

# A Brief Introduction to *The Accountant's Tale* and *Unanswerable Questions*

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The two books were originally conceived as one, and then split into two, because they have somewhat different unifying ideas. *The Accountant's Tale* (AT) leaves unsolved problems that are treated in *Unanswerable Questions* (UAQ), so I suppose the natural order would be to read AT first; but each book depends on the other.

AT follows three sources of error in theology, all of them repudiated from time to time by the Church. The first error is half-marcionite theology, attempting to start Christianity with the New Testament rather than the Exodus, though the Gospels themselves candidly start with the Exodus. The second error is an analog of monophysite Christology: seeking acts of God (more generally than in Christology) as a kind of interference with natural processes. The third error is a turn to other forms of objectivation, as a way to evade responsibility for the choices of faith.

UAQ deals with transcendence, grounded in two starting points. The first is ambiguity and its origins in language. The second is the interpersonal character of all human relating to reality. From these starting points it is possible to revisit some traditional features of transcendence, and in the end provide some (albeit incomplete) Christian answers to the general questions of philosophy of religion.

## 1 The Accountant's Tale

The first of this pair of books is about some themes to criticize in the history of the Catholic Church. There are more problems in philosophical theology than just the three that follow, but they were the ones of most interest to me.

(1) For the past millenium, Catholic theologians have done a brisk business in *proofs*, arguments for the so-called “existence” of God, the validity of the Christian faith, and so on. I think this is a mistake. Christianity is a choice.

(2) Typical Christian theology begins with Jesus rather than with the “Old Testament,” or as I prefer it, the Common Documents, the Documents shared in common by Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. This instinct even has a name, “Marcionite Theology,” so called for its most notorious exponent, Marcion, a priest in the second century. (Marcion wanted to delete the Common Documents from the Bible, along with everything in the New Testament that reminded him of them.) Many problems in theology become much more tractable if the Common Documents, the Exodus focally, are treated as the foundation and model, not a mere prolog to the New Testament.

(3) There are problems with God interfering with nature, and they have become worse with modern science. God interfering with nature doesn’t just mess up the sciences, it also generates serious pathologies in theology.

All three of these ideas will take some explanation. The theme is *choices* made by the Church, and the book is called *The Accountant’s Tale* because a joke once lampooned accountants for answering “what is  $2 \times 2$ ?” with “what do you want it to be?” The book is organized historically, but this introduction merely summarizes the issues. The focus on choices accepts by presupposition that all human religions are human creations, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann explained in *The Social Construction of Reality*.

First, proofs. To try to prove the “existence” of God is like trying to prove the existence of one’s wife. (One had better hope she never finds out.) Seriously, relating personally to ultimate reality is a starting point, not something one could reason *to*.

The problem is complicated by the fact that an explanation can be misinterpreted as a proof. An explanation is hermeneutically circular, but a proof (of a starting point) is viciously circular.

Hans-Georg Gadamer explained the difference, as it appears in the interpretation of texts. A whole text is composed of many parts, and

the repeated return from the whole to the parts, and vice versa, is essential. Moreover, this circle is constantly expanding, since the concept of the whole is relative, and being integrated into larger contexts always affects the understanding of the individual part.

The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, it is an iterative process, and it may or may not converge to a stable reading. Mathematically literate readers (not Gadamer's intended audience) would see parallels to their own iterative approximations.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible is unaware of proofs as we know them, and it handles the issue as a confessional matter: In the great covenant renewal ceremony in Joshua 24, Joshua asks the assembled Israelites, "Which gods will you serve? Choose now." The Bible knows it is a choice, Anselm of Canterbury knew that he had already chosen, but moderns think they can find proofs to justify their choices. Proofs are an invention of the Devil. The Bible in its own peculiar way dealt with proofs, for proofs are an example of what it called "putting God to the test," which it frowned on.

This is not blind choice, which gets dismissed as "fideism" in modern arguments. You can see perfectly well what you are choosing: whether or not to affirm human life in this world as good, in full view of its pains, and to acknowledge the unanswerable questions that that choice raises.

The second major issue is semi-marcionite theology, the attempt to explain Christianity starting with Jesus rather than with the background in Israelite religion from the prehistory and Exodus, Monarchy, and Exile to Second Temple Judaism. The short explanation is that, as explained in the hermeneutical circle, Jesus and the New Testament look very different when the whole of which they are a part includes the prior history. Here is the structure of the Exodus:

Israel begins in the Promised Land  
with the patriarchs  
Israel goes down to Egypt  
and there becomes a mighty nation  
the management in Egypt changes,  
the new management is unfriendly.  
The Israelites complain,  
the Boss brings Israel out of Egypt,

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<sup>1</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960). Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Crossroad, 1989. See pp. 190 and 291.

