

“The Bible Lab”
*Developing Hands-On Teaching Experiments
For High School Age Biblical Studies*

Hosted by:
Dr. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher
Professor, Theological Studies
Loyola Marymount University

E-Mail:
dchristopher@lmu.edu

Welcome!

Teaching the Bible, like teaching history, literature, or other subjects normally associated with the area known as the “humanities” puts even the experienced teacher at a distinct disadvantage. In comparison, teaching naturally hands on subjects like the sciences, music, or other fine arts, can incorporate “labs” or “studio” sessions as a major part of their course work. The humanities may be the most lecture-dependent area of modern high school education, especially at the introductory level where discussion becomes difficult in the circumstances as students are just becoming acquainted with basic material of the subject.

This doesn't have to be so! In due course, on the Ave Maria Press Religious Education website, we are introducing a new online project to encourage greater creativity in teaching the Bible. This new venture and approach is known as the “Bible Lab.”

The Bible Lab is built on some of the most important successes of in-class, hands-on experiments as developed by Dr. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, the author of *The Old Testament: Our Call to Faith and Justice*. Dr. Smith-Christopher teaches several undergraduate courses, necessary to freshmen, at Loyola Marymount University, and uses many of the lesson ideas that will form the first projects in the Bible Lab. However, this Bible Lab is intended to be a dialogue between high school and other Scripture catechists. Thus, in the coming months, we encourage all Scripture teachers to contribute to this site, by collecting and developing hands-on, in-class, or homework experiments that help make Scripture study more engaging, lively, and relevant.

If you have interesting and creative experiments or lesson plans that you have invented related to biblical studies, please e-mail them in care of “Bible Lab” to avemariapress.1@nd.edu for inclusion with full credit on this website.

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Class Experiment #1

Dr. Moorey's Mystery

By

Dr. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher

Background

The most successful hands-on experiment that I have used in my freshman college courses (and with visiting high school students and in adult education settings, too) is what I call: "Dr. Moorey's Mystery." It is named for Dr. P.R. Moorey of Oxford (who passed away in 2004), with whom I consulted on the original design of this experiment when I first invented it as a graduate student at Oxford.

Preparations

You will need a total of four homemade clay pots for this experiment.

- Pot 1 should be roughly made as a "pinch pot" without using a wheel. For my series, each of the pots has an obvious rim. Each of your four pots should have one obvious feature that remains constant throughout the series. This is a very significant clue, and illustrates what archeologists look for in studying pottery styles.

The next three pots should be made on a wheel.

- Pot 2 should be made with thick walls. Leave your finger impressions on the side (e.g. do not smooth the walls on the outside). Don't forget your constant feature (like the rims on my pots).
- Pot 3 should be made with thin walls, smoothed surface, and even some decorations (e.g., a design, or even simple animal figures, etc.). After this one is made and fired, take it apart from the others, find a safe place to burn some paper, and set only this pot on the burning paper to make some black sooty markings on it.
- Pot 4 should be very much like Pot 3, but only with smooth walls, no designs, and no burn marks.

When you have finished making these four similar sized pots, each one should exhibit at least one generally similar feature (as I said, for my set, it is rims around the top).

Next, break up (smash!) all four pots. Keep only a few pieces of the first hand-made pot including pieces that feature your main stylistic clue (e.g. rim, etc.). This is your "most primitive" pot, and should have fewer sample pieces than the others.

I keep all my pieces together in a box, and bring it to class on the very first day of the course, in order to have a surprising, "hands on" activity for a class that most students think is going to be bookish and slow.

Classroom Directions

I ask the entire class to stand, come forward, and draw pieces of broken pottery from the box. I then tell the entire room that there is a story in these pieces, and their task is to tell the story. Make up something fun, like, "While digging the foundation for my house, something incredible was found . . ." or "While the gardener was working in the garden by the school, he stumbled onto . . ." I always stop, with a smile, and say, "This is *not* a true story." Finish the story with: "These pieces are dying to tell you a story—your task is to give these pieces a voice! Tell their story!"

You must clarify, however, that the key to unlocking the story is that they must also seek the answer to a single critically important question that is answered with either "yes" or "no". I inform them that they can ask any question they want at any time, but I will only answer the correct question. If the class is not moving toward this question, I give a hint – "it has to do with how they were found." In the meantime, I tell the students to circulate around the room, collecting information about the pottery pieces.

