

THE EPISTLE

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This Month's Cover

In recognition of the feast of Saint Luke, October 19th, our cover this month is the fresco *Saint Luke Painting a Portrait of the Virgin* by Giorgio Vasari, completed in 1565. It is displayed in the Basilica of the Most Holy Annunciation in Florence. Fresco is water-based paints on wet plaster. As the plaster dries, it secures the color of the paint. A fresco under the right conditions can last for centuries and retain its vivid colors. It was a very popular art medium in the late Italian Renaissance.

There is no indication in the Bible that Luke was a painter, but it is a very early Christian tradition, and it is also traditional that he painted a portrait of the Virgin Mary. There are many Renaissance paintings of him doing this. There is also no statement in the Bible that he knew her personally, but if we read between the lines, it is very evident that he did, although it is likely that he never met Jesus personally before the Resurrection. Although this painting shows him portraying her holding the infant Jesus, it is highly unlikely that he ever knew her that early. It is entirely reasonable that they were friends later, however, and if so, she would have told him many stories of the early life of Jesus. Some of these he recounts in his Gospel.

Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) was a Florentine artist, architect, and art historian in the late Italian Renaissance. He is generally considered the father of art history writing, and he is still cited today by art historians. He was renowned in his own time as a painter and architect, and he was the chief cultural advisor to the court of the Medici. He was born in Arezzo in southern Tuscany, where his artistic talent was recognized in his early childhood. At the age of 16, Cardinal Silvio Passerini sent him to Florence to study. He became a friend of many noted

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Florentine artists, including Michelangelo, whose painting style had a strong influence on that of Vasari. He resided primarily in Florence for the rest of his life, although he frequently visited Arezzo and built a home there, decorating its walls and ceilings with paintings. It is now the Casa Vasari Museum. He also maintained a beautiful residence in Florence. He died in 1574 in Florence at the age of 62.

Richard R. Losch+

A Word from the Editor

One of the fascinating characters in American literature is Stubbs, the Second Mate of the whaling-ship *Pequod* in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. He is the exact opposite of Captain Ahab, who arrogantly believes that he can control anything around him. Stubbs is completely fatalistic and doesn't believe that he can control much of anything. Even though he is very competent at his work, he believes that everything that happens is predetermined. Since he doesn't think he can do much about it anyway, his solution is to laugh. Even though he is occasionally capable of cruelty, he is nonetheless one of the most likable characters in the story. He is also a dangerous one in that it is easy to accept his happy-go-lucky attitude of fatalism. He just takes things as they come, deals with situations as they arise, laughs about them, and feels no responsibility for trying to change anything other than what may be happening at that moment. He says, "I know not all that may be coming, but be it what it will, I'll go to it laughing."

Stubbs' fatalism points out two very perilous trends in modern society. One is the attitude that "I can't do anything about it anyway, so why bother getting upset over it?" If enough people feel that way, that paves the way for a small handful of people who do feel they can do something about it to take power. More often than not, these are the ones who destroy rather than build. Some wise man once said that the only way for evil to prosper is for enough good people to do nothing.¹ The other danger of Stubbs's fatalism is that it leads us to accept whatever happens without trying to see the cause and, if it is something bad, trying to fix it. This can lead us to accept, even in

¹ This is usually attributed to Edmund Burke, but it is not found anywhere in his writings. No one knows the real origin of it.

our own actions, things that we know are wrong. Stubbs was not a cruel man, and yet his treatment of the ship's cook was brutal because that was the way the hierarchy of a ship worked. Fatalism leads us to think, "That's the way things are, I can't change it, so I might as well just live with it." In its extreme, this is what led many decent Germans who needed a job to sign up as concentration camp guards, and little by little devolve into unimaginable monsters.

We have a choice. Like Stubbs, we can take the easy way out, take what comes and laugh about it, or choose the Christian way: take responsibility and try to change things for the better. The latter isn't the easy way, but it is the way that God intends for us.

