



In the Aftermath . . .

IN THE AFTERMATH of recent *Outlook* issues,¹ we have received a number of questions, comments and suggestions. Some have been critical, others complimentary. All have been helpful. We wish to express our gratitude for these responses.

In general, these communications have focused on incompatible views of reality — antihistorical, nonrelational self-existence versus relational coexistence in history. For over 4,000 years dominant world cultures have constructed gods that are claimed to be self-existent and therefore in need of

nothing and no one else. Moreover, these cultures have applied this exclusionary principle to themselves, with tragic consequences. Only one voice has questioned the self-existence of God and of mankind — the voice of covenantal Judaism!

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In our previous issue we began reflecting on this unique Judaic history.² Before reviewing further developments in pagan and Judaic culture during the so-called Axial Age (800-200 BCE), we wish to comment on some of the contributions received from our readers.

A Foundation of Relational Existence

One supportive reader inquired about our recent statement on the origin of language:

. . . [A]bout 4,000 years ago, God withdrew god-consciousness. In its place God gave mankind the gift of language — so essential to self-consciousness, to memory and reflection, to verbal and written communication, and to the development of human relationships.³

This statement, of course, is based on certain assumptions, and we offer the following commentary:

Archaeological finds of standardized tools and evidence of the cooperative hunting of large animals may well indicate some kind of communication among early

hominids, but not necessarily in the form of modern human language. All primates, including man, use visual communications such as facial expressions, body language, and nonlinguistic vocalizations such as screams and cries to transmit information to other members of their group. These communications are largely instinctive, and the signs are very limited in meaning. Spoken language, however, allows human beings to name things with “open” symbols — i.e., symbols that, in countless combinations, can be made to relay different messages.⁴

[T]he origin of language has never failed to provide a subject for speculation, and its inaccessibility adds to its fascination. . . . [P]eople have tried . . . to discover or to reconstruct something like the actual forms and structure of man’s first language. This lies forever beyond the reach of science, in that spoken language in some form is almost certainly coeval with *Homo sapiens*. The earliest records of written language, the only linguistic fossils man can hope to have, go back no more than 4,000 to 5,000 years. Some people have tried to claim that the cries of animals and birds, or nonlexical expressions of excitement or anger, evolved into human speech, as if onomatopoeia were the essence of language; these claims have been ridiculed for their inadequacy . . . and have been given nicknames such as “bowwow” and “pooh-pooh” theories.⁵

Language, therefore, is a unique gift to mankind. This gift — in which sounds and written symbols are used to represent thoughts, feelings, objects and events — provides the fundamental means of communication with others. Language thus constitutes a foundational means of moving beyond instinctual, self-existence to conscious, relational existence with others.

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The Violence of Self-Existence

In response to recent articles, another reader helpfully referred us to scholarly works on the nature of violence. These included treatises entitled *Violence and the Sacred*, by Rene Girard,⁶ and *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*, by Gil Bailie.⁷ Together, Girard and Bailie have added a new dimension to George Mendenhall’s observation on “the exercise of divinely delegated force through war externally and through law internally.”⁸

“Violence,” otherwise known as “grand domestication”⁹ or “sovereign freedom,”¹⁰ is designed to protect, preserve and extend self-existence in at least three dimensions:

1. Mankind’s sacralized violence involves a sacrificial dimension in which human, animal and other sacrifices are made to placate self-existent deity and to assure the self-existence of the body politic. This dimension includes sacrifices made to the gods of all archaic and primitive societies. Such sacralized violence maintains the connection but preserves the distance between divine and human “self-existence.”

2. Mankind’s sacralized violence is directed toward “profane and fallen others” — those unlike us. This involves aggression toward, suppression of, and

destruction of “aliens.” History will not absolve the horrific sacralized violence perpetrated by such as Hitler against the Jews, Stalin against the landed peasantry, Pol Pot against educated Cambodians, Hutus against their Tutsi fellow tribesmen in Rwanda, and Serbs against their Moslem neighbors in Bosnia.

3. Mankind’s sacralized violence violates the essential role of law. Rather than viewing law as the necessary means of maintaining order in a predatory world, sacralized violence imposes law without mutual consent. It mandates law to restrict normal, relational existence. It deliberately violates law in the interest of predatory criminality. Such internal violence is the antithesis of the “weightier matters of love, justice, and compassion.”¹¹

In the interest of “power,” this predatory world has long sacralized violence to justify and maintain its supposed self-existence before the gods, before “alien others,” and even before itself. Now, as always, “power” is defined by the “right” to victimize others in the name and in the image of the self-existent god!

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The Answer to Self-Existence

Still another friend recommended the published series, *The Hinges of History*, by Thomas Cahill. Cahill’s second book in this series is entitled *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*.¹² In his recent review of this fascinating treatise,¹³ Paul Gediman states:

Cahill’s Jews are the prophetic Jews of the Torah. He doesn’t take his reader . . . into the . . . development of rabbinical Judaism. He doesn’t even take us up to the time of Jesus. He confines himself to the Hebrew Bible. . . . In *The Gifts of the Jews*, however, Cahill openly treats the Bible as a literary document, a narrative that reveals the heart of the evolving Judaic world view.

Firstly, over against the self-existent presuppositions of all pagan religions and societies, Judaism emphasized the One God who relates to mankind in history.