They will make lots of good observations. Affirm the observations they make, like: "the pieces seem to come from more than one pot" and "the pieces are made from the same material" (suggests same people making them?). Eventually someone will say: "Were they all found at the same time?" That is the question and they immediately realize that the different pots they are discerning among the mixture must represent different pots from different times.

Now have them group the pieces, and try to guess which came first, then next, and analyze why they are saying this. The key to the experiment is to make sure that students are not allowed to speculate beyond reasonable inferences from the evidence.

Teaching the Lesson

The point of the lab experiment is to illustrate a number of critical skills for the study of biblical texts:

- Biblical study requires careful, critical, and rational thought
- Biblical study requires historical analysis based on evidence
- Biblical study must rely on the evidence first and foremost
- Speculation must have a basis in evidence

In this particular mystery, the evidence is the pottery pieces. In the Bible, the evidence is the text itself—not what we think it says, not what it is supposed to say...but what it actually says. The experiment teaches students to examine the evidence before making guesses as to the meaning and purpose in biblical study.

This experiment is lots of fun, especially as you get better at guiding groups through it.

Class Experiment #2

Buzzer Beater

By

Dr. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher

Background

One of the best ways to get students to read the Bible is to make it “worth their while.” This can be, and has been, accomplished by teachers for decades using various means. The old standby is “...because we will cover the material on the test.” Is there a more adventurous and creative way to approach this? I have often thought that there must be better ways to get students to make the initial plunge into serious reading.

Why not borrow a page from popular television game shows like Jeopardy where the contestants “buzz in” to give correct answers (or questions in the case of Jeopardy)? Could it be the act of “buzzing in” that makes games like this so much fun? This experiment explores that possibility a little deeper.

Preparations

This lab will involve an investment. You will need a set of stop-buzzers, or stop-lights in a push-button system for quick response. If you know someone (maybe a student) who is electronically inclined, he or she may be able to actually make one for you. However, there are companies that make these machines for what I consider to be a fairly reasonable investment. Although I have never tried it, in a pinch, you could use a set of tabletop “hotel bells”. “ If you do, you will have to judge or assign someone to judge which contestant “buzzed in” first.

If you want to invest in a set of easy-to-use buzzers, the website for Zee Craft is <http://www.zeecraft.com>. I have found their products to be reliable and, lots of fun. When I bought the system for the Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies Department, I ordered eight units (four of one color, four of the other) so that as many as eight students could compete at the same time. The other advantage to buying the professional unit is that you can set up the system to “shut out” the wrong answers who ring first, allowing the remaining competitors to try for the correct answer. This is helpful for those who always buzz before the question is finished.

Classroom Directions

You can experiment with different kinds of games, but I will explain the system I use in my Introduction to Old Testament courses for college freshmen.

First, if you have eight units (bells, buzzers, etc.), then divide the class by groups of eight. Determine a set

number of questions for each round (15-20). Ask the questions and determine the winners of each round by who correctly answered first. Send the winners on to the next round. You will notice that the class enthusiasm picks up considerably as you get closer to the final round.

Award grading points to the students who proceed further along in the game. I also include a challenge round after an overall winner has been determined. Any student who wants to try for some extra points, and thinks they want another chance, can come forward for an extra challenging question or round of questions.

I use the book of Genesis for my first competition. You may wish to adapt my list of questions by making them simpler (or harder!) or dividing them into specific sections of Genesis. These questions are suggestions, and you can, of course, make up more.

Game Show Questions from the Book of Genesis

1. In the last verses of Genesis, what does Joseph make the Israelites swear to do?
A. Carry his bones to Israel
2. In Genesis 20:15, what comes next: "Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brother's said, 'What if Joseph _____.'"
A. "Still bears a grudge"
3. What was the significance of the place called Abel-Mizraim, the "Mourning of Egypt?"
A. It was the burial place of Jacob.
4. Who was the first Israelite who was mummified?
A. Jacob (Gen. 50:2)
5. Where did Jacob wish to be buried?
A. In the field of Ephron the Hittite or the field Abraham owned in Canaan.
6. Name at least half of the tribes of Israel?
A. Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Naphtali, Joseph, Asher, Benjamin, Levi
7. Why did Jacob gather his sons?
A. To pronounce blessings and to make predictions about their futures
8. What strange action did Jacob perform during his blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh?
A. He crossed his hands, reversing the order of the blessing.
9. Whose sons were Ephraim and Manasseh?
A. Joseph's sons.
10. How many chapters are there in Genesis?
A. 50
11. What was the occupation of Jacob's family?
A. Shepherds
12. When Joseph created the economic system in Egypt, what was the event that initiated his plan?
A. A famine
13. Joseph sold grain, and collected money. When the people came back to him again, starving, what did he collect instead of money for the food?
A. Livestock
14. What did Joseph collect for the household of Pharaoh?
A. All the land of Egypt