Richard R. Losch+

The Death and Resurrection of a Language

Languages evolve and change over the centuries. Many of them die, some disappearing altogether from history. Some very early languages we know existed only because we can see their influence on later ancient languages. If the same or very similar word appears in several related languages, it is an indication that it came from an earlier language about which we may know nothing. A dead language is one that is no longer spoken by the common people, but if used at all, is used only in very specialized areas. For example, Latin is a dead language. Even though it is still used in many ecclesiastical and academic circles, there is no place in the world where it is the language of everyday life. Most of the ancient languages of the world have disappeared altogether or have evolved into languages that would be totally unrecognizable by their original speakers. We can see this in English, even in relatively recent times. In the 14th century, this was a line from John Wycliffe's English translation of the Lord's Prayer: "*Foryyue to vs oure dettis, as we foryyuen to oure dettouris.*" Any who have studied the writings of Chaucer can see that the English of the 14th century is barely recognizable as the language that we speak today. Even as recently as the 17th century, if you were to stand in Queen Elizabeth I's court, you would have a very hard time understanding anything that they said. You could probably read their writing if you could decipher their style of handwriting, but their accent and vocabulary were such that you might as well be in a foreign court. We would sound as strange to our descendants four hundred years from now.

When Abraham left his home in Mesopotamia, he and his companions spoke a Chaldean language. Over the centuries that language evolved, absorbing words and structures from the various places that his descendants traveled. By the time his descendants lived in Egypt and Moses led their escaped from slavery, that language had become what we today call Early Hebrew. Like Wycliffe's English versus our modern English, the Hebrew that the Israelites spoke when they first settled in Canaan was very different from the Hebrew that was used when the first oral stories that would become the Hebrew Bible were written down several centuries later. That early language was that of David and Solomon and of the early prophets, but like every other language, it continued to evolve and develop over the centuries. By the time of the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BC, it was very close to the Biblical Hebrew that scholars are familiar with today. It was during that time of exile in Babylonia that Hebrew slowly died as a language. When the Israelites returned to Judah, most of them had grown up in Babylon and Persia speaking Aramaic, the common language of most of the Middle East. Aramaic is a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew, and is written in the Hebrew alphabet, but it is nonetheless considered a different language. When Moses addressed the people, it was in Early Hebrew. When Ezra addressed them after the return from the Exile, it would have been in Aramaic. That was the primary language that Jesus spoke then. Hebrew was still used as the official language of the Jewish religion. The Scriptures were written and read mainly in Hebrew and the prayers recited in it, but when they went to the marketplace, the language they used was Aramaic.¹ After the Romans expelled the Jews from Judea in AD 70 and again in AD 135, they dispersed all over the known world. This was called the Diaspora.² Hebrew, like Latin in later times, had become a dead language, being used only for liturgical and academic purposes. It would remain so until the 20th century almost 2,500 years later.

¹ Several passages in Daniel, a few verses in Ezra and Jeremiah, and a few phrases in Genesis were written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew.

² At least from the days of the early Roman Republic, there were Jews all over the known world who had migrated from the Levant and settled in other countries. In Jesus' time, the Jewish proportion of the world's population was about ten times what it is today. "Diaspora" refers particularly to the forced exile by the Romans. It comes from the Greek for dispersion.

The Aramaic- and earlier Hebrew-speaking Jews absorbed the local languages into their own vernacular. In the Diaspora they dispersed in two major groups: the Sephardim, who migrated across the Mediterranean into Iberia, and the Ashkenazi, who migrated north into Europe and Western Asia. The primary language of the Sephardim is a mixture of Hispanic and Aramaic languages known as Ladino. The Ashkenazi increasingly spoke Yiddish. Yiddish is a mixture of Aramaic and German, liberally enriched with contributions from a variety of Balto-Slavic languages. The name is a corruption of the German *Jüdisch*, “Jewish.” For most of their history, Yiddish and Ladino have been written in the Hebrew alphabet, although in the 20th century it became common to write Ladino in the Roman alphabet with diacritics to indicate the uniquely Ladino sounds.

Eventually Yiddish became so common in the Ashkenazi communities in Europe and later in America that it was sometimes the only language that many Jews understood. As Jews came to assimilate into the cultures into which they had moved, Yiddish began to fade out. By the early 20th century, it was in danger of becoming a dead language, but the efforts of many who sought to preserve it, including such writers as Mendele Mocher Sforim, I. L. Peretz and Shalom Aleichem,¹ maintained it as a living spoken language.