<sup>2</sup>It was Timothy Axelrod, a physicist and astronomer, who pointed this out to me.

feeding them in the desert,  
with many trials.  
Eventually they come into the Promised Land,  
crossing the Jordan at Jericho,  
settling in the land of Canaan;  
Israel asks for a king.  
The monarchy begins with Saul and David,  
and through many cycles of faith and unfaith  
eventually brings disaster upon itself.

This, especially the parts before the Monarchy, is summarized in the Short Historical Creed in Deuteronomy 26.5–10, “My father was a wandering Aramaean, few in number . . .”). The differences between a religion of nature (focused on bountiful harvest) and a religion of history (remember the God who brought you out of slavery) did not become clear until well along in the journey. In effect, the Exodus was an exodus from nature into history.<sup>3</sup>

The New Testament, in the Synoptic Gospels, recapitulates this sequence. The key is to identify Jesus as the new Israel, or the new Joshua (the names are even the same in Greek).

Both Israels start out in the Promised Land  
both go down to Egypt  
there is a slaughter of innocents in both cases  
both are tested and fed in the desert  
one for 40 years, one for 40 days  
both re-enter the Promised Land  
crossing the Jordan at Jericho,  
and after a period of activity,  
both go up to Jerusalem  
and a triumph of sorts.

In effect, the Gospels are a parody of the Exodus, just as Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* is a parody of the Gospels.

There is an inescapable irony in the endings of the Gospels. The Exodus story has been retold with the ineffable pain of Deutero-Isaiah<sup>4</sup> rather than the

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<sup>3</sup>The difference is explained in depth in Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death*, chapters 10–11.

<sup>4</sup>I. e., Isaiah 40–55, especially the Suffering Servant Songs, of which the most memorable is “surely, he has borne our griefs . . .,” familiar from Handel’s *Messiah*.

triumphalism of the King David Report.<sup>5</sup> Disaster has been re-understood as triumph. That vision is precarious, and forgetting its precariousness is the way to serious trouble.

Now look at the structure of Mark in a slightly different analysis:

the title at the beginning:

“this is the good news of Jesus Christ”

call for *metanoia* (change of perspective)

the baptism

calling the disciples

a series of cleansings, raisings, and feedings,

interleaved with teaching

At the end,

the cleansing of the Temple,

the feeding of the disciples,

the crucifixion

— and where we are led to expect<sup>6</sup> a raising,

we get only a message, “he is not here.”

Expand one part of the structure above, the series of cleansings, raisings, and feedings. The point of the series is, in the terms of the holy parody noted above, that just as God cleansed, raised and fed Israel in the larger Exodus story, so also does Jesus cleanse, raise, and feed the new Israel. Edward Hobbs noted that Mark gives us a sequence of miracles leading up to the three at the end:

The first five:

1.21 a demoniac

1.29 Simon’s mother-in-law

1.40 a leper

2.1 a paralytic, lowered through the roof by his friends

3.1 the man with the withered hand

The second five, with feedings interspersed:

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<sup>5</sup>Stefan Heym, *The King David Report* (1972; reprinted by Northwestern University Press, 1998). It brings out the ironies in 1–2 Samuel, telling how David (and Solomon after him) came to be king.

<sup>6</sup>That expectation is attested in the words of the bystanders, “he saved others, he cannot save himself.”

5.1 the Gerasene demoniac  
5.21 Jairus' daughter  
5.25 the woman with a hemorrhage  
6.30 (five loaves)  
7.24 the Syro-phoenician woman's daughter  
7.31 the deaf-mute  
8.1 (seven loaves)  
8.14 (the 13th loaf)

The third five:

8.22 the blind man at Bethsaida  
9.14 a man with a deaf and dumb spirit  
10.46 blind Bartimaeus  
11.15 the cleansing of the Temple  
14.22 (the feeding of the disciples)  
16.1 "He is not here."<sup>7</sup>

The "miracles" begin small and work up to the three at the end. The cleansing of the Temple, the Last Supper, and the Resurrection are the goal and climax of the series. Each is the last of its series: cleansings, raisings, and feedings.