15. Who was Asenath?
A. She was the Egyptian wife of Joseph.
16. When the brothers returned, what convinced Jacob that Joseph was still alive?
A. All the wagons, food and other material things convinced them he was alive.
17. Finish the sentence. "When Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, he said, 'God sent me before you to _____.'"
A. Preserve a remnant
18. When people wept for joy in Genesis, they were said to have "fallen on their ____."
A. Necks
19. When they were not aware of Joseph's identity, who spoke for his brothers?
A. Judah
20. For the second of his secret acts, what did Joseph have put in the sacks of grain to give to his brothers?
A. His silver cup
21. Whose sack contained the cup?
A. Benjamin's sack
22. Why was Benjamin special to his father?
A. He was the youngest son.
23. What was the first thing that Joseph secretly put into the sacks of grain?
A. Money
24. Why did Jacob send his sons into Egypt in the first place?
A. There was famine in Canaan.
25. What did Joseph first accuse his brothers of doing in Egypt?
A. Spying
26. Joseph was willing to let the brothers go if they did what?
A. Left one brother behind
27. While sitting in prison, Reuben told his brothers that they were being punished because.
A. Of what they did to Joseph years before.
28. Complete sentence: "And Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of _____."
A. Pharaoh
29. How did Joseph describe the fourteen critical years that were coming to Egypt and the surrounding area?
A. There would be seven years of plenty, then seven years of famine.
30. What did Joseph have Egyptian government do during the years of plenty?
A. Store up food.
31. Who was Zaphenath-Panea?
A. This was Joseph's Egyptian name.
32. What kind of animal was in Pharaoh's dream that Joseph interpreted?
A. Cows

33. How were the years of “lean” portrayed in the dream?
A. Seven thin and ugly cows
34. Pharaoh said about Joseph: “Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is _____.”
A. the Spirit of God
35. What were the professions of the two people in prison with Joseph?
A. Cupbearer and baker
36. What ability did Joseph demonstrate to these two?
A. The ability to interpret dreams
37. Why was Joseph in prison in the first place?
A. He was falsely accused of molesting an Egyptian officer’s wife.
38. What was the name of the Egyptian officer?
A. Potiphar
39. What was the fate of the baker in prison?
A. He was hanged.
40. What was the fate of the cupbearer?
A. He was restored to office.
41. What was the period of time that Joseph said would pass before the baker’s and cupbearer’s fates would be acted upon?
A. Three days
42. What did Joseph refuse to do with Potiphar’s wife?
A. He refused to sleep with her.
43. What did Tamar disguise herself as?
A. A prostitute
44. What did Tamar take from Judah to prove he had slept with her?
A. His signet ring
45. Which brother decided not to kill Joseph?
A. Reuben
46. What was done with Joseph?
A. He was sold and taken into slavery in Egypt.
47. What was the young Joseph’s first dream described to his brothers?
A. It involved corn sheaves bowing to a young sheaf.
48. What was young Joseph’s second dream that angered the brothers?
A. It involved the sun moon and stars bowing down to Joseph.
49. It is likely that these dreams that predicted Joseph’s fate would occur where?
A. Egypt
50. What was Jacob renamed?
A. Israel

