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This quarterly journal is an exercise in theological poetics. Because this is an odd undertaking, even for an academic journal, we thought a word of explanation was in order. The word poetics refers to the philosophy of making or creating, so a theological poetics is an approach to making and creating that is theologically informed and expressive. We want to publish theological topics that are rigorous enough to make you think, and winsome enough to make you want to. We want to publish creative and literary efforts that are theologically orthodox, and which therefore retain and grow into a truly human shape. We thank you for reading.
IN 1900, during the early months of the Second Boer war, *The Speaker*, a young liberal weekly, carried several articles and reviews denouncing the popularity of English imperialism. The articles were signed simply, “G.K.C.”¹ Earlier the same year, a short collection of poems entitled *The Wild Knight* had also been released under the same three initials.² Soon everyone was asking, “Who is this G.K.C.?” One reviewer of *The Wild Knight* claimed “G.K.C.” was actually the famous poet John Davidson writing under a pseudonym.³ As the articles in *The Speaker* spread, the full name came to the surface: G.K. Chesterton. In a few months the name was well known in literary circles, in a few years it was famous across the country. One reviewer observed, “I do not know any example in the last fifty years of so dizzy a rise from obscurity to fame.”⁴ Chesterton came into the literary world like a comet. To men of his own day he was an anomaly: a man outside his time. Where did he come from? What led him to develop a perspective so alien to the celebrated thinkers of the time?

Chesterton understood that every writer, no matter how original, begins by imitating others.⁵ He saw that not much is truly original. New ideas can be tacky and boring, old ideas almost never are. Chesterton had a deep-seated love for old Christendom. He loved the courage, he

² Ibid. 30.
³ Ibid. 31.
⁴ Ibid. 30.
loved the nobility, he even loved the crusades. Unlike some of his enlightened contemporaries, Chesterton was more than willing to take up old tomes and dip into the treasure-troves of the “dark-ages.” Descartes compared this kind of reading to traveling in different countries. Interacting with past authors is like visiting other times. When you come home from your travels, you might see some things about your homeland that you never noticed: beautiful things—and blind spots. Chesterton witnessed the same phenomena as he turned his attention back to twentieth-century England.

One book in particular had a shaping impact on Chesterton’s work: Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. At the center of *Don Quixote*, Quixote gives a simple distillation of his mission. He says, “My only endeavor is to convince the world of the mistake it makes in not reviving in itself the happy time when the order of knight-errantry was in the field.” This is the manifesto of the knight Don Quixote. But it could just as easily be the manifesto of G.K. Chesterton. In the man that has often been viewed as a hapless idiot, Chesterton saw a glorious Christian hero. Don Quixote embodied the traits that Chesterton saw were necessary in his own time: a courageous madman willing to defy the norm and bring back the beauty of the olden times. Cervantes’ influence is pervasive throughout Chesterton’s work.

*Don Quixote* impacted Chesterton in a number of ways. First, many of Chesterton’s novels are direct imitations of *Don Quixote*. Chesterton tried to take Quixote’s story and tell it from a new angle. Like Quixote, Chesterton’s heroes are considered insane by society. Like Quixote, they make it their goal to restore the lost virtues. Madness and revival are bedrock themes in Chesterton’s writing. Both are heavily inspired by Cervantes. The second place we see the fingerprints of *Don Quixote* is in Chesterton’s own life. In many ways he came to embody the same heroic traits that he saw played out in *Don Quixote*. Chesterton’s heroes are often Quixote-types and Chesterton himself fell into the same category.

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The Christian Quixote

Before we jump into Chesterton’s writing, we need to take a quick review of Quixote’s story and its conflicting interpretations. In order to fully appreciate the story’s impact on Chesterton, we’ll need a comprehensive understanding of a soft reading of *Don Quixote*.

Common interpretations of Cervantes paint him as the anti-Chesterton: a man who wanted to end the shabby ideals of the Middle Ages and bury romance in a casket six feet deep. After a casual reading of *Don Quixote* and Chesterton, we might assume that the two are opposites. Chesterton is a lover; Cervantes is a hater. Where one man tried to abolish medieval ideals, the other tried to save them. In order to understand how Chesterton could have been so fascinated by a writer so seemingly opposed to his own philosophy, we need to recognize that there are two conflicting interpretations of *Don Quixote*: the soft reading and the hard reading. The hard reading says that *Don Quixote* is a joke. Cervantes is just mocking chivalric tales, showing the world how ridiculous it would be if someone actually took them seriously. Hard critic P.E. Russell calls *Don Quixote*, “…a comedy in which well-found ed reality holds madness up to ridicule.” Cervantes himself declares at the end of the novel, “...my desire has been no other than to deliver over to detestation of mankind the false and foolish takes of the books of chivalry.” Many readers find this interpretation plausible, it certainly falls in line with the plain meaning of the text.

In 1914, Spanish philosopher Miguel Unamuno introduced a new reading. The so-called soft reading sees Don Quixote as the unlikely hero of the tale. From this perspective, Quixote is the protagonist, the one man who understands how the world truly is. He sets out on a glorious mission: to bring back the old virtues to save his own time from its malaise.

As we look into Part I of *Don Quixote*, the case seems fairly cut and dried in favor of the hard reading: Quixote exhibits the qualities of an arrogant fool. His efforts only bring trouble on the people around

him. His library of chivalric tales has driven his addled brain off a cliff. Now he spends his days troubling others with his pathetic belief that the stories are real.

Complications ensue. As Part I progresses, Cervantes goes off on massive narrative excursions that have little or nothing to do with Don Quixote himself. Each new character that Quixote meets has a story to tell: one man recounts how he braved imprisonment and shipwreck to save (and Christianize of course) a beautiful Muslim princess. Quixote runs across two separated lovers; each wandered the world alone only to be reunited by chance at the inn where Quixote is staying. Shepherds turn out to be noblemen, and almost every girl he meets happens to be beautiful beyond compare—a fair lady in disguise. Cervantes clearly enjoys telling these fantastic tales, and, for the reader, they’re even more entertaining than the blunderings of Quixote and Sancho. By the end of Part I, Don Quixote is barely in the picture; the story has become dominated by our newfound romantic friends.

Rescued princesses? Angsty lovers? Aren’t these the very type of tales that Quixote is so taken with? The ones that garner him so much contempt? Yet, here they are, taking place in real life. Cervantes encourages us to laugh at Quixote’s obsession with chivalric tales, then turns around and entertains us with his own. Clearly there’s more to Don Quixote than pure satire. Part I is threaded with a strong undercurrent of irony as Cervantes masterfully feeds us the very types of stories we were invited to ridicule.

Still, in Part I, the secular reading remains strong: Quixote is an unlikable, selfish fool. After Cervantes wrote Part I of Don Quixote, he went on to write more of his little romantic tales in a collection called Novelas ejemplares. But what the people really wanted was more of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Ten years after writing Part I of Don Quixote, Cervantes finally relented and penned Don Quixote Part II. Given the enormous time gap between the writings, the tone of the second part is drastically different from the first. Cervantes completely reinvents the characters of Quixote and Sancho. Now, they have a new aura: a complex combination of wisdom and folly. Everyone who comes into contact with Quixote is left asking the question, “How could a man be so mad and so intelligent at the same time?” Don Diego captures the enigma: “I have seen him act the acts of the greatest madman in the world, and heard him make observations so sensible that they efface and undo all he does.”9 The new Quixote is a riddle to those around him. In Part I, Don Quixote is a menace to the community and a hazard to everyone he meets. In Part II, he emerges in a different light, as the “glorious madman.”10

The new Quixote is also strangely self-aware. He knows that people think he’s crazy. When the barber tells him a pertinent parable, Don Quixote easily catches his meaning and affirms his decision to remain “mad.” In Part I Quixote continually harps upon his desire to win personal glory through his endeavors.11 In Part II, his purpose has changed radically. Quixote proclaims, “...the chief object of my profession is to spare the humble and chastise the proud; I mean, to help the distressed and destroy the oppressor.” Unlike the Quixote of Part I, the new Quixote displays the motives of a true hero.

Not only does the Don Quixote of Part II have a new purpose, he also has a new, concrete grasp of reality around him. When Sancho tries to trick him about Dulcinea being one of the peasant girls in the road, Quixote’s answer astonishes Sancho and the reader: “I see nothing, Sancho, but three country girls on three jackasses.”12 The old oblivious Don Quixote is gone from the script and a new, savvier Quixote takes his place. At one point, Quixote even plays his own little joke on Sancho, baiting him into making vocabulary mistakes.13

As Don Quixote and Sancho are being welcomed by the Duke and Duchess, Cervantes pens an unassuming line that retroactively impacts the entire novel: “Don Quixote was greatly astonished, and this was the first time that he thoroughly felt and believed himself to be a knight-errant in reality and not merely in fancy”14 (emphasis mine). For seven hundred pages, Don Quixote has been telling every living thing

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10 Ibid. 619.
11 Saavedra, Don Quixote. 68.
12 Ibid. 564
13 Saavedra, Don Quixote. 544.
14 Saavedra, Don Quixote. 705.
that he is a knight-errant. Now we learn that he never truly believed it until this moment. In one line, Cervantes reshapes how we view Don Quixote’s persona. In the court of the Duke, Quixote rebukes Sancho for being crude: “Dost thou not see... that if they perceive thee to be a coarse clown or a dull blockhead, they will suspect me to be some impostor or swindler?” Don Quixote is nervous that he will be revealed as an impostor because he knows that he is one.

In chapter forty-nine of Part II, a steward makes an offhand comment that encapsulates Quixote’s game plan and lies at the core of Chesterton’s perspective on the novel. The steward remarks to Sancho, “Every day we see something new in this world; jokes become realities, and jokers find the tables turned upon them.” Jokes become realities. This is Don Quixote’s strategy: to play the part of the knight well enough to be accepted as genuine. Once recognized as a true knight, he’s sure others will be inspired to follow his example.

In chapters fifty-one and fifty-two, for a brief, fleeting moment, it seems that Don Quixote has succeeded. Sancho has his government just as Quixote promised. Dona Rodriguez, a genuine and sincere supplicant, asks Don Quixote for his help. Sancho is truly a good governor; Quixote is actually able to bring Dona Rodriguez’ plight to a happy conclusion. The joke becomes reality.

After this summit, Cervantes sends Quixote down the long trail of defeats that will lead to his grave. In a medley of Palm Sunday and crucifixion imagery, Quixote is led through the streets on a horse that is not his own with a sign stitched to his back: “This is Don Quixote of La Mancha.” Cervantes is pointing us to the inevitable: Don Quixote will soon meet his death at the hands of those who mock him. As Quixote is paraded down the street, one man shouts, “Get thee home, blockhead!” The jeer sours the mood. From this point on, it’s clear: the emperor has no clothes. As the tale nears its end, Quixote no longer inspires laughter, only pity.

One by one, all Don Quixote’s successes crumble to ash. First, the knight of the white moon shatters his prestige. Next, he meets the lacquey, Tosilos, who tells him that his one true success (helping Dona Rodriguez) was undone the moment he left. Yet, Quixote still has one comfort left to him. Cervantes writes, “His sadness arose from his defeat, and his satisfaction from the thought of the virtue that lay in Sancho.” However, in this very chapter, even that one comfort is taken from Quixote. Sancho, whose loyalty he swears by, begins tricking Quixote out of his money, taking reels for fake lashings.

In the end, we find Quixote alone and undone, cheated by his own companion. A boy of the village captures the scene: “Come here, boys, and see Sancho Panza’s ass figged out finer than Mingo and Don Quixote’s beast leaner than ever.” Sancho has gone out empty and come back full. Quixote has gone out empty and come back broken. He is, for all his bravery, worse off than he started. On his deathbed, Don Quixote finally breaks.

This is the tale that the soft reading gives us: Don Quixote as tragedy, the story of a madman who tried to change the world for the better and was crushed for his troubles. On his deathbed, Don Quixote faces a reality that every man fears: everything you did was a waste, you were lying to yourself the entire time. You can’t change things. This is what Dostoevsky was referring to when he claimed Don Quixote as “the greatest expression of human thought” and the “saddest book” ever written. Reading with this soft interpretation in mind, the tale of Don Quixote serves as testament to the fear that suffering for good will only be mocked in the end; that when all is said and done, your work will be nothing, and you will be broken.

Keep in mind, this soft reading is the minority report. Also take into account that we’ve just highlighted the major passages in the one thousand plus pages of Don Quixote that support it—one side seems right till the other presents his case. There are also strong passages that support the hard reading and send conceptions of Quixote as tragic hero amuck. For instance, at one point Quixote destroys an entire puppet show because he believes that the puppets are real and

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15 Ibid. 912.
16 Saavedra, Don Quixote. 964.
17 Ibid. 976.
18 K. A. Lantz, The Dostoevsky Encyclopedia (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 51.
the princess puppet is in danger. Quixote sincerely believes that enchanters are out to get him. He kills sheep, he charges windmills, and, at times, his antics cause serious harm to those around him.

At the end of the day, Cervantes keeps his cards close to the chest; he’s the original master of intentional ambiguity. As Quixote scholar Edith Grossman remarks, “as soon as you think you understand something, Cervantes introduces something that contradicts your premise.” So which is right? The hard reading or the soft reading? That’s not the point here. The point is that the soft reading and the hard reading both have legitimate foundation in the text. Whether he meant to or not, Cervantes crafted a piece that can be interpreted a number of different ways, and, in doing so, he scattered fistfuls of creative seeds that would later shoot off in directions he may never have planned.

**Chesterton’s First Quixote**

In the secular reading, *Don Quixote* is mockery. In the Christian reading, it is tragedy. One can see how Chesterton would not leap to embrace either of these readings. To understand how *Quixote* molded Chesterton’s outlook we need to return to that moment in the story when everything was going right: when Quixote was a good knight and Sancho a good governor—when the joke became reality. For Cervantes, this point marks the peak of Quixote’s journey. Afterwards Quixote will spiral down into despair and death. For Chesterton, this point marks the beginning of a glorious revolution. He takes the mad heroic spirit of rebellion that he sees in Quixote and sits down to tell the story with a new ending—the right one this time. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill, The Ball and the Cross, and The Return of Don Quixote* represent Chesterton’s most blatant attempts to rewrite the story of *Don Quixote*.

Starting with his first novel, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, Chesterton takes the fertile concepts of *Don Quixote* in his own wild new directions. In Chesterton’s tales, the Quixote figure actually succeeds in effecting a full-scale revival of medieval ways. In this version, the quixotic character is a man named Adam Wayne. Wayne is living in London in the year 1984. But nothing in London has changed. Chesterton writes that the city is still, “...very like it was in those enviable days when I was still alive.” The reason is this: people have lost faith in revolutions. Conflict has become completely extinct. Adam Wayne becomes obsessed with the old nobility and valor of chivalry. He runs around trying to convince people to make a full-fledged return to medievalism. At first, his efforts are wasted. No one buys his ridiculous plan; everyone shuts the door in his face. Then Chesterton changes the script. Wayne starts to gain traction and eventually rallies the people of Pump Street to embrace the old chivalric customs. United, they crusade against the might of modern businessmen who are trying to destroy Pump Street. By the end, the whole city is converted by Wayne’s vision. The men walk about in full robes and tunics and the women in flowing dresses. Men wear their swords at their hips and everyone goes about addressing each other with elaborate chivalric courtesy just like Quixote dreamed they would. Chesterton triumphantly pens his first “how it should have ended” to *Don Quixote*: this time Quixote and Sancho are the heroes. This time, the courageous efforts of the madman are rewarded and society is saved from the brink and brought back to the virtues of old.

**The Madman**

Adam Wayne exhibits one of Chesterton’s favorite quixotic traits: madness. Nearly all of his heroes are considered insane by the society surrounding them. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill, The Poet and the Lunatics, Manalive, The Ball and the Cross, The Return of Don Quixote*—each story has a madman for its protagonist. As with Quixote, the insanity of Chesterton’s characters is initially puzzling to those around them. Are the madmen really insane? Or are they right? Are they self-aware? Don Quixote certainly seems to be. Folk in Chesterton’s tales are left asking the same question as Tom Cecil in *Quixote*, “I’d like to know

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now which is the madder, he who is so because he cannot help it, or he who is so of his own choice?”

Chesterton’s entire book *The Poet and the Lunatics* is based on this muddled line between intentional and unintentional madness.

*The Poet and the Lunatics* is a set of short mystery stories following the adventures of a poet named Gabriel Gale. People who meet him generally assume that he’s insane, eccentric, or both. Yet, at the end of every story, the mad poet Gabriel Gale is able to solve the problems that no one else could. His “madness” allows him to see the world and others in a way that sane people have lost or forgotten. Characters react to Gabriel Gale in the same way that Don Larenzo reacts to Quixote: “Our guest has broken out on our hands, but, for all that, he is a glorious madman, and I should be a dull blockhead to doubt it.”

Quixote is mad. Everyone who knows him admits this. Yet, it’s almost a beautiful madness. Who ever heard of a man who went mad with the desire to help people? Mad with the idea of defending the weak and beating back the proud? Quixote is mad with the idea of restoring lost virtues, mad with the idea of rousing the populace out of their stagnant lives. The man has a healthy mania. A sane insanity. People that meet characters like Quixote and Gale can’t wrap their minds around the contradiction, but they do understand that there’s something noble going on. Don Larenzo slaps a name to the type: the “glorious madman.”

The hero of *Manalive* falls into the same category. The protagonist, Innocent Smith, comes bounding into a boarding house shooting off his pistol and performing a variety of antics to rouse the people from their un-romantic stupor. At first, the boarders are shocked by Smith’s colorful entry, but as the story progresses they come to understand Smith’s role. Mr. Moon remarks, “You expect a Don Juan to dress up as a solemn and solid Spanish merchant; you’re not prepared when he dresses up as Don Quixote.”

