

We hope you enjoy these sample pages. For ordering information, visit Liguori.org.

AND GOD SAID, “IT’S GOOD!”

Amusing and Thought-Provoking Parallels Between the Bible and Football

Gary Graf



Liguori

Imprimi Potest:
Thomas D. Picton, CSsR
Provincial, Denver Province
The Redemptorists

Published Liguori Publications
Liguori, Missouri 63057
liguori.org

Copyright © 2007 by Gary Graf

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7648-2622-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Graf, Gary.

And God said, “It’s good!” : amusing and thought-provoking parallels between the Bible and football / Gary Graf.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Bible—Criticism, interpretation, etc.—Miscellanea. 2. Football—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Football—History—Miscellanea. I. Title.

BS538.G62 2007

242—dc22

2006103436

The editor and publisher gratefully acknowledge permission to reprint/reproduce copyrighted works granted by the publishers/sources listed on page 181.

Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists. To learn more about the Redemptorists, visit redemptorists.com.

Printed in the United States of America
15 14 13 12 11 / 5 4 3 2
First edition



CONTENTS



Foreword Pass	ix
Pre-Game Show	1
Creation: The Big Kickoff	7
The Good Book and the Playbook I	18
Proverbs, Prophets, and Pro Football	30
The Good Book and the Playbook II	42
The Draft: Players and Apostles	53
Players and Parables	61
Talents and Touchdowns	72
Fum-ble!	79
Halftime	93
The Immaculates	104
Hail Mary: From Prayer Book to Playbook	109
Gentiles and the American Football Leagues	119
A Tale of Two Pauls	124
Oh, 'Dem Saints	131
The Parable of the Rams	139
The Blessed Trinity and Then Some	146
GOATS and Lambs	152
Alan Ameche and the power of Forgiveness	161
Resurrections: A Hollywood Ending	169
Notes	177
Sources and Permissions	181



PROVERBS, PROPHETS, AND PRO FOOTBALL



LEST YOU THINK that all football references in the Bible are about quarterbacks, let us turn to the Book of Proverbs. Again, some background. Israel's most famous king, David, from whose family Jesus descended, had a son, Solomon, also a king. Solomon was as wise as he was handsome. In a famous story from the First Book of Kings, the wisdom of Solomon is detailed.

Later, two women who were prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. The one woman said, "Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house. Then this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne." But the other woman said, "No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours." The first said, "No,

the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine.” So they argued before the king.

...So the king said, “Bring me a sword,” and they brought a sword before the king. The king said, “Divide the living boy in two; then give half to the one and half to the other.” But the woman whose son was alive said to the king—because compassion for her son burned within her—“Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!” The other said, “It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it.” Then the king responded, “Give the first woman the living boy; do not kill him. She is his mother.” All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice (3:16–22, 24–28).

Solomon was not wise of his own accord. His wisdom came from God, just as all our talents are gifts from above. This holds true whether we have a slashing running style or musical talent, are able to pass rush with speed and power or have a gift for medicine, are able to accurately kick field goals from fifty yards or teach fifty second-graders how to write.

As a side note, it should be mentioned that football, too, benefited from the wisdom of Solomon—Freddie Solomon. Before 49ers Jerry Rice and John Taylor were favorite targets of Joe Montana, there was another pass-catching duo in town that helped bring home two Super Bowl trophies to the city by the bay. While Dwight Clark provided the possession receptions, Freddie Solomon stretched the defenses with his speed and pass-catching ability. During his 49er career, he totaled 329 receptions for nearly 5,000 yards, and 44 touchdowns. While modest in some respects, those numbers add up to 15.8 yards per catch, more than Rice averaged in his Hall of Fame career.

As far as the Book of Proverbs goes, many entries are attributed to Solomon, some to other contributors. As the name of the book

suggests, Proverbs are sound bite-sized sayings of good advice, the wisdom of hard-earned experience handed down from our biblical elders. Like all Scripture, they are given to us so that we might learn how to better live our lives. And in one particular case, how we might learn about...you guessed it, football.