As increasing numbers of Jews fled the pogroms of Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there developed a strong surge of the Zionist movement. This was a movement to establish a State of Israel on the ancient homeland in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies that eventually all the Jews would return to the Promised Land.² As anti-Semitism and persecutions began to surge at the end of the 19th century, many Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe migrated to Palestine. The Holocaust gave a great impetus to Zionism. The question arose that if they were successful, what should be the official language of the new nation? Hebrew was a dead language, Yiddish was dying and primarily European, and

¹ Shalom Aleichem was the author of the stories of Tevye the Dairyman, which were the source of the play and film “Fiddler on the Roof.”

² The original concept was not so much as a refuge, but as a fulfillment of the ancient prophecies that God would eventually lead the Jews back to the Promised Land. It was controversial in that many traditionalist Jews believed that it could be brought about only by the coming of the Messiah.

Ladino was primarily Hispanic. Aramaic was still a living language in a few tiny communities in the Middle East, but was spoken by more Christians than Jews.¹ A Russian Hebrew scholar at the end of the 19th century named Eliezer ben-Yehuda is credited with the revival of Hebrew as a living spoken language. Following the ancient linguistic patterns of the language, he created a large vocabulary of modern words to bring it into the 20th century. He spent years encouraging Jewish communities around the world to push it beyond its limited use in prayer and scholarship. He urged them to adopt it as their language of everyday Jewish life. Increasing numbers of Jews began to learn the language and to speak it on a regular basis.² Its popularity became such that when serious consideration of the establishment of a State of Israel began, Hebrew was the primary candidate to become its official language. Even before the U.N. officially partitioned Palestine and established the State of Israel in 1948, Hebrew was a commonly spoken language in the region, having been adopted by Great Britain as the legal language of the Palestinian Mandate. When the U.N. finally confirmed the establishment of Israel, its legal language was Hebrew. Today, it is spoken by millions of people as their primary tongue. Even though modern Hebrew as it is spoken in Israel today is in many ways quite different from that of the Hebrew of the Bible, its continuity certainly qualifies it as one of the oldest living languages on earth.³

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¹ In the early 21st century, the fanatic Islamist terrorist group ISIS attempted a genocide of all Aramaic-speaking communities. They slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people, but a few communities still survive. Most Aramaic speakers today are Christians.

² We see a similar thing happening with the resurgence of Gaelic in Ireland after the creation of the Irish Free State. For centuries under British control it was illegal to speak Gaelic, but after the southern part of the country became independent, an interest in Gaelic resurged in hope of preserving their Celtic heritage. It is taught in the schools, and hundreds of thousands of Irish are now fluent in English and Gaelic (or “Irish,” as they call it).

³ The other two commonly spoken languages in Israel are English and Arabic. Many people are not aware that there is a large Arabic Muslim population in Israel, including 4% of the Knesset, Israel’s parliament. Most Israeli Muslims are strongly pro-Israel.

A Touch of Trivia

If you ever wondered if that little button on the top of a baseball cap has a name, it has. It is a Squatchee. The cap is constructed of several triangles (usually six) sewn together to form a dome. Where the points of all the triangles meet at the center, a cloth-covered button is attached to cover the joint. There is no record of its ever having had an official name until the 1980s, when the comedian Rich Hall published a series of booklets called *Sniglets*, in which he attempted to give names to many everyday objects which did not seem to have any. He called that button a Squatchee. The baseball commentators Bob Brenly and Mike Krukow used the word several times on the air. It caught on, and is now the official name of that little button.

Richard R. Losch+

Blessing for Blessing, Curse for Curse

The core of God's covenant with Abraham is the promise that "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse" (Gen. 12:3). This is similar in almost every English translation and sounds like a classic statement of reciprocity like "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." It is grammatically symmetrical and sounds reasonable. Like so many problems in translation, however, there are subtleties behind this in the original Hebrew that do not show up in translation, and cast a very different meaning on it. The same root word, *barak* (ברך) is used both times for "bless." When it comes to the other half of the promise, however, two very different words are used. The first, referring to the human action, is *qalal* (קלל). This does not mean curse in the sense that we normally use that word, but has a much milder implication. It means to disrespect, hold in contempt, disparage, or dismiss as insignificant.¹ It does not imply malice so much as it does condescension. The second word that we translate "curse" is *arar* (ארר), which is a harsh and powerful condemnation. This is the word used for the curse pronounced on the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The word is used several times in the Old Testament to imply divine judgment or damnation.

