

A Chapter From God's Memoirs

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In the last century, the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed to the world his momentous discovery that "God is dead!" Since this occurred before the building of the "Information Super Highway," it took a while for the news to make its way across the Atlantic, but by the 1960's word had reached this continent. Soon, there was a small, but sturdy band of theologians, men like Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, who were busy trying to devise a way to keep their disciplines alive, and to justify their on-going careers in an environment in which God was dead. Inevitably the group was known as "God Is Dead" theologians, and their school of thought as the "God Is Dead Theology." The death of God was confirmed, finally, when *Time* magazine discovered this group of religious scholars, and blazoned the news of the divine demise across the cover of the magazine.

In the years which have passed, it has been as hard to convince true believers of the death of God as it is to convince a similar group of the death of Elvis. Regular sightings of both of them are constantly being reported. Just as there are those who believe that Elvis faked his own death and is now part of the FBI's Witness Protection Program, so there are those who insist that the announcement of the death of God is highly premature and that God is only hiding out somewhere, waiting for a more propitious moment to take an active part in the world again.

I don't want to get into this debate. An argument with true believers is usually a futile and unpleasant undertaking. However, I have found myself thinking, "What if God is dead, and what if, like other great political leaders, he had found time before his demise, to draft his memoirs? What might God have thought, what might he have wanted to share with us as he looked back over his career." That set me to scrounging around in unlikely places to see if I might discover the manuscript.

Well, I wish to announce that I have found a portion of God's memoirs, buried under the compost heap at Unitarian House. After working intently, I have deciphered that document and would like to share it with you this morning. You may laugh, but I ask you to remember that all alone, and without any corroborating witnesses, Joseph Smith discovered his tablet--in Palmyra, New York, of all place--and the result is the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Who can say what will result from the memoirs recently unearthed in Summit, New Jersey.

The opening pages of the manuscript are impossible to read. The microbes have been busily transforming them into mulch, leaving them more fragmentary than the Dead Sea Scrolls. Here and there is an occasional legible word, enough to surmise that the memoir

began with some kind of family history. There is clearly some reference to God's mother, or grandmother; but we experts have been unable to discover any clear reference to a father figure, leading some to conjecture that God was reared in a single-parent household, or at least some sort of unconventional family setting. It is a great loss to religious scholarship to be unable to learn more about God's early years. Several pages in, however, the memoir becomes quite legible. (Indeed, God had a fine hand for a professional man.) Beginning in mid sentence, the memoir says, in part:

"...bored out of my mind! Perhaps that is why I was not more careful, and did not think the whole thing through at the beginning. Being God was so very lonely. There was simply no one to talk with; there was no place to go; indeed, there was no place to be; there was not even any time to pass. Oh, occasionally, when I was truly desperate for some diversion, I would split myself up into two or three persons--sometimes even more--and try to work up an interesting conversation, or sometimes even a diverting game. It never worked very well. I always knew what I was going to say before I said it. You just can't get a really good argument going that way! By the same token, the games were dull and predictable. Try as I would, I could never surprise myself. No matter what clever strategy I devised, I always knew what to expect from me. Being God was a celestial bore!

"Then one day--no that's not quite right because I hadn't invented days and nights or even time yet--all of a sudden, when my boredom had become unbearable, it was almost as if I sneezed and the universe exploded into being. Oh, I know those stories I put out about how I carefully thought the universe into being. I was young and insecure, and it seemed more grown-up and responsible to describe it that way, but in all honesty, it just happened. I suppose Freud might explain it in terms of my unconscious mind taking over to rescue me from terminal ennui--a poltergeist sort of thing.

"Whatever the cause, I looked up and there were the galaxies, the star clusters, the solar systems, the planets with their moons, all busily spinning around and going nowhere at an enormous speed. For the first time, there was a sense of place. I could be here, or I could be there, or I could be somewhere else. For the first time there was a sense of time. As objects moved from here to there, and aimed to be somewhere else, they defined past and present and future.

"For the first time in my memory, I was intrigued. Something quite unpredictable had just happened--a totally new experience for me. I determined to get a closer look. I picked out a smallish solar system--nine planets circling a modest yellow star located on the outer fringes of a whirling galaxy. I visited each of the planets in turn, including the ring of rocks which, for some reason, had either failed to become a planet, or had broken up into asteroids. The outer planets were much too cold; I did not spend much time with them. The fourth planet from the sun was just too dry. Contrary to some of the stories told about me, I am not really a desert deity. I don't mind visiting the desert; I just wouldn't want to live there. The two planets closest to the star were much, much too warm. The third planet I found to be just right and it was there that I came to spend much of my time.