Smith is also a Quixote figure, the glorious madman, leaping in to convince the people, by example, of the value of nobility and wonder. At the start of the story, the boarders of Beacon House have high opinions of their own dignity and intellect, yet, by the end, all see that Smith is the wisest of them all. Here Chesterton is keying off another Cervantean concept. In *Don Quixote*, Quixote remarks, “The cleverest character in the comedy is the clown, for he who would make people take him for a fool, must not be one.”

Chesterton’s two lunatics are MacIan and Turnbull, who roam the countryside dueling one another with antique swords in an attempt to rouse people from their apathy. They also live in a time when men are no longer willing to take a stand. No one sees any virtue in the old ways of heroism, conflict, and nobility. In *Don Quixote*, Quixote’s steps are constantly dogged by his own friend Sampson and others as they attempt to take him home and cure his madness. Likewise, MacIan and Turnbull are pursued by the entire population of England. Eventually they are caught and placed in the care of an asylum.

In *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* there are also two madmen, Adam Wayne and a fool named Auberon Quin. People call Wayne “the red-haired madman” due to his mad Scottish efforts to restore conflict and medieval culture. Auberon Quin is described this way, “…he never opens his mouth without saying something so indescribably half-witted that to call him a fool seems the very feeblest attempt at characterization. But there’s another thing about him that’s rather funny… Have you ever seen his books? All Greek poets and mediæval

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21 Saavedra, *Don Quixote*. 598.
22 Ibid. 619.
24 Saavedra, *Don Quixote*. 523.
French and that sort of thing.”

Quin, the madman, has an extensive library of romantic medieval literature. Similar quixotic breadcrumbs are scattered throughout Chesterton’s stories. Even Syme in The Man Who Was Thursday recognizes he is mad to some extent. He remarks, “Well, if I am not drunk, I am mad, but I trust I can behave like a gentleman in either condition.”

At some point in Chesterton’s stories the characters come to realize that the lunacy of the protagonists is actually sanity. The madmen (Quixote and Sancho) are not mad, they are the only two people who grasp the true reality of the world. In Manalive, Mr. Moon suddenly comes to this realization:

“Sakes alive!” said the American gentleman, almost in an awed tone.

Then he added, “Are there two maniacs here?”

“No; there are five,” thundered Moon. “Smith and I are the only sane people left.”

In The Napoleon of Notting Hill, Quin concludes, “...the whole world is mad, but Adam Wayne and me.” Later Wayne remarks to Quin, “...let us start our wanderings over the world. For we are its two essentials.”

The world views them as irrelevant kooks but, in the end, they are the only ones who are relevant, the only two who are necessary.

Maclan makes the same assessment in The Ball and the Cross. He says to Turnbull, “This whole civilization is only a dream. You and I are the realities.” Throughout the book, everyone has relentlessly pursued Maclan and Turnbull in an attempt to lock them up. Everyone told them they were lunatics. Everyone will always tell the two fools that they are living in a dream-world, yet, for Chesterton, they are the only ones who are truly awake. The madmen are the reality.

They are the ones who can see through the blinders of their own time and pursue true virtue.

The Farce

Don Quixote has another virtue that Chesterton covets. The foolish knight has the ability to see the world with a renewed sense of wonder and imagination. To Quixote, every object, every person, no matter how frumpy or insignificant, is a colorful character in his romantic conception of reality. Quixote’s been cooped up with his books so long that he sees everything in the world with new eyes: the shabby old inn is a mighty stronghold, the wenches loafing outside are beautiful ladies, the windmills are menacing giants, a beat-up barber’s basin is the perfect helmet for a wandering knight. Innocent Smith in Manalive displays that same romantic naivety. Where others see inconvenience, Smith sees adventure. Where others see a tattered old umbrella, Smith sees a magnificent coronation canopy. The eyes of the people have been dulled by everyday association. Quixote and Smith invite them to look again with the eye of joy and imagination.

To those around them, this imaginative wonder seems like childish nonsense. The friends and acquaintances of Quixote see his mad romanticism as a massive claptrap charade. Often that is exactly what his actions amount to: silly poems, verbacious speeches, and irrational knightly customs. Quixote is not only a kook, he is a fool. He and Sancho are the butt of the jokes, the jesters of the story, whether they know it or not. This farcical aspect is largely what drove Don Quixote’s popularity with original audiences. Naturally, we take these comic failings and ridiculous antics as support for a secular reading. Who could respect heroes that are so farcical? Their nonsensical folly disqualifies them.

Not for Chesterton. What we see as symptoms of insanity, Chesterton claims as heroic virtues. In his essay, On Humor, Chesterton gives us his own definition of nonsense:

Nonsense may be described as humour which has for the moment renounced all connection with wit. It is humour that abandons all attempt at intellectual justification; and does not merely...
Jest at the incongruity of some accident or practical joke, as a by-product of real life, but extracts and enjoys it for its own sake.\(^\text{31}\)

Nonsense is just humor minus pretension. Chesterton continues, “Humour always has in it some idea of the humorist himself being at a disadvantage and caught in the entanglements and contradictions of human life.”\(^\text{32}\) For Chesterton, humor and nonsense are, in and of themselves, forms of admitted weakness. We all see something admirable in the man who doesn’t take himself too seriously. Cervantes certainly didn’t. \textit{Don Quixote} contains a trove of internal inconsistencies that the man just never bothered to fix. John Ormsby remarks, “Never was a great work so neglected by its author. …it seems clear he never read what he sent to the press.”\(^\text{33}\) Lack of artistic pretension was something that Chesterton loved about Cervantes and his work, he writes, “…there appeared with the great Cervantes an element new in its explicit expression; that grand and very Christian quality of the man who laughs at himself.”\(^\text{34}\) Chesterton scoffed at the “serious” thinkers of his day and of every age who could not understand the real value and affluence of the comedic. He writes, “All the most brilliant men of the day when they set about the writing of comic literature do it under one destructive fallacy and disadvantage: the notion that comic literature is in some sort of way superficial.”\(^\text{35}\) Comedy does not equate to frivolity and the mere fact that Quixote inspires laughter does not disqualify him as a hero. In his introduction to a theatrical rendition of \textit{The Man Who Was Thursday}, Chesterton deals with readers who have misinterpreted his novel as pro-anarchist: “Probably they thought that being able to see that a policeman is funny means thinking that a policeman is futile. Probably they would say that thinking Don Quixote funny means thinking chivalry futile; in other words, they are barbarians and have not learnt how to laugh.”\(^\text{36}\)

33 Saavedra, \textit{Don Quixote}. 34.
35 Ibid. 341.
36 Chesterton and Lethem, \textit{The Man Who Was Thursday}. 193.

Basically, people who write off Don Quixote because he’s funny are fools. Farcical antics do not bar Quixote from heroism.

**The Revivalist**

Remember Quixote’s mission: to convince the world of the mistake it makes in not reviving the happy times of chivalry. Don Quixote’s countrymen may see themselves as moving forward into a new era of renaissance, but Quixote sees them regressing into a dull, unvirtuous status-quo. He mourns the loss of nobility and the looming malaise of his own time. To the barber Quixote rants, “…now sloth triumphs over energy, indolence over exertion, vice over virtue, arrogance over courage, and theory over practice in arms, which flourished and shone only in the golden ages and in knights-errant.”\(^\text{37}\) If he had only a handful of the knights of old, Quixote muses, he could reverse this denigration—the king would find himself well-served and “the Turk would be left tearing at his beard.”\(^\text{38}\) Unfortunately, Quixote stands alone—one man trying to save a world that just won’t take him seriously.

Quixote’s acquaintances see him as an anomaly: a curious contradiction of folly and wisdom. When Quixote speaks up on matters other than chivalry the people are shocked by the good sense of his opinions. More and more, we come to see that Quixote is actually a judicious gentleman—as long as the conversation steers clear of knights and princesses. When placed in their desired roles, Quixote and Sancho perform magnificently. Quixote is a wise man and Sancho is a shrewd governor. So why does Quixote’s mission fail? Part of the reason is this: Quixote can never seem to gain enough traction. He can never keep together a core group of people who actually believe that he’s a knight. Quixote never succeeds, in part, because no one ever really thinks he can. Pessimism restricts the characters from believing a return to the old virtues is possible.

This is how Chesterton paints the story in \textit{The Return of Don Quixote}. The book tells the tale of a librarian named Herne who takes

37 Saavedra, \textit{Don Quixote}. 509.
38 Saavedra, \textit{Don Quixote}. 509.
part in a medieval play. Once the production is over, he refuses to relinquish his costume. After brooding several days, Herne announces his intent to revive chivalry and medievalism. Initially everyone takes him for a fool. The characters around him are impeded by a “subconscious pessimism;” a festering belief that the dead things will never return. Pessimism is the force that threatens to foil revival. Chesterton calls it “the unpardonable sin” and rightly so: in Chesterton’s mind, Quixote is not defeated by beatings and hardship, he’s defeated by cynicism.

Here, once again, Chesterton takes the story in a new direction. Herne gains a follower, then another. The movement snowballs and a new “fashionable” medievalism sweeps the country. The entire English government is reformatted to medieval standards and Herne is made king. But all this upheaval does not come without a struggle, the men of the factories rise up in opposition to the new medievalism. The country is divided into two factions: the medievals and the moderns. While the medievals hold their high court in the country, the factory workers are meeting back in the town. Chesterton’s bent against modernity is clear as he describes the lay of the land: “Beyond the park, beyond the gates of their chivalric paradise, the modern monster, the great black factory town, lay snorting up its smoke in defiance and derision.” For Chesterton’s Quixote, the fuming factories and the face-erasing forces of modernism are the new giants that must be fought. In this respect, Don Quixote’s action may seem like madness but, in the end, the miller is the real villain. Quixote is the man who sees past the facade, the only man of his age who can recognize and challenge the true dangers menacing society.

Chesterton’s other heroes follow a similar path. In The Napoleon of Notting Hill, everyone sees Adam Wayne as mad for trying to defend Pump Street and fight for medieval freedom. Then Wayne meets Turnbull the toymaker. Turnbull has spent his whole life building models of old battles and joyfully embraces Wayne’s mission. Only with the aid of Turnbull does Wayne convert and organize the rest of their neighbors. Like Quixote, Wayne and Turnbull are tired of the malaise grown up in their day. They seek a return to the conflict and glory of the knights. Wayne remarks, “It is of the new things that men tire—of fashions and proposals and improvements and change. It is the old things that startle and intoxicate.” The revivalist recognizes: the people do not need anymore “progress”; what they need is a return to the old virtues.

In The Ball and the Cross, MacIan and Turnbull are striving after the same mission: to rouse the people out of their apathy and wake them to the glory of conflict and rebellion. They are trying to bring back distinct lines to a society that has become nothing but blurs of grey. They run about on a series of mad adventures trying to show the people by example that a return to conviction and knightly valor is good and necessary.

Smith in Manalive, oddly enough, is also trying to revive medieval customs at Beacon House. Early on, he suggests that the members of mind, the assault was not madness but foresight. Chesterton takes a similar stance in his poem In Memoriam P.D.:

Heed not if half-wits mock your broken blade;
Mammon our master doeth all things ill.
You are the Fool you charged a windmill. Still,
The Miller is a knave; and was afraid.

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41 Chesterton, The Return Of Don Quixote. 141.
42 Ibid. 169.
45 Chesterton and Robertson, The Napoleon of Notting Hill. 292.
the boarding house split from modern government and create a new chair of justice modeled on the medievals, called “The High Court of Beacon.” Smith receives support for his endeavors from his Sancho-character, Mr. Moon. What the others take as a joke, Smith and Moon soon make a reality.

Likewise in The Return of Don Quixote, Herne attempts to fully restore a medieval social construct. He sees that there was good in the old ways that modernity has lost. Arguing with his nemesis, Herne says:

“I mean that the old society was truthful and that you are in a tangle of lies. I don’t mean that it was perfect or painless. I mean that it called pain and imperfection by their names. You talk about despots and vassals and all the rest; well, you also have coercion and inequality; but you dare not call anything by its own Christian name. You defend every single thing by saying it is something else. You have a King and then explain that he is not allowed to be a King.”

The old ways were truthful simplicity. Modernity is nothing but false intricacy. Like the others, Herne is the rebel revivalist; working to tear down the new and bring back the old. As the man himself said, “It is always easy to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one’s own.” Everyone is almost inevitably swept away by the thinking of their own time, regardless of its validity in a larger context. Like Quixote, Chesterton’s heroes are able to take stock of the current cultural situation and work to reverse it. In The Return of Don Quixote, referring to the Quixote character, Lord Eden remarks, “The man is mad. It is dangerous for unbalanced men when their dreams come true. But the madness of a man may be the sanity of a society.” This is the picture of the Chestertonian hero: the man who stands up against the “madness of the majority” to bring sanity back to society. Quixotic heroes recognize the big picture unfolding and spend their lives fighting the tide of false ideas in their own day.

46 Chesterton, The Return Of Don Quixote. 100.
47 Chesterton, Orthodoxy. 107.
48 Chesterton, The Return Of Don Quixote. 122.

The ending of The Return of Don Quixote gives us some insight into how Chesterton saw himself in relation to the story of Don Quixote. Near the closing of The Return of Don Quixote the Quixote figure, Herne, and the Sancho figure, Murrel, ride off in a hansom cab to do good deeds throughout the countryside just as Don Quixote had done. But Chesterton notes that their exploits are not really appreciated by the people, “From the standpoint of the cold and satiric populace the story was rather that of the progress of the hansom cab, through scenes where hansom cabs very rarely figure.” The populace takes the hard reading of Herne’s endeavors. Still, the narrator holds out hope that someone will come along and tell their story from a truer perspective: “But some riotously romantic chronicler may yet give some account of how they attempted in various ways to use the vehicle for the defense and consolation of the oppressed.” The tale needs someone to retell it. For Don Quixote, Chesterton worked to do just that. His Quixotes are not mere fools, they are the defenders of the oppressed; revivalists of the old ways. Through his fiction, Chesterton plays the part of the riotous chronicler come along to tell the story how it really happened.

Will the Real Don Quixote Please Stand Up

Quixote figures are most prevalent in Chesterton’s novels but they also crop up in his non-fiction. In Orthodoxy the Quixote figure turns out to be Chesterton himself. He writes, “I am the fool of this story, and no rebel shall hurl me from my throne.” Chesterton really was the Don Quixote of his day. In many ways he saw his own time as parallel to the foolish knight’s. In a world awash with enthusiasm for science and modernism, Chesterton was the fool calling for a return to the dark ages. He took Quixote’s mission and made it his own.

At the turn of the century, society was confident humanity could pull itself up by the bootstraps; eugenics and other movements were picking up steam. Chesterton made himself into a tire chock against

49 Ibid. 168.
50 Chesterton, The Return Of Don Quixote. 168.
51 Chesterton, Orthodoxy. 16.
this rolling advance of modernity. He was one of the only Christian intellectuals of his time willing to stand up against the giants of his day, men like George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells. Where others applauded forced sterilization, abortion, and euthanasia as progress, Chesterton denounced them as pure evil.\(^{52}\) Intellectuals shunned the glories of old Christendom as fantasy and clung to modernism. Chesterton worked to convince the world to turn back from the deadening effects of this new order and return to the virtues of the medieval church. Just as Don Quixote sought to reverse the faithless regress of his day, Chesterton sought to fight modern malaise and restore the noble and exuberant Christianity of the middle ages.

In *G.K. Chesterton: A Criticism*, Cecil Chesterton, GKC’s younger brother, gives us a well-informed take on Chesterton’s work and focus. He writes,

> [Chesterton] has a certain vision of a normal human life, and in his view reforms and revolutions must be undertaken not for the purpose of helping mankind on its march to an unattained ideal, but in helping it back to a sanity and health away from which it is constantly tending to fall. This sanity and health... he finds, for example, in the best period of the Middle Ages, a period which he eulogizes to an extent which must startle and shock the ordinary modern man, especially when coming from a professed liberal.\(^{53}\)

Cecil Chesterton confirms our assessment. Chesterton was the man attempting a return to medieval values; the fool charging the windmills. Chesterton had no delusions of utopia, he merely recognized a dystopia unfolding and worked to reverse the damage.

Chesterton was also a shameless propagandist. He latched on to basic truths and relentlessly pushed them throughout his life. He tended to use blunt-force trauma in his battle against the age. Subtlety was not his strength. As Cecil remarks, “He wants to give every idea a feather and a sword, and a trumpet to blow and a good ringing voice to speak.”\(^{54}\) Chesterton tends to dress philosophies up as characters rather than give his characters philosophy.

Blatant proselytization didn’t embarrass Quixote, neither did it embarrass Chesterton. Like Quixote, Chesterton was committed to one central mission that became ingrained into everything he wrote or said. Quixote never stops expounding the glory of the old knights and Chesterton never stops pushing his love of wonder and loathing of modernity. As the Nicaraguan president in *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* notes, “Every man is dangerous who cares only for one thing.”\(^{55}\) This was certainly true for Chesterton. He was not ashamed to say the same thing twice, or even five times or twenty times. He was an open opponent of modernity. Cecil remarks, “Mr. Chesterton stands for... Catholicism with its back against the wall, the hunger of a perplexed age for the more lucid life of the Ages of Faith, for the revolt against Modernity.”\(^{56}\) In Chesterton’s mind, much of man’s so called progress is only decay in disguise.