There is another subtle nuance here, in that the blessing is plural—those who bless you will be blessed, but the second part is singular—he who curses you will be cursed. What this implies is that

¹ In Hebrew, it is the antonym of *kabed* (כבד), to honor or to take seriously.

anyone, individual or group, who does not treat the bearers of God’s covenant with decency and respect is in danger of horrible retribution. This does not mean approval of their wrongdoings or automatic agreement with their positions or opinions. It simply means taking them seriously with respect. In this era of rampant anti-Semitism, Genesis 12:3 is an admonition that we need to heed.

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Be Wordly Wise

Numeric Prefixes

We are living in a digital age in which we are bombarded with numbers representing huge or tiny amounts. We thought it might be helpful to explain what some of the prefixes mean. Large numbers are often represented in “powers of ten,” symbolized by 10^x or 10^{-x} , where x stands for the number of zeros following 1. For example, 10^3 is 1,000 and 10^{-3} is $\frac{1}{1,000}$. There is a prefix for each group of 1,000. Note that the large values use a capital letter as their symbol and the small values use a lowercase letter. Below is a table showing these various values. The next time you hear about a milligram of your medication or a Terabyte¹ of memory in your computer, you may better understand what it means.

Name	Value	10^x	Prefix	Symbol
Thousand	1,000	10^3	Kilo-	K
Million	1,000,000	10^6	Mega-	M
Billion	1,000,000,000	10^9	Giga-	G
Trillion	1,000,000,000,000	10^{12}	Tera-	T
Quadrillion	1,000,000,000,000,000	10^{15}	Peta-	P
Thousandth	$\frac{1}{1,000}$	10^{-3}	milli-	m
Millionth	$\frac{1}{1,000,000}$	10^{-6}	micro-	μ^2
Billionth	$\frac{1}{1,000,000,000}$	10^{-9}	nano-	n
Trillionth	$\frac{1}{1,000,000,000,000}$	10^{-12}	pica-	p
Quadrillionth	$\frac{1}{1,000,000,000,000,000}$	10^{-15}	atto-	a

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¹ A byte is a cluster of eight zeros and ones representing a number. It is in a mathematical system called Binary (base-2), and it is the basis for all common computers. One Terabyte of computer memory represents eight trillion ones and zeroes arranged in such a way that they can store data.

² This is the Greek letter mu (μ). All the other symbols are Roman letters.

The Capture of the Ark

Whenever we mention the Ark, the first thing that comes to mind is Noah's Ark. Much more important in the history of the Israelite people is the Ark of the Covenant.¹ According to the Torah, Israelite artisans built the Ark under Moses' supervision according to God's specifications (Ex. 25:10ff). It was an elaborately carved and decorated box in which were placed the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. On the top of the Ark were carvings of two cherubim. We are not entirely sure what kind of angels cherubim were, but we do know that they were not the cute little baby boy angels known as *putti* but commonly called cherubs that were common in Renaissance art. They were terrifying winged creatures, between whom God is enthroned.²

One of the most disturbing stories in the Old Testament is that of the capture of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4). The Philistines, known as the Sea People, were a band of Hellenic raiders from somewhere in the Mediterranean, possibly Crete. In the 12th century BC, when the Israelites began their invasion of Canaan from the east, the Philistines attacked Gaza from the sea in the west. The two were in conflict in Canaan until the Philistines were finally subdued by King David.³ During that century of conflict, the Israelites had shown the same pattern of backsliding and taking God for granted that they had had from the beginning. At the Battle of Aphek, the Philistines were overcoming the Israelites. In those days, it was believed that the victor in a battle had won because his god was more powerful than the god of his enemies. The god of

¹ In almost every synagogue to this day, the sacred handwritten scroll of the Torah is stored in an elaborately decorated box, also called an Ark.

² The Ark was kept in a large tent called a Tabernacle until Solomon built the First Temple in Jerusalem in 966 BC, after which it was housed there in the Holy of Holies. Sometime before the Assyrians attacked Judah in the 8th century BC, the Ark disappeared. There is no mention of it in the Temple thereafter. Many believe that it was hidden in the complex web of tunnels beneath the temple to protect it from the Assyrians. Some believe that it is still there, somewhere under the Temple Mount.