51. What happened to Dinah that started a great deal of violence involving Jacob's sons?
A. She was raped.
52. What did the family of Schechem offer to do regarding Dinah's rape?
A. They offered to be circumcised and become Jews.
53. It was said that Hamor was the most _____ of all his family.
A. Honored
54. Esau approached Jacob with how many men?
A. 400
55. What was the river where Jacob met the angel and wrestled?
A. Jabbok
56. Jacob called Jabbok "Peniel" because it meant "Have I seen _____."
A. God
57. What was Jacob's injury?
A. A hip out of joint
58. When Jacob prepared to meet Esau, what did he prepare to give him?
A. Livestock
59. Jacob prayed to God and said about Esau, "I am afraid of him, that he may come and _____."
A. Kill us all
60. What land was Esau associated with?
A. Seir and/or Edom
61. When Jacob left Laban, what did Rachel steal?
A. Household goods
62. How did Rachel hide the household goods?
A. She pretended to be on her period, and hid them under her dress.
63. What did Jacob do with rods of poplar, almond, and plane?
A. He peeled stripes into them.
64. What were these sticks or rods supposed to accomplish?
A. They were supposed to make sheep pelts.
65. How long did Jacob have to work for Laban?
A. Fourteen years
66. Who were Jacob's two wives?
A. Rachel and Leah
67. Jacob wanted to marry whom first?
A. Rachel
68. Why did Laban switch Leah for Rachel?
A. Laban claimed that the oldest daughter must be married first.

69. What did Jacob see in his dream when he escaped Esau?
A. A ladder up to heaven, with angels
70. Isaac's blessing included: "The dew of heaven and the fatness of _____."
A. the earth
71. Did Esau get a blessing at all?
A. Yes
72. Why did Jacob wear skins to fool Isaac?
A. Esau was hairy.
73. Who helped Jacob with his plot?
A. His mother helped him.
74. What two senses did Isaac use to recognize Esau?
A. Touch and smell
75. What did Jacob prepare to offer Esau for his birthright?
A. A red stew
76. What was Isaac's wife's name?
A. Rebekah
77. When Isaac settled in a foreign land and noticed that the men asked about his wife, Rebekah, what did Isaac tell her to say?
A. She was to tell them that she was his sister.
78. How did Abraham's servant meet Rebekah?
A. She offered him water.
79. Why did Abraham send his servant away to find a woman?
A. He did not want Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman.
80. What did Abraham purchase when Sarah died?
A. A burial place
81. How did God test Abraham about Isaac?
A. God asked him to sacrifice his son.
82. What did Abraham actually sacrifice?
A. A ram
83. Who was Abimelech?
A. He was the ruler of Gerar who wanted to marry Sarah
84. What was Abraham's original name?
A. Abram
85. Where was Hagar from?
A. Egypt
86. What were the two cities destroyed by God?
A. Sodom and Gommorah

87. When Abraham bargained with God about destroying the city, how many righteous people did he first offer to find to prevent God from destroying the city?
A. 50
88. When Abraham began bargaining, what was his next number that he offered to find?
A. 45
89. What was the smallest amount Abraham offered to find?
A. 10
90. Finish the sentence: "Abraham shall become a _____."
A. Great and/or mighty nation
91. What did God show Abraham to promise him many descendents?
A. Stars
92. Where is Beer-Sheva located?
A. Negev Desert
93. What did God make with Abraham when he was ninety-nine?
A. A covenant
94. Since the covenant involved descendents, it seems logical that the physical sign of that covenant was _____.
A. Circumcision
95. God told Hagar, "Now you shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call him _____."
A. Ishmael
96. Why did Abram first go down into Egypt?
A. There was a famine.
97. What feature of the Nile River made it typically a place of refuge in times of famine?
A. The Nile River flooded every year. Its source was far away.
98. God told Noah, "You shall not eat flesh with _____ in it."
A. Blood
99. When God agreed never to destroy humanity again, what did he signal this agreement with?
A. A rainbow
100. The flood stories say that the flood lasted either forty days, or _____.
A. 300 days.
101. God told Noah, "Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are _____."
A. Righteous
102. During the flood the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with _____.
A. Violence
103. What did the cherubim carry to prevent re-entry into the Garden of Eden?
A. A flaming sword

104. To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pain in _____."
A. Childbearing
105. To the man he said, "I will curse the ground...in _____ shall you eat of it all the days of your life."
A. Toil
106. Finish: "This at last is bone of my bones, and _____."
A. Flesh
107. You cannot eat of the tree of _____.
A. The knowledge of good and evil
108. Finish: "In the image of God he created them _____ and _____."
A. Male and female
109. On which day was humanity created?
A. The sixth day
110. Finish: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and earth, the earth was _____."
A. A formless void

Class Experiment #3

5-Minute Whodunit

By

Dr. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher

Background

Here is an idea to encourage reading.