"For a while, it was enough just to watch the galaxies and the stars and the planets and the moons doing their intricate dance. But after a while, it was rather like watching an artificial log in a fire-place--nothing much was happening. Oh, occasionally a comet would go whizzing by; sometimes a star exploded; sometimes a new star was born; but, after a few eons, it was all very predictable. And that's when I began my fateful experiments.

"I considered that third planet from the sun and decided to do some redecorating. What would happen if I dammed up the water, created some oceans, raised the level of the land, and covered the land with green and growing things? And so, I planted my first garden.

"I was delighted with the results. Plants of great variety grew in the oceans and on the land, and the earth, as I now called the planet, became green and alive. In many ways, as I now look back upon it, I wish I had stopped with the green plants. In truth, they are perfect examples of life at its best. They draw nourishment from the soil and the water and the sun. They do not go running all over the place; they do not engage in war; they do not devour each other; they do not engage in heated controversy. Oh it is true that sometimes they crowd each other a bit, but by and large they are an ideal form of life. But they are also very predictable, and boring. And so I set about to experiment some more.

"Now green is my favorite color. But you can have too much of a good thing. I tried varying the shades--dark green, light green, moss green, aspen green--but in the end, I wanted something more. So, I invented flowers, bright splotches of color exploding out of the green. The flowers truly did surprise me. To begin with, they have this determination to transform themselves into fruit and seeds--something I had never considered--and to do this, they need bees and butterflies to pollinate. Without consulting me at all, the flowers invented sex and called into being insects to help them along. Looking around me, I suddenly realized that this place had the power to end my boredom for all eternity.

"If I had left it alone, there is no telling how the planet would have evolved, but I was young and impatient and full of self-importance. I decided to nudge things along. A quick look at the oceans made it clear that the plants I had planted there were thriving also. I found myself wondering whether there might be other forms of life. I made me a fish, and some whales and an occasional dolphin, and was delighted with my new aquarium.

"Again, I found myself surprised. The life in the oceans had ambitious plans and began to crawl up onto the land. Frogs and Snakes and Turtles moved in among the plants and made a home for themselves. They grazed on the plants and ate an occasional insect, but it didn't seem to hurt the plants, and after all, I hadn't made the insects so It didn't bother me much at the time. I just didn't realize how vast a difference it would make having creatures which ate other creatures.

"In fact, watching the animals intrigued me so that I began experimenting with new kinds. My first ones, I must admit, were kind of clumsy and awkward. I wasn't much of a

sculptor at first, and my dinosaurs and mammoths, were big and lumpy and looked like slabs of clay pushed together. But in time I got better at it. My antelopes and horses and deer were elegant and my monkeys were a comic delight.

"But again, the planet surprised me. The next time I checked my oceans, in addition to the fish and the whales and the dolphins, there were sharks, not content to graze, but delighting in slaughter and driven to a frenzy by a taste for blood. On the earth, among my antelope and deer and horses and sheep there were wolves and lions and other creatures who earned their living not by grazing, but by killing. It wasn't what I had in mind and it made me very sad, but there was, nonetheless, a kind of balance in it. The predators kept the herds in check and prevented them from over-grazing the planet. I would have preferred a world without killing--that's why I often think I should have stopped with the non-flowering plants. But, I had wanted a little excitement and change and this self-regulating planet was as fascinating as a well-balanced terrarium.

"I had been observing it's development for quite a long time before I became aware that off in a corner of Africa, a tribe of enterprising apes had been busy transforming itself into a new species of animal--homo sapiens. Now, I know all about that story of how I created human beings by molding them out of the dust of the earth and breathing my own breath into them. But in truth, that was a bit of propaganda I put out in my on-going effort to control this creature. Human beings were not my invention; they just suddenly appeared, and frankly, they scared me.

"These creatures could think like me; they could talk to each other and plan and scheme; they lived in all three dimensions of time at once--past, present and future; they were crafty and sly and inventive, and they seemed to have no innate limits. The first time I saw one of them, standing up-right, hefting a stone, calculating how far it might be thrown, and pondering how to make it more efficient, I knew there was no limit to their aspirations. I knew I was up against something dangerous and challenging and frightening.

"I watched this new creature closely. And, eventually, I discovered that there was another side to it. It seemed to thrive on love. Adults carefully sought out mates and promised each other a life-time of devotion. Their children, born weak and under-developed, were cared for by parents and non-parents alike and nurtured, and taught and loved. Sometimes human beings were unbelievably patient and understanding. Other times they were unpredictably violent and destructive.

