



# The “World of the Journey”<sup>1</sup>

## A Summary of *The Gifts of the Jews*

Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

IN THE SECOND VOLUME of his work on *The Hinges of History*, Thomas Cahill addresses *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*.<sup>2</sup> Before exploring the incomparable gifts of the Jews, however, Cahill examines the Sumerian culture and civilization that arose along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers between 4,000 and 5,000 years ago. It was in Ur of the Chaldees — one of the principal city-states of Sumer — that the patriarch Abraham was born, and it was from this city that God “brought” him (Genesis 15:7; Nehemiah 9:7).

### Sumerian Culture

For centuries the Sumerians struggled to achieve an urban culture where people could dwell together in sheltered homes with convenient storerooms, streets, and temples for worship. They invented agriculture, with the

seasonal planting of seed . . . [which] greatly lessened man’s reliance on the uncertain harvests of hunting and gathering and . . . made possible the first settled communities, organized around a dependable grain supply. The domestication of flocks and herds for predictable yields of eggs, milk, flesh, leather, and wool soon followed. . . . The invention of the hoe and the further invention of the plow . . . went a long way toward creating stable farming communities. . . . Someone’s brilliant idea to . . . fashion canals and reservoirs . . . so that river water could run controllably from higher embankments to lower fields meant that the farmer no longer had to wait for the uncertain rains of the Middle East. . . .

Then . . . an explosion of technological creativity [occurred in Sumer] on a scale that would not be matched till the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of our era. For this period witnessed not only the sudden expansion of farming communities with their growing inventory of agricultural and pastoral innovations, but wheeled transport, sailing ships, metallurgy, and wheel-turned, oven-baked pottery — all

appearing, as it were, within weeks of one another. The Sumerians were the first . . . to erect vastly impressive, even overwhelming enclosures for business and ritual: monumental stone sculpture, engraving, and inlay, the brick mold, the arch, the vault, and the dome all first came to light under the dazzling Sumerian sun. . . . [T]his unique series of creations made . . . trading [possible and, hence,] great concentrations of people and possessions.<sup>3</sup>

About this time, or even earlier,

. . . a human hand first carved a written word . . . The written word was an invention born of necessity: how else were the Sumerians to keep accounts straight?

This innovation . . . would change forever the course of the human story, making possible fantastic feats of information storage and retrieval and wholly new forms of communication, both interpersonal and corporate.<sup>4</sup>

Socially and religiously, however, the Sumerians made little or no progress over their ancestors and nomadic neighbors. The Sumerians were polytheistic, with a pantheon of gods allegedly responsible for everything that happened. For them the gods had introduced and produced all their tools, weapons and marvelous inventions. The gods alone deserved and demanded privileges and services.

The reigning monarch was the only visible representative of the gods, the only one who existed in the “image of the gods.” Neither the gods nor the monarchs had any sense of human identity. Ordinary human beings were exploited and wholly expendable. They were used as chattels, slaves, prostitutes and sacrificial offerings. They had no democratic rights, no privileges, no freedoms, no values, no vocations, no destiny. Ordinary human beings had no sense of individuality or personhood, no hope of human relationships, no expectation for justice. Other than working to achieve prosperity, they were devoted to their fertility cults and frequent sexual orgies. Beyond this, death alone was their solitary comfort and release.

Furthermore, once they had died, ordinary human beings were never remembered, for there was no sense of time, no idea of the history that is necessary for the emergence of human personhood. For the Sumerians everything had already happened and everything would happen again in the cyclical wheel of light and darkness, sowing and reaping, living and dying.

---

*For the Sumerians everything had already happened and everything would happen again in the cyclical wheel of light and darkness, sowing and reaping, living and dying.*

---

## Jewish Culture

On one hand, the Sumerians achieved stunning advances in mathematics and science, technology and architecture, language, writing and commerce. But on the other hand, they exhibited an archaic sexual, social and religious consciousness. It was in this ancient culture of Sumer that God first appeared to Abraham and called him out of Ur of the Chaldees. Abraham responded to God’s call:

So, “*wayyelekh Avram*” (“Avram went”) — two of the boldest words in all literature. They signal a complete departure from everything that has gone before in the long evolution of culture and sensibility. Out of Sumer, civilized repository of the predictable, comes a man who does not know where he is going but goes forth into the unknown wilderness under the prompting of his god.<sup>5</sup>

---

*“So, ‘wayyelekh Avram’  
 (‘Avram went’) — two of the  
 boldest words in all  
 literature. They signal a  
 complete departure from  
 everything that has gone  
 before in the long evolution  
 of culture and sensibility.”*