I love mysteries. Sherlock Holmes. Inspector Morse. Inspector Lynley. Miss Marple. I especially love the British mysteries such as those made famous by the twentieth century Christian mystery writer, Dorothy Sayers.

It has often been noted that theologians are typically also mystery fans—especially Biblical scholars! Why? Because there is a similar methodology; gathering clues, interpreting results, and testing theories. In fact, some mystery writers claim that the first true mystery story is from the Greek additions to the Book of Daniel, the story of "Bel." In this famous Hebrew story written before the time of Jesus, the writer borrows the famous character of Daniel and writes a story (many centuries after the time that the historical Daniel was supposed to have lived). Nebuchadnezzar believes that a pagan idol, Bel, actually eats food and therefore is truly alive. Does this make sense, a sign of a true God? Priests leave food, and it is "miraculously" eaten every morning. The Emperor is impressed, but Daniel famously laughs, and sets about to prove that the Emperor has been fooled. He spreads ash on the floor around the placement of the food and then returns the next morning with the King—and they both see the footprints of the false priests who come and eat the food to fool the Emperor! Elementary, my dear Nebuchadnezzar! (The priests, incidentally, don't fare too well at the hands of the furious Nebuchadnezzar.)

In American literature, it is usually claimed that the first true Detective Story was written by Edgar Allan Poe. The famous short story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", was written in 1841 and introduced Auguste Dupin, the first fictional detective. My awareness of the Daniel story as the first detective story and the fact that Poe wrote a short story came together for me when I first spotted a book called, Five Minute Mysteries by Ken Weber (Running Press Book Publishers, 1989) Here is the Amazon.com link: http://www.amazon.com/Five-Minute-Mysteries-Challenging-Mayhem/dp/0894716905/sr=8-1/qid=1158634147/ref=pd_bbs_1/002-0834951-0005604?ie=UTF8&s=books

Preparations

It finally occurred to me that such short mysteries might serve as a clever way to encourage students to read the

Bible very carefully! The key is writing a mystery that requires knowledge of certain books of the Bible in order to solve the mystery. Although my own story uses Daniel again, I think interesting short mysteries could use modern characters and settings as well.

So, I tried my hand at writing one, and you can see what you think. My students at Loyola Marymount University tried it out and a handful of them e-mailed the solution. I offered extra points to all students who could e-mail the solution by a deadline, and requested all those who received points to keep the secret so others may enjoy the mystery, too.

You can use this “5-minute Whodunit” or create your own. If you do create your own, don’t forget to send it on to the Bible Lab website so that it can be shared with all.

The Case of the Strange Priest

I am Mishael, unfortunately known to most of my friends and foreign superiors as Sharreach, the name given to me by our Persian superiors. I am not fond of the name, nor the name given to my friend and mentor, Daniel—whom you will know as “Daniel HaMaskil”—Daniel the Wise, but whom the Persians continue to call “Beltshazzar”. I, on the other hand, have the rare honor of referring to him as “Wise Teacher”, for our Creator has seen fit to make this poor, undeserving one a student of this strange and mysterious servant of the Lord of Heaven. I consider it my duty, much less pleasure, to write of some of the more amazing cases of The Wise Teacher’s startling abilities and adventures.

You will know, my dear reader, of those works that I have already written, dealing with the strange and wonderful exploits of the Wise Teacher—his amazing interpretation of the dreams of foreign rulers, and most recently, his courageous defiance of Persian law which landed him in the presence of hungry lions for the sport of the Emperor’s advisors. Yet, he miraculously and mysteriously lived the night in the presence of these ravenous beasts and amazed even the Emperor himself. The Wise One spoke of an angelic presence in the night, and who am I to question him? It was enough to see him walk, unharmed, from that dark pit where the animals are kept to believe that something amazing had happened—amazing even compared to his strange and wonderful life. I have read, of course, of the awesome reports of Enoch and his travels through the heavens—but I confess I read them with some measure of doubt, while I have witnessed with my own eyes the exploits of the Wise Teacher. But, I digress, my dear reader, and you await the story I am about to unfold. By the grace of the Lord of Heaven, I report yet another of the Wise Teacher’s exploits. But, please, have patience while I explain something of the background to the events I here will describe.

