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AND GOD MAKETH THE RULES OF SYNTAX

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*"Man is a religious animal: he is the only religious animal"*

– Mark Twain

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*The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want*

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul – and something runneth over – I think it was my cup.

When I was in the ninth grade I loved maketh, leadeth, restoreth, and runneth – they were such inspirational words, almost as cool as the upside down question marks that we learned in Introductory Spanish. I always wanted to find an opportune time and place to use one of those biblical words in conversation or in an essay, especially “maketh,” but they never seemed appropriate – except during morning devotionals at school.

SIDE NOTE: A decade after my first exposure to mandatory classroom prayers an angry woman named Madalyn Murray O’Hair convinced the U.S. Supreme Court to ban Bible reading in public schools – which meant that all those great ecclesiastical words would be erased from the language of future generations. Of course, a few people were unhappy with this court decision – in 1995 the infamous atheist, her son, and granddaughter, were kidnapped, murdered, and dismembered (*For more details about these gory events you might want to watch the 2017 Netflix movie: “The most hated woman in America”*)



“It’s a Jewish prayer,” said Grace Carter, my homeroom teacher. “Y’all should really appreciate the Twenty Third Psalm, it was written by King David – he was one of your people.” Miss Carter, a religious spinster from Alabama, was alluding to the fact that 34 of the 35 students in my classroom were Jewish, all except Paul Yardley, who liked to call himself the “token Goy.”

Miss Carter smiled, “yes, boys and girls, King David was the ancestor of the future King of the Jews, our Lord and Savior.” Miss Carter rarely said “Jesus” or “Christ” in the classroom– she didn’t want to offend the Jewish kids. During the spiritual mornings of my youth we were reminded, at least once a week, that the Lord and Savior was Jewish – that was Miss Carter’s compassionate way of reassuring us that it wasn’t such a terrible sin to be Jewish.

“There’s something I don’t understand,” said Howard Steinberg, a very intelligent boy who was known more for his big nose than his intellect. “If Joseph was descended from King David, that means he was royalty.”

“That’s right, Howard.” Miss Carter flashed a smile that stretched from

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

ear to ear. Finally, one of the Jewish kids recognized that Jesus was of royal blood.

"So then, why did Mary have her baby in a barn? Couldn't she just tell the mayor of Bethlehem that her husband was the great great great grandson of King David? I'm sure they would have found her a nice hotel room."

"Well, Howard," replied Miss Carter. "To begin with, it wasn't a barn, it was a stable. And, as y'all know, Bethlehem was very crowded that week; it was the Passover holiday, and all the Jews and Jewesses were taking a census for Caesar Augustus. I'm sure Mary didn't want tourists and autograph seekers bothering her. When you're having a baby you want a little privacy."

"Yeah but didn't they have hospitals? I mean, like...." Howard attempted to respond to Miss Carter, but she cut him off before he could finish his comment.

"Howard, stop asking silly questions. Anything y'all want to know about the Immaculate Conception, it's there in the Holy Scriptures – plain as the nose on your face." Miss Carter glanced at Howard's huge nose and chuckled – so did many of the kids in the classroom – everyone was familiar with the slang expression, "big nose means big hose."

"Miss Carter, what's the past tense of 'maketh,' asked Penny Sherman, "is it 'madeth'? That word just don't sound right to me." Penny was in several of my classes. She talked a lot, asked dumb questions, and always stared into a little mirror to make sure that her pony tail and lipstick were perfect. She was pretty, I guess – but I never felt comfortable talking to her – she was always surrounded by a flock of boys.

"Good question, Penny. I guess I'd have to say that holy words transcend time – 'maketh' is a word of the Lord; it's all tenses – past, present, and future. What the Lord 'maketh' was there before the beginning of time and it will be there after the end of time. The word of God is eternal – God is omnipotent."

