

## “Arithmetic Matters in Scripture”

Genesis 1:21-23 (God creates all living creatures and encourages them to multiply.)

Amos 5:21-24 (Take away trappings of religion and walk the talk.)

I Kings 3:16-28 (King Solomon wisely *considers* dividing in half)

2 Peter 1:1-8 (Add to your faith: goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, Godliness, mutual affection, and love.)

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We focus so often on one scriptural passage at a time. Yet, as guidance for our contemporary world, we can benefit, I think, from gleaning overall themes that guided faith-pondering people of our tradition over centuries. We’re going to link together four biblical passages that have in common at first glance only the fact that they all include advice to do a basic arithmetic operation: to divide, to multiply, to take away, or to add. This is why I asked math professor Beth to read Scriptures today. However, when we look at each and all of them together, we see what we might call “an equation” that insists—in very different genres of writing—that we work really hard to get along with each other—to care for others and the next generation.

### **First, the King who shocked people by his paradoxical suggestion for division.**

Imagine a front yard where children who are about eight or 9 years old are playing kickball. They’ve chosen up sides and are about to play. Two children on the team that is in the field each insist upon being the one to “pitch” the kickball. Eventually they scream at each other: “It’s my turn.” “You did it last week.” “I’ve never done it.” “I’m better anyway.” When the screaming doesn’t work, they start pulling at the old rubber ball. They don’t hit each other, but they pull and tug on the ball until a surprising thing happens. The ball pulls apart! Each child stands still, holding an odd shaped piece of rubber. There is no longer a “ball” to play with. *No one* will get to pitch the ball in this kickball game. The game’s over.

Imagine now a very different set of events. At the point of these children’s screaming, a wise teen-ager comes by and says, “I’ll help. Here. I’ll cut the ball in two, so you both can share this position.” The younger kids look at the teen-ager as if he’s from Mars. “Cut the ball in two? It wouldn’t be a ball any more.” The cool teenager responds, “Then, which of you will let the other pitch?”

Imagine two countries that insist that a certain plot of land is theirs. They bicker and toss bombs back and forth for decades until “all hell breaks loose.” When there’s almost nothing left to bomb, they—and the rest of the world—realize that the very land they both wanted is ruined for generations to come.

Now imagine that early in the argument over the land a mediator is brought in to negotiate. Imagine that the mediator tells them: “Devastate this land right now, so you get that over with.” The countries would cry, “Get another mediator! What a dumb idea.” One political leader gets the point: in the end, the land will be destroyed and people will die, if we do not find a peaceful creative solution. When the land is destroyed, our two countries will have to figure out the solution, so why not seriously find a solution without all that destruction.

Now to our puzzling scripture passage. Imagine two mothers who have given birth to their precious infants within three days of each other. Imagine that they are in the same house, for there is no husband caring for them. It may be a brothel, for these poor women were left on their own to be prostitutes—scorned by society in general, but enjoyed by some in particular. Imagine that no one else is around to observe what happens. Imagine one child dying in the middle of the night. Think of the grief, the sadness, the horror of the mother who awakens to find her child who is no longer living. Imagine now that she switches babies,

putting her baby who has died beside the other woman and taking the live one to embrace. Imagine the distress of the mother of the live baby when she awakens holding the one who is not hers. Imagine their pulling and tugging on that one live baby until in their wisdom they decide to go get help.<sup>1</sup> A wise King—by tradition it is King Solomon—recommends a solution to their dilemma.

The King suggests that they cut the baby in half, so both mothers could have half a baby. How cruel, how gross! Why would he even think of such a thing? One mother agrees, “Yes, cut it in half.” The other mother says, “Don’t do that. She can have the baby.”<sup>2</sup> Out of compassion for the baby, the woman wants it to be whole and to be cared for.<sup>3</sup> So the king knows that one is the mother and awards the baby to her.

Not long before moving to Redlands, I met a Claremont School of Theology Professor of Hebrew Bible at an event at Chapman College. His talk was on this passage. Since I had never heard anyone speak on it before, you bet I took notes! This professor surprised me. He was critical of King Solomon.<sup>4</sup> He argued: “What if the grieving mother had not said ‘Go ahead.’ What if the real mother hadn’t said, ‘No, let her have the baby.’?” The professor was critical of King Solomon’s paradoxical solution to this problem because, he said, the solution *could not be applied to all such situations for all times*. In other words, some mothers might not respond as these two had.