My brothers and sisters of Judah who are captive with me in this land live mostly in villages no farther than a days travel from the vast city of Babylon. Most live there because that great demon, Nebuchadnezzar (may his name be forever cursed) of Babylon destroyed David’s city and Solomon’s Temple, and carried away thousands of us, only to resettle us in villages in the lands surrounding his city so that we may better serve his Imperial designs for building and maintaining the structures of his Empire. As my reader will recall, however, the Lord of Heaven saw fit to remove the line of Babylon by means of Cyrus the Father of Persia—and many of us remain servants of the Persian Imperial Services to this day.

Life among the villages can be hard, perhaps the more so because those who were taken from Judah were not used to the life of exiles and workers, being in the main from the wealthy and powerful families of Jerusalem and Judah. But hunger and need are powerful teachers, and we learned to cope with the challenges of a new land and new tasks. There have been occasions when the brothers and sisters have turned on one another with less than charitable intentions, which is why we have been so blessed to have a tireless seeker of justice in the Wise Teacher. No doubt you will recall, for example, his brilliant revelation of the deceptive lies of a few corrupt Elders who tried to implicate the fair Susanna in immoral acts. It was the Wise Teacher who revealed that it was they, in fact, who were lying.

There was, then, one other occasion which I hesitate to describe in great detail, not wanting to dwell on yet another example of the community failing to act toward one another with the charity and concern that Moses the Lawgiver taught us so many generations ago.

It began when a nearby village was visited by a Priest bearing a startling report. A large gathering of Levites and Priests in a nearby settlement, a larger settlement from the sound of it, had gathered to discuss the dire need of the people to recommence some semblance of the rites of the purity by which my people believe that their impurities and sins are removed.

We all sympathized with the reports of their debates. The Temple ruins were many a hard days’ journey away,

and we were not allowed by our Persian superiors to return on our own (although some have gone under special permission with Sheshbezzar about whom we have sadly heard very little since his departure years ago). To make a complex debate more simple, my dear readers, the Priest's meetings and decisions were reported by this priestly visitor amount to this: we have no idea when (or if) we will ever be able to return to Solomon's Temple, the House of the Lord of Heaven, and resume the regular offerings there for the purity of our people, or their confession of sins. We cannot continue to live even in this foreign place without the possibility of expressing to God our devotion through sacrifice, or our invitation to God to continue to dwell with us by offering sacrifice of thanksgiving. We must consider the possibility that we should build altars among our villages and allow some sacrifice to recommence, even if on a limited scale.

Now, my dear reader, you can immediately understand why this would raise deep emotion among the brothers and sisters. On the one hand, the idea of being able to express our devotion through sacrifice even in this land has obvious appeal. On the other hand, we still live under the laws reaffirmed by our recent great King Josiah (of blessed memory) who insisted that sacrifice take place only in the House of God itself, and no longer anywhere else. It seemed right and good when King Josiah proclaimed it, because there was so much mixing of foreign and impure practices in places of sacrifice throughout the land, but now that we are in exile, what are we to do?

So, this Priest arrived at the nearby village, with the news that altars are to be rebuilt. He had arrived to commence the task of rebuilding an altar for their use. Thereafter, he said that he would be honored to remain as local Priest and convener of sacrifice for those in this area who would welcome the chance to express this material devotion to our God and perhaps plead for a hasty return to the Lands of His Choosing and rebuild Solomon's House. Many of the villagers were overjoyed and welcomed the young Priest with open arms.

No sooner had a week passed, however, that strange things began to happen in the village where the new Priest had arrived. Possessions went missing—even though strangers had not been passing through, nor Persian companies of soldiers (we are used to their thieving). Various searches had not turned up these valuables (some of them long-term possessions of families who treasured these memories of their former lives in the Land of God's Choosing). When finally a home of a prominent Elder and his son was destroyed by fire—and Elder Beniah himself killed within the flames. The Wise Teacher was sent for, with pleas from the village council to come and investigate.

I don't know if I detected a slight smile on the face of the Wise Teacher, but he seemed to relish the chance to once again think through the puzzles of our lives. We packed a few pieces of clothing that very evening when the messenger arrived and left early the next morning.

The Teacher settled in the home of a friend who lived in the village and immediately sent for a number of people to come and discuss the events of the recent weeks. This was often the Wise Teacher's method, as he is often heard to repeat the proverb: Where there is no guidance, a nation falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.