We have slipped from the second major theme into the third: divine interference with nature. The irony in the miracle texts comes out when one considers whether to take them literally or not, and if not, how to construe the hermeneutical circle in which they live. The literal reading is pre-scientific<sup>8</sup> and is incoherent, so the literal interpretation doesn't converge in a hermeneutical sense.

If the literal reading of the miracle texts is incoherent, what are they doing in the Gospels? They are clearly important and (unlike Liberal theology), we do not simply dismiss them. Edward Hobbs showed that they have the same literary structure as TV advertisements. A client with a problem is introduced to the product, the problem gets solved in a very preposterous way, and the client buys the product and goes away happy. The product? Mark announces that early: *metanoia*, change of mind, change of perspective. We do not really see what the

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<sup>7</sup>Edward Hobbs, instructional materials, published with his permission in my *By the Waters of Naturalism*, section 7.2.

<sup>8</sup>When UAQ and AT answer the question "where does your u-r show itself in the world," they assume the world that we actually live in — which assumes modern science. Anyway, modern science comes from the doctrine of creation, in which the world is *good*, part of which includes being consistently intelligible under the aspect of nature. Details in *The Accountant's Tale*.

new perspective is until the end, when the irony of the product comes out. See above, where a raising is expected, and the messenger at the tomb just says, in effect, “He is not here; you’re looking in the wrong place. You will find him in your lives.” After that, the story has grown in the telling — though the Church never allowed the story to give the reader an eye-witness view of the Resurrection (as in the Gospel of Peter).

The canonical Gospel texts are never free of ambiguity; you can take them literally if you like, and in a pre-scientific culture that option is even more available. To take them literally is to interpret them as “signs and wonders,” a possibility the Gospels acknowledge and then deprecate. See Matt 24.24, Mark 13.22, and John 4.48; all reproach the crowd’s unwillingness to believe “except they see signs and wonders.” Even Luke, who does not repeat verbatim Mark’s rejection of signs and wonders, speaks of signs in very negative terms. Luke 11.29: “The crowds got bigger and he addressed them, ‘this is a wicked generation; it is asking for a sign.’” Selling miracles (signs and wonders) today is still a big business.

There are several reasons why so many demand signs and wonders. In the first place, signs and wonders objectivate the faith, thereby relieving them of responsibility for their faith choices. In the second place, signs and wonders, especially reading the Resurrection as a resuscitation, promise people a way out of the pains of life. But the whole point is to find blessing *in* all of life, pains included. Signs and wonders subvert the message of the Gospels.

At this point we should note that Christianity really does affirm human life, in this world, pains included.<sup>9</sup> The Christian answer to “where does your proposed ultimate reality show itself in the world?” is in the Passion of the Christ. We would all like to get out of the pains of the day (Jesus did), but in a larger perspective, they have to be integrated into a good life. The Gospel texts, especially the Resurrection texts, put the reader to the question: are we saved *from* the pains of life, or *in* the pains of life?

It was Edward Hobbs who saw this, and chose as the cardinal pains of life the series Exposure, Limitation, and Need.

(1) In the face of the situation which exposed or revealed the discrepancy between one’s pretensions and one’s actual life-as-lived, one responded with acknowledgment of the true situation and a “change of understanding” (Greek: *metanoia*, poorly translated “repentance”);

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<sup>9</sup>Rabbinic Judaism does not disagree; the rabbis express it a little differently, in the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 60b, where they ask “are we to say a berakah (a blessing) for the evil in life as we do for the good?” They answer in the affirmative.

(2) in the face of the situation which confronted one with the contingency or limitation of his existence, one responded with creative thankfulness for the new — albeit in many cases unwanted and limited — possibilities presented by the limiting situation itself;

(3) in the face of the encounter with others in their need for help, one responded with action directed to the benefit or good of those others.<sup>10</sup>

*The Accountant's Tale* goes on for several more chapters with a critique of the world, the Church, and some of the pastoral questions raised by the story so far.

The chapters, in order:

The first chapter collects some necessary ideas that are presupposed in understanding the Bible and Christian history at all. Ways to think in theology (there are more than one), and basic questions; a sketch of the history; extending the principle in the Definition of Chalcedon to applications beyond Christology; how to deal with a strange culture, and its social constructions; and a confessional approach: biblical religion is a choice, not something that could be proven.

The second chapter works through the history in the Common Documents, with a little on the results of critical-historical study of the Bible.

The third chapter does the same for the New Testament, beginning with Exodus typology.