---

Abraham’s father, Terah, Abraham’s brother, Nahor, their nephew, Lot, and their families journeyed northward up the banks of the Euphrates River to Haran. Here they remained until Terah died. God then called Abraham out of Haran into the Canaanite country to the south. There he and Lot, their families and entourages, dwelt as nomadic shepherds. In a subsequent time of famine, Abraham found refuge in Egypt but then returned to Canaan. There his concubine, Hagar, gave birth to Ishmael, father of the Arabs, and his wife, Sarah, gave birth to Isaac, father of the Hebrews. Isaac’s son, Jacob, deceptively gained his father’s inheritance, lost his favorite son, Joseph, to Egyptian captivity, and finally migrated to Egypt himself. There Jacob’s descendants prospered and multiplied but became enslaved. More than 400 years later, God called Moses — the adopted Prince of Egypt who had fled into the Midianite wilderness — to lead his people out of enslavement. After this Exodus deliverance the people wandered in the desert for 40 years. Joshua then succeeded Moses and led the people across the Jordan, where they gradually subdued the Canaanites and possessed the land that God had promised them. Not satisfied with God and the appointed prophets to covenantally govern them as a theocracy, the people demanded a monarchy like all their ancestors, neighbors and enemies. This led to more than 400 years of monarchical rule, beginning with Saul, David and Solomon in the 10th century (BCE) and extending to the capture and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the end of the kings, and the Exile in Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar.

This emerging history recalls disastrous events and rehearses dreadful and violent records of the determination of (supposedly) both God and man to murder helpless women and children, destroy entire cultures, and wreak vengeance on imagined enemies. As we review this history, we have every right to wonder: Could any good have come from these desert nomads who had left Sumer, escaped from Egypt, conquered Canaan, and later been exiled in Assyria or Babylon?

## Gifts of the Jews

The answer to this question is a surprising but emphatic “Yes.”

Without the Jews, we would see the world through different eyes, hear with different ears, even feel with different feelings. And not only would our sensorium, the screen through which we receive the world, be different: we would think with a

different mind, interpret all our experience differently, draw different conclusions from the things that befall us. And we would set a different course for our lives.

By “we” I mean the usual “we” of late-twentieth-century writing: the people of the Western world, whose peculiar but vital mentality has come to infect every culture on earth, so that, in a startlingly precise sense, all humanity is now willy-nilly caught up in this “we.” For better or worse, the role of the West in humanity’s history is singular. Because of this, the role of the Jews, the inventors of Western culture, is also singular: there is simply no one else remotely like them; theirs is a unique vocation.<sup>6</sup>

---

*“The role of the Jews, the inventors of Western culture, is . . . singular: there is simply no one else remotely like them; theirs is a unique vocation.”*

---

How, then, did this “tribe of desert nomads change the way everyone thinks and feels”?

**Monotheism.** The Hapiru or Hebrews — eventually called Jews — believed that there was only one God. They were the first monotheists. To them God was One. For them the unutterable name of God was YHWH. Strangely, the term YHWH is not a noun or adjective, nor is it a descriptive adjective or adverb. YHWH is a verb form.

We can take comfort in the certain knowledge that God is a verb. . . . His self-description is not static but active, appropriate to the God of Journeys. YHWH is an archaic form of the verb *to be*. [First, YHWH is] *I am who am*: this is the interpretation of the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. . . . Second, *I am who I am* — in other words, “None of your business” or “You cannot control me by invoking my name . . . as if I were one of your household gods.” Third, *I will be-there with you*: . . . which emphasizes God’s continuing presence in his creation, his being-there with us.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, this One God acts as a Person, an Individual, rather than as some unapproachable, immovable, impassible essence or energy. The One God also is the Creator. He is the One who made all things, so that “without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3). He is therefore the Creator of the race of human beings.

---

*This One God acts as a Person, an Individual, rather than as some unapproachable, immovable, impassible essence or energy.*

---

**Democracy.** Human beings are not simply unnamed, unobserved, insentient forms or structures. YHWH created all mankind in his own image. This is wholly unlike the gods of Sumer and Mesopotamia.

. . . [T]he Mesopotamian ruler is described as being in the “image” of the god. [In Akkadian writing, t]he word for image was *sa-lam*. In one case, the ruler was declared to be in the “image of Enlil”; in another, in the “image of Bel”; in still another, in the “image of Marduk.” Each of these examples used the word *sa-lam*.

Suddenly, despite my limited Hebrew, I recalled the Hebrew *b'tselem Elohim*. Mankind was made “in the image of God,” *b'tselem Elohim* (Genesis 9:6; see also Genesis 1:26-28). The Hebrew *tselem* and the Akkadian *sa-lam* were cognates, the same word in different languages.

Here was the same word in the Hebrew Bible that was used in Mesopotamian texts — except that in the Hebrew Bible it was applied not just to the king but to all mankind. Here was the democratization of that most powerful of metaphors, expressing all peoples’ relationship to the divine, not just royalty’s. Whatever it meant to be made in the image of God . . . , it was a characteristic that was shared by all humanity. The ancient Israelites . . . applied it to everyone.<sup>8</sup>

**Individuality.** Another implication of Judaism’s One God as the Creator of mankind is that mankind exists before God as distinct and separate individuals.