The first four or five discussions followed more or less the same pattern as no one was present to see how the tragedy unfolded. The final discussion of this series, however, seemed to raise more signs of interest in the Wise Teacher:

"Did the fire occur in the home of the host of the altar?" asked the Teacher.

"I know what you are thinking, Honored Guest, but the altar was not complete, and so the flames did not come from an accident involving a sacrifice," the woman replied.

"Had the Priest been present anytime near the time of the fire?"

"No, Honored Guest, he was at prayer with villagers on the South side of the village, and as you know, the Elder's home was in the northeast corner of the village..."

"The northeast, you say?"

"Yes, Honored Guest."

I admit that at that moment, I was not sure why the Wise Teacher found this detail of significance, but we had not yet visited the actual site of the fire.

"And this was the Priest's suggestion to locate the altar there?"

"Why, no, Honored Guest. It was the Elder Beniah's insistence when the Priest first suggested that the altar be built."

At this response, I noted a quiet moment of reflection on the face of the Wise Teacher, and after he stroked his beard briefly, he turned to me and said quietly, "I must see this altar, my friend. We should go quickly."

The Wise Teacher and I rose to visit the remains of the home of the Elder. The Priest must have been notified of our presence and our journey to the site of the horrible tragedy, because we found him dressed in Priests'

Linens, awaiting our arrival.

The Wise Teacher bowed his head in gentle recognition of the holy calling of the Priest, but he was himself unknown to myself or the Teacher. After brief pleasantries, the Wise Teacher proceeded to examine the remains on the ground.

The altar was only partially constructed, as the Wise Teacher and I had been told. I found nothing especially noteworthy about this fact, but something about the partially constructed stones troubled my Teacher, as he examined them closely.

“Do you have any idea why this fire has occurred here?” The Wise Teacher asked the Priest.

The Priest replied immediately, “I wasn’t here when it occurred, but I presume that Elder Beniah or his son were preparing a meal and the flames got out of hand...I am really not sure, Teacher.”

“Indeed,” Daniel replied, “But I wonder if you can tell me why there are so many pieces of straw scattered on the ground not far from the altar?”

“That I can explain,” The Priest replied. “For I had already begun to gather wood in preparation for the holy sacrifices. Elder Beniah was making such rapid progress, I anticipated the joyous commencement of ceremonies in a very short time.”

Continuing to examine the ground closely, the Teacher asked, “And these stones, so near a burnt patch of ground. Is this where you had gathered the stones?”

“Yes,” the Priest replied, “In fact, this is where I was supervising the construction of the altar. Elder Beniah was himself of a stoneworker’s family, and had offered to work the stones as a labor of devotion. I presumed that this was why he was so insistent that the altar be located where he could work near his home.”

It all seemed logical—near the individual stones were the iron tools of a stone-worker.

The Wise Teacher then turned slowly toward the Priest, “And yet he worked the stones so close to the gathered straw and wood, knowing that sparks could well fly from the work and ignite the pile?”

At this, the Priest’s expression changed—almost it seems, to relief—as he nearly interrupted the Wise Teacher in his enthusiasm.

“Your reputation is well deserved, Son of Wisdom, because I would never have thought of this. You are surely correct! Of course this is what happened—sparks from the Elder’s devoted work must have ignited the wood, and the fire leapt out of control and consumed not only the wood, but his home, and tragically, he himself as well. Perhaps even his clothing was burned. He was old, after all, and even a skilled stone-worker can make mistakes after all these years.”

Then the Wise Teacher suddenly stood tall and turned full front toward the Priest, his face wrinkled in sadness and, it seemed, some anger:

“You are right in one thing, brother: the Elder’s death was a tragedy, but it was not an accident, and you are no Priest.

Before the Priest could react to this shocking revelation, the Wise Teacher had turned to the Persian soldiers, and said to them: “Detain this man. I am pained to observe the injustice of a brother Hebrew, but this man is both a liar, and most likely a murderer. If we examine his quarters, most likely we will find some of the valuables that have gone missing from this village.

Question

How did Daniel the Wise know that the Priest was not real?

Clue

Exodus Chapter 20

Solution

If you make an altar of stone for me, do not build it of cut stone, for by putting a tool to it you desecrate it (Ex 20:25).