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The Bible among the Myths

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THE BIBLE IN ITS WORLD

The Western world has been founded on a certain way of looking at reality. Obviously that way of understanding is an amalgam of many separate contributions. But without minimizing the importance of others, it can be asserted with confidence that the Bible is the single most important of these contributors, especially when its outlook was integrated with the contributions of Greek philosophy first by Augustine and then by Thomas Aquinas. These thinkers showed that the transcendent monotheism of the Bible provided the metaphysical foundation for Greek thought, while using Greek thought provided a means of logically organizing the observations about reality found in the biblical narratives.

GREEK THOUGHT

The Greek philosophers of the seventh through the third centuries BC¹ intuited that this is a “universe” and not a “polyverse.” They believed that there must be a single unifying principle in the cosmos. Furthermore, they believed that this is a real world in which effects are the result of observable causes. In addition, they believed that these causes and effects were discoverable through rational thought. At the foundation of this thought was the conviction that something could not be so and not so at the same time.²

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1. I am writing as a Christian. Therefore, I will continue to use the conventions of the last two millennia in the West. I refer to the sixty-six books of Christian Scripture as “the Bible,” labeling its first thirty-nine books “the Old Testament” and its last twenty-seven books “the New Testament.” I refer to the time prior to Christ’s birth as BC and the time since that event as AD.
 2. For a good summary treatment of the Greek philosophers, see volumes 1 and 2 of *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, ed. R. H. Popkin (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005).

Increasingly, this way of thinking brought the Greek philosophers into conflict with the dominant thought of the world up until that time. That thought insisted that this is a “polyverse” in which we live, wherein existence is the result of the conflict of many different forces, most of them unseen, and many of them unknowable. As a result, it becomes all but impossible to determine why anything that happens does happen. There are an almost infinite number of potential causes for any event, and the majority of these are in the realm of the invisible, which is the “real” world. Because of the fundamental unreality of the observable world, it is entirely possible for something to be so and not so at the same time.

Ultimately, this conflict between the philosophers and the prevailing religious culture was won by the culture. Socrates was forced to drink hemlock, and while Plato³ and Aristotle, his successors, were able to live out their lives, they were the end of their line. While the philosophic tradition was never really submerged into Greek thought, it was never able to exercise a dominant hold on the Greek culture. Instead, what dominated the culture was the world of myth, with all of the characteristics just mentioned, which had that hold.

The Greek playwright Euripides, in his play *The Bacchae*, portrays this struggle and its eventual outcome in a devastating way. He uses a group of men to represent the rational side of human nature and depicts them explaining why their point of view is much superior to the largely irrational, but ultimately more vital aspects of that nature represented by a group of women. The action centers upon the annual “Bacchanalia” when Bacchus, god of wine, is celebrated. The men want to reduce this worship to a set of rather lifeless ideas and theorems while the women want to participate in the inexplicable, but terribly real experience of unity with the god. Ultimately the women win, hacking the men to pieces in the course of the worship. It takes little explanation to understand the author’s point: rational thought is finally unable to compete with the mysterious and largely inchoate world of affective experience.

There is a certain irony in *The Bacchae* because it was almost the last of the great Greek dramas. These dramas were written to be performed

3. In Plato we see a learned attempt to integrate the two ways of thinking with his idea of the invisible forms, of which all visible forms were inadequate reflections.

during the Bacchanalia, and they were an attempt to wrestle with the great issues of life, especially as these were exposed in the conflict between the two ways of looking at life that the Greeks were experiencing during this time. As one of the last of these great dramas, *The Bacchae* seems to be a historical statement admitting that the attempt to integrate the two opposing views had failed and that the old antirational way had won.

HEBREW THOUGHT

At the same time as the Greek philosophers were struggling to articulate their point of view, there was a parallel series of events taking place at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Between 625 BC and 400 BC the Israelite people went through the crisis of their faith. While Old Testament scholars continue to argue about the precise historical details of this crisis, the general outlines are clear enough. The crisis was prompted by the rise of first the Assyrian and then the Babylonian empires. The ability of these two groups to achieve military and political dominance over large parts of the ancient Near East called Israel's particular faith into question.

This faith had been and continued to be drawn in sharp relief by a series of persons we know as the prophets. The prophets had articulated an understanding of reality that was starkly different from that of the peoples around them. The present editions of what those leaders said assert that these ideas did not originate with the prophets, but the prophets were only trying to call the people back to understandings that had been theirs from the very time of their emergence as a people hundreds of years earlier. Among those ideas were the following: there is only one God; God is the sole Creator of all that is; since this world is not an emanation from him, it has a real existence of its own; God has revealed himself to humans primarily in the context of their unique experiences in space and time; he has communicated an explicit will for human behavior in this world; and he rewards and punishes on the basis of obedience to that will.

Much like the positions of the Greek philosophers, these ideas came into direct conflict with the views that were current all around Israel: there are many gods; the visible world is an emanation from them and as such has no real existence of its own; the gods are known through their identity with the

great natural cycles of the cosmos; the gods have no purposes except those that humans have: survival, dominance, comfort, and pleasure; humans exist to provide these for the gods; if humans do care for the gods, the gods will reward them; and if they do not, the gods will punish them.