The fourth tells the settlements after the destruction of the Second Temple, by the Church fathers and the rabbis.

The fifth chapter visits the medievals and the recovery of Aristotle.

The sixth brings us to modernity, and with it only a few issues that touch the thread of the book's story: the sciences, the crisis of the French Revolution and responses in Reform Judaism and Liberal theology, and the invention of historical inquiry into the Bible.

The seventh, somewhat dangerously called "Postmodernity," touches Kierkegaard, Heidegger, the Neo-Orthodox, and hermeneutics; the reaction in Analytic philosophy of religion; the troubles with proofs; and the sociology of knowledge again.

The eighth chapter begins the harvest of this history in our own time. The issue is "miracles," more technically monophysite theology of divine action, in which

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<sup>10</sup>The thesis that we meet God in disappointments transformed into blessings comes from Edward C. Hobbs, "An Alternate Model From a Theological Perspective," in H. A. Otto, ed., *The Family in Search of a Future* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), pp. 32–33. The core of it above is repeated in *Basic Concepts of Biblical Religion* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2014), p. 10. *Basic Concepts* is on the Net, full text.



God interferes with the natural course of events. In returning to a Chalcedonian method, we re-understand the Resurrection and come to see the saving presence of ultimate reality in all of life, pains included, rather than in ultimately getting out of the pains. The Resurrection is not proof of anything, it is a confessional commitment. It does not objectivate God or Christianity.

The ninth chapter prosecutes several quarrels with the secular worldview that we all live with. We don't even agree about being itself; or what a religion is and how it works. The humanities are a loss in education today, and the chapter touches briefly what is on every postmodern mind: sex.

The tenth chapter reproaches the Church, based on her own standards — for all of the offenses recounted in this book have been repudiated by the Church, some many times. The Church is confused about itself and its history. It is possible now to understand the mis-handling of relations with rabbinic Judaism, It is possible to understand the critique from secular culture, and to diagnose many responses by the Church as a form of religious auto-immune disease. And in view of all these criticisms, it is possible to re-understand our own history.

There is very little constructive theology in *The Accountant's Tale*, since it has the logic of a historical account, but some of that lack is remedied in *Unanswerable Questions*

## 2 Unanswerable Questions

*Unanswerable Questions* was originally part of *The Accountant's Tale*, but its subject is sufficiently different so that it's better as a book by itself. The two books do not have a logical order, and each relies on ideas in the other. Both grow out of several earlier books, *Basic Concepts of Biblical Religion* being the closest. That book was about pain, history, and transcendence, very briefly. Some of its themes were expanded in *The Accountant's Tale*, and some in *Unanswerable Questions*. Before them all was *Living in Spin*, about the structure of action, based on a circular relationship between narrative and action.

Transcendence is commonly taken to be about another world, one that transcends this one. Instead, I would say that transcendence is about unanswerable questions, and unanswerable questions arise naturally in human life. We deal with them without answering them (for example in the comic strips), but philosophers are usually loth to admit that there even *are* unanswerable questions.

Philosophy of religion usually starts with familiar questions such as “is there a God?” and the like. (That's kind of like “do neutrinos exist?” or “is there a

luminiferous ether?") I would like to do something a little different. Here are some more basic questions:

- What is your idea of ultimate reality (u-r)?
- What does it mean to "succeed" in life?
- Where does your u-r show itself in life and the world?
- What is it about life and the world that leads you to identify u-r as you do?

These questions were chosen on the way to my own Christian answers, and they welcome narrative answers; but one of my Buddhist friends once said to me, "we think the whole point is to get *beyond* narrative." Even your questions may vary from these. In more detail than these broad issues lie some particular questions: how do you want to make sense of nature, history, and the pains of life? are you assuming the Principle of Sufficient Reason? do all questions have answers, or are any questions unanswerable? The questions in effect ask what you want as a basic life orientation (BLO). One could go on to ask how you want to add recognition and intention to your chosen BLO.

People differ in their answers. Since these questions ask for a starting point in making sense of life, it is logically impossible to argue about different choices. (If you try to prove a starting point, it is no longer a starting point, and the starting point has been moved to something else.) It may be impossible to argue about starting points, but that doesn't stop most people. They argue anyway. If you want to get out of biblical religion I can suggest several easy ways. Biblical religion affirms human life in this world, in full view of all the pains of life. When asked where u-r shows itself, biblical religion answers with "in history." Pains raise unanswerable questions, and unanswerable questions are the visible face of transcendence. If you want to get out of biblical religion, you don't need proofs (or disproofs); all you have to do is say that you are not interested in all that pain, or that history is bunk, or that biblical history is the wrong history, or that unanswerable questions should just be dismissed and ignored. These are choices, not inferences.