Chesterton recognized that the world does not move happily forward on its own. It will deteriorate unless men choose to change it.\(^{57}\) Because of this falltness in nature, the need for revolt is constant. Chesterton expounds this point in *Orthodoxy*, “If you leave a white post alone it will soon be a black post. If you particularly want it to be white you must always be painting it again; that is, you must be always having a revolution.”\(^{58}\) Every time has its own madness. The Christian hero must constantly be in rebellion to reinstitute the old truths. For Chesterton, Quixote was that hero, the man trying to repaint the world white with the virtues of medieval times. But attempts to repaint the fence will always garner some degree of public contempt. The people in Quixote’s world don’t see the benefit of returning to the fanciful ways of knight errantry. Likewise modern men could not understand Chesterton. Even today his opponents denounce him as

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54 Ibid. 199.
55 Chesterton and Robertson, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*. 47.
57 Ibid.
58 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*. 122.
foolish and flippant. Christopher Hitchens called him “unserious and frivolous” at times and “sinister” at others.59

Like Quixote, Chesterton was branded as a fool. Like Quixote, he saw the knights of old as heroes and denounced the derision they received from his contemporaries. In his essay *The New Jerusalem* he writes:

I heard the local legend, which says it is here that some of the Christian knights made their last stand after they lost Jerusalem and which names this height The Mountain of the Latins... They fell, and the ages rolled on them the rocks of scorn; they were buried in jests and buffooneries. As the Renascence expanded into the rationalism of recent centuries, nothing seemed so ridiculous as to butcher and bleed in a distant desert not only for a tomb, but an empty tomb. The last legend of them withered under the wit of Cervantes, though he himself had fought in the last Crusade at Lepanto...

...Great men and small have agreed to contemn them; they were renounced by their children and refuted by their biographers; they were exposed, they were exploded, they were ridiculed and they were right.

...Centuries after their fall the full experience and development of political discovery has shown beyond question that they were right. For there is a very simple test of the truth; that the very thing which was dismissed, as a dream of the ages of faith, we have been forced to turn into a fact in the ages of fact.60

The old Christian knights fought and died for the kingdom. Modern times have tarnished their memory. But those knights were right, they knew what was worth fighting for. Chesterton’s claim is clear: we must return to the strength and nobility of the knights of old.

Quixote bases his entire life and mission on the “chivalric tales” he read in his library. Throughout his adventures, Quixote butts up against people who don’t believe that those knights ever existed. They mock him for believing what they consider to be thoughtless old tales of vanity from a more credulous time. Don Quixote is constantly dealing with a population that has lost faith. Quixote based his core beliefs on a collection of stories; stories that everyone else told him were just myths. Chesterton found himself in the same boat. As new secular biblical scholarship scoffed and derided biblical historicity, Chesterton was constantly called on to defend what others told him were just tall tales.

Quixote tried to fight his accusers with bloated eloquence. Chesterton chose to battle biblical skepticism with a few shots of satire. Describing the activities of an atheist character in *The Ball and the Cross*, Chesterton writes, “He read how the Mesopotamians had a god named Sho (sometimes pronounced Ji), and that he was described as being very powerful, a striking similarity to some expressions about Jahveh, who is also described as having power.”61 He makes a similar jab in *The Return of Don Quixote*,

But as the Bible said somewhere that somebody drove away forty-seven camels, Professor Elk was able to spread the great and glad news that in the Hittite account of what was evidently the same incident, the researches of the learned Herne had already deciphered a distinct allusion to only forty camels; a discovery which gravely affected the foundations of Christian cosmology and seemed to many to open alarming and promising vistas in the matter of the institution of marriage.62

Chesterton mocked the smug academics who claimed to stand above the tales of various “primitive” religions. He battled the same naysayers as Quixote, men who saw the old tales as a bunch of stories made up for fun a long time ago. Men like Hitchens saw the mission of Chesterton and Quixote as charming but ultimately irrelevant—


61 Chesterton, *The Ball and the Cross*. 85.

the old tales are just myth, the fantasies of man’s infancy. But for Chesterton, the dull monotony of contemporary thought is the shadow. The romantic chivalry of old Christendom is the vibrant reality.

Critics accuse both Quixote and Chesterton of turning to wonder and romanticism merely because they have been steeped in it. Chesterton addresses this issue in his autobiography.

If some laborious reader of little books on child-psychology cries out to me in glee and cunning, “You only like romantic things like toy-theatres because your father showed you a toy-theatre in your childhood,” I shall reply with gentle and Christian patience, “Yes, fool, yes. Undoubtedly your explanation is, in that sense, the true one. But what you are saying, in your witty way, is simply that I associate these things with happiness because I was so happy. It does not even begin to consider the question of why I was so happy. Why should looking through a square hole, at yellow pasteboard, lift anybody into the seventh heaven of happiness at any time of life? Why should it specially do so at that time of life? That is the psychological fact that you have to explain; and I have never seen any sort of rational explanation.  

Chesterton does not love romantic chivalry because of “early childhood exposure.” He clings to the stories of the knights because there is a strong aspect in which they are true. In his commentary on Chaucer, Chesterton writes, “But there is more in it than that; for man lives by his devouring appetite for morality. The chivalric romance does really represent the Christian conception of life, which is at once a Quest, a Test and an Adventure. And the decorative allegories, that seem so dead to us, were once alive like a dance with the balanced morality of the Middle Ages.” Chivalric romance is the Christian life. The Christian hero stands up to challenge the dragon. As foolish as he may be, Don Quixote never shirks this responsibility; whether it’s lions or bandits or duels, Quixote steps straight into the fray. Even his critics recognize his courage. Quixote’s tombstone reads, “a doughty gentleman lies here; / a stranger all his life to fear.”  

Like Quixote, Chesterton saw a deficit of this sort of courage. In a world where thinkers were edging away from absolute truth, Chesterton recognized the need for people who are willing to take a stand, even if it means taking a beating. He understood that the heroic aspects of Don Quixote really are heroic aspects of an ideal Christian hero and sought to embody the same attributes. He recognized that being a Christian often means playing the fool—standing against tide and enduring the mockery of the majority.

A Challenge

So far we’ve seen how Chesterton’s characters and Chesterton himself embodied the virtues found in the soft reading of Don Quixote. Still, we might raise the question, “Are Chesterton’s characters intentional types of Don Quixote or did Chesterton simply come up with the same themes on his own?” Newton and Leibniz each independently invented calculus —this stuff happens. Chesterton himself warns us against playing little “free association” games with themes and authors, creating imaginary connections. It may be fun to play connect-the-dots and draw our own picture, but what we end up with may not always be the reality.

This is not the case with Chesterton and Cervantes. Chesterton makes numerous direct references that openly acknowledge Cervantes’ presence in his work. His heroes often reach a point where they find themselves overcome with a vague sensation that, perhaps, they represent Don Quixote. In The Ball and the Cross, Chesterton writes “Macclan could not rid himself of the fancy of bestriding a steed; the long, grey coping of the wall shot out in front of him, like the long, grey neck of some nightmare Rosinante. He had the quaint thought that he and Turnbull were two knights on one steed on the old shield of the Templars.” At other times, Chesterton’s allusions are more subtle. In The Man Who Was Thursday, he writes, “The sword-stick became almost the sword of chivalry, and the brandy the wine of the stirrup-cup.

64 Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Chaucer (Faber & Faber, 1959). 157.
65 Saavedra, Don Quixote. 984.
66 Chesterton, The Ball and the Cross. 258.
For even the most dehumanized modern fantasies depend on some older and simpler figure.” Chesterton also drops direct references to Quixote in his poetry, most notably in Lepanto. One of Chesterton’s poems referencing “knight-errantry” dates back to ca. 1890-1892—Chesterton easily could have had exposure to Don Quixote by the age of sixteen. Even in his biographies of Aquinas and Francis of Assisi, he compares the two monks to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. It’s nearly impossible to read through one of Chesterton’s novels without running across an allusion to Don Quixote in some form or another.

Clearly, Chesterton’s imitation was intentional. But what did he write about Don Quixote itself? Chesterton rarely wrote commentary on Quixote directly. To find Chesterton’s explicit opinion, we need to go back to 1901. At that time, the only books Chesterton had published were two small collections of poetry, Greybeards at Play and The White Knight. It would still be years before he began writing his fiction and apologetic works. It was at this point that Chesterton wrote a piece for the Daily News entitled “The Divine Parody of Don Quixote.”

In it, we get a candid look at Chesterton’s perspective on Don Quixote as he stood on the verge of his literary career.

Chesterton begins his review by acknowledging the inherent ironic aspect of Don Quixote. He notes the same paradoxical tendency that Grossman saw: at times, both Quixote and his persecutors seem to be in the right. He writes, “Deep underneath all the superficial wit and palpable gaiety of the story there runs a far deeper kind of irony—an irony that is older than the world. It is the irony that tells us that we live in a maddening and perplexing world…” There is a sense in which Cervantes crafted a somewhat balanced literary paradox, a story where both sides could be right.

Chesterton goes on to give us his creed on Don Quixote:

For the core of the truth is that we have the follies of Don Quixote in our very blood; we are by irrevocable generation children of the Middle Ages. Adventure and ceremonial, chivalry and idolatry, fantastic pride and a fantastic humility lie at the very root of our institutions and in the inmost chamber of our imagination.

Quixotism is in our veins. Everyone’s perspective is ultimately tied to the medieval culture that we came out of. Chesterton continues, Cervantes with a fearless realism, led his hero almost a dance of degradation through the man-traps and cross-purposes of the coarse world, rolled him in ditches and beat him with cudgels. But the fact remains that we all read Don Quixote because we are all knights-errant; we read it for the sake of Don Quixote’s dream, and without that dream the whole story would be as flat and common as the chronicles of Camden Town.

Don Quixote isn’t just satire, and it shouldn’t be dismissed as such. Chesterton sees the reality behind Quixote’s persecution. For the sake of his mission, Quixote endures beatings, floggings, stonings, imprisonment. It all sounds vaguely familiar. Chesterton reads Don Quixote as the Christian hero: the man who makes it his mission to fight the evil of his day regardless of consequence. He concludes, Don Quixote then, is a part of all of us, and a part which will always remain and give a great deal of trouble to any persons who wish to tie us up finally in any political constitution or synthetic philosophy. The knight figures in Cervantes’ romance as the foe of that civilization which thinks that everything is best trusted to an institution. In the story, he is the last individual.

Everyone worth their salt has a little Don Quixote in them and that quixotic spirit is what keeps us free from mad systems and domineering institutions.

Chesterton ingrained the themes of Don Quixote in every aspect of his work because he saw that ultimately, they were the themes
of the Christian life. Men will persecute, mock, and beat you. They will call you a mad fool. But the madness of the Christian is not folly, it is sanity and health. Human “progress” will always fall flat and the need for the fool’s revolution will always be present. This is why Chesterton’s heroes are madmen. This is why they are revivalists. Through his fiction, Chesterton sought to retell the story from the madman’s perspective. Through his life, he sought to lead society back to the virtues it had lost: to convince the world of the mistake it made in abandoning old Christendom.

The Joke Becomes Reality

Hard critics of Don Quixote like Erich Auerbach or P.E. Russell might wring their hands. In their view, Chesterton got Cervantes all wrong. From the perspective of the hard critics, Chesterton molded his writing on a mistake, a simple misreading of the authorial intent in Don Quixote.

Through the lens of The Napoleon of Notting Hill and The Return of Don Quixote, we learn how Chesterton saw his own relationship with Cervantes. In The Return of Don Quixote, Herne remarks,

They say I am behind the times, and living in the days that Don Quixote dreamed of. They seem to forget that they themselves are at least three hundred years behind the times and living in the days when Cervantes dreamed of Don Quixote. They are still living in the Renaissance; in what Cervantes naturally regarded as the New Birth… Cervantes thought that Romance was dying and that Reason might reasonably take its place. But I say that in our time Reason is dying.  

Chesterton does not actually believe that Cervantes intended the soft reading in Don Quixote. In his mockery, Cervantes was merely following the ideas of his own day—ideas that are now obsolete. Again in his essay, On Humor, Chesterton notes that Cervantes meant to mock chivalry, in fact, he says Cervantes’ mockery was the final nail in its coffin. Chesterton freely acknowledges his apostasy from Cervantes’ original goal. The times have changed, he says, now modernity is the outdated code that must be put to rest.

The plot of The Napoleon of Notting Hill gives us additional insight into Chesterton’s relationship with Cervantes. In it, Auberon Quin, the acting King of England, creates a nationwide joke. In mockery of the “arrogance” of medieval ways, he decrees that all the people of London must don medieval apparel and heraldry. Quin is only making a joke; a mockery of chivalric stupidity. As I noted earlier, a young man named Adam Wayne takes the facade seriously. Instead of seeing the medieval flags as a mockery he sees them as a return to nobility and rally the people to reclaim the glory of past ages. Through his sincerity and enthusiasm, Wayne succeeds in starting a mass revival of chivalry. Adam Wayne, the fool, takes Quin’s satire as genuine and brings the mockery to fruition. The joke becomes reality.

Don Quixote was Cervantes’ joke. In it he mocks the fool who tried to foil progress and bring back the dark ages. He told a tall tale about a madman’s revival and Chesterton was the fool who believed him. Where one man saw futility, the other saw glory. Cervantes’ joke became Chesterton’s reality.

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75 Chesterton, The Return Of Don Quixote. 169.

76 Chesterton, On Lying in Bed and Other Essays by G.K. Chesterton. 138.

77 Chesterton and Robertson, The Napoleon of Notting Hill. 72.
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MODERN CHRISTIANS don’t really care two figs for medieval cosmology. Why should we? Why should we care about Jupiter or Saturn or Venus? The principalities and powers have lost their sway, and we give them no more thought. The ancient gods in their ancient caves, if we believe in them at all, have been mythologized and placed in crusty anthologies for use in fourth-grade unit studies. We give them as little thought as we give unicorns or dragons, and for many people this is the same amount of thought they give to trees or grass or blue sky—that is to say, we take them for granted and have ceased to see them for what they really are. Nature is nature. Stripped of magic, of power, of any interest besides the scientific, we live in a very different world than the one the medieval men inhabited. But the question remains: what has the Gospel to do with Venus? What has Christ to do with Jupiter?

But C.S. Lewis’s answer would be, much. As a medieval and Renaissance scholar, Lewis had a special love for medieval cosmology. In *The Discarded Image* he devotes the entire work to exploring the Medieval Model of the cosmos. He focuses in particular on the emotional and imaginative power that this way of looking at the cosmos possesses. This was one of the things that he implemented in his own works, primarily the *Space Trilogy*, but also, as we shall see, the *Chronicles of Narnia*. But the question remains—what is it about this old way of seeing, the bulk of which has been proven to no longer mirror reality, that is so important to Lewis?

In *The Discarded Image*, Lewis outlines at length an aspect of the Medieval Model that he most enjoyed—that of the planetary influences or characters. But first, let’s look at the layout of this Model.
Formally, the Medieval Model consists of a series of hollow and transparent globes. Earth, central and spherical, is surrounded by these, one atop the other. These are the seven heavens or spheres and each one is governed by an individual “luminous body.” The order from earth is the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Beyond this is the Stellatum, the realm of the “fixed” stars. And beyond this is the sphere called the First Movable or Primum Mobile. Past the Primum Mobile is the “very heaven” or caelum ipsum—pure light and love. As Lewis says, “when Dante passes that last frontier he is told, ‘We have got outside the largest corporeal thing (del maggior corpo) into that Heaven which is pure light, intellectual light, full of love’ (Paradiso, XXX, 38).”

The earth exists in the sublunary world—“Nature in the strict sense”—the realm of earth where disease and decay hold sway. The Moon is the border, the dividing line between the dead realm and the realm of light and life. While the heavens are full of dancing and the music of the spheres, beneath the Moon all is silent.

This Model, by its formal arrangement alone, gives rise to certain imaginative and emotional effects that Lewis admired and regarded as an untapped treasure mine of creative potential:

The really important difference [between the medieval universe and ours] is that the medieval universe, while unimaginably large, was also unambiguously finite. And one unexpected result of this is to make the smallness of Earth more vividly felt... Again, because the medieval universe is finite, it has a shape, the perfect spherical shape, containing within itself ordered variety. Hence to look out on the night sky with modern eyes is like looking out over a sea that fades away into mist, or looking about one in a trackless forest—trees forever and no horizon. To look up at the towering medieval universe is much more like looking at a great building. The ‘space’ of modern astronomy may arouse terror, or bewilderment or vague reverie; the spheres of old present us with an object in which the mind can rest, overwhelming in its greatness but satisfying in its harmony.

Lewis loved the harmony and imaginative force of the Medieval Model, but what really brought it to life, what gave it color and character and vibrancy, was the influence of the planets themselves. The spheres of the cosmos and their planetary rulers are not entirely sealed off and separated from the sublunary realm, but they have such exuberant and dynamic personalities that they necessarily exert some influence on the terrestrial realm. Lewis gives more than a paragraph to each planet in The Discarded Image, outlining their personalities, the qualities that they are associated with, and the influences they exert. They are each unique, and they are so bold and dynamic that they affect mankind in a myriad of ways.

Of all the planets one stands out, not just in the hierarchy of the planets themselves, but in the amount of personal and professional interest that Lewis took in it—Jupiter, the kingly planet. Here is his description of the Jovial influence in The Discarded Image:

Jupiter, the King, produces in the earth, rather disappointingly, tin; this shining metal said different things to the imagination before the canning industry came in. The character he produces in men would now be very imperfectly expressed by the word ‘jovial’, and is not very easy to grasp; it is no longer, like the saturnine character, one of our archetypes. We may say it is Kingly; but we must think of a King at peace, enthroned, taking his leisure, serene. The Jovial character is cheerful, festive yet temperate, tranquil, magnanimous. When this planet dominates we may expect halcyon days and prosperity. In Dante wise and just princes go to his sphere when they die. He is the best planet, and is called The Greater Fortune, Fortuna Major.