As a result of this conflict in understandings of reality, the eventual capture of Israel first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians caused a real crisis of faith. The Israelites realized that these two different understandings of reality could not coexist. If they had not formally expressed the logic of noncontradiction as the Greek philosophers had, they still understood that if the other understanding of reality was correct, then theirs was false. And surely the fact that the Assyrians and the Babylonians had triumphed over them showed that the Assyrians and Babylonians, and everybody else, were correct. So would the unusual Israelite faith disappear? When Jerusalem finally fell, would the final remnant adhering to that faith in Judah give it all up and admit that they had been wrong?

As a matter of fact they did not! There is no Old Testament version of *The Bacchae*, for the pagan vision of reality did not triumph in Israel. Why it did not is still, and probably will remain, a matter of controversy. As far as the biblical text is concerned, there were several contributing factors. One was the fact that the prophets had boldly predicted that the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests would be evidence of God's work in history to punish his unbelieving people. But coupled with this prediction of that conquest and the exile was also the prediction of the return from exile, something that had never occurred before during the many centuries in which exile had been practiced as an instrument of foreign policy. Thus, when the exile and the return did occur as predicted, it certainly became easier for Israelite believers to believe that the interpretation of the exile that the prophets had given was the correct one: it was not an indication of the triumph of the gods, but of God using the pagan nations as his tools.

Another factor that played a part in the survival of the peculiarly Israelite worldview was, according to the text, the survival of an authoritative collection of books that the Israelites understood to record the origin of their faith and the narrative of the ways in which that faith had fared in the Israelite experience. Thus the priest Ezra returned from Babylon with the authority to teach "the Torah of his God," which was the core of the

collection (Ezra 7:25). And one of the early acts of Nehemiah, after the rebuilding of the Jerusalem city walls, was to sponsor a public occasion in which Ezra read that Torah to the people (Neh 8:1 – 3). Thus, in addition to any subjective faith that the people might have had, there was an objective standard that stood over against them and called them to account.

To be sure, it appears that the Israelites swung directly out of one ditch into another. Prior to, and immediately after, the exile, according to the text, there was a tendency to take a rather cavalier attitude toward God's commands. Many people thought they could live according to the pagan worldview while giving lip service to the biblical one. Because of the work of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi, whom we know, and many others whose names we do not know, there came the conviction that the only way to avoid another dose of divine punishment was to get serious about worshipping Yahweh exclusively. Unfortunately, the understanding of exclusive worship that developed was one of literalistic obedience to the commands without the kind of alteration of attitude that the commands were designed to foster. But be that as it may, the survival of the distinctly biblical understanding of reality was assured.

COMBINING GREEK AND HEBREW THOUGHT

What we find, then, at the beginning of the Christian era was, on the one hand, the biblical worldview, which had not been worked out with philosophical consistency, but which had about it a vigor and a vitality stemming from its survival in the crucible of life. On the other hand, there was the worldview of Greek philosophy, which did have the logical consistency but had proven unable to be translated into the common experience. It was when the gospel of Jesus, presupposing the Israelite worldview, penetrated into the Greco-Roman world that the stage was set for the combination of the Greek and the Hebrew worldviews in the distinctively Christian way.

As a result of that combination there was now an explanation for the Greek intuition of a universe: there is one Creator who has given rise to the universe and in whose creative will it finds its unity. At the same time the Greeks showed the Hebrews the logical implications of their monotheism. In the Hebrew idea of sole creatorship by a transcendent Deity there is a

basis for the idea that this world is a real one: God has spoken it into existence as an entity separate from himself; it is not merely an emanation of the gods. But the Greeks could show the Hebrews that in this real world there is a linkage of cause and effect that the Hebrews tended to overlook in their emphasis upon the First Cause.

Now there is a basis for the law of noncontradiction in the recognition that God is not the world and the world is not God. There is such a thing as truth because the one Creator of the universe is absolutely reliable and faithful to his Word. The idea that the Creator is primarily known in this world and especially in relation to unique events in human-historical experience provides the basis for the concept of historical responsibility.

To be sure, the full development of this combination was a long time in coming. The platonic cast of much of early Christian thought perhaps did more to hinder it than to help it. It is only with the recovery of Aristotle that resulted from the various interactions with Islam⁴ (beginning with the Crusades) that the full implications began to be worked out. Then for the first time logic and science began to be worked out in detail. At last logic and science had an understanding of metaphysical reality under them that was fully consistent with them. At the same time the Christendom of the Dark Ages was called back from the bifurcation between heaven and earth that had sprung up from an essentially magical view of faith.

THE NECESSITY OF THE BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW

One important conclusion that must be drawn from all of this is that contrary to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century delusion, science and logic are not self-evident. They cannot stand on their own. It was not until the biblical idea of one personal, transcendent, purposeful Creator was allowed to undergird them that science and logic were able to be fully developed and to come into their own.⁵ Without that undergirding, they fall to the ground

4. Aristotelian philosophy was preserved in one form or another in Islamic schools because of Islam's rigid monotheism. Christendom was at first more attracted to Platonic thought with its idea of invisible universal ideals.

5. Stanley L. Jaki, *The Origin of Science and the Science of Its Origin* (South Bend, IN: Regnery/Gateway, 1979).