³ The name Palestine is an Anglicization of the Latin *Palestina*, Philistine. The name was given to the region by the Roman Emperor Hadrian in the second century AD as an intentional insult to the Jews.

the Philistines was Dagon. Rather than turning to God in repentance and appealing for his protection, the Israelites thought they could handle things by themselves by bringing their “super-weapon,” the Ark of the Covenant, into the battle with them. They brought it before the army from the shrine at Shiloh, where the high priest Eli presided. They were soundly defeated, and Eli’s sons, the corrupt priests Hophni and Phinehas, were both killed. The Philistines captured the Ark, took it back to their city of Ashdod in Gaza, and placed it beside the statue of their god Dagon in his temple. When Eli learned of the death of his sons and the capture of the ark, he fell over backwards dead. All took this as a sign that Dagon was more powerful than Yahweh, and it appears that even the Israelites feared this. The next morning, however, when the Philistine priests came to offer sacrifice to Dagon, they found that his statue had fallen over. It was lying face down prostrate before the Ark of the Covenant. They put it back in place, and it remained there for the rest of the day. The next morning when they came to the temple, they found that the statue had fallen over again, and this time the head and the hands had broken off. They could no longer attribute this to coincidence and became frightened. The city of Ashdod suddenly was overrun with a plague of tumors. They moved the Ark to Gath and then to Ekron, and those cities also were plagued with tumors. Finally, in terror, they determined to return the Ark to the Israelites, along with a “guilt payment” of five gold tumors and five gold rats (1 Sam. 6:4). This payment indicates that they may have been afflicted with the bubonic plague, which is carried by rats’ fleas and produces painful, fatal tumors (buboes, whence the name bubonic).

This story not only tells an event in the history of Israel’s relationship with God; it drives home an important point to us today. As the Israelites learned, we cannot control God and simply use Him for our advantage. Similarly, the Philistines learned that they could not subdue him. Our gods (the things that we value most in this life) must always be subservient to God. As the Israelites often did, we today tend to forget both these lessons. God is neither a tool for us to use nor a pal whom we can expect to do our wishes (“the Big Guy Upstairs”). Both the Israelites and the Philistines learned this the hard way. Pray that we have the wisdom to understand that we are God’s servants, and he is not ours.

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The Cedars of Lebanon

In ancient times, the region that we now call Lebanon was known by the Greeks as Phoenicia. It was not actually a nation, but a confederation of city-states whose primary cities were Tyre and Sidon. One of the most prized woods of ancient times was Lebanese cedar (*Cedrus libani*), a variety of cedar that even to this day grows almost exclusively in Lebanon, with a few trees found in Cyprus and Syria. It was highly valued because of its many outstanding qualities. It is easily worked, has a very pleasant scent and attractive reddish-tan color, is resistant to rot and insects, and cures with almost no shrinkage. It was used in most temples, most notably Solomon's and Herod's, although it was also common in pagan temples. King Hiram of Tyre sent Lebanese cedar and craftsmen to Jerusalem to build David's and Solomon's palaces and to build Solomon's temple. Its durability is indicated by the fact that when the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem was reconstructed in the 1930s, it was found to contain re-used Lebanese cedar timbers that many scholars believe may have been timbers used in Herod's temple 2,000 years earlier, having survived its destruction by the Romans in AD 70.

Lebanese cedar was also highly valued for shipbuilding for the same reasons that it is resistant to rot and insects, easily worked, and very durable. In 1987, a sunken ship was discovered on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee. It was dubbed the "Jesus boat" because it was almost certainly the type of boat that Jesus and his disciples used in several of the gospel stories.¹ It was constructed of Lebanese cedar, with many of its timbers having been previously used for other purposes. It survived under water for almost 2,000 years. This is unusual even in salt water, but the Sea of Galilee is fresh water, which does not have preservative properties.

Lebanese cedar to this day is a symbol of stability and strength. The flag of Lebanon bears an image of the cedar tree, and many hospitals around the world are called "Cedars of Lebanon Hospital."

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Correction: In last month's article "The First Shall Be Last" we mentioned Simeon and Levi unjustly slaughtering all the males of Haran. It was the men of Shechem, not Haran, that they killed (Gen.34:24ff).

¹ There is no evidence that it was used by Jesus, but its age, type, and location near Capernaum are such that it could have been.