One of Solomon's early Proverbs provides guidance for the young:

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths....
Then you will walk your way securely
and your foot will not stumble
(Proverbs 3:5–6, 23).*

There are two components to trusting God. One is to prayerfully discern his will for us in how we live our daily lives. Part of this comes from reflecting upon Scripture and the teachings of Jesus. Christ has given us all we need to know about living in right relationship to God—love our neighbors as ourselves. Anticipating our questions as to how to do that, Jesus provides us with those answers, too: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the marginalized, comfort the afflicted, care for widows and orphans. From hurricane victims in New Orleans to earthquake victims in Pakistan, from sufferers of AIDs in Africa to refugees of war-torn Sudan, the world offers us plenty of opportunity to feed, clothe, and comfort those in need.

The second component to relying on the Almighty is to trust our God-given instinct. Call it conscience, the good angel whispering in your ear, that feeling in your gut, your heart's deepest desire, we have been given an internal moral compass on which to base our life's decisions. How often have we ignored that voice in our head or feeling in our heart to not drink and drive, to bite our tongue

before lashing out, to give to the homeless instead of ignoring them, to become involved with our community instead of residing on the couch? That voice is the voice of God, that feeling is the life spark that our Creator placed inside each and every one of us, making us in his image and likeness. When we follow our instincts, more times than not, glorious things will happen.

Take Barry Sanders, for instance.

Not big for a running back, the five-foot eight-inch Sanders relied on explosiveness and catlike reflexes to stymie defenders. Before what many thought to be a premature retirement at the age of thirty-one, the Detroit Lion halfback had accumulated more than 15,000 yards rushing. Included in that total were five seasons of more than 1,500 yards, including 1997 when he ran for 2,053, becoming only the third player in NFL history to break the 2,000-yard mark. It wasn't just the number of yards Sanders gained that was amazing, it was how he did it. Often times he would run sideline to sideline to eek out a short gain. Other times he would squirt through a small hole and be gone. Most often, by virtue of his God-given talent and running instincts, he would start and stop, shift direction and gears, shimmy and spin, and be off to the races. Would-be tacklers were left literally grasping at air. Far from having his feet stumble, Barry Sanders ran safely to pay dirt ninety-nine times with another ten scores coming via the pass.

In a riddle meant to predict the coming of the Son of God, Proverbs 30:4 asks, in part, who has established all the ends of the earth? As we know, from mountain high to valley low, from sea to shining sea, God the creator has established the ends of the earth, and of the cosmos for that matter. He has also given us all the ends of the earth, as in the pass catching variety.

Just as the Almighty has blessed the earth with flowers and trees, birds and insects, animals and fish of all description, so has he done the same with football receivers. Tommy McDonald was only five-feet nine inches tall yet averaged a touchdown for every 5.9 receptions, playing mostly with Philadelphia. On the other extreme,

at six-foot three, R. C. Owens of the 49ers had such great leaping ability that he popularized the "Alley-Oop" catch, where he out-jumped defenders for passes thrown intentionally high.

Don Hutson of the Green Bay Packers is considered the first modern superstar receiver. He created never-before-seen receiving routes such as the Z-out, buttonhook, and hook-and-go.¹ He also caught passes for the defense, totaling 30 interceptions in his career.

Hall of Famers Raymond Berry of the Colts and Steve Largent of the Seahawks made their reputations as precise route-runners with sure hands. Not gifted with great speed, Berry compensated with hard work and guile. By his own count, he had developed eighty-eight different moves to get open.² Largent was thought to be too small and too slow to play in the NFL, so the Oilers traded him to the Seahawks—for an eighth-round draft choice. Largent "only" lasted fourteen years in the league, accumulating 819 receptions and 100 touchdowns.