2. Ibid., 94.
5. Ibid., 106.
The comment that Lewis makes about the Jovial influence being “not very easy to grasp” explains the impetus behind the emphasis that Lewis gave to Jupiter throughout his professional and personal writings. Lewis embraced the Jovial influence and mourned its loss in our society. While he loved the Jovial character for its own sake, his use of it in his fictional writings and his references to it in his scholarly works stem from the desire to reawaken an awareness of this character that has been lost. The saturnine character is all too familiar to us. This was his primary critique of such poets as Donne and T.S. Eliot. Saturn, the “lord of lead” with his “melancholy complexion,” connected with “sickness and old age”—we are far too familiar with his sphere, especially among our poets. And so, Lewis designated himself as Jove’s “standard-bearer,” deftly weaving the Jovial character throughout his writings. More than this, Lewis presents Christianity as essentially Jovial at its core. Christ, the Wounded King, is the true Jove.

Michael Ward, author of Planet Narnia, argues for Lewis’s use of the planetary characters as the organizing feature and creative impulse behind his Chronicles of Narnia. Ward’s thesis is truly compelling, but the feature I would like to focus on is Lewis’s use of Jovial elements in a Chronicle besides the most obviously Jovial one, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. But what does it mean to be “Jovial?” In Lewis’s alliterative poem “The Planets,” we get an additional glimpse of how he viewed the Jovial character:

… Soft breaths the air
Mild, and meadowy, as we mount further
Where rippled radiance rolls about us
Moved with music – measureless the waves’
Joy and jubilee. It is JOVE’s orbit,
Filled and festal, faster turning
With arc ampler. From the Isles of Tin
Tyrian traders, in trouble steering
Came with his cargoes; the Cornish treasure

That his ray ripens. Of wrath ended
And woes mended, of winter passed
And guilt forgiven, and good fortune
Jove is master; and of jocund revel,
Laughter of ladies. The lion-hearted,
The myriad-minded, men like the gods,
Helps and heroes, helms of nations
Just and gentle, are Jove’s children,
Work his wonders. On his white forehead
Calm and kingly, no care darkens
Nor wrath wrinkles: but righteous power
And leisure and largess their loose splendours
Have wrapped around him – a rich mantle
Of ease and empire…

The Jovial spirit is not simply being “jolly”—a word that shares origins with “joviality.” While jolliness is jovial, it is not synonymous with it. Joviality encompasses and reaches beyond jollity. It possesses a depth and richness, a well of deep calm that reaches beyond the snap and sparkle of gaiety. It includes this jolly twinkle of rippling waters in the sunlight, but there are deep blue twilit pools underneath—and these give joviality its special quality. “Ease and empire,” “calm and kingly”; as Lewis mentioned in The Discarded Image, this kingliness is the quality of a king at peace, ruling in unbridled majesty and splendor, not without joy and feasting, but with a solemnity that deepens joy rather than eradicating it. Is it any wonder that this quality is difficult to find in our casual, party-driven modern culture?

In The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, the Jovial thematic elements are easy to spot, especially after reading the portion of “The Planets” on Jove. Ward does a brilliant job highlighting these elements. “Winter passed/and guilt forgiven” was a key line in alerting Ward to what became his entire thesis—the existence of this underlying theme of the seven planets in the Narnia Chronicles. And once you are tuned into this mindset, the Jovial imagery comes thronging to the forefront, hard and fast: winter passing, the arrival of spring, the theme of kingliness, the raiment associated with a king in stately leisure, and the list goes on...
and on. But there is another, almost more important, function that Jove plays in the Chronicles—that of uniting and holding them all together.

In the Space Trilogy, we can clearly see Jove acting as a unifying force in more than one way. Jove is embodied in the person of Ransom in That Hideous Strength and at this point in the story Ransom has become a Christ-figure, acting as a priest-king. He is the fundamental agent that enables the reunion of Mark and Jane Studdock and the restoration of their marriage. If we’ve been paying close attention to the role that Jove has been playing throughout the Trilogy and Lewis’s other works, this should not surprise us. Jove as priest-king is not a unique image. Jove, as a planet, was frequently associated with Christ—the red spot in its side that looks like a wound and the kingly place granted to it in the medieval cosmology leads naturally to this association. The wounded priest-king heals and binds, cures and connects. Jupiter blends and unites all of the characters of the other planets and holds their number in harmony. In That Hideous Strength, in the chapter titled “The Descent of the Gods,” Glund-Oyarsa, Jupiter himself, descends to Thulcandra. The relationship that Jove has with the other Oyéresu, as well as with the cosmos, called “the fields of Arbol,” is fundamental to understanding the Jovial spirit itself. “Suddenly a greater spirit came—one whose influence tempered and almost transformed to his own quality the skill of leaping Mercury, the clearness of Mars, the subtler vibration of Venus, and even the numbing weight of Saturn.” Jove is the King of Kings. He “tempers and transforms” the qualities of the other planetary rulers with his own quality. But what is this quality like?

Before the other angels a man might sink: before this he might die, but if he lived at all, he would laugh. If you had caught one breath of the air that came from him, you would have felt yourself taller than before. Though you were a cripple, your walk would have become stately: though a beggar, you would have worn your rags magnanimously. Kingship and power and festal pomp and courtesy shot from him as sparks fly from an anvil. The pealing of bells, the blowing of trumpets, the spreading out of banners, are means used on earth to make a faint symbol of his quality. It was like a long sunlit wave, creamy-crested and arched with emerald, that comes on nine feet tall, with roaring and with terror and unquenchable laughter. It was like the first beginning of music in the halls of some King so high and at some festival so solemn that a tremor akin to fear runs through young hearts when they hear it. For this was great Glund-Oyarsa, King of Kings, through whom the joy of creation principally blows across these fields of Arbol, known to men in old times as Jove and under that name, by fatal but not inexplicable misprision, confused with his Maker—so little did they dream by how many degrees the stair even of created being rises above him.

This is a lengthy quote, but it is essential to understanding that quality that Lewis thought was so important and with which all of his writings are infused.

To move back to the Chronicles of Narnia, I’d like to spend some time exploring the Jovial elements in one of the Chronicles that does not have Jove as its ordering element, but is nonetheless held within the Narniad by Jove’s ordering influence. In the end, we will see how Jove’s presence has a deeper affect on the success of the Chronicles as a whole and also the role that Joviality has in the Christian faith and life.

The Horse and His Boy is my personal favorite of the Chronicles and the one that is frequently, I feel, overlooked. In Planet Narnia, Ward discusses how this Chronicle is oriented around the mercurial spirit. Here is Mercury’s section of Lewis’s “The Planets”:

\[
\text{MERCURY marches;—madcap rover,} \\
\text{Patron of pilferers. Pert quicksilver} \\
\text{His gaze begets, goblin mineral,} \\
\text{Merry multitude of meeting selves,}
\]

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7. Planet Narnia, 57.
9. Ibid., 323.
10. Planet Narnia, 140.
Same but sundered. From the soul’s darkness,
With wreathed wand, words he marshals,
Guides and gathers them—gay bellwether
Of flocking fancies. His flint has struck
The spark of speech from spirit’s tinder,
Lord of language! He leads forever
The spangle and splendour, sport that mingles
Sound with senses, in subtle pattern,
Words in wedlock, and wedding also
Of thing with thought.

I’m not going to take the time as Ward does to discuss all of the ways in which Mercury appears in The Horse and His Boy, though it is worth looking into. But I would like to explore where Jove enters the picture. Where does his influence make an appearance and how does it serve as a link or bridge between this Chronicle and the others?

“The happy land of Narnia – Narnia of the heathery mountains and the thomy downs, Narnia of the many rivers, the plashing glens, the mossy caverns and the deep forests ringing with the hammers of the Dwarfs! Oh the sweet air of Narnia! An hour’s life there is better than a thousand years in Calormen.”

One of the things that intrigued me the most as a child about this book, and the thing that still does, is that almost the entire tale takes place outside of Narnia. The story begins in the land of Calormen, far south of Narnia across a treacherous desert. The main character, Shasta, leaves Calormen and travels across the desert to Archenland, which is across a small mountain range from Narnia. He steps into Narnia only briefly and then returns to Archenland to help save its people from the Calormenes. This fact might lead the reader to see the book as the least “Narnian” of all the Chronicles—but that would be far from the truth. In many ways, this book is actually the most Narnian of the series, and I would say that this is a direct result of Jove doing what Jove does best—working through the characters of the other planets and holding all things together.

The Horse and His Boy takes place during the Golden Age of Narnia, when the four Pevensie children reign on the thrones of Cair Paravel. Narnia is in the middle of all its glory and splendor in the high days of King Peter. Lewis could have written any number of tales that take place within Narnia itself during this peaceful and bountiful period of its history. But he didn’t. He wrote instead about a ragged orphan in Calormen who escapes his servitude and ends up saving the small country of Archenland from an invasion of the Calormenes. Why? By setting his story outside of Narnia during her most glorious days, Lewis emphasizes the valor and nobility of the land of Narnia and her subjects in contrast to the slave culture of the Calormenes. The joviality of the Narnians is seen most clearly by setting it next to a culture devoid of this very quality.

In the beginning of the book, Shasta decides to run away from his adopted father who is going to sell him to a Calormene lord or Tarkaan. The Tarkaan’s horse, a Talking Horse of Narnia, wants to escape with him and return to Narnia. They have the following conversation after Bree, the horse, doesn’t speak the customary words of honor after speaking of the Tisroc, the ruler of Calormen:

“I say,” put in Shasta in rather a shocked voice, “oughtn’t you to say ‘May he live forever’?”

“Why?” asked the Horse. “I’m a free Narnian. And why should I talk slaves’ and fools’ talk? I don’t want him to live forever, and I know that he’s not going to live forever whether I want him to or not. And I can see you’re from the free North too. No more of this Southern jargon between you and me!”

Lewis immediately sets up a dichotomy, a distinction between the Narnian and Calormene cultures. He separates Narnia and Calormen with more than just a desert and a mountain range. He draws


12. The Horse and His Boy, 14.
a distinct cultural line and shows us that Narnia is on one side and Calormen on the other. Bree is a “free Narnian” and so he is not going to act like a “slave” or a “fool.” He recognizes that, while showing respect to the rulers of the land is a good thing, groveling, speaking lies, and flattery are things that do not befit a free Narnian.

One of the places this distinction is most striking occurs when Shasta and his companions arrive in Tashbaan, the capital city of Calormen. While there, they see a company of Narnians pass through the streets:

It was quite unlike any other party they had seen that day. The crier who went before it shouting “Way, way!” was the only Calormene in it. And there was no litter; everyone was on foot. There were about half a dozen men and Shasta had never seen anyone like them before. For one thing, they were all as fair-skinned as himself, and most of them had fair hair. And they were not dressed like men of Calormen. Most of them had legs bare to the knee. Their tunics were of fine, bright, hardy colors – woodland green, or gay yellow, or fresh blue. Instead of turbans they wore steel or silver caps, some of them set with jewels, and one with little wings on each side. A few were bare-headed. The swords at their sides were long and straight, not curved like Calormene scimitars. And instead of being grave and mysterious like most Calormenes, they walked with a swing and let their arms and shoulders go free, and chatted and laughed. One was whistling. You could see that they were ready to be friends with anyone who was friendly and didn’t give a fig for anyone who wasn’t. Shasta thought he had never seen anything so lovely in his life.13

This passage paints a vivid picture of the differences between the Calormene culture of the South and the Narnian culture of the North. The Narnians walk through the streets on their own two feet, not being carried about in a litter. They are free. Even in their walking and manner of dress, they are free. They are ready to make friends and speak to anyone without regard for rank or station, and they don’t care if people aren’t friendly towards them. This behavior is foreign to Shasta and the culture that he has been raised in, but he is drawn to it immediately. It is lovely to him. And above all, it is fundamentally Jovial. Nobility in Narnia is merry nobility.14

But because this freedom is Jovial, it is not a “no strings attached” freedom. The Narnians are free for a specific reason. And this is the difference between Calormen and Narnia, between the cruel, harsh, flamboyant pretension of the South and the strong, noble valor of the North. They are like the gods they worship. Paradoxically, the Narnians are in fact free because they are bound, and the Calormenes are bound because they are free. “For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness” (NKJV, Romans 6:20). “And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6:18). The Calormene gods are cruel, bloodthirsty, and power-hungry, and because of this they impose no higher standard of morality on their worshipers. The Calormenes are ‘free’ in regard to righteousness. They see no reason to help the poor and needy or to treat their slaves well or to respect their women. They are “free” to do what they want. But they are bound to sin and evil. The Narnians, on the other hand, are bound to the will of Aslan. They know what they are to do and what they are not to do. And so they are free to be what the Calormenes cannot be—the noble, chivalrous, kind, valiant, joyful people that Shasta sees in Tashbaan amidst all the poverty and snobbery of Calormen. The Narnians are free to be Narnians and this is all they could wish to be. The Narnians are free because they are “slaves of righteousness.”

And the wine flowed and tales were told and jokes were cracked, and then silence was made and the King’s poet with two fiddlers stepped out into the middle of the circle. Aravis and Cor prepared themselves to be bored, for the only poetry they knew was the Calormene kind, and you know now what that was like. But at the very first scrape of the fiddles a rocket seemed to go up inside their heads, and the poet sang the great old lay of Fair Olvin and how he fought the Giant Pire and turned him into

13. The Horse and His Boy, 57

In *The Horse and His Boy* Lewis consistently compares the enslaved, gaudy, imperious land of Calormen with the bright, valiant land of Narnia. From the beginning, Shasta is filled with a strange longing to go North, though he scarcely knows why. And to the last, with a comparison of storytelling, Lewis pushes the distinction even farther. The Calormene poetry was long and boring, filled with old adages and dusty proverbs, saying much but meaning little. The Narnian poetry is brave and bold, filled with great deeds, noble men, and great adventures. *The Horse and His Boy* is the only book of the series to show us a foil, a contrast, to the happy land of Narnia. Nowhere else do we see so clearly the essence of what it means to be a Narnian. To be a Narnian is to be free to do what Aslan tells you. To be a Narnian is to be free to fight the true fight, to be noble, honorable, joyous, hearty, and self-sacrificing. To be Narnian is to be Jovial, and to be Narnian is to be Christian.

To connect back to the Medieval Model that we began with, the Jovial influence cannot be truly separated from the personality of the planet, and thus of the entire cosmology, standing behind it. The importance of personality is seen in the distinction outlined before between Calormen and Narnia. What is the real difference? Why are the Narnians Jovial and the Calormenes not? They worship different gods. The personality of Aslan is what makes Narnia Narnian. And the joviality of Jove is what makes his influence what it is. Ultimately, Christ is the true Jove, the true bridge between all created things and all the qualities that the planets embody. And the medieval structure of the cosmos, despite being “scientifically disproven,” better embodies this true reality than our dead, vacuous “space” and matter-driven, loveless “solar system” can.

The implications that this has for the Christian life is seen in those Narnians, walking boldly down the streets of Tashbaan. Why are they like this? It may seem odd to say that they are like this because of Jupiter. But if I have made the case that I set out to, then this will not seem so absurd. What has Jupiter to do with Christ? The Jovial spirit that Lewis was so keen to see reawakened in our own day fills the pages of the *Narnia Chronicles*, Lewis’s academic writings, and even his theology. And ultimately this Joviality is simply Christian joy, Christian love, and Christian charity. Joyful boldness, deep gladness, solemn gaiety—these qualities have been slowly rubbed away, like gilding off a picture frame, by the cynicism and saturnine melancholy of our culture. And Lewis, with determined cheerfulness, pulls out his bottle of liquid gold, dips in his brush, and begins to paint—without restraint, but with unabashed, excessive, Jovial generosity, covering all the corners.  

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LIKEABLE PEOPLE everywhere agree that there is a good and right way to slaughter sheep. The Jewish term for this good and right way is *shechita*, and it can only be performed by a highly trained shochet. The shochet, in turn, is required to attain certification and maintain a license if he wants to put his training to use. The actual procedure consists of a rapid and precise horizontal incision using a chalaf, a specially designed instrument of surgical sharpness. When executed properly, the major structures and vessels at the neck are severed, causing an instant drop in blood pressure in the brain and immediately resulting in the irreversible cessation of consciousness. *Finis*. This is all very clinical and perhaps peripheral, but I think the take-home point is that having your throat slit sounds worse than it actually is. Of course, that’s assuming that the slitter is a shochet and that he approaches from behind, with a chalaf. Those three things being true, it really doesn’t sound like a bad way to go. If you’re a sheep, it certainly beats wolf breath or falling from a cliff.

Even more encouraging is that this method is said to render the animal insensible to pain. The Jews say this is done in obedience to God and in reflection of His character, because He is merciful and compassionate and would only provide for a merciful and compassionate method of dispatch for His creatures. I have no problem with this. In fact, if that’s the game, I want in. One of these days I too will be led from my pen for the last time, and when that moment comes, I do prefer to be dispatched with compassion.