Without Avram’s highly colored sense of himself — of his own individuality — there could hardly be any relationship, yet the relationship is also made possible by the exclusive intensity that this incipient monotheism requires, so much so that we may almost say that individuality (with its consequent possibility of an interpersonal relationship) is the flip side of monotheism.<sup>9</sup>

**Relationality.** But to the Jews the Creator-God had not only *made* all mankind in his own image as individuals. This same God also repeatedly *entered into covenantal relationship* with mankind — first with

---

*The “God-human relationship has at last made possible a genuine human-human relationship.”*

---

“Adam,” then with “Noah,” Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants. Thus, “[G]od wants to covenant with Avram, just as chieftains covenant with one another.”<sup>10</sup> Through such covenantal or contractual arrangement, God enters into relational existence with mankind. He, of course, is Other than they; but he is related to them, and they to him. And they, in turn, are related to each other. The “God-human relationship has at last made possible a genuine human-human relationship.”<sup>11</sup>

**Freedom and Responsibility.** The One God of the Hebrews did not create human beings as robots. He made them to be free and responsible. When God and two of his companions appeared to Abraham in the wilderness, they sat and ate with Abraham by his tent and then engaged him in conversation (Genesis 18).

When God reveals his plan of destruction for Sodom and Gomorrah, Avraham attempts to reason with him: “Will you really sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?” By questioning God, who has been gradually revealing his awesome grandeur to Avraham, the patriarch exhibits striking courage, a courage that will reappear in his descendants throughout the ages to come. A verbal tug-of-war ensues, ending with God’s promise to stay his hand if as few as ten innocents are found within the walls of these cities.<sup>12</sup>

This is the beginning of ultimate freedom and responsibility. Like Jacob, Abraham and his descendants freely and responsibly prevailed with God (Genesis 32:24-38).

**Historicity.** For the archaic cultures of the world, there was no sense of linear time. Everything was cyclical. Thus:

Everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the power of the world always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. . . . Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves.<sup>13</sup>

But to Abraham and his descendants, the world was not a wheel or a circle. Abraham embarked on the “world of the Journey.”<sup>14</sup> Thus:

“Avram went” — really went. Cyclical religion goes nowhere because, within its comprehension, there is no future as we have come to understand it, only the next revolution of the Wheel.

Since time is no longer cyclical but one-way and irreversible, personal history is now possible and an individual life can have value. . . . And without the individual, neither time nor history is possible. But the God of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov — no longer your typical ancient divinity, no longer the archetypal gesturer — is a real personality who has intervened in real history, changing its course and robbing it of predictability.<sup>15</sup>

---

*To Abraham and his descendants, the world was not a wheel or a circle. Abraham embarked on the “world of the Journey.”*

---

### **Innovation.**

Israel invents not only history but the New as a positive value. . . . [N]o “commercial” of the ancient world flogged the New. The beer of the Sumerians was good because of its associations with the eternal, with the archetypal goddess who took care of such things. If the brewer had announced his product as new — as singular and never-before-known — he would have been committing entrepreneurial suicide, for no one would have drunk it. The Israelites, by becoming the first people to live — psychologically — in real time, also became the first people to value the New and to welcome Surprise. In doing this, they radically subverted all other ancient worldviews. . . .

. . . [T]he moral is not that history repeats itself but that it is always something new: a process unfolding through time, whose direction and end we cannot know, except insofar as God gives us some hint of what is to come.<sup>16</sup>

**Education.** When YHWH gave Moses the Ten Words on Mt. Sinai, he did a number of things that were “new.” One, for example, is the Jewish Sabbath (or “Ceasing”).

No ancient society before the Jews had a day of rest. The God who made the universe and rested bids us do the same, calling us to a weekly restoration of prayer, study, and recreation (or re-creation). In this study (or *talmud*), we have the beginnings of what Nahm Sarna has called “the universal duty of continuous self-education,” Israel being the first human society to so value education and the first to envision it as a universal pursuit — and a democrataic obligation that those in power must safeguard on behalf of those in their employ.<sup>17</sup>

**Justice.** From the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” came “Israel’s interpretation of the murder prohibition as including an obligation in justice to have-nots.”<sup>18</sup>

. . . [I]n the prescriptions of Jewish law we cannot but note a presumption that all people, even slaves, are human and that all human lives are sacred. . . . However

faint our sense of justice may be, insofar as it operates at all it is still a Jewish sense of justice.<sup>19</sup>

. . . [O]ur God is the God of heaven and earth, who has told us that the only acceptable offering is justice like his justice: to treat others fairly and compassionately and never to stoop to the cruelty that these quid pro quo transactions can entail — things as hideous as the sacrifice of children.<sup>20</sup>

. . . [T]his Jewish God of justice and compassion — undergirds all our values . . . [so that] human effort without this God is doomed to certain failure. . . . [W]ithout God there is no justice. . . . [And] without justice, there is no God.<sup>21</sup>

**Compassionate Selfhood.** By the time of David, the

journey [for Israel] through the wilderness is being gradually transformed into a journey to the unknown recesses of the self — to “the inward parts.” . . . [I]t is with David that the interior journey begins. A sense of the self is notably absent in all ancient literatures. *I*, as we commonly use it today to mean one’s interior self, is seldom in evidence before the humanist