Manny Lefkowitz, a big tough boy who sat at the desk behind Penny, pulled on her pony tail and began laughing. "Hey, God can't get a boner."

"No, you dumb putz," whispered Penny, "that's 'impotent.'"

I raised my hand to ask a question: "Miss Carter, how can there be an end of time? What comes after the end?"

"Only God, Myron – only God!"

Paul (the Christian boy) raised his hand and wiggled it in the air – he had an important question. "Miss Carter, did they have Chinese food in Bethlehem? I mean back then, when Jesus was a baby?"

"I don't think so Paul. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I seen pictures of the three wise men, one of them had slanted eyes and looked like a Chinaman. And what kind of gift were they giving the baby Jesus? What's Frankenstein?"

Miss Carter laughed: "No Paul, it isn't frankenstein, it's frankincense, a type of tree sap. It was used to make incense."

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

"Well, they also gave him gold," Penny interrupted. "Jewish mothers don't want tree sap for their new baby. What a yucky gift!"

Miss Carter was tall, with thin lips covered by flesh colored lipstick – which seemed stupid to me. What's the purpose of invisible lipstick? And she wore black horn rimmed glasses that encircled steel-gray eyes that never looked at you; they looked through you. The middle-age spinster reminded me of the gaunt, raw-boned woman in "The American Gothic," the famous painting of a rural couple. And she always wore sheer see-through blouses that invited the pubescent boys to gawk at a flesh colored slip that covered her perfectly flat chest. And when the boys stared she'd chuckle and start humming an old-time tune from her state: "I come from Alabama with my banjo on my knee."

I think she used the word "banjo" as some type of metaphor – maybe to represent something spiritual or sexual – but I wasn't quite sure.

"She's definitely a virgin," Manny Lefkowitz whispered. "You don't need to be a friggin' genius to know what she's gonna' do with her banjo."

"No," said Penny, "the banjo is a paddle; she's warning all you horny boys to get your mind out of the gutter or she's going to spank your Jewish butt."

Don't get me wrong – morning devotionals in the ninth grade weren't really all that bad, Miss Carter never made us pray to the father, son, and holy ghost; we just concluded our prayers or psalms by saying "Amen." Then she would turn her back to the class and sneak in a private finger crossing. Paul Yardley told stories about Jewish holidays, when he was the only kid in class. Miss Carter would breathe a sigh of relief and conclude her morning prayer with an impassioned "father, son, and holy ghost" and trace a bold, uninhibited, four cornered crossing in front of an empty classroom.

### Ms. Carter – The English Teacher

In addition to being our home room teacher (and spiritual leader) Miss Carter was also the ninth grade English teacher. She loved reading poems in class, especially *The Bells*, by Poe. And, even though she was very vocal in her views about the lord and savior she was sensitive to the fact that almost all of the students were Jewish. For example, when she read segments from *Macbeth* in class she made a slight alteration to the boiling cauldron poem – that's the part where the witches say, "double, double, toil, and trouble." Instead of saying, "liver of a blaspheming Jew" Miss Carter changed "Jew" to "ewe" (a female sheep). But some kids were offended; they felt that she was comparing Jews to sheep, inferring that we were cowards. I think she was just trying to be respectful – and ewe rhymed with Jew. Well, maybe she should have said, "blaspheming shrew." That's what I would have done.

### Remembering Robert E. Lee

In the north courtyard of my school there was a statue of a World War II soldier standing with a rifle at his side. The statue was a gift from the Class of '45, in memory of former students who died in World War II. "Boys and girls, one week from today is the nineteenth of January – we will be commemorating Robert E. Lee's birthday," said Miss Carter. She stood tall, and brushed wrinkles off her long pleated dress, in honor of her favorite American hero. "Out of respect for this great patriot we will be having an essay contest. Bring two sharpened pencils and a memo pad – meet me at the foot of the statue."

"Now, look into the eyes of the soldier – think of the boys who perished in the war and compose an 'inspirational' one page essay. Pretend that the soldier is talking to us from the grave, imparting the advice of a hero."