To be clear, I’m not volunteering for shechita. I’ve always been squeamish about my throat. I’m just saying, it seems quick, smooth. Clean, almost.
Located in north-central France at the base of the Champagne region, the town of Troyes is conveniently said to be shaped like a cork. From my view in Google maps that assessment seems a bit accommodating, but as a settled territory the place is older than the Romans, and more resilient, so I can respectfully concede the point. The town stands by the Seine River about 100 miles southeast of Paris, and measuring in at just over five square miles, it’s probably smaller than wherever you went to college. Over the centuries this spot was conquered by Caesar, threatened by the Huns, and sacked by the Normans, but its strategic economic location as a critical hub for trade allowed it to always survive and often prosper. It’s the way of the world: men swell and perish, kingdoms totter and crash, cultures take root, wither, and blow away, but strategic economic locations remain.

By all accounts, Troyes is a treat. A gem. Picturesque. Maybe even delightful. Spin the wheel and land on a term—everyone agrees, the place has character and class. Today, I just want to mosey through the streets. See the home and burial place of Charles de Gaulle, window shop at LaCoste. I’ll skip the Museum of Modern Art but will take in the cathedrals if time allows. Some of them remember when Mona Lisa was born, and can probably teach me a thing or two. I would prefer to sip champagne and savor small bites of andouillette along my tour, but I’m stuck in the wrong hemisphere, so I’ve settled for dark roast, pumpkin bread, and Google Earth. Character and class.

I’m content with this arrangement, but I still have problems. Specifically, I am frustrated by the internet and my inability to find exactly what I want. I’ve been assured by a whole bevy of websites that there’s a section of Troyes where 600 half-timbered houses from the 16th century still stand, and finding these on street view is the endgame of my hunt. I’ve seen enough images on said websites to know that the half-timbereds are packed in tight rows along narrow cobbled streets near the Troyes Cathedral. I’ve dropped down at the cathedral and have maneuvered my position all around, but I can’t figure out where to go. The houses elude me, and I’m in danger of going home empty-handed. I’m aware that this says more about me than about the software, but I long for the day when Google figures out teleportation, and my struggles and whining and deep angry sighing will be no more.

The room filled with lambs has a dirt floor and tan walls. Most of the lambs look classic, white and soft, and as a whole they are quiet. A handful lick each other and a few are preoccupied with a spot on the wall, but most of them just look at you—not watching, not sizing up, not hoping to play—just looking, because there you stand and because they weren’t facing the wall when you arrived. Stereotypes aside, they really do seem dumb. It’s endearing, though. By definition these little guys are all less than one year old, and they are cute.

The adjacent room is smaller, with a dark green floor and white walls. A man in teal scrubs shuffles in backwards, and after a moment I see that he’s dragging two lambs into this room by their necks. The rest follow. Some walk lazily but most scamper, which I interpret to mean they are being herded from behind.

As this second room fills two of the lambs become hysterical and try to dart back through the door, but the man in scrubs wants no nonsense, and he flings them back to the mass. The procession continues and the lambs are tightly packed now, pressing into each other at all angles. The smaller ones strain their necks upward to avoid having their noses buried in a neighbor’s ribs or rump. You or I would do the same. The docile beasts still look cute, but they’re much louder now. Bleating is the official term, and I believe it signifies nervousness.

My pumpkin bread is gone and I need a refill, but I’m not ready to give up on Google Earth. I know that somewhere on this tiny patch of civilization, in 1572, was a home—maybe one of the surviving 600?
inhabited by a Catholic sergeant known to history only as Pernet.\(^1\) I know that on September 3 of that year, Pernet retired to his home shortly after being given an order by the city bailiff during the hour of corporate prayer. He declined supper and went immediately to bed, where he spent the night sad, pensive, and afraid (his words). In the morning he rose very early and made his way to the home of the city magistrate. Whether the sick feeling in his gut had given way to resolve or to resignation, or whether it had simply been displaced by exhaustion, I don’t know. But I want to retrace his steps as much as possible, because I want to wrap my mind around what happened next.

Pernet confessed to the magistrate that he had been ill and that the order had yet to be carried out. He then made his way to the city jail, where the recently-jailed prisoners had been given breakfast and locked together in one large room.

Outside, he gathered the jailers and soldiers. He handed a piece of paper to the city solicitor, a Catholic named Jean Le Jeune, and asked him to read it aloud.

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The man in teal scrubs now wears a white apron and knee-high rubber boots and carries a chain. With his free hand he reaches down and grabs the tail of the lamb nearest his leg. He claps one end of the chain to the tail and the other to a mechanical device connected to the low ceiling. The lamb once airborne glides over the others until a new set of arms receives him. A knife pokes in and out then, quick and smooth, right in the throat, and the device restarts until the lamb now leaking bumps into several others. They hang in a tight row, pressing into each other, each life descending in a skinny red stream, pooling in a long trough.

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\(^1\) Everything that follows regarding Pernet and Troyes comes from Barbara Deifendorf, *The Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009), 121-125.

Jean Le Jeune did not read the paper aloud as ordered. He dropped to his knees, raised his hands to heaven, and cried out for Pernet to have mercy and compassion. Pernet, probably exhausted and wanting no nonsense, killed him on the spot using a halberd.\(^2\) Someone else was found to do Le Jeune’s job and the prisoners were called from their pen, one by one. Each was struck with several blows before having his throat slit.

As the finer points of the scene play out in the security of my imagination, there are bright colors but no sound, like in a painting. The sun is high and unhindered, so that as each new prisoner enters the courtyard from the dark of the prison, he has to squint. Perhaps he tries to look Pernet in the eyes, or perhaps he prays. Some probably cry, quietly, but I presume that hysterics are at a minimum, for when has that ever helped?

Let’s say you’re the thirtieth prisoner to be brought out. What has been done with the first twenty-nine? Have they been piled, or left to lie where they fell? Have the soldiers been put to work, taking the dead and dying to the Seine on a rolling basis? Does the smell make you cringe, or is that the least of your concerns? When your own throat is cut, is the incision rapid and expert, such that you experience an immediate cessation of consciousness? Seeing what was about to happen, did you demand that Pernet at least produce proof of his qualifications and up-to-date license for this particular task? Did you ask if his dagger was shechita-approved? Did you praise God for His mercy and compassion but still make one last selfish request, that Pernet would do what he needs to do, but please, render you insensible to pain?

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As I fumble around in street view, I’m aware of the distance. I am 443 years and half a planet removed from the mass execution at Troyes on September 4, 1572. But something draws me to this blood. I feel a

\(^2\) A halberd was a weapon commonly carried by 16th century soldiers. It consisted of a battle-axe mounted on a spear.
need to catch it, or at least collect it off the ground. To swirl it around and look deep at the death of God’s creatures, precious in His sight. I think it will be worth it, but it might take a while; I can’t help but assume that Pernet, for all of his pensiveness, was probably pretty sloppy.

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Let’s stay in France, but move to Paris and rewind to a happier time. Just a couple of weeks is all we need, to August 22, 1572. A new marriage was afoot, and Paris was aglow, with good and gaudy royal fun. The bride was Marguerite of House Valois, younger sister of 22-year-old King Charles IX, and the groom the prince of Navarre, Henri of House Bourbon. The celebration of their union involved all the typical pomp of a wedding in the French Renaissance court. Elaborate plays, tournaments, costume balls, and banquets had been going for four days without stopping. King Charles especially was said to be fond of the various dancings, maskings, and stage plays. But more important than Marguerite and Henri, more important than the young king’s fun, was what it all represented. A marriage of this political and religious magnitude was unprecedented in the realm. Marguerite was Catholic, Henri was Protestant, and their marriage would unite the two sides. This would in turn usher in a new era of religious peace in France, a peace that, even two short years earlier, would have been unthinkable.

In the early part of the 16th century, France had been relatively tranquil. She weathered the occasional storms of social unrest, but the country was stable. Religiously, Catholicism had a strong and unchallenged hold on the crown and thus on the people. But the printing and circulation of Lutheran pamphlets in the 1520s introduced Protestant ideas and set the stage for the publication of John Calvin’s influential work, Institutes of the Christian Religion, in 1536. Calvin was a native Frenchman who had settled nearby in Geneva, Switzerland, and through his intellectual leadership the Reformation started to gain traction in France. However, for Frenchmen to consider the teachings of Luther, Calvin, and the other reformers was not a simple exercise in comparative thought. Anyone who embraced Protestantism in the Catholic country also embraced the very real possibility of harsh persecution. Nevertheless, the reformed church surged in the 1550s. By the end of the decade, at least 1,200 reformed churches had been established. One leader boasted that “we have churches in nearly all the cities of the realm, and soon there will be scarcely a place where one has not been established.”

Protestant efforts were most fruitful in cities in the south of France, in large part because of their proximity to the Reformed bastions in Switzerland, especially Geneva. Few peasants and manual laborers left Catholicism, but conversion rates were much higher among the literate and highly-skilled urban populations. Prosperous merchants and those of liberal professions especially adopted the new faith in disproportionate numbers. Despite this growth and relative flourishing, Barbara Deifendorf points out that “as a percentage of the French population, the aggregate number of Protestant converts always remained small—at most 10-15%. Yet,” she continues, “the disproportionate attraction that the new religion held for the most articulate and prosperous members of the middle classes, as well as the large number of noble converts, made Protestantism appear far more threatening than numbers alone might suggest.” As a result, the 1560s were anything but peaceful. Intermittent massacres, religious riots, and iconoclasm deepened pre-existing distrust between Catholics and Protestants. Deliberate and often unprovoked destruction of people, cherished buildings, and sacred objects stoked the constant smoldering of religious partisanship and fanaticism. Even three successive royal edicts

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5 Deifendorf, 8.
7 Deifendorf, 9.
8 Ibid., 10.
9 Kingdon, Myths, 39.
of pacification were unable to quench sectarian violence, and every few years latent hostilities exploded into all-out civil war.

Both sides deserved blame. Scott Manetsch writes that “Protestant crowds pillaged and desecrated churches, smashed Catholic images, and assaulted priests and monks. At a riot at Saint Médard’s Church in 1561, they paraded through the streets, chanting ‘The Gospel, the Gospel; where are the idolatrous priests?’ Catholic crowds, in turn, showered insults and stones on Huguenot[10] neighbors, burned Protestant Bibles and books, and disrupted Reformed worship services to cleanse their towns of the pollution of heresy. Sometimes they took more drastic measures, incited by inflammatory sermons or placards. One placard posted in Paris in 1566 proclaimed, ‘Cut them down. ... burn them. ... kill them without a qualm.’[11] Mob violence, municipal takeovers, broken peaces—these were the markers of a bloody and tumultuous decade in France.

But in 1570, things seemed to turn for the better. The Peace of Saint-Germain was signed near Paris in early August, which effectively ended France’s Third War of Religion. Besides bringing the war to an end, the Peace also resulted in greater freedom for French Protestants than they had enjoyed to that point. Specifically, they received four cities “to ensure their personal safety,” two locations in each province for preaching, and the right to “hold assemblies and preaching in their houses.”[12] The two years that followed were the most idyllic that the Huguenots had experienced since the Reformation first took hold in their country. It appeared that Protestantism was finally accepted and would be allowed to develop unhindered. Even if a large majority of the population remained devoted to Catholicism, the reformed Christians would at least be able to worship and preach without fear.

So when Marguerite and Henri were married on August 18, 1572 as the final outworking of the Peace of Saint-Germain, the ceremony was expected to cement the long-sought calm. Thousands of Huguenots, including their political and military leader, Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, had flooded Paris for the occasion, further packing the most populated city in northern Europe.[13] The union of Marguerite and Henri would, they thought, tighten the bonds between the Huguenots and the royal family and serve as one of the final steps on the long road to freedom and peace. For Parisian Catholics, however, including several prominent members of the royal court, the marriage was “an impious alliance, for which God would surely be avenged.”[14]

300 miles southeast of Paris, the Protestant city of Geneva was infected with the plague, and had been for quite some time. In fact, historians estimate that as many as 3,000 people may have died in Geneva from the plague between 1568-1572.[15] This, of course, kept the city’s ministerial corps, known collectively as the Company of Pastors, busy. Beyond their normal ministry of the Word and involvement in the lives of their church members, these men were the ones responsible for caring for the souls of the sick and dying. They still followed the practice set out in Calvin’s liturgy of 1542, “to visit the sick, and console them according to the word of God, showing them that everything they are suffering and enduring comes from the hand of God and His good providence, and that He sends nothing to His faithful people except for their good and salvation.”[16]

Their leader was 53-year-old Theodore Beza. In addition to being the Moderator of the Company of Pastors, Beza had long served as a spiritual leader to the reformed churches in France.[17]

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10 “Huguenot” was originally used as a pejorative term for French Calvinists, but became a common term to denote Protestants in France. I use the terms “Huguenot” and “Protestant,” and their plurals, interchangeably throughout this paper when referring to French reformed Christians.
11 Manetsch, “Saint Bartholomew’s.”
12 Deifendorf, 78.
13 Jensen, 211.
14 Deifendorf, 19.
Protestant leaders, he was encouraged and grateful for the peace that the Huguenots had enjoyed since 1570.

This new reality was especially heartwarming for Beza because France was his homeland. Born in Vézelay in 1519 to parents of Burgundy’s lower nobility, at the age of nine he was sent to Orléans to live with his uncle Nicolas, a member of the Parliament of Paris. Nicolas soon placed him under the tutelage of Melchoir Wolmar, a man with prodigious knowledge of the Greek language and classical literature. Young Beza proved to be a star pupil as he learned to write elegant Latin and Greek, and to love poetry. But Wolmar’s influence on Beza went beyond the classroom. Some years earlier, Wolmar had begun to sympathize with Lutheran teachings filtering out of Germany, and he eventually broke with the Roman Catholic Church. Though Beza was a Catholic by family and would remain so in practice for many years, he would later call the time he spent under the influence of Wolmar his “nascent reform.”

After several years Beza moved with Wolmar from Orléans to Bourges, but when his tutor later fled France for the religious safety of Germany, Beza’s father ordered that he return to Orléans and complete his licentiate in civil law, which he did at the age of 21.

Afterward, however, when he returned to Paris, he was intent on devoting himself to the humanistic arts rather than pursuing the legal career marked out for him. The young nobleman “aspired to literary fame, drunk on the writings of Cicero and the poetry of Catullus,” and by all accounts he possessed considerable talent. He published a collection of poems, Poemata, in 1548 while he was still in his twenties. The collection received great acclaim and was said to be “well-regarded, valued, and honored” by everyone in Paris. As for Beza, a friend described him as “happy in the gifts of grace, nature, and fortune.” Schaff said he was “well-introduced and well-connect-
ed, a scholar, a wit, a poet, handsome, affable, amiable, he lived on equal terms with the best of Parisian society.”

But soon after Poemata was published, the trajectory of Beza’s life was dramatically changed by a “crisis of body and conscience.” At the age of 29, “bed-ridden with a serious illness, the young poet contemplated how a triad of temptations—sensual pleasure, wealth, and literary glory—had distracted him from a religious vow made several years earlier to repudiate Catholicism and seek a safe-haven for his conscience at the side of Wolmar in Germany.” In addition to this, Beza felt ashamed by a second unfulfilled vow, to marry Claudine Denosse. Claudine, to whom Beza had become betrothed several years earlier, was the orphaned daughter of a Parisian merchant, and he had not married her publicly for fear of losing the income of his benefices.

Through his twenties he had continued reading Reformed literature, and the teachings he had absorbed worked together with his crisis of conscience to bring him to a point of spiritual conversion. Disgusted with the selfish and sensual ways he had spent his youth, and fearing God’s judgment, he resolved to break with Catholicism and leave the land of his fathers. As soon as he was healthy enough to do so, he fled. In a letter to Wolmar twelve years later, Beza recalled, “I broke every chain, collected my possessions, and abandoned my native country, my kinsmen, and my friends in order to follow Christ. Accompanied by my wife, I went to Geneva in voluntary exile.”

When Henri and Marguerite were married on August 18, the words solemnizing their union were framed in such a way as to greatly offend neither Catholics nor Protestants. After the ceremony the bride was led into the church to hear mass, while the groom, Admiral...
Coligny, and other Protestant nobles left the church and waited for her to return. The festivities resumed, and by August 22 there were several tournaments still to come, after which the Huguenot leaders would return home.28

While walking back to his lodgings from a meeting with the royal council that afternoon, Coligny made a sudden movement and bent toward the ground. Just then, a shot fired from a nearby window tore off one of his fingers and lodged in his arm. The sudden movement had saved his life, and he was rushed to safety as the would-be assassin disappeared. The Huguenots, surprised and outraged at this attempt to kill their leader, demanded immediate justice from the king and threatened retaliation if nothing was done.29 The marriage that was supposed to bring religious and political stability to France wasn’t even a week old, but the union between Catholics and Protestants already hung in limbo. Thirty-six hours later, the visage of peace shattered.

Everything that led to the botched assassination and everything that happened in the immediate aftermath is a web for someone else to unravel. The more you zoom out, the more that personal ambition, long-held grudges, foreign governments, the general complexity of the 16th century, and historical distance—not to mention conflicting early accounts driven by partisan ideology—muddy an already difficult-to-discern picture. But the consensus has long been and remains that the queen mother, Catherine de Medici, convinced herself and convinced the young king that the safety and security of France depended on Coligny’s removal.30 When and why exactly that decision was made, no one knows. If it was ever committed to writing, the document has yet to be found. Regardless, when the attempt on Coligny’s life failed, and with Protestant nobles ostensibly preparing to fight back, the decision was then made—if it hadn’t been the plan all along31—to eliminate not only the admiral, but all of the Huguenot leaders who had gathered in Paris.32

Coligny remained the first that needed to fall, and the Catholic Duke of Guise “was only too willing to carry out the bloody deed,” because he believed that the admiral had been behind the assassination of the Guise’s own father a decade earlier.33 Very early in the morning on August 24, Guise took a mercenary team to the place where Coligny was recovering from his injuries. After hacking him to death in his bed and killing most of his entourage, the mercenaries threw Coligny’s body out the window to the duke, who was waiting below to confirm the now-dead admiral’s identity.