"They had a remarkable talent for cooperation and their ability to learn was nothing short of phenomenal, but--rather like me--they were easily bored and often impatient. Despite their ability to learn from the past and to project into the future, they often seemed prepared to risk everything for a single moment of immediate gratification. It soon became frighteningly clear that this volatile creature had the ability to upset the balance on the entire planet. Beyond question, they would modify the planet, and there was no life form that was safe from their impact. Something new had emerged in the universe, and I would never, ever be bored again.

"The rest of my career has been spent dealing with this audacious, promising, threatening creature. I have to confess that my attempts have not been all that successful. Undoubtedly, I got off to a bad start. Being young and new at the job myself and more than a little insecure, I began by trying to bully human beings into a responsible attitude toward the planet. I tried to set limits, giving them a lot of 'thou shalt NOT's.' But they seemed to regard every limit as a challenge to be overcome. I said, 'don't eat of the that tree of knowledge,' and they tore the world apart, trying to discover what made it tick. I said, 'thou shalt not kill' and they made an industry of discovering gruesome and ingenious ways of killing plants, animals and each other.

"Failing to intimidate them, I tried to elicit their sense of ownership of the whole project. I told them they were made in my image, just a little lower than the angels. They concluded from my words that they were better than anyone else and they went swaggering up and down the planet oblivious to the rights of other living things.

"I thought perhaps I might alter their behavior by giving them some real responsibility, so I charged them with naming the other inhabitants of the planet, and I told them that I had given them dominion over the earth and its living beings. They came to the conclusion that the entire universe had been made for them to use as they wished. Instead of stewards of the planet, they become its exploiters. Nothing was safe unless human beings could find some economic reason to keep it alive and intact.

"I tried punishment--floods, fire, drought, famine, pestilence. They built levies, and dams, organized fire-fighting teams, stored food and devised serums and anti-toxins. Nothing in life seemed to deter them for long. So, I invented an after-life, and threatened them with endless punishment. They invented religion, a mechanism for assuring my forgiveness no matter what they did, and appointed one of their own to speak in my name. After a while, so inventive were they that it became difficult to decide just which of us was God. And so, I withdrew, resigned to letting things develop and watching what would happen.

"Before long, human beings had over-run the earth. Their cities dominated the globe. Most of the plants and animals existed only at their sufferance. Except for some microscopic organisms, there was no living thing that could threaten them. Only human beings could threaten human beings. Their numbers threatened to beggar the earth; their violence threatened to destroy the earth; their greed threatened to sterilize the earth. And most frightening of all, they had begun to cast their eyes on other places in the universe. They journeyed to the moon, sent probes to the outer planets, and like slime mold, they dreamed of sending capsules to other planets and other systems when they had exhausted the earth's ability to sustain them.

"I have grown old in the futile attempt to set some limits on the human animal. As I look back on it now, I know that if I had it to do over again, I would begin differently with them. I would not have resorted to threats and punishments, to warnings and other negative responses. Rather, I would have enlisted their positive qualities much sooner than I did. By the time I started to treat them with love, and respect, they had already learned fear and distrust. Had I been wiser, I would have enlisted their sense of

relationship in managing the earth. I would have taught them that they were not my special creation, and therefore entitled to treat the earth and its creatures as resources to be exploited. Rather, I would have taught them that they were born from the earth at a time when I really was not paying attention. I would have taught them that the earth is their mother, that the trees and forests, the fish swimming the oceans and the animals roaming the lands and the birds sailing the winds are all their kin. I would have taught them that as they love their children and respect their parents, so they must love and respect the earth from which they have sprung and the creatures who share the earth with them.

"Had I been wise enough to impart this crucial knowledge, the history of the human race might have been very different, and the earth might have been saved much sorrow and grief. However, as I have grown older and have settled into semi-retirement, I notice that there is some evidence that human beings are beginning to discover the truth of this lesson on their own. At this very late date, they seem determined to undo some of the damage they have done to the earth and to each other. I cannot help but wonder, since my efforts have been so counter-productive, if they and the earth might not have been better off had I lavished my attention on some other world--perhaps that hot desert planet fourth out from the sun. Well, the past is the past, and not even God can change what has been or cancel old errors."

At this point, the manuscript breaks off, the last few pages mouldering into dust. It is not clear whether God had written more, or whether this was as much as he was able to complete, whether this was all he intended to write, or simply a sketch for a projected larger work. I would suggest that if you are participating in the Building and Grounds clean up next Saturday at Unitarian House, you might keep an eye out for some ancient, mouldering pages. Who knows what might be written there. And if you doubt it is important, remember the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.