It could seem that we could disagree within some larger agreed-upon framework, but that is deceptive: the disagreements are about precisely that larger framework. We can sometimes get along without conflict, but that is just mutual toleration, not true common ground.

Now, have a look at the choices made in biblical religion. What follows are my answers, and many theologians take other positions, so the reader is cautioned.

The first thesis of the book is a call to recognize the ambiguity in all we can know and do. Humans are language-capable life, and it is language that gives us a world, but language can do that in many ways. Ambiguity is built-in, so to speak. Language can also resolve ambiguity. Ambiguity is the pivot of jokes: you thought you were in one story, but in the whiplash of the punch-line, you find yourself in another story. Language gives us a world, but we are often wrong about the world. In language, we cope with the world, but it does not give us an absolute or ultimate truth. Despite much tradition to the contrary, I am not advocating any of the platonisms, which do offer absolute and ultimate truth, even if hidden from us and inaccessible. Instead, we have each other, and so the remedy for our plight is interpersonal relations, the truth of other people. There is truth, but truth is based not on Platonist ideal forms but on interpersonal truth.

One could put it this way:

In the beginning was the Joke,  
and the Joke was on us.

Some might take this as a stance that all is lost, or that the world is illusion and inhospitable to us. Nevertheless, in biblical religion, we trust in reality, if cautiously and critically. Our experience (history, again) has been positive.

The second thesis of the book is that we relate to other persons in all we are and do. D. Z. Phillips once summarized the crux of disagreement in philosophy of religion thus:

[W]hether one is reacting to the vicissitudes of human life religiously or non-religiously, one is reacting to something that is beyond human understanding.

The great divide in contemporary philosophy of religion is between those who accept and those who reject this conclusion. It has certainly been rejected by religious and secular apologists alike. When a sense of the limits of human existence has led to bewilderment and to the natural cry, 'Why is this happening to me?', 'Why are things like this?', it is essential to note that these questions are asked, not for want of explanations, but *after* explanations have provided all they can offer. The questions seem to seek for something that explanations cannot give. This is what theodicies and secular attempts at explanation fail to realize.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> D. Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, pp. 133–134. Some italics in the original removed.

When we ask “*why* such-and-such?”, in effect, we are asking, “show me how such-and-such fits into the world and u-r, and tell me how to deal with it. One of my central contentions in this book is that we always relate to the world with other people virtually present and involved, whether they are seen or not. This appears by its absence in Heidegger’s definition of human being: In effect (his German is slang; I paraphrase), human being is the sort of being that matters to itself, or human being is the sort of being that has a stake in its own being. All true, and a brilliant insight, but I am not the only one who has stakes in my being. I matter to other people, not just to myself, and they matter to me. This mutual mattering is part of the very being of persons. Heidegger mostly missed it. The result is that “we interpersonate,” or relate to other people in everything we do. And just as D. Z. Phillips said about why-questions, where we keep asking *why* after answers have done all they can, so also we still interpersonate after all mundane persons (real, virtual, actual, possible) have done all they can.

These issues have appeared in many places. When Moses asks God’s name in Exodus 3.14, the traditional translation of the answer is, “I am who I am.” Some scholars have commented that considering the pertinent background, the Hebrew would make more sense as “I shall be with you as who I am shall I be with you.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the issue is not Greek philosophy of being, but rather interpersonation. The biblical God is present, but on his terms, not ours.

In another place, John of Damascus asks whether there is a God, and answers that no, there is not a God in the sense of a (divine) being among other beings, but that God is beyond being at all. Theologians and philosophers have disagreed forever about whether God is a being or not; I take sides.

The chapters, in order:

The beginning chapters alternate between language and interpersonation.

The first chapter is about the ambiguity that language gives us.

The second chapter brings resources from philosophy to show that human existence is always interpersonal, always related to other persons. We still interpersonate even when there are no more persons to relate to.

In the third, we return for more comments on language.

In the fourth, we continue the development of interpersonation.

In the fifth, we visit some of the traditional problems with transcendence.

In the sixth chapter, *Unanswerable Questions* closes with an attempt to pull some of the ideas together.

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<sup>12</sup>John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God* (Yale, 1964), p. 10. This is not original with Murray, though he explains it very well.