3. Use the light of that study—and especially the light that breaks out with such brilliance in the story of Jesus--to see the revelation of God’s character down through the centuries.

## Seen in the light of the Jesus equations,

- “[t]he images of God that most resemble Jesus, whether they originate in the Bible or elsewhere, are the most mature and complete images; the ones less similar to the character of Jesus are the more embryonic and incomplete, even though they may be celebrated for being better than the less complete images they replaced” (114).
- “This is why we cannot simply say that the highest revelation of God is given through the Bible (especially as the Bible read as a constitution or cut and pasted to fit in the Greco-Roman six-line narrative). Rather, we can say that, for Christians, the Bible’s highest value is in revealing Jesus, who gives us the highest, deepest and most mature view of the character of the living God” (115).

## “Christ as the hinge of the biblical story”



- “This, I suggest, represents seeing Christ as the hinge of the biblical story, the spine or backbone of the narrative, the climax and focal point toward which the Old Testament points and ascends and the peak from which the vigor and vitality of the New Testament flow” (118).