From there, the killing spread to the Louvre, where many of the Catholic and Protestant leaders were staying, along with the newly minted bride and groom. Starting around 4 A.M., “young Protestant noblemen, who only a week earlier had been enjoying balls and games and who were still sharing living quarters in the royal palace of the Louvre with their Catholic colleagues, were now slaughtered by those same colleagues, often within the palace itself, on orders of the king.”34 “Some were executed by the sword, still rubbing sleep from their eyes. Others were shot by harquebuses35 as they tried to flee. A few died with sword in hand… The [Protestant] princes Navarre and Condé were placed under house arrest as their companions were cut down in cold blood.”36

What began as a single assassination had turned into a series of politically-motivated nighttime murders. When morning hit, the dry tinder of religious hatred caught fire, and frenzied mobs took over. In conjunction with the city militia they began attacking known Protestants in their

31 Protestant literature from the months and years following the massacres of Saint Bartholomew’s Day often suggested that the wedding between Marguerite and Henri was a sham all along, the culmination of a highly organized and lengthy Catholic ruse to get Coligny and the other Huguenot leaders gathered in one place, where they could be disposed of quickly and with minimal resistance.

32 Manetsch, “Saint Bartholomew’s.”

33 Jensen, 211.

34 Kingdon, Myths, 35.

35 A harquebus was a portable gun used in the 16th century. It was usually supported on a tripod or other type of rest stand.

36 Manetsch, “Saint Bartholomew’s.”
homes, killing anyone and everyone with swords, daggers, and harquebuses, or by throwing them out of windows. One 16th century account describes the scene: “[the first day of the massacre] was employed in such killing, raping, and pillaging... The commissioners, militia captains, quartermiers, and district officers all went with their men from house to house, wherever they thought they might find Huguenots, breaking down the doors, then cruelly massacring those they encountered, without regard to sex or age, having been incited to do this by the dukes of Aumale, Guise, and Nevers, who went through the streets calling out, ‘Kill, kill them all; the king commands it.’ Carts piled high with the dead bodies of noble ladies, women, girls, men, and boys were brought down and emptied into the river, which was covered with dead bodies and red with blood…”

The decision to eliminate the Huguenot leaders had ballooned into a city-wide disaster with explosive and disturbing speed. Soon, men and women all across France would learn that the Peace of Saint-Germain had been broken, and that a new and horrifying season of bloodshed had only just begun.

Theodore Beza entered Geneva for the first time on October 23, 1548. He had heard a call to leave—to leave his father, his home, and his vain ambition for worldly acclaim—and he obeyed. In his mind he had consciously placed the cross of Christ above his country and career, a shift that represented a profound reorientation for his life.

Being a product of the lower nobility and having been trained in both civil law and humane letters, Beza was “refined in his cultural tastes and at ease in the presence of people of power and wealth.” And, his academic gifts were evident. So when he met John Calvin a few weeks after arriving in Geneva, the great Reformer with a keen eye for talent took immediate notice of Beza’s potential as a churchman and scholar. His reputation as an accomplished poet with strong command of language went before him, and Calvin quickly encouraged him to employ his impressive gifts on behalf of the reformed cause. He also helped him secure a teaching post at the reformed Academy of Lausanne, where Beza would remain for ten years, until Calvin again recruited him, this time to return to Geneva and serve as a preacher and rector of the Genevan Academy.

Scott Manetsch writes that “over the years, a deep bond of friendship and trust was forged between the two men, due in large part to their shared labors for the gospel, their common concern for France, and Beza’s unflinching loyalty to his spiritual mentor.” When Calvin died in 1564, Beza was the appointed choice to succeed him as leader of the Genevan church. Meanwhile, though living and working full-time in Switzerland, Beza had retained strong ties to his homeland. Even before Calvin’s death he had been the de facto counselor for the French Reformed churches. He participated in the colloquies of Poissy in 1561 and Saint-Germain in 1562, as well as the national synods that followed the Peace of Saint-Germain in 1571 and 1572. Since 1561 he had been a chief adviser to Admiral Coligny, and in the early 1560s he marched with the prince of Condé’s Huguenot armies, serving as chaplain and fundraiser for the Reformed cause in France.

As a native Frenchman ministering in Geneva, Beza was hardly an exception. In fact, of the sixty-five pastors who served in Geneva from 1560-1594, thirty-eight were from France. Like Calvin and like Beza, many of the men who served as pastors in Geneva had emigrated from France either because of conscience, personal danger, or both. As such, these pastors had a natural burden and desire to see the church flourish in their home country, and to see their reformed

37 Deifendorf, 102.
38 Schaff.
40 Manetsch, Calvin's Company, 38.
41 Ibid.
42 Raitt, 149.
43 Ibid.
45 Manetsch, Calvin's Company, 43.
brothers and sisters live, work, and worship in peace and safety. In Calvin’s Company of Pastors, Manetsch writes of the impact of having so many Frenchmen in Geneva: “many of these ministers and their families had weathered grave dangers and experienced tragedy and loss during periods of religious violence in France. For many, the flames of persecution had galvanized and greatly intensified their religious convictions. Consequently, nearly all the refugee ministers brought to their pastoral work in Geneva a fierce opposition to Catholic doctrine and practice, a deep suspicion of the [French] monarchy, and an uncompromising commitment to Reformed Christianity.”46

Meanwhile, the fact that so many of Geneva’s pastors were religious refugees themselves led naturally to Geneva becoming a major haven for other French refugees during the frequent outbursts of violence and unrest throughout the 16th century. Long before Theodore Beza ever set foot in the small republic, John Calvin had welcomed great numbers of refugees to Geneva. There had even been times during his ministry when the city’s population nearly doubled from the influx.47 In many ways Geneva, and especially the Reformed church established there, had been built by refugees and for refugees. Manetsch writes that “Calvin perceived himself not solely as the minister of a city or territory, but as a pastor of refugees. In the reformer’s hands, the Pauline doctrine of election became a salve intended to comfort and encourage dispossessed wayfarers as they trekked toward a homeland in heaven.”48

As Calvin’s successor, Beza was particularly burdened that anyone who made their way to Geneva would know the Word of God. He preached several times a week, and always took great care in how he interpreted and explained the Scriptures. He believed that a great need in the church of his day was that people would know what the Bible really said, rather than just knowing “bits and pieces haphazardly tossed together.”49 The Bible, and knowing God’s living word, was central to all that Beza did as a minister because it was the primary means of arriving at comfort in the midst of the spiritual battle he saw raging all across Europe.50 If the Protestants in his flock were armed against the world’s oft-severe trials with little more than human reason, then their faith would not stand. He attempted to comfort Christians in his very troubled times by reminding and convincing them that their God was the one in the universe with all authority, and was absolutely sovereign over everything. The large movements and minute details of their lives and their world were under His care. No matter how dark their suffering might become, God was in control.51

Mutilation, degradation, terror all across the nation.

Bodies still breathing, thrown in the Seine. Murder and rape, and babies on blades—living, squealing, babies on blades, or baptized in blood of parents just slain.52 Streets painted red; rivers soaked with blood; neighbor slaughtered neighbor, and God remained God.

When faced with these things, what should we say? The grotesque might be accurate, but it isn’t very fun. Let’s try bullet points instead. Lifespan of chaos: in Paris, about a week.53 Body count: in Paris, 2,000-3,000, maybe more.54 Beyond Paris? The fuse had lit, and the fire spread.

A German student of law in the city of Orléans, where massacres began on August 26: “One could feel from moment to moment the outbreak of violence approaching… All of the street corners were provided with sentinels and the guard of the city as a whole entrusted to ten captains, each of whom had command over a designated group of soldiers… The Huguenots hid wherever and however they could, since they had been taken by surprise and knew the cruelty of the people… Everything bad was happening all at once; it was necessary

46 Manetsch, Calvin’s Company, 59.
47 Kingdon, Myths, 11.
48 Manetsch, Theodore Beza, 3.
50 Ibid., 84.
51 Ibid., 5.
52 Deifendorf, 21.
53 Manetsch, “Saint Bartholomew’s.”
54 Deifendorf, 1.
to save one’s property but also one’s life. On all sides the papists began not just to pillage but also to kill... During the days that followed, the massacres did not diminish in the center of town; they especially searched in the places known to be frequented by Huguenots. In particular, they sought those known as the elders of the church, and I know that several had their throats cut most despicably. The orders said first to get rid of all the leaders among the Reformed, after which they could more easily take care of the rest.”

Other accounts of the slaughter in Orléans record that the movement was launched by a Catholic captain named Lacour. On August 26, he had plans to dine with a Huguenot leader in the city. After sharing the meal as planned, Lacour killed him. And just like in Paris, after the first murder, fury exploded. Protestants were grouped together at the city wall and slaughtered while the murderers sang the beginning of Psalm 43 to mock them. Children older than 9 were killed, and the women were massacred with the men. As a general rule, individuals were beaten and then dragged through the streets to the Loire River, where they were thrown in, often with a stone attached to keep them from swimming to safety.

Lifespan of chaos in Orléans: two to three days. Body count: over 1,000. The beginning of Psalm 43: “Vindicate me, O God... and rescue me from wicked men.”

In most places where massacres occurred, the typical method of operation was imprisonment prior to death. In Lyon, news of the Parisian massacres reached the city on August 28. Janine Garrison-Estèbe writes that, almost immediately, “the people began to murmur about taking up arms, wanting to throw themselves at those of the new religion.” Officials took charge the next day and placed Protestants under protective custody in convents and the city jail, but on August 31 the mobs broke through and killed the prisoners. Sword, drowning, or simple strangulation were the preferred modes of dispatch.

A letter from the Company of Pastors in Geneva to the reformed church in Paris, written on September 16, 1557, reads like it could have been written on September 16, 1572: “Most dear sirs and brethren, there is no need for us to tell at greater length how saddened and distressed we are at the news of your affliction... never doubt that our God will watch over you and will hear your tears and groanings. If, indeed, we do not trust in His providence, even the slightest disturbance will be an abyss to engulf us, any puff of wind will unsettle us, and we will be thoroughly perplexed and confused... especially when Satan and his servants are given their head to torment and trouble the poor Church of God. We must always hold fast to this truth, that if God cares for all His creatures, He will not abandon those who call on Him. If not a single sparrow falls to the ground without His will, His fatherly care for those who are His own children will never fail...

55 Deifendorf, 119.
57 Ibid., 146.
58 Ibid., 147.
59 Manetsch, “Saint Bartholomew’s.”
60 Deifendorf, 23.
It is true that when we see a calamity like this which could bring in its train a state of extreme desolation, we are strongly tempted to suppose that God is tardy to intervene and put things right... And if at times He permits the blood of those who are His to be spilt, even so He does not cease to hold their tears precious... It is certain that He has only permitted what has happened as a preparation for some great thing which surpasses all our thoughts... If we are truly wise we shall subject ourselves to Him and, even if all should be thrown into confusion, calmly await the deliverance which He has promised us... And do not think that it is too much to expect that you should suffer calmly like placid sheep in the face of the fury of wolves, for you have the promise that the good and faithful Shepherd who has taken us under His care will never fail us, however furious and monstrous the cruelty of our enemies may be: God is fully powerful... we have the assurance that He will repel these attacks or else give us strength and grace to endure them.”

As the date of the letter indicates, the violence of the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacres, while shocking for its cruelty and scale, could not have been entirely surprising to the Huguenots. They had long faced intense persecution. Over the decades they had had to choose again and again to believe by faith that God had not abandoned them, and that their sufferings were part of some greater purpose, to conform them to the image of Jesus and carry them safely to their eternal homeland. In the late 1550s and into the 1560s, ministers like Beza and Calvin frequently appealed for calm and discipled their listeners to trust in God's good providence, even as their brothers in Christ had their houses sacked, were arrested, and sometimes even tortured and burned at the stake for their Protestant beliefs. These pastors insisted that the Reformed, like the Christian martyrs who had gone before them, had to renounce the “cursed spirit of murder” and “conquer through prayer and patience.”

So by 1572, Theodore Beza had personally endured and comforted others through the difficulties of long decades. As a minister in Geneva he had welcomed ragged and stricken refugees displaced by violent flare-ups and persecution. As adviser to Admiral Coligny and the prince of Condé, he had marched with Huguenot armies during the early Wars of Religion. He had cared for countless plague victims and seen many friends and colleagues pass away. Yet through it all, he believed resolutely in a God who was sovereign over all things and guided all events by His good and wise hand of providence. He saw God as the Good Shepherd, always caring for and watching over His sheep, the church. When evil befell believers, it was not because Satan had wrested control from God, or because God was powerless to stop it, or because He no longer cared for His people. In the midst of wickedness, Beza saw God’s hand at work, even if he couldn’t see the reason why God was working in that particular way.

Over the years Beza laid out his doctrine of providence in various theological writings. In 1558, dealing with a theological attack on the sovereignty of God and its relationship to evil, Beza wrote, “[Scripture] attests that all things, no matter what, are governed by God, including those that seem to be most fortuitous. It proclaims that even ‘tiny sparrows do not fall to the ground apart from the will of the Father,’ and that ‘all the hairs of our head are numbered.’ In fact, Satan cannot touch Job apart from God’s decreeing, and accordingly ‘permitting him to do so.’ The demons could not even rage against the swine apart from seeking their power from Christ... So, we can only say that all things are done with God willing—and consequently, when we see anything come to pass, let us confess that it has not occurred apart from God’s just, eternal, and immutable decree... we affirm that there is a sure and immutable outcome of all things, which the Lord has decided freely, wisely, and justly, from eternity... to the end determined by God.”

In 1559 he published one of his most famous works, Confession of the Christian Faith, written to persuade his Catholic father of the truth of the Reformed church. In it he discussed providence, and declared, “Nothing happens by chance, and without a very righteous decree of God (Eph 1:11; Matt 10:29; Prov 16:14). Nevertheless, God is in no wise the author or the one culpable for any evil which takes

63 Wright, 140.
place. Because His power and His goodness are so incomprehensible, that even when to do something He uses the devil or wicked men—whom He then punishes justly—He does not fail nevertheless to ordain and to do His holy work well and righteously (Acts 2:23; 4:27; Rom 9:19-20).”

And in 1570, after the bloody decade of war that ravaged his homeland, and before the massacres of St. Bartholomew’s Day, he wrote, “Nothing at all happens without God’s will or knowledge (that is, by chance or accident), but totally as God himself decreed it from eternity, disposing all the intermediate causes powerfully and efficaciously, so that they are necessarily brought to their destined end, in respect to His decree.”

Historians have rightly taken care to emphasize that it was a relatively small portion of the population who actually carried out the violence in 1572. Many French Catholics were horrified by the killings, and a good number of Huguenots only survived because they were hidden by Catholic friends until it was safe for them to flee.

Not all Catholics were as sympathetic, though. One of the especially disturbing aspects of this dark episode in European history was the reaction of political leaders, even while the violence was still happening. We’ll let them speak for themselves.

◆ The Spanish ambassador, on the massacre in Paris: “While I write, they’re killing them all. They’re putting them naked in the streets and pillaging their houses and not sparing the children. Blessed is the Lord who turned the hearts of the French princes to a just cause!”

◆ The ambassadors to Venice: “On every street one could see the barbarous sight of men cold-bloodedly outraging others of their own people, and not just men who had never done them any harm but in most cases people they knew to be their neighbors and even their relatives. They had no feeling, no mercy on anyone, even those who knelt before them and humbly begged for their lives. If one man hated another because of some argument or lawsuit all he had to say was ‘This man is a Huguenot’ and he was immediately killed. (That happened to many Catholics.) If their victims threw themselves in the river as a last resort and tried to swim to safety, as many did, they chased them in boats and then drowned them…

“The killing spread to all the provinces and most of the major cities and was just as frenzied there, if not more so… At present, sermons, meetings, and all other activities of the new sect are forbidden. Both nobles and commoners are returning to the [Catholic] Church… The king is an absolute ruler and just as he can shower rewards on those he likes, so he can ruin and make life miserable for those he despises and chooses to forget…”

◆ The Venetian senate, in response to the ambassadors: “The event about which you have informed us at length in your letters… telling about the massacre of the heads and principal leaders of the Huguenot sect, not only in Paris but also in other parts of the kingdom, caused in us such joy… We have also organized a procession to give thanks to God.

“Though confident that the two of you will not have failed to fulfill your duty in congratulating His Majesty, we nevertheless wanted to charge you to do so again in our name… Tell him that we rejoice immensely to see in him the courage that complements his singular goodness, great prudence, and virtue. We do not know by what action he could have better demonstrated this than by entirely destroying this plague so detrimental to his state and to the name of Christian…Because such a grand opportunity has opened to His Majesty to demonstrate to the world his holy thoughts directed toward beautiful actions and honorable enterprises, we are assured that he will continue to take all measures necessary to prevent such a pernicious seed from again taking root. We consider it certain that he will happily succeed, for, by the death of the chiefs, the members are scattered;

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64 Ibid., 139.
65 Ibid.
66 Deifendorf, 23.
67 Garrison-Estèbe, 22.
68 Deifendorf, 89.
and that excellent action on the part of His Most Serene Highness the king will thus live on, to his eternal glory, in the memory of men.”

In Rome, where word of the massacres had arrived in an unusually short time thanks to the hard riding of motivated couriers, the news evoked great delight. Pope Gregory XIII, after attending several triumphal church services in celebration of the massacres, ordered the striking of a commemorative medal. On one side is his own portrait, and on the other an avenging angel wielding a sword over a crowd of dead, dying, and fleeing Huguenots, along with an inscription of the date that the bloodshed began, Sunday, August 24, 1572.