I didn't have any definite thoughts; I just sat on the grass and observed that there were several orange trees growing in the courtyard; I had never noticed that before. They were pretty trees, with little white flowers. Death is scary and orange trees are pretty – that's about as profound as I could get. Thankfully, we had the weekend to work on our essay; it was to be turned in the following Monday.

One week later, on the birthday of Robert E. Lee, Miss Carter called me to the front of the classroom – I won the contest and was asked to read my paper. I stood behind a lectern and in a slow, somber voice I began reading:

"Once, not too long ago, I was a student at this beautiful school, I enjoyed eating kosher franks at Penways Pharmacy, with chopped onions and lots of hot spicy mustard, but no catsup. I also loved going to football games and dances. I was a good dancer – we did the Jitterbug when I was in school. I had a very pretty girlfriend – we made plans for college and a life together, a beautiful life – then came the war. We had dreams that would never be! *(long pause – I glanced around the room, a cute girl with blue eyes and long blonde pigtails was looking directly into my eyes)* Come, sit by the foot of my statue; I have a story that I'd like to share with you – a war story "

During a hard fought battle a general decided to attack the enemy even though his troops were greatly outnumbered. He felt if he could instill confidence in his soldiers they would win. Unfortunately, his men were scared. While marching to the scene of the battle the troops stopped at a religious shrine and took time to pray. Then, at the alter of this shrine, the general took out a coin and said, 'I shall now toss this coin in the air. If it lands on heads, we shall win. If it's tails, we shall lose. We shall now discover our true destiny.' He threw the coin into the air and all watched intently as it landed. It was heads. The soldiers were so overjoyed and filled with confidence that they vigorously attacked the enemy and were victorious.

After the battle, a young lieutenant remarked to the general, 'Sir! It's impossible to change your destiny with the flip of a coin.' You might be

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

right, the general replied, and he complimented the young man for his bravery in battle. However, he didn't show the coin, which had heads on both sides."

"So, what are you trying to say?" asked Harold Lorber, a religious Jewish boy who always wore a yarmulka at school. "What's the moral of the story? The general tricked his soldiers into having a false sense of confidence. I wonder if Hitler flipped a two-headed coin?"

"No, Harold – that's not the message," replied the cute girl with the blonde pigtails. "The soldier is telling us that our worst enemy is fear, but if we believe in ourselves we can reach for the stars." Her name was Aliyah (*a Hebrew name meaning ascent – as when one ascends to God*) she was the only one who understood what I was trying to say. Her blue eyes sparkled when she spoke – she had a warm smile. I had seen her before – maybe in a dream.

Miss Carter told me, privately, that she liked my writing, but she reminded me to review her editorial comments – which were scribbled with a red pencil at the end of the essay.

Good imagery; vivid imagination! I enjoyed your story – faith is everything. If you truly believe that God is on your side you can accomplish anything.

What was she talking about? That was not my message! I got an "A-minus" on that essay – she took off a few points for run-on sentences and dangling modifiers. I wrote several short stories and essays that year and always reviewed Miss Carter's little red notes. She liked my writing and usually gave me an "A minus" – but I don't think she ever understood what I was saying. She read several of the essays in class – sometimes she laughed in parts that were supposed to be sad or she'd get all teary eyed in the funny parts.

And with her little red notes – I was admonished never to begin a sentence with "and" or "but." But I always violated that rule. "But" is such a natural word to use when you interrupt your thought process and start a new sentence or a new paragraph. And I reminded Miss Carter that many sentences in the Bible begin, "And the Lord sayeth." But, she told me that Biblical writing doesn't have to follow the normal rules of grammar and sentence structure. And you cannot criticize God for bad grammar or bad punctuation, not even for bad spelling – he wrote the Bible – he is the creator of everything.

**And God maketh the rules of syntax.**