For years, the tight end position was thought of as just another blocker on the offensive line. That is until Baltimore Colts John Mackey brought speed to the position. Not only did Mackey have the wheels for 331 catches and 5,236 yards during his career, in his rookie year he averaged 30.1 yards in kickoff returns. That's right, kickoff returns. If Mackey redefined the tight end position, Ozzie Newsome revolutionized it. The Wizard of Oz turned the tight end into a viable offensive scoring option, with 662 grabs for nearly 8,000 yards and 47 trips to the end zone. Current Kansas City Chief Tony Gonzalez surpassed Ozzie's Hall of Fame numbers with his own combination of size and speed. Tony G. has totaled 721 catches, 8,710 yards, and 61 scores with plenty of fuel still left in the tank.

Cris Carter and Tim Brown made careers out of being possession receivers, those wideouts who consistently keep drives alive with their ability to get open and hold on to the ball. Each player caught over 1,000 passes. Brown, playing primarily for the Raiders, grabbed 1,094 balls for 14,934 yards; Carter, splitting his career

for the most part between the Minnesota Vikings and Philadelphia Eagles, caught 1,101 passes for 13,899 yards.

Then there are the wonderfully athletic receivers who combine speed, great leaping ability, sure hands, and acrobatic grace. James Lofton became the first receiver to snare touchdown passes in the seventies, eighties, and nineties en route to 764 catches covering 14,004 yards in his career. Playing for the Browns and Dolphins, Paul Warfield averaged 20.1 yards per catch in his career, meaning any time his quarterback tossed him the ball Warfield would gain, on average, enough yardage for two first downs. With more than 10,000 yards in receiving already, Randy Moss has made the spectacular catch seem almost ordinary, while Marvin Harrison is putting up Hall of Fame numbers with the Colts: 1,022 receptions, 13,697 yards, and 122 TDs.

Then there is the incomparable Jerry Rice. Known for his hard work and soft hands, Rice's preseason workouts were as grueling as they were legendary. Many a teammate tried to keep up, especially running The Hill, only to be left gasping for air or losing their lunch. Rice not so much rewrote the record book as he took possession of it. Most career receptions (1,549), most career receiving yardage (22,895), most career touchdowns (207), most consecutive games with at least one reception (274), the list goes on and on...and on and on. Add to that three Super Bowl rings while with the 49ers and one Super Bowl MVP.

From Lance Alworth to Joe Zelenka, God gave us all the ends of the earth. But he also has provided us with all the doctors of the earth, all the teachers, software developers, social workers, police officers, accountants, carpenters, bakers, engineers, nurses, custodians, merchants, mechanics, and more. Simply put, all that we have, and all that we are, are gifts from God.

If ever there were two books in the Old Testament that spoke to the sport of football and the Spirit within us, they would be Ecclesiastes and Daniel. Many scholars attribute the Book of Ecclesiastes to Solomon. Like his father before him, Solomon stumbled following

God's path. Father David sent one of his military leaders to sure death on the battlefield so he could bed the man's wife, Bathsheba. Son Solomon took to idolatry and the pursuit of foreign wives. Upon repenting, the wise king authored Ecclesiastes as a way to find meaning from life, primarily his exhortation to be in awe of God and to respect his laws for we will all be judged on the Last Day. Showing wisdom beyond his years, and millennia ahead of the Super Bowl, Solomon also made several references to football.

The third chapter of Ecclesiastes is one of the most well-known portions of the Bible, even if people may not realize it. This is due for the most part to the song-writing talents of Pete Seeger and a remarkable recording of his song "Turn ! Turn! Turn!" by The Byrds in the 1960s. Scripture and song both speak to sport.

For everything there is a season (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

There is a time in our lives for all things. A time to be born, a time to die, a time to weep, a time to laugh. What's more, there is a time for God in all these things. Saint Ignatius of Loyola realized this hundreds of years ago.

Ignatius was a man of adventure in sixteenth-century Spain, chivalrous, all about fighting for the king and ladies of the court. That is until he almost lost a leg to a cannonball. During his recuperation from his battlefield injury, Ignatius read a book on the saints. Captivated by the way they led their lives, this small man from Loyola decided to devote himself to God instead of the king. In time, he founded the Society of Jesus, later to be called the Jesuit Order, and wrote his own book about spiritual exercises. All of which is by way of introducing his concept of consolation and desolation.