In the ecclesiastical rhythm of Geneva, Friday mornings were set aside for a meeting of the Company of Pastors. On Friday, August 29, we can only hope that the providence of God used this time to strengthen and prepare Geneva’s ministers for the news of the massacres that would arrive later that day, via merchants traveling from nearby Savoy.

Robert Kingdon, a notable scholar on 16th century Geneva, says that Beza “came nearer to real despair in the first weeks after the grisly news reached Geneva than at any other time in his career... News of this sort must have come as a particularly severe blow to a man saturated in Calvinist theology—in the Calvinist conviction of the omnipotence of God, of the pervasiveness of divine providence, of the ways in which God controls every event in this universe.”

And despite having lived and labored through the 1550s and 1560s, Beza was shaken. In his first letter after learning of the massacres, he wrote to his friend Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich, “You will learn of the most horrible, the most cruel, the most monstrosous things... It’s a universal conspiracy; Geneva will surely suffer the same, and without a doubt I am writing you for the last time.”

Three days later, having collected more information from the refugees straggling into the city, Beza wrote to a friend in Germany to explain what he had learned. “I write without collecting my wits, stricken in spirit, and with a sense of tragic foreboding, to inform you of the events which have taken place, as they were reported to me, and which I can hardly grasp in my mind, let alone describe in writing or in speech... [he explains the assassination attempt on Coligny, then the murder]... Not content with this they threw his body out of the window for the crowd to tear apart. Then the whole town became a scene of massacre. So great was the mad rage that no distinction was made of age, sex, or condition...

“As the news of this atrocity spread rapidly though the provinces, city-gates everywhere were closed, and in case someone resorted to treachery our people were assured in solemn proclamations that they had no need to be afraid... And then, that very same night, in almost every town, our people were detained without warning and cast into prison. We still do not know what will happen in most places. They say that in Lyon at least 3,000 people have died, some cruelly put to the sword, some strangled. Others were thrown into the Saône to drown, but some of them managed to struggle ashore and to make their way here.

“My thoughts run more upon death than upon life at this time, and I write to you, most honored friend and dear brother, for what may well be the last time... I have told you a story of unprecedented perfidy and cruel barbarity; from such events may our Lord God preserve us. Farewell, my brother. Continue to pray to the Lord for us all. May I ask you to communicate to my esteemed brethren the news of all this, for it hurts me to describe repeatedly all this sorrow. One thing only consoles me, the hope that my future life will be but brief, so that I may soon draw nearer to my God.”

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69 Ibid., 134-135
71 Defendorf, 26.
72 Manetsch, Calvin’s Company, 2.
Firmly situated in the stream of theology handed down by Luther, Calvin, and other first-generation reformers, Beza believed in a God who controlled all things, who did not change, and who was never caught off-guard by evil. His God was the one who directed and even decreed everything that happened, and nothing about the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacres changed that in his mind. But the lead pastor in Geneva had a human heartbeat, and his theological fortitude didn’t lessen his horror at the actions of his fellow Frenchmen from August to October 1572. What he was hearing and seeing was nothing less than evil, which he had once defined as “any action which does not have the revealed will of God as its goal.”

God was good, wise, and in control, but Satan, demons, and men were capable of incredible wickedness. For Beza and his co-laborers in the gospel, the attacks of 1572 were a blood-soaked reminder that the advance of the reformation in France was still very much opposed.

Beza and the other pastors announced the news of the massacres in their Sunday sermons on August 31, exhorting their parishioners to humble themselves and pray earnestly for their French brethren. Beza preached in the pulpit of the church that Calvin had preached in for so many years, and his sermon shows that the news of the attacks did not crush his faith in the sovereignty and goodness of God. “The hand of the Lord is not shortened,” he said. “He will not suffer a hair of our heads to fall to the ground without His will. Let us not be frightened because of the plot of those who have unjustly devised to put us all to death with our wives and our children. Let us rather be assured that, if the Lord has ordained to deliver all or any of us, none shall be able to resist Him. If it shall please Him that we all die, let us not fear; for it is our Father’s good pleasure to give us another home, which is the heavenly kingdom, where there is no change, no poverty, no want, where there are no tears, no crying, no mourning, no sorrow, but, on the contrary, everlasting joy and blessedness. It is far better to dwell with the beggar Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom, than in hell with the rich man, with Cain, with Saul, with Herod, or with Judas. Meanwhile, we must drink of the cup which the Lord has prepared for us, each according to his portion. We must not be ashamed of the cross of Christ, nor be loath to drink the gall of which He has first drunk, knowing that our sorrow shall be turned into joy, and that we shall laugh in our turn…”

The Company of Pastors met with Geneva’s Small Council the following day, and shortly thereafter the city held a special day of public prayer and fasting, only the second in Geneva’s history. As the days went on, news of the spreading massacres and firsthand accounts from refugees continued to filter in. Within two weeks between 400 and 500 men, women, and children had made it to the Protestant haven. While destitute survivors filled the city, rumors, misinformation, and panic spread through it. Reports circulated which greatly exaggerated the number of Reformed victims. Refugees warned of Catholic plans to attack Geneva and kill Beza. Beza himself was certain that the massacres in France were the result of a Catholic plot meant to impose the decrees of the Council of Trent by force, and destroy the Protestant religion once and for all.

Despite being overwhelmed, Beza kept up his correspondence, and his letters show that he vacillated between hope and grief. He wrote to a friend in Heidelberg on September 10, “We are in mourning and lamentation. May God take pity on us! Never has anyone seen so great an atrocity… Our city where the plague and fever already reigned is now filled with the most unfortunate people on earth.”

He wrote of the massacre in Lyon, from where most of the refugees filling Geneva had come: “At Lyon, excepting a small number of persons saved by the greed of the soldiers, all gave themselves up to

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76 Wright, 141.
78 Ibid.
79 Manetsch, Calvin’s Company, 129. The first was held in 1567, when, similar to 1572, a great number of refugees from Lyon had come to Geneva following an outbreak of violence.
80 Manetsch, Theodore Beza, 33.
81 Beza to Christopher Harsdehaim, 4 September 1572, CB XIII.
82 Beza to Thomas Van Til, 10 September 1572, CB XIII.
be arrested and shut up in the prisons, then offered their necks [to the knife]. Not one drew a sword, not one murmured, not one was questioned. All were butchered like lambs marked to be slaughtered...

O Lord, you have seen these things, and you will judge! Pray for us too, who may expect the same fate. Our government is doing its duty, but it is in God that we must put our hope.”

And in a letter to Jean Cousin, Beza cried, “What, indeed, is this madness, what ferocity, what barbarism! And lastly, what shamelessness [on the part of the king] in excusing such an unheard of crime!… Do you see these things from on high, oh Lord?”

He was also buoyed by the incoming prayers and words of friends throughout Europe. In response to Beza’s short letter on September 1, Bullinger replied, “Even though, my lord and brother, you languish in heavy danger, and although you are tangled in great divisions, [remember] that you will be set free and saved by the most powerful and imminent help of our God. Our Lord still lives. None of His grace and power has ceased; therefore, He is able, at this very moment, to safeguard all of us against the mad fury of this world.”

In response, Beza thanked Bullinger for his words, which “were full of benevolence, consolation and encouragement.” He said that though the tasks before him were “so many and so great,” by the grace of God his soul was not despairing. Plus, it was necessary for Beza to work to comfort others, or else neglect his pastoral duties. In the aftermath of St. Bartholomew’s Day, steadfastly declaring the goodness and sovereignty of God was crucial. But a hallmark of church life in Geneva was the insistence that a true pastor not only attends to the ministry of the Word, but also shepherds his flock.

Faced with their desperation and needs, he was pushed to action, with little time for personal reflection and despair.

In the year or so following the massacres a total of several thousand people sought refuge in Geneva for varying amounts of time, and Beza worked constantly to provide them with relief and help get them settled. These Huguenots, thankful to have escaped France with their lives when so many of their neighbors did not, found safety and rest in the Protestant stronghold. Baird writes that the Swiss Protestants did well to care for the beleaguered refugees as they arrived in the city. “In fact,” he writes, “so fully did individual liberality provide for immediate wants, that, at first, no public help was called for.” But as the days went on, the ever-growing swell of survivors put a strain on the city and its people, who were “taxed to the utmost.” Relief and material assistance were needed far beyond what Genevans could provide.

During Calvin’s ministry, the Company of Pastors had established a private fund for the specific purposes of assisting French refugees and advancing the Protestant cause in France. In 1572, the fund, known as the bourse française, was quickly depleted by the influx of refugees needing relief. So on September 8, less than two weeks after refugees began arriving in Geneva, Beza and fellow minister Jean Trembley went before the city council “to advise the councillors on a strategy to provide relief, whether by a collection or some other means, for these poor people.” The council agreed to write to the magistrates in nearby Bern and Neuchâtel to solicit funds. In the meantime, they gave the deacons a sizable grant for meeting the most urgent needs. The deacons were also given permission to house the homeless in the city hospital, and to provide them with clothing and furniture as necessary. As the weeks went by and even these efforts proved inadequate, Beza and other pastors personally wrote to friends in Switzerland, Germany, and

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83 Ibid.
84 Beza to Jean Cousin, 23 September 1572, CB XIII.
85 Heinrich Bullinger to Beza, 9 September 1572, CB XIII.
86 Beza to Bullinger, 24 September 1572, CB XIII.
87 Manetsch, Calvin’s Company, 133.
88 Ibid., 292.
89 Manetsch, Theodore Beza, 38.
91 Manetsch, Theodore Beza, 34.
92 Kingdon, Myths, 11.
93 Baird, 250.
94 Ibid.
96 Manetsch, Theodore Beza, 36.
England, asking for financial assistance on behalf of the refugees. Later, at the prompting of Beza, a citywide collection was organized for the purpose of clothing the ravaged exiles against the approaching winter.97

It was a widespread belief in the 16th century that God through divine providence controlled all human activity.98 Therefore, most Christians believed that God had, at the very least, permitted the events of the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacres. But how individuals then grappled with and interpreted that idea made all the difference. For people like Theodore Beza, belief in God’s providence was an anchor and comfort in an otherwise hopeless situation. Though the devil used violence and cruelty and political webs to bring about events that might cause the Huguenots to lose faith in God, Beza continued to believe that God was the one above all wicked schemes, using even evil for His own divine purposes. In his sermons, he often called this “a doctrine of singular consolation for the children of God, that whatever wicked men and Satan (who directs them) have planned and are prepared to do against us, there will be nothing... that God has not ordained, because not even a single sparrow falls to the earth apart from the command and will of God.”99

However, not everyone agreed with his application of the doctrine of providence in this situation. Many Catholics believed, because of how events unfolded all across France, that it must have been God’s wish that the Protestants be put to death by their Catholic neighbors. It was therefore expected that most Protestants would see the error of their ways and “return to the bosom of the Holy Mother Church.”100 Barbara Deifendorf writes that many Catholics “celebrated the success of the [massacres] as a sign of God’s hatred for heresy and a promise that the unity of the church would be restored.”101

For many French Protestants, meanwhile, the belief that God had permitted the massacres was not comforting or assuring at all, but rather raised the dreadful possibility that God was actually against them, and the chilling proposition that the massacres were therefore the result of God’s wrath toward the Reformed.102 This in turn undermined all faith to which they had previously clung. Even Reformed leaders weren’t immune to this, as shown by the case of Hugues Sureau Du Rosier, who was pastoring a small church somewhat near Paris at the time of the massacres.

He wrote, “Being put in prison, I resolved at first to endure whatever death they made me suffer, and felt some peace in my conscience if I upheld the truth of the Gospel, which I was sure I would do... But this courage was just a puff of smoke, which did not last long, for when left alone I began to turn over in my mind the severity of the persecution that had just occurred, which I found quite different from preceding ones. I had always believed the past calamities to be so many visitations and rods by which God purged His church, and had always judged them to be clear signs marking out the children of God. But inasmuch as [the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacres] could be seen to entirely ruin the church, without the least sign of hope for its reestablishment, I began to see it as evidence of God’s indignation, as if He had declared by this means that He detested and condemned the profession and exercise of our religion, seeing that He had struck us again and again, as if He wished entirely to ruin this church and favor instead the Roman one.”103

In the midst and the wake of the violence, many Protestants who had not been killed left the reformed faith and swore allegiance to the religion of Rome. Some surely did so out of fear, but it’s clear that a good number of Huguenots experienced a severe crisis of belief as a result of the prolonged and extreme bloodshed. If God was their Shepherd, then why hadn’t He come and saved them from their attackers? Why did He let the slaughter rage on for so long and spread so far? Catholics who carried out the murders

97 Ibid.
98 Kingdon, Myths, 109.
99 Manetsch, Calvin’s Company, 107.
100 Kingdon, Myths, 41.
101 Deifendorf, 25.
102 Kingdon, Myths, 109.
103 Deifendorf, 130.
asked the same thing, in a mocking way. “Where is your God?” they taunted the victims, “Where are your prayers and psalms? Let Him save you if He can.”

When it was all said and done, the number of Protestants who quit the faith far outnumbered those who had been murdered. At one point in Lyon, sixty Huguenots were imprisoned together. Forty immediately abjured when given the opportunity at the request of their Catholic friends. Twenty refused, seven of whom were killed. At that point the remaining thirteen accepted a second offer to return to Catholicism. Nicolas Pithou, a Reformed pastor in Troyes, estimated that in his town only twenty remained who didn’t die or renounce the Protestant faith. And in Paris, an eyewitness claimed that more than 5,000 Protestants there had abjured by the end of September. Whatever the total number, Protestant losses due to conversion during and after the massacres were substantial. After all, the abjurers thought, if the Reformed church was the true church, and if Protestants were the people of God, then why would God have let this happen?

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Psalm 44: “O God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old: you with your own hand drove out the nations, but them you planted; you afflicted the peoples, but them you set free; for not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm save them, but your right hand and your arm, and the light of your face, for you delighted in them. You are my King, O God; ordain salvation for Jacob!

Through you we push down our foes; through your name we tread down those who rise up against us. For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me. But you have saved us from our foes and have put to shame those who hate us. In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever. Selah.

“But you have rejected us and disgraced us and have not gone out with our armies. You have made us turn back from the foe, and those who hate us have gotten spoil. You have made us like sheep for slaughter and have scattered us among the nations. You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them. You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us. You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples. All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face at the sound of the taunter and reviler, at the sight of the enemy and the avenger. All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you, and we have not been false to your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way; yet you have broken us in the place of jackals and covered us with the shadow of death. If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart. Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our afflic-

tion and oppression? For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our belly clings to the ground. Rise up; come to our help! Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!”

In an article titled “St. Bartholomew and Historical Perspective,” Theodore K. Rabb writes, “At a certain level the massacre of St. Bartholomew remains unique, sui generis. It haunts historical consciousness as the epitome of the cold viciousness of religious excess... But at another level it blends those agonizingly slow and deliberate processes that are the historian’s main concern. The particular process... may vary, but each offers the historian the means to achieve the perspective
that is his stock in trade, the long view that alone can lessen the horror
of St. Bartholomew.”

His point, of course, has to do with the historical distance that we now have from the event, but it could be said that “the long view” is what sustained Theodore Beza in 1572, even while the horror still raged. Beza had always seen the Protestants as the faithful remnant of God, and often likened them to earlier Christian martyrs who remained steadfast in the midst of terrible evil. The story of the Reformed church in France, he believed, was the story of the elect Church throughout history: the Jews in Egypt, the prophets persecuted by wicked rulers like Jezebel, the remnant from Judah exiled in Babylon, early Christians who faced lions in the presence of Roman emperors, and so on. In his day, it was the Huguenots who were confronting yet another satanic plot to destroy God’s people, and he insisted that they must persevere and trust in the Lord who alone could shelter them through the storm.

Beza explicates these ideas in his History of the Reformed Churches in France, published in 1580. In an engraving on the title page of the book, three men stand with a large anvil between them. In front, a broken hammer rests discarded on the ground. The men are soldiers, strong, armor-clad from helmet down. Each one has a sword on his belt and is caught in motion, preparing to strike the anvil with a large hammer. The soldier in the middle doesn’t seem to realize it, but his hammer has also broken, and will detach from the handle at any second.

The storm of the massacres eventually passed, and life returned to a degree of normalcy for Beza, the Company of Pastors, the citizens in Geneva, and the thousands of French refugees they had served in 1572 and 1573. Protestantism never fully recovered in France, even though Beza and others continued to labor to advance the Huguenots’ cause and secure their peace.

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109 Manetsch, Theodore Beza, 54-55.
111 Deifendorf, 13.
112 Ibid.
113 Schaff.
Beza continued to teach and preach in Geneva for close to thirty more years. As he grew older, he seems to have expended extra effort to shine light on the doctrine of providence for the parishioners under his care. He preached a sermon series on the passion and resurrection of Jesus in the hope that preaching on the suffering and death of Christ might provide consolation for Christ-followers in the latter half of the 16th century—a time of “great confusions” and “so many harsh storms.”\(^\text{114}\) He also wrote a lengthy commentary on Job, published in 1589, when he was seventy.

In it, he broke down the doctrine of providence into finer points,\(^\text{115}\) which I have abridged and paraphrased as follows: 1) God, as the maker of all things general and particular, is also their governor. 2) Nothing can happen that God is unwilling to let happen, because then He wouldn’t be omnipotent; nothing can happen that He doesn’t know about, because then He wouldn’t be omniscient; nothing can happen that He doesn’t care about, because then He wouldn’t be a good and just ruler. 3) Therefore, everything that happens, not only in result but also in cause, comes about through God’s ruling and directing will. 4) Everything that God wills, regardless of how it appears to us, is just and right in that it emanates from His own hidden, eternal, perfect counsel; whatever He uses to accomplish these purposes (whether men, angels, nature, etc), He is just and right in using those means. 5) Even so, God cannot be said to be the author of evil; if anyone does make this conclusion, he is guilty of great blasphemy.