Some biblical commentators who seem to be in agreement with this professor point out that the King did not require for the women to take oaths, asked for no evidence, did not even go check the scene of the crime. All this criticism of King Solomon’s behavior shocked me. I had never considered this encounter with the King as a strict legal proceeding. I thought of it more like mediation or family counseling.

I’m going to draw a picture of a contemporary situation that helps me to understand, and frankly, appreciate positively King Solomon’s advice.

Please pretend with me that you are in the courtyard after worship, visiting with others when a father comes up to you who is sad and upset because every time his family manages to sit down together for dinner at home, there is chaos of some kind. The youngest spills something, or two people get into an argument, or someone complains about the cooking. The father enjoys family meals but has begun to dread them. He thinks you look wise and asks for your advice about how to have a peaceful, joyous dinner meal together. If you fancied yourself to be like King Solomon, you might recommend something like this: “Tonight, and every time you all eat together, you yourself set the table strangely. Put people in the wrong place, put the fork on the right, and turn the plates upside down.” The father who has asked for your advice is shocked. “I want peace, not turmoil.” So you explain: “If YOU start out creating disarray, then that’s taken care of. No one else will have to do it. And, you won’t be sitting there dreading when something’s going to go awry.” The father tries your advice. The other family members are perplexed by the father’s behavior; however, after turning over their plates, they enjoy a peaceful meal for many times in a row.<sup>5</sup>

You have stood **not** stood on the courtyard bench and suggested that all of us, with all our families, at all dinnertimes, set our tables in disarray. The solution is for ONE situation at ONE moment in time. To me that’s the point of this biblical story. In this instance King Solomon was wise in recommending **division**. **He guessed that a paradoxical suggestion would evoke a peaceful solution.** (In my imagination, I

visualize that both women helped to raise the child as it grew. It's hard to raise a child alone.)

Not all mediations are as paradoxical as King Solomon's. Paradox is usually applied only when the conflict seems insurmountable and many other attempts at solutions have been tried. Yet, many times when there is conflict and a solution emerges, the answer seems shocking. We've become so accustomed to the problem that when it is solved we think to ourselves, "How did that happen?"

**Now, a brief look at the recommendation to multiply:**

In *Genesis* we are told that God encouraged us to be fruitful and **multiply**. That advice is part of our heritage to consider children a blessing. Only in the past five decades or so have we realized that we are now multiplying too fast for our earth. *Sharing* the raising of children is wise advice today. And, along with that we need to develop more of a parental feeling for children not our own.

From the little you know of me, I bet you can tell that I'm a mother who cares tenaciously for my children. My dad thought my sister and I could do no wrong, so he was always on our side, even when we *were* wrong! Though it was awkward for us at times, I liked thinking he would defend me no matter what! Think about the natural tendency of the vast majority of parents to care tenaciously for their children—even if it means numerous kinds of sacrifices. We tend to love our children—and nieces, nephews, grandchildren, and cousins—almost as extensions of ourselves. The children of our extended family usually come from us, often look like us, *are* us in some ways.

It's true, there are acts of exceptional care for those who are not our own. From non-Jews hiding Jews in WWII to Shiite families hiding Sunis and Suni families protecting Shiite children, we do take on parental-like protection of those who are not our kin whenever we rise *to our full humanity*. Last week many of us did acts of service for families in Redlands whom we do not know. Yet it's hard—maybe impossible—to care for all other children as "our own." We hear that a bomb kills children in a place we can barely pronounce, and we may not flinch. Yet if a bomb were to hit a school near Redlands, Yucaipa or Highland, we'd be wailing, even if the children weren't related to us, because we can more easily think of them as "ours."<sup>6</sup> Imagine if we had parental-like feelings toward all children!

The arithmetic advice we've looked at so far includes (1) a king who solved the predicament of two mothers by paradoxically naming the possibility of **dividing** the one remaining baby and (2) the Creator God encouraging us humans to be fruitful and **multiply**. **Now we see the biblical prophet, Amos, who strongly recommends subtraction.**

Prophet Amos was upset because the choir was singing so well, the preacher was preaching so eloquently, and the banners were so beautiful that everyone left saying, "What a nice **worship**." Amos did not mind if people liked worship, but he didn't want people to be content with worship—he wanted people **to act** better. He didn't think people worked hard enough for justice or cared enough about others outside their walls. He said, in effect, "**take away—subtract—the noise; instead, walk the talk.**" Put your faith into action. Amos would have liked our Week of Service and our many on-going ways of caring for people; he would also have liked our looking at justice issues with regard to immigration.

