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ESSAY

# Biblical Quarantines: A Survey

By Debra Rienstra   March 21, 2020   21 Comments



learn.

## The Garden of Eden

The first chapters of Genesis say nothing about walls and gates around the garden, so perhaps it's a stretch to propose that the human race began in a quarantine situation. However, Our First Parents—only the <sup>1</sup> of them, according to Genesis 1 and 2—were apparently isolated, at least from other humans. And since these early chapters also say nothing about God giving them a compass, one guesses they were not compelled to venture far, even without a wall to prevent them. Stuck in quarantine, then, perhaps the fruit-eating episode could be read as the world's first instance of people getting bored and restless while cramped in tight quarters together. Lesson: behave yourselves while in quarantine. If you do break the rules, don't blame each other. It just makes it worse.



Esau, even if it meant living with wily old Uncle Laban in Haran for a while. Jacob's experience demonstrates that in quarantine situations, one thing leads to another and before you know it twenty years have passed. However, if you play your cards right, then love, babies, and animal husbandry skills can result. Not sure if all that applies in our modern situation, but there it is. Other lessons of uncertain application <sup>1</sup>present circumstances: When making deals with relatives, get things writing. Also, look under the veil before saying "I do."

### ☞ Desert

<sup>1</sup> Suppose we could read the Exodus as one interminable, sand-  
ured, post-slavery quarantine. I know we modern folks are looking at several dreary weeks of being stuck at home, but chances are slim this will last forty years. One hopes. Anyway, much like the Israelites, we had to scramble to prepare and we are finding ourselves sorely ill-equipped with appropriate skills for our sojourn. Eventually, the

permanent solution to her Sisera problem. Kind of a worst-case scenario among possible sharing-close-quarters outcomes.

## The Pit

The psalmist frequently finds himself in a pit and begs God to get him out. He doesn't want to be there, he didn't choose it, maybe enemies <sup>1</sup>Shares; the pit for him. In any case, "the pit" is the biblical source for a case we may be using frequently in the next few weeks: "This VID-19 business is the pits."

## <sup>1</sup> e Lion's Den

Being exiled in a house full of relatives and/or restless pets who are starting to feel like devouring lions? Daniel's example suggests a three-pronged plan: insist on your innocence, pray a lot, and learn to be a lion whisperer. Lesson: virtue is rewarded.



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## The Upper Room

The other Gospels are vague about this, but John reports that after the crucifixion, the disciples locked themselves in a room “for fear of the Jews” (John 20:19). Tradition has it this is the same upper room where the disciples shared the Last Supper. Makes sense they would return to self-isolate in a place they knew. Thankfully, according to Luke, they<sup>1</sup> remembered to pack a supply of fish and a broiler (Luke 24:42). This story offers some comfort: Even if you’re afraid, hang in there, eat the fish, and wait for Jesus to come and bring reassurance and grace. Current recommendations from the CDC, however, stipulate<sup>1</sup> that you gather in groups of fewer than eleven.

## The House of Ananias

Actually, it was the house of Judas on Straight Street in Damascus (Acts 9:11). Immediately after his blinding road-side experience, Saul goes to this house to recover for a few days. Soon enough, Ananias, the

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## Isle of Patmos

I keep seeing social media memes about how, when the theaters were closed for the plague, Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*. Very impressive. But how about that Apostle John? Tertullian claims that the Romans tried to boil John in oil, but he popped out unharmed. So instead they banished him to the Isle of Patmos. There he wrote the book of <sup>1</sup> Revelation, which has way more than five acts and a body count far more than *Lear's* measly nine. And what's more tragic than apocalyptic plagues and bowls of wrath? I guess this means either that situations of banishment and isolation can lead to extraordinary divine visions, or it means we could all go wacky crazy.

No doubt there are more examples of biblical quarantines one could ponder. Let's get a-pondering because the next weeks and months will be rough. We can only hope Jesus meant it when he said, "And surely, I will be with you always, to the very end of the *age*."





## Debra Rienstra

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I am a writer, professor, amateur musician, science fiction fan, and lifelong member of the Reformed Christian tribe. For my day job, I teach early British literature and creative writing at Calvin University, where I have been on the faculty for over twenty years and still need to pedal fast to keep (mostly) ahead of smart, feisty undergraduates. I have published three books, over two hundred essays for *The Twelve*, and numerous articles, poems, and reviews in popular and scholarly contexts. I have a B.A. from the University of Michigan (Go Blue!) and a M.A. and Ph.D. from Rutgers. My husband and I have three grown children.



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## 21 Comments

**Jan Zuidema**

March 21, 2020 at 6:04 am

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Words are inadequate to express how much this was needed this morning. Thank you for providing a bit of Biblical mirth!

↳ Reply

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**Daniel J Meeter**

March 21, 2020 at 6:18 am

Eventually, the Israelites figured out that if you complain annoyingly enough, the Lord will provide. It's true, but you dared say it.

↳ Reply





↳ Reply

**Helen Luhrs**

March 21, 2020 at 7:48 am

Thank you for this. So refreshing to laugh aloud.

↳ Reply

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**Esther Bos**

March 21, 2020 at 8:15 am

This is much better than starting the morning reading the news! Thanks Deb!

↳ Reply

**Kenneth Bos**

March 25, 2020 at 9:05 am

I totally agree!



This was great — several good laughs at these quirky “applications” ... lots of fun to begin the day. Thank you!

↳ Reply

### Jeff Barker

March 21, 2020 at 10:13 am

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Thanks so much for this marvelous mingling of wit and wisdom! May God keep your writing productive at this time when the thieves of focus peer into every window.

↳ Reply

### Sharon

March 21, 2020 at 10:15 am

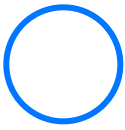
This was the best thing today. I love your perspective.

We will get through this.

Blessings.

↳ Reply





**Debra Rienstra**

March 21, 2020 at 6:11 pm

Glad this was useful to people. I'm a big believer in the power of silliness. Thanks, all.

↳ Reply

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**Mary**

March 21, 2020 at 7:25 pm

A great read Deborah! Thanks! A bit of light and fun in a dreary time!

↳ Reply

**Jim Dekker**

March 22, 2020 at 8:35 am

Thanks, Debra. Porridge? Or pottage? I thought Jacob upstaged Esau with meaty dinner for Isaac, not breakfast. But maybe in your rigorous research you found a more ancient manuscript that moved the meal some hours earlier. Come to think of it, if old Isaac was blind, likely he also had few functioning teeth, which would make



**anne vanderziel**

March 22, 2020 at 6:57 pm

Hi Willa, it made me laugh too. I am thinking she wrote it with tongue in cheek.

↳ Reply

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**Jessica A Groen**

March 23, 2020 at 11:06 am

Love it! I've been thinking of Red Tent social distancing rules for menstruating women. The "confinement" as a segment of isolated time for women right before and after childbirth. The community rules for social distancing from lepers, Samaritans, dead people. Rituals and boundaries separating clean/unclean. So much about the purity/morality/out of the camp mandates of Leviticus and New Testament religious mores are going to become relevant to our daily lives for a long time.

↳ Reply

3/25: "Come to me...and I will give you rest." - Vergennes Church



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