Beza then followed up these points by saying that lest “any man find fault that all these grounds are taken from human reason, and not from the word of God, let him answer me, whether God himself may not properly and without blasphemy be said to have sent Joseph to Egypt (Genesis 45), to have raised up Pharaoh, upon whom hardening his own heart, He might show His power (Exodus 4:21); to have given David’s wives to his son Absalom; to have moved David’s heart to number the people; to have bidden Shimei to curse David… Likewise the rebelling and falling away of the ten tribes from Rehoboam, the Lord calls His own work (2 Chronicles 11)… And that we may not forget the most excellent work of all others, namely, man’s redemption, that most ancient, true, apostolic church, not uttering any blasphemy, but speaking as it was moved by the Holy Ghost, with one accord cried out, that Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and people of Israel gathered themselves together, to do whatsoever the hand and counsel of God had determined before to be done (Acts 4:28).”\(^\text{116}\)

The doctrinal discussion on providence might be prone to descend into technicality, but for Beza, the Scriptural support was crystal clear. As he had throughout his career, he maintained that human reason must always submit to the truth taught in the word of God, and never the other way around. Also, Beza knew that a discussion on providence was far more than theoretical. In his work on Beza’s pastoral theology, Shawn Wright says, “Discussion of God’s providence, and His relationship to evil… concerned the very foundation of the faith, for it concerned the character and power of God. It dealt with the good of God’s people… Rather than making believers doubt God’s character, His providential rule over evil should give them hope in the midst of the battle raging around them.\(^\text{117}\) And as Beza himself said, “This doctrine is full of excellent comfort, for thereby we understand that by the power of our God the rage of that hungry lion is abated and bridled, and that God will never suffer him to do anything against His children which shall not be to their good and profit, as the apostle [Paul] tells us (Romans 8:28) and also teaches us by his own example (2 Corinthians 12:17).”\(^\text{118}\)

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A curious reality of the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacres that puzzled contemporaries and has puzzled historians ever since is the ease with which the Huguenots allowed themselves to be slaughtered. Why didn’t they fight back? Natalie Zemon Davis says, “The non-resistance of the Protestants is an extraordinary fact which emerges

\textit{\textsuperscript{114} Manetsch, \textit{Calvin’s Company}, 238.}

\textit{\textsuperscript{115} Wright, 153.}

\textit{\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 156.}

\textit{\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.}

\textit{\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 159.}
from all accounts of the 1572 massacres, and which is in contrast to the militant high morale of the Protestants when they were attacked in, say, 1561-62. The Protestant martyrs described in Crespin in 1572 either try to run away or die bravely in their faith. When an individual does try to resist, it is jarring for being the great exception to the rule.” H. G. Koenigsberger agrees that this was an unexpected pattern of behavior. In many cases the men being killed were tough, experienced soldiers, he writes, and their “complete failure to take even the most elementary military precautions seems to have been [due to] their complete trust in the king and their assessment of his absolute authority.”

I imagine Beza reading that last sentence today and laughing to himself. On one hand, Koenigsberger nails it—there are always exceptions, but it seems like large swaths of the slaughtered Huguenots really did trust in the absolute authority of the king, even unto death. On the other hand, the reason Koenigsberger is so befuddled is because he’s talking about the wrong king.

We don’t know for certain why the Huguenots allowed themselves to be killed so easily. They were not pacifists, and in the aftermath of St. Bartholomew’s Day, Beza and other reformed leaders championed resistance efforts against the French crown. But perhaps the steady discipling from pastors like Beza to trust in God’s providence had infiltrated the hearts of the Huguenots. Beza did not believe that Christians should respond to suffering with stoic indifference, but neither should they return evil for evil. Like Jesus before His accusers, and “like a sheep before its shearer is silent,” Beza had long urged the Huguenots to endure suffering bravely, and to trust in God’s goodness, power, and plan, even while praying fervently to Him for His help.

In Romans 8, Paul says, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us... And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son... If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,”—and then he quotes, from Psalm 44—“For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

As for so many of God’s suffering children through the ages, Psalm 44 reads like a commentary on the temporal experience of Beza, the Company of Pastors in Geneva, and the Huguenots. But Beza banked his life and eternity on Romans 8. The doctrine of providence that anchored him in this world only made sense if there was a King and a Kingdom for God’s people beyond this world, secured by Jesus Christ.

Beza was a poet, counselor, theologian, and leader. But above all, he was a pastor. His legacy is that he trusted God in all things, and for decades discipled the sheep under his care to do the same. He trusted and taught that God is good, even when evil rages. He trusted and taught that God is sovereign, even when the storms of the world toss everything into chaos. God’s ways are often perplexing, Beza knew, but His word can and must be trusted. God was, is, and always will be the only king with absolute authority, and He alone has always had the long view that will make sense of horror and suffering.

119 Davis, 241.
121 Wright, 146. For example, Beza countered a wrong notion of providence when discussing how Christians should respond to the plague by asserting that it was foolish to not take measures to guard against it. If that were the case, then “let us neither eat, nor drink, nor seek any remedy against diseases; let soldiers also go unarmed to battle...”
122 Ibid., 166.
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**Introduction**

WHILE WE have carefully preserved the many theological works of the Reformers, we have largely ignored and forgotten the orthopraxy—the practical theology—that went hand-in-hand with that theology. Far from producing only bare, unadorned theology, the Reformers did indeed plant seeds of Reformed culture; but we have not cultivated these seeds as we have their theological counterparts. *Cato Censorius Christianus* is one of those forgotten seeds. Written by Theodore Beza in 1592, Cato is a collection of eighteen charming Latin poems mocking various vices, from drunkenness to adultery to (quite humorously) monkery. As art, *Cato* is delightful and clever. It demonstrates the power of art to train our minds and souls by means of beauty and laughter. As literature, *Cato* is a Christian descendant of a pagan work. The title is a nod to the *Disticha Catonis*, a collection of didactic Latin moral poems attributed to the Roman statesman Cato. Beza builds upon the literature of his pagan forefather rather than merely replacing or ignoring it. As theology, *Cato* reconciles the concepts of natural law and church discipline. The collection is a poetic counterpart to Beza’s *On Excommunication*, showing that sin is naturally destructive. It thus shows how church discipline in particular and Christian truth in general are not contrary to but rather parallel with nature. And in each of these ways—as art, literature, and theology—*Cato* exemplifies the Reformed understanding of the Lordship of Christ over all of creation.

*This is a direct prose translation of the poems, and the first English translation to date.*

—Douglas Wilson
I. Against the Prideful

Hey, you with the scornful brow, the sniffing nose, the lofty eyes, the puffed up chest, and in your very gait resembling the peacock—you strut [about], wholly declaring vain presumption. Who in the world dreams himself to be everything, when he is really nothing? Will there be no Avenger of this arrogance observing you from high heaven? Even if, delaying, He were to put off His anger, who would put up with you here, you who are incapable of putting up with others?

II. Against the Lazy

And you, whose sole occupation is leisure, wont to watch others while doing nothing [yourself]—do you not see the heavens above working with constant rotation? The wind rushing through the expanses of the air? The rain pouring down in an endless torrent? The sea swelling, back and forth, with waves? And yet the earth itself remaining still, taking on an appearance so contrary [to all else]? You do see these things, then: do you not understand that your idleness is thus condemned [both] above and below?

And so listen, fool, if you have the time: as man is born to labor and not to leisure, so also is rest bought by labor, not leisure. There is therefore no employment worse than unemployment.

III. Against Graspers

I ask you who, having ascended the peak of one mountain, start on the path to the peaks of another, and never cease to join mountains to mountains: when has rest ever been granted to you in this way? Clearly, in order that you may transcend the heavens themselves, even the whole palace of Heaven will come to be yours, or He who made the world will enlarge the world, since the world [as it is] would not quench this thirst. [But] on the contrary, either you will never obtain what you desire while living, Grasper; or while climbing in your misery you will fall. And when you are dead, whom while living the whole world does not satisfy, six feet [of earth] will be enough for you.

IV. Against Liars

You, Falsehood, are unknown to the heaven and unknown to the earth, and to all those things which that Father of the world holds in check with the bridle of truth. But you are pleasing (Oh the crime of it!) to mortals alone, a schoolmistress of all deception and cunning; settling yourself in the heart and mouth; trespassing unpunished into the very throne room of princes; and sitting on the judges’ rowdy benches—shouting aloud throughout the workplaces, throughout the market places, crying out unashamed from the sacred places and from the pulpits themselves, upwards, downwards, overturning all [that is] holy: will you never be overcome until the whole world is in ruin? For as divine Truth keeps watch over all, so by accursed Falsehood all perishes.

Therefore rule, O Falsehood of the World (for falsehood deserves this [title]), rule as long as God permits. But those few of you whom Truth delights, stand strong, supported by the hand of Providence. For the time will come when the world and its lies will fall together with a single blow. Falsehood will drag down with it the world, and the world, falsehood.

V. Against the Garrulous

To wish to remain quiet when you ought to speak, or to wish to speak when you ought to be silent: these two vices must be carefully avoided by men in both private and public matters.

However, of these two vices I would prefer the man who conceals things he ought to reveal to the man who reveals what he ought to conceal. For there are many things that are fit for silence, and often many things could have been said that ought to have remained unsaid until their proper time.

And so learn, O Garrulous ones, how to be quiet, or be exiles throughout whole world.

VI. Against the Silly

Since by their constant motion the unresting heavens turn the times and [with each passing] age the uncertain[ty of death] hastens to
morts, [and] once that is done the time will come for you to give an account for your past life before the judgment seat of the serious God—what help will it be to you to have spent your life in speaking nonsense, you whom silliness will bring unwilling to such a serious position?

VII. Against Adulterers

Do you wish for the earth to be destroyed? Uproot the cities.
Do you wish to destroy the cities themselves? Destroy the homes.
Do you wish to destroy homes? Then let spouse be without spouse, and let the promises of holy marriage be in vain.
Therefore whoever commits adultery must be removed from the earth, or homes, cities, and the whole earth must perish.

VIII. Against Theologians Who Philosophize Too Much

The things which God has revealed to us by His own voice cannot be discovered by human reason. The one who, awake, dreams by the empty speculations of philosophy that these things may be known or may be taught with more certainty—that is, imagining that the light [of the Scriptures] needs the darkness [of philosophy]: that man is worthy to be considered the chief among idiots. For truth refutes a lie, but a lie does not prove the truth.

IX. Against False Witnesses and Blasphemers

To swear in God’s name is to place Him on His own throne, in part as One who knows hidden things, and in part as the Vindicator of His own truth. But you who knowingly swear through false gods, or who swear falsely, do you know what crime you commit? You place God’s own enemy on the very throne of God, and on the podium of Truth you place a Lie. Will you not bring down the heavens upon his head? And will you not destroy the very ground beneath his feet?
But you, more wicked than any other criminal, who provoke God Himself by your impious words, punishment known to God alone awaits you as one guilty of an unforgivable sin.

X. Against Epicureans

You display a human appearance, but inside you are an animal, more stupid than any beast. Are you able to observe the lights of the stars as they travel in such perfect order? Are you not ashamed to trample the dirt of the earth and its many wonders? To see the raging of the sea as it ebbs and flows, and its many creatures swimming [within]? And although all those things proclaim the great and most high God to all, to wish to blow a raspberry at such witnesses, so that you might be ignorant of what everyone else knows? But, you say, if God made these things, and directs them by His nod, why, as he allows so many good men to suffer, do we see so many wicked men thrive? [But] you have it all wrong. For in reality, though all things do happen for the best for the righteous and all for the worst for the wicked, what you consider to be good fortune for the wicked is really bad and what you think is bad fortune for the good is really good. You ought instead to confess the great God who has so often spared you.

XI. Against Flatterers

Lavishing praise unduly (if praise is ever merited) and clothing the shameful with the worthy name of virtue: just as this turns even sound minds from a straight path, so it makes bad men still worse. Whoever is afraid to bring eternal shame upon himself in the long run, let him run from flatterers. For how much better would it be for a counselor be said to be harsh, to praise sparingly and to criticize liberally!

XII. Against Drunkards

Having been given over to the gorging of your bellies, you drink death from where others find life. Both early morning and late night see you sitting at the table with your enormous drinking cups until, vomiting a foul hangover, you become a loathsome spectacle to bystanders. Who would believe these were people with such faces? With your foreheads mottled with so many enflamed spots? With your noses shining with dried, bronze-colored snot? With a scarlet ring about your
red eyes? With your eyes swollen with a wine-colored flush? With your jaws sodden? With your cheeks streaming? In truth, who could even compare you to beast? For no one has ever seen a drunken beast.

What fate might we possibly judge you worthy of? This, of course: that your drunkenness will distort you more and more while still living with the very punishments it usually treats its own lovers, and [finally] unending thirst will thrust you all prostrate into the grave.1

XIII. Against Whore-Mongers

You, whom the base love of pleasure has turned into billy goats and dogs, and who have been harnessed to the foul yoke of harlots: whichever of them is most impure leads you to perish in your shared debauchery. And this, contrary to the vows of marriage, teaches you not to sow the human race but to destroy it. Be gone, O Foul Diseases, to wherever the just wrath of Providence and seething Nature herself call you.

XIV. Against Misers

How could he be touched by the love of God? How could he wish to love someone in return? And how, I might even say, could he want to love himself—whose God is money alone? One who grasps at profit from whatever contemptible source? One who lives as his own cruel tormenter? In this way the Miser is hateful to everyone, such that he is an enemy to God, to all others, to himself.

XV. Against the Envious

Rising out of the dark, dire depths of hell, your chests swollen by the poison you there inhaled, you are neither able to appreciate your own blessings, nor are you able to bear good will toward the blessings of other good men. Where will I then tell you to go, envious ones, since in life the world is not able to bear you, and in death the very underworlds would likely reject you also? But certainly, as you are accustomed to be the likeness of all hell, so continue to be it always. O Envious, destroy your fellow Enviers in turn, for there could be nothing more wretched than the Envious.

XVI. Against Usurers

He who by lending never increases your wealth with his but rather continually increases his own wealth with yours; for whom even things that are by Nature sterile bear fruit; who robs by giving, who by lending acquires; who, although never sowing, never stops reaping; who, devouring the cooked and the raw2 alike is never satisfied; to whom, whether the ground be barren or fertile, the moon brings the monthly payments and the sun the yearly: do you want to know what kind of man he is? He is a usurer; no pestilence in the world is more deadly than he, and no pestilence in the world is more common. But you, God, who are the stern defender of the poor whom this man has devoured with his interest, make him repent; or let him be dragged before your judgment seat and pay the price, with interest.

XVII. Against Monks

Who, feigning to imitate Christ, is actually a pig from the herd of Epicurus? For whom is piety a crime and religion a joke? Who, celibate by name, is filling the cities with mothers? Who, seeming to be a pauper, in reality makes everything his own? These are those whom Satan will afterwards keep cozy in his halls, each well-versed in whichever art of wickedness happens to please him—and, as the just wrath of God demands, Satan draws them out little by little and scatters them throughout the whole world; whom at one time Greece called monks,

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1 I have here translated stratos tumulo as “prostrate into the grave.” However, there seems to be a pun in the Latin that is lost with the English translation. The word translated “grave” is tumulo, which can also mean “heap”; and stratos tumulo would be a very fitting way to describe drunk men sprawled in a heap.

2 Cocta literally means “cooked,” as I have translated it here; but Beza seems to be making a play on words here, as it can also mean “bankrupt.” Cruda, which I have translated “raw,” more literally means “bleeding”; and in context it seems to refer to unseasoned businessmen.
as an all too perfect omen, because they are “only a pain” to all. 3

XVIII. Against Old Age

Old Age, you are hoped for by all, but when you have come you are pleasing to few. How is it that the very people for whom you open the doors of heaven and end the miseries of this life shudder at you? Because most think about nothing except for earthly things, they are ignorant of the heavenly. Because of this there are countless complaints, because of this there is futile grumbling, while the miserable old man—the living dead, with his neck trembling, his eyes bleary, his brow carved with wrinkles, stooping to the ground—with faltering step barely walks with a cane: one complains he is now unable to taste anything; another, coughing incessantly, is unable to sleep day or night; another is burnt up by the heat of fever, constrained by the harsh torment of gout; still another writhes in pain from his torturers, kidney stones. All these fill the heavens with their vain complaints—and this is to omit many thousands of other afflictions which that cruel old age is accustomed to bring with it; for old age is in itself the worst of diseases. But what if they should instead attribute those hardships which each man suffers not to old age but to themselves and to their own self-indulgence, which are the reason this just punishment is thus paid? Rather, though a thousand crosses come with old age, who will justly call these crosses wicked, from which we learn to know God, and even ourselves?

And so of course, whatever this or that man might say, old age is truly a great gift from a good God: whether it be mild, as it has been with me, or harsh—that is, if it is granted to men to use a good thing well. This is what Beza gratefully confesses with this poem, asking only that this old age of his continue to remain for a little longer. 4

COURTNEY SKEEN graduated in May and is working as the Customer Service Manager for Wovax. She also teaches music on the side and has returned to NSA part-time this fall to study Hebrew.

3 μόνον ἄχος (“pain alone”) is a pun on the Greek word for monk (μοναχός,) which in reality means “a solitary one”
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