While prophet Amos suggested **subtracting** worship noise if we can't live out our faith in our actions, Simon Peter achieves the same goal, but does it by recommending **addition**. He affirms that God has already given those of us who have faith everything we need for life and for godliness. He says that what we are to do is to make every effort to **add to our faith: goodness**. Isn't that what the prophet Amos was saying—take away only talk, add good actions? After Peter strongly advises his congregation to add to their faith, goodness, Peter goes on, "Oh, and add knowledge, and not only that, add self-control, and also add endurance, and add mutual affection...and add love."

Do we need to heed this advice in any particular order? If you were given the arithmetic problem:  $3 \times 4 + 5 - 6$  divided by 2, you'd need to know which thing to do first. Multiply? Subtract? When some of us grew up we were taught the phrase "My dear aunt sally" to know what to do first. "My Dear Aunt Sally" reminded us to Multiply, Divide, then Add and Subtract. That's helpful even as we look at these four biblical passages, from different genres of writing, but alike in their advice to be cooperative, to get along. Be fruitful and **multiply**; love the next generation. Don't **divide** or hurt any of them; rather find creative solutions. **Take away** any thought that your faith means just having nice worship. Instead, **add** goodness, knowledge . . . and love.

That could be the end of this sermon, but it's not quite enough. Both our daughter and current math teachers have informed me that children are no longer taught "My Dear Aunt Sally" to remember what to do first. In math classes, children now learn, "Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally." The "p" is for parenthesis and the "e" is for exponents. *So, I'm adding a parenthesis to this sermon: All of this creative problem solving and "walking the talk" of our faith, for those of us who are trying to love beyond our own families requires exponential help!* That is, help from a Higher Power! You know what? We HAVE THAT HELP. Our Higher Power considers us **all** extended family and helps us with more wisdom than even a very wise human king could dream up.

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<sup>1</sup> A: My son is the living one, and your son is the dead one. B: Your son is the dead one, and my son is the living one.

It's an argument going in circle with no end. Not all thought Solomon was wise for doing this. Josephus... wrote that people made fun of the king for this solution... "Woe to you, O Land, whose king is a boy. One dead child not enough, you're willing to have two?"

<sup>2</sup> In the original Hebrew the pronouns do not make it clear which mother responded in which way. When the Hebrew was translated into Greek, the story became clearer, supporting our assumptions that mothers are willing to sacrifice for the good of their own children. *Interpreter's Bible*.

<sup>3</sup> Why was the one woman willing? Perhaps envy born of bereavement... p. 100, *Women's Bible Commentary*

<sup>4</sup> "What was he doing in Canaanite territory anyway?" (Solomon was known for having foreign marriages.) Frankly, since I don't pay much attention to biblical geography, I hadn't noticed where this incident occurred.

<sup>5</sup> Watzlawich, Weakland and Fisch, *Change*.

<sup>6</sup> The Greek myth of Narcissus is fascinating to think of in relation to this love of our own children. Narcissus was so attractive that he had many potential girl friends; plenty of female nymphs wanted his love. However, Narcissus ignored them all. One of them was so upset at Narcissus' jilting her that she cursed Narcissus to experience the same thing all those girls had—unrequited love. The curse came to pass. Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in a still lake. But whenever he reached for his beloved, putting his hand in the water, the beloved fled. Narcissus eventually died from the agony of his love. However, even today, you may see a beautiful flower named a Narcissus, rooted beside a still lake. We call people who are so wrapped up in themselves that they fail at loving others "narcissistic."

We had a parakeet named Ucello. That's Italian for "bird." Our kids loved our other parakeet a lot, the one we had when they were growing up. He was named Scotty. Scotty would come out of the cage and even played soccer with them. Really. Scotty would nudge a ping-pong ball with his beak, moving it toward a goal post our kids made out of pipe cleaners. Scotty died, and a few years later we got Ucello. Ucello's personality is quite different. He's sort of anti-social, or afraid. At least we haven't been able to get close to him. He spends most of his time right by the mirror where he sees his reflection. A teenage girl who came into our home one time observed Ucello by the mirror and commented, "He's narcissistic." That surprised me. I had never thought of Ucello as being in love with his own image. I had only thought of him as "lonely," lonely for another bird. *Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between loneliness and excessive preoccupation with self. [Repeat perhaps]*

Narcissus in the Greek myth did love his own image, but wasn't he also lonely?