

Reflections on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament

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I have been thinking lately about the essential differences between Judaism and Christianity, or more properly, the kind of religion reflected in the Hebrew Bible and that of the Greek New Testament. I have long ago rejected as personal options the major contemporary manifestations of Judaism and Christianity — by that I mean the Mishnaic-Talmudic forms of the Classical Jewish faith that developed after Second Temple times, and the Orthodox Catholic versions of Christianity that developed in the West and East after Constantine. I am interested in religious and philosophical truth, but my training is that of an historian, so perhaps that is why I am drawn to the more ancient forms of these two faiths, i.e., the Hebrew faith as formulated by the Prophets and final redactors of the Hebrew Bible, and earliest Christianity as reflected in the New Testament.

In considering these two “religions” or ways of thinking about God, the world and human purpose, I find that I am much more drawn to the former than the latter. Why is that so? What is it about the Hebrew Bible, even on a purely mythological level, that seems to draw me so? Conversely, what is it about early Christianity, especially the systematic interpretations of Paul or the Gospel of John, that puts me off so?

The Hebrew Bible's Ambiguity

As for the Hebrew Bible, the whole notion of the One, true and living Creator, the God of Abraham is most appealing. Humans are seen as mortal, made of dust. Consequently, death and human

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history are taken very seriously. They are made in the image of God, capable of reason and free choice, of good as well as evil. God reveals Divine laws, the "Way" for humankind; a way that brings blessings not curses. The human race is seen starkly in its wayward and sinful condition, yet there are those who love and follow this true God in the midst of it all. Their mission is to be a witness to the "nations" (non-believers) and to bring about the establishment of righteousness, justice, and peace on the earth. On an individual level, as in the Psalms or Job, there is a lot of questing after God. The ways of God are far from clear. There is certainly expectation of intervention, a longing for God's help and care, but any simplistic view of things is rejected.

The Hebrew canon (with the exception of Daniel) essentially closes with this kind of ambiguity. Humans are to seek God, to live the ways of God on the earth, but much is left open, whether individual ideas of immortality or broader schemes of historical plans and purposes. The essential idea of the *Shema* is the heart of it all: God's people are to acknowledge God's nature, to love God, and to follow the ways of God revealed in the Torah and Prophets. Ecclesiastes shows clearly how many questions are simply left unanswered. True, the Prophets do offer many predictions of a restoration of Israel and even a transformed age to come. However, the texts themselves express lament-full doubts about when, and even whether, this will ever come (e.g., Psalm 89; Habakkuk). The Hebrew canon closes with II Chronicles 36:23 — "Let him go up" — which could bear some symbolic meaning. It comes at the very beginning of the Second Temple period: all is open, Israel's future is still unwritten, and individuals are called to respond.

The New Testament's Answers

The New Testament comes out of a wholly different milieu. First, it is part and parcel of the broad changes in religious thought that we know as "Hellenization." It is characterized by a vast and expanded *dualistic* cosmos, an emphasis on immortality and personal salvation, i.e., on *escaping* this world for a better heavenly life. At the same time, and to be more specific, it is absolutely and completely dominated by an apocalyptic world view of things, whereby all will be soon resolved by the decisive intervention of God, the End of the Age, the last great Judgment, and the eternal Kingdom of God. In addition, the Christology that develops, even in the first century, is thoroughly "Hellenistic," with Jesus the human transformed into the pre-existent, divine, Son of God, who sits at the right hand of God and is Lord of the

cosmos. The whole complex of ideas about multiple levels of heavens, fate, angels, demons, miracles and magic abound. It is as if all the questions that the Hebrew Bible only begins to explore — questions about theodicy, justice, human purpose, history, death, sin — are all suddenly answered with a loud and resounding "Yes!" There is little, if any, struggle left. There are few haunting questions, and no genuine tragedy or meaningless suffering. All is guaranteed; all will shortly be worked out.

Of course, various attempts are made to reinterpret this early Christianity for our time, usually in terms of ethics or some existential core of truth. But early Christianity rests on two essential points, both of which resist easy demythologization: it is a religious movement built upon an apocalyptic view of history; and an evaluation of Jesus as a Hellenistic deity, i.e., a pre-existent divine Savior God in whom all ultimate meaning rests. If these are unacceptable in the modern world, or incompatible with the fundamental Hebrew view of things, then the whole system becomes difficult, if not superfluous.

This is not to say that there are no similar problems with the Hebrew Bible, but fundamentally things are different. Even Daniel, which begins down the path of fantastic apocalyptic answers to hard human questions about the meaning of history, is somewhat vague about it all. That is one good reason Daniel was never included among the Prophets in the Jewish canon.

Of course, the Hebrew Bible, like the New Testament, is "interventionist" to the core, and that is a problem for modern interpretation. God calls Abraham, delivers Israel from Egypt, reveals the Torah at Sinai, gives the Land to the Israelites, expels them, promises to bring them back, etc. It is an interventionist story. And yet, there are many dark areas, many unanswered queries, and much doubt and debate expressed about it all, even *within* the texts themselves. But more important, the two major problems for the later Hellenistic age — human mortality and the question of final historical purpose — are left open and vague. This is the main difference between these two canons.

My Attachment to Both Canons

By why bother with either, with any? I find myself drawn to these texts, these ideas and images, even if only on a mythological level. For example, my commitment to vegetarianism, though resting on other grounds, is reinforced by the ideal picture in Genesis 1, where humans *and* beasts are given only "green herbs" to eat. It is only after the Flood that meat is allowed, when sin and violence had filled the earth. Are we to re-present to the world in

this small way, this way of peace from which we have fallen? It is a powerful idea, as Isaiah himself knew when he spoke of the child's leading the lion, the infant's playing at the nest of the scorpion — "They will not hurt nor destroy on all My holy mountain, says the LORD" (Isa. 11:9).

Yet we still must daily face the stark reality of life on this planet, with its inevitable ways, "red in tooth and claw." One could go on and on with this. The images are powerful — but are they really necessary, and are they the best or most truthful ones? Why are they so much of my life? Why do I even think of them as some kind of a "message" deserving of proclamation?

Do we need such myths? What about simply stated philosophical statements? Isn't that enough? Certainly all language about God and the great religious questions is necessarily anthropomorphic and analogical. We should not naively imagine that we live without myth and symbol. But to what degree are we able to affirm honestly the divinity of Jesus Christ, his resurrection from the dead, the Second Coming, or — even more fundamentally — the Creation accounts of Genesis and the Sinai revelation? Much of the time I am inclined to leave it behind. However, I still find myself picking up the Bible, mostly the Hebrew Bible, and reading it with some sense of its value and power. I want to share it with my children, to talk about those stories and ideas, so couched and formed by the world view of an age long past.