In the two great narratives of the first two books of the Bible, writes Cahill, “Israel invents not only history but the New as a positive value.” Cahill makes fine work of describing how revolutionary it was for Abraham — a “skeptical, worldly patriarch” — to leave the urban comforts of Ur for the unknown frontier simply because a disembodied voice told him to, and he notes that God’s promises to Abraham — that he will have a son, that his descendants will flourish — imply a revolutionary sense of the future. He further develops this idea in his discussion of the scene in Exodus in which God reveals his name to Moses. Rather than the King James Bible, which translates YHWH as “I am who I am,” Cahill uses Everett Fox’s translation (published by Schocken in 1997 as *The Five Books of Moses*), which reads “I-will-be-there-with-you.”

Secondly,

Cahill revels in . . . the Bible’s discovery of individual character (which he identifies not only in David but also in Job and Ruth) as a revolutionary step forward from

the static archetypes of pagan myth. It's this notion of self, he asserts, which makes the biblical moral vision so profound. Borrowing from Martin Buber, Cahill writes: "the people who became the Jews could begin to go from the I of David to the I of the spirit to the I of the individual to the I of compassion-for-the I-of others." From there, it's a very small step for Cahill to make the final, universalizing point that — whether or not we believe in God — the voice heard by Abraham and Moses, the "still, small voice" heard by the prophet Elijah, is "the Conscience of the West."

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And in an editorial aside in his book, Cahill quotes from a discussion he had with Rabbi Burton Visotzky of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, who "with arresting insight" declared "that individuality [the "I"] is the flip side of monotheism."¹⁴

Thirdly, "Cahill emphasizes . . . the moral foundation laid by the Ten Commandments." These commandments are actually the provisions of the covenant made between YHWH and his people. They are the ground of biblical covenantal relationship and, subsequently, of Western ethics. This covenantal relationship is the gift, not of victimizers, but of victims long held in Egyptian bondage but liberated by YHWH — the God who *became* Jesus Christ, the God who has always been and who is here with us today.

The Significance of Covenant

At a serendipitous moment the other day, an illuminating volume to the current discussion was discovered in a local church library. The book is entitled *God's Covenant of Blessing*, by John P. Milton.¹⁵ In his chapter on "The Religious Significance of the Concept of Covenant,"¹⁶ Milton states:

. . . [T]he concept of berith (covenant) as it pertains to human relationships . . . [represents] a mutual agreement between two or more persons or parties.

The human berith, however, significant as it may be, is overshadowed by the divine berith, where God makes a covenant with men. . . . According to Wright and Filson, "The close relation of God and people, as symbolized in the covenant, was Israel's nomadic heritage, and the most important factor in saving her from idolatry."¹⁷ God is! God lives! God acts! He who is man's Creator enters into personal covenant with him. In such a God Israel believed.

Such a God is in the very nature of the case a God of revelation. There can be no covenant without self-revelation on the part of him who makes it. So also the divine berith implies a revelation of the divine will and purpose, and these in turn reflect the divine character. Revelation does not consist in a list of divine attributes so much as in a series of divine actions. That God makes a covenant with men . . . is the same as to say that he acts in relation to them with gracious purpose; that he seeks fellowship with them and offers fellowship to them; and not least, that he calls them into holy partnership of service in relation to other men. The covenant is a way of interpreting history which recognized the presence and activity of God in the historical process; which believes that God has set a goal for human history, and has given to men whom he has called a divine mission relevant to that goal. . . .

In speaking of the divine fellowship as the goal of the berith, we must not overlook the fact that the covenant was in its very nature prophetic. It was in itself part of the savings acts of God . . . in relation to all the nations of the earth.

In his concluding statement Milton affirms:

. . . [A]s humans we “need to see ‘the face,’ the face of Jesus Christ, in order to know God as He really is. . . . [I]n like manner we need to see ‘the plan,’ . . . that unfolds step by step from Abraham to Jesus, in order to understand . . . the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments. . . .” They . . . bear witness to a God who acts, by interpreting for us where and when and how and why God has acted. To these saving acts of God *faith* says *Amen*. “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen . . . to the glory of God.”¹⁸

So, in the aftermath of reader questions, comments and suggestions, we continue preparing to address the history of the so-called Axial Age (800-200 BCE), which touches the threshold of the “fulness of . . . time” (Galatians 4:4).

Endnotes

1. See “It is Finished,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1998.2); “The Most Painful Difficulty,” *Outlook* (September/October 2004) (originally published as an April 1998 prequel to subsequent online *Outlook* articles and therefore not duplicated as an online *Outlook* prequel); “From the House of Bondage,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1998.3).
2. See “From the House of Bondage,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1998.3).
3. Ibid.
4. *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Hominidae as a Zoological Family.”
5. *Britannica Online*, s.v. “Language: Characteristics of Language: Historical Attitudes Toward Language,” at www.britannica.com/topic/language.
6. See Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).
7. See Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1997).
8. George E. Mendenhall, “The Suzerainty Treaty Structure: Thirty Years Later,” in Edwin B. Firmage, Bernard G. Weiss and John W. Welch, eds., *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), p.99.
9. See Karl W. Luckert, *Egyptian Light and Hebrew Fire: Theological and Philosophical Roots of Christendom in Evolutionary Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).
10. See Orlando Patterson, *Freedom*, vol.1, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
11. Mendenhall, “Suzerainty Treaty Structure,” p.100.
12. See Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1998).
13. See Paul Gediman, “Inventing Time, Self and Ethics” (book review of Cahill, *Gifts of the Jews*), *Commonweal* 125, no.9 (May 8, 1998): 22, 23.
14. Cahill, *Gifts of the Jews*, p. 259.
15. See John P. Milton, *God’s Covenant of Blessing* (Madison, WI: Straus Publishing Co., 1965).
16. See Milton, *God’s Covenant of Blessing*, chap. 2, “The Religious Significance of the Covenant,” pp. 13-21.
17. *Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), p. 5.
18. Milton, *God’s Covenant of Blessing*, p. 227.