Ignatius came to believe that whether we have moments of joy or sadness, grief or consolation, any and all are opportunities to find God. The birth of a child, the beauty of nature, a homeless man on the street, the loss of a loved one, a punt return for a touchdown. The death and devastation left behind by Hurricane Katrina allowed

thousands of people in the rest of country to open their hearts to help their fellow Americans. The tranquillity and humility of the Dali Lama gives those who come in contact with him a feeling of the sacred, of being loved unconditionally. In short, God is present in all people, places, and events. We just have to be willing to find him. Or let him find us.

Beyond the obvious fall and winter football schedule, there is also a season to each player's career. Springtime represents nurturing and development. So it was when the Cincinnati Bengals drafted USC quarterback Carson Palmer in 2003, then let him learn the game from the bench for a season before turning the reins of the team over to him. The wait was worth it as Palmer led the team to the playoffs in 2005, ending a drought of fifteen seasons. Summer is the prime of a player's career. Witness Colts QB Peyton Manning with his recent streak of six 4,000-yard seasons, and his record 49 touchdown passes thrown in 2004. Autumn brings the fall of leaves and a player's production. After eleven seasons with at least 50 receptions as a starter for the Raiders, wideout Tim Brown ended his career as a player off the Buccaneer's bench, starting only four games and catching only 24 balls. Winter with its bare trees and dark nights is analogous to the end of a career, either by retirement, injury, or diminishing talent. For most players, it's a dark time.

Our lives are not much different. As youngsters we learn about life and love. In middle age, we start families of our own and achieve success in our professions. In our fifties or sixties, we may experience a decline in health or be affected by downsizing at the office. In our later years, we experience the loss of contemporaries, our spouse, and eventually all are called home to our Creator. Yet, through each of our seasons, as Saint Ignatius taught us, we can find God.

*[A] time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away
(Ecclesiastes 3:6).*

Solomon sums up quite nicely the ebb and flow of football seasons and lives. Any running back who has ever strapped on a helmet knows all about seeking and losing yardage. A bobbled exchange, a slip of the foot, a plugged hole, a blitzing linebacker can all cause even the shifتيest of running backs to lose a yard or more. Fortunately, most rushing attempts afford opportunities to gain back what was lost and then some.

Franchises gain and lose as well. In 1976, Tampa Bay started its existence by losing its first twenty-six games. All of the frustration and ineptitude seemed to pay off when the Buccaneers captured the flag by winning Super Bowl XXXVII after the 2002 season. Baltimore lost its entire team when the Colts moved to Indianapolis for the 1984 season, only to gain a franchise when the erstwhile Cleveland Browns became the Ravens of Baltimore twelve years later. Not to be outdone, Cleveland resurrected its beloved Browns via an expansion team in 1999.

Quarterbacks everywhere take to heart the second half of the above verse from Ecclesiastes. Under a severe rush, a QB must make split-second decisions, reading his receivers' routes, judging the tightness of coverage, estimating the defenders' imminent arrival, gauging his linemen's protection. Should his wideouts be covered and his own escape precarious, he must either throw the ball out of bounds to pass another day or keep and protect the ball from the oncoming rushers.

We, too, have a time to keep and a time to throw away. In the early years of our adult lives, it's all too easy to become wrapped up in material things. We buy homes, cars, big screen TVs, stereos, suits, shoes, boats, skis, cameras, cell phones, time shares, golf clubs, season tickets, you name it. With maturity, we realize that never-ending spending is not the way to happiness. For those who have much, it is our duty to help those who have little. Perhaps we donate some of our clothes and belongings to charity. Maybe we donate some of our time to a worthwhile cause such as the local homeless shelter or Big Brothers or Sisters. Football or life, there is a time to keep and a time to let go.

Confidante to Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar and Persian ruler Cyrus, Daniel wrote his book to encourage Israelites that, even though they had been held captive in Babylonia, God would restore and reward his chosen ones. Written in the fifth century before Christ, the Book of Daniel also predicted the coming of several members of the National Football League.

Thrown into a den of lions (6:7).

Those familiar with the story of Daniel know that he was cast into a den of lions for being true to the one true God. One growling beast after another left him unharmed. This was not the case with football teams visiting Detroit, especially in the 1950s. Behind QB Bobby Layne and running back Doak Walker on offense and middle linebacker Joe Schmidt on defense, the Lions won four division titles during the decade, as well as back-to-back NFL championships in 1952 and 1953, and another league title four years later.

In his seventh chapter, Daniel tells of a dream in which various animals represent oppressing empires of the Jews, thought to be the Babylonians, Medo-Persians, Greeks, and Romans. He also foretells of the coming of a number of NFL franchises:

[A]nd four great beasts came up out of the sea....The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings....Another beast appeared, a second one, that looked like a bear....After this, as I watched, another appeared, like a leopard [a Bengal, Jaguar, or Panther perhaps?]....After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast [quite possibly a reference to Buffalo], terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong (7:3-7).

If Daniel had lived in the twenty-first century, the animals in his visions may have referred to Iraq and Iran, Sudan and the Congo, Korea and Columbia, Israel and Palestine, any place where violence and oppression keep the world a broken place. With his mentions of

lions and eagles and bears, the prophet must have known that our planet can learn a lesson from football. Take in a game and you'll see two teams push and shove, hit and tackle one another in a grueling fight over territory. But when the final gun goes off, combatants shake one another's hands, offer words of encouragement and consolation, and embrace in respect. If only the world could too.

In between the books of Ecclesiastes and Daniel falls the Book of Isaiah, the ninth chapter of which offers an opportunity that allows us to know Jesus and the game a little better.

An advisor to four kings of Judah, Isaiah exhorted the Israelites to mend their wicked ways or face disastrous consequences. At the same time, Isaiah spoke of promise and hope, predicting that one day a Messiah would bring comfort and joy to the chosen people.

*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (9:6).*

Sound familiar? Composer George Handel used this verse from Isaiah as the basis for the lyrics to his world-famous oratorio *Messiah*, a line of which also refers to a number of football players who have had titles bestowed on them as a way for people to better relate to them as players and people.

And he is named: Bam and Bambi, Boomer, Bruiser, Bronko, Bulldog, Buck and Bullet; The Assassin, The Snake, The Toe and The Bus; Red, Ace, Dutch, Link, Tank and Turk; Broadway Joe and Leo the Lion; Prime Time and Night Train; Peggy and Pudge; L.T. and T.O.; The Golden Boy and The Galloping Ghost; The Mad Bomber and The Mad Stork; Mercury and Hollywood, Dandy, Deacon, and Crazy Legs; Curly and Tuffy; and last but not least, Fudgehammer.

PROVERBS, PROPHETS, AND PRO FOOTBALL

Even teams have their own monikers: The Orange Crush, Purple People Eaters, Fearsome Foursome, Steel Curtain, and Monsters of the Midway.

Nicknames offer us an insight into a player's youth. They remove players from the pedestal and make them more accessible in our minds. Nicknames help keep the game young, reminding us that even if grown men are playing, football is still also a boys' game, from Pop Warner youngsters to high-schoolers. Likewise, when we speak of God, it is hard for us to imagine a relationship with the all-powerful, ever-living creator of all that is. So in our human way, we bestow "nicknames" on God himself. He becomes more knowable and approachable to us. When we pray to our Father, we in effect become children of God. When we refer to Jesus as the Savior of the world, we become the rescued.

Whether we read about Creation stories, Noah's Ark, Joseph and his coat of many colors, or adventures of escape from Egyptian soldiers by the parting of the sea, we are being taught of God's covenant with us. When we sing the Psalms, recite the Proverbs, or read the Song of Solomon, we learn what it is to praise God, thank God, petition God, place our troubles before God. Similarly, the more we understand the personalities, procedures, and plays of the game, the more we appreciate football. Remarkably, the more we study the one helps us appreciate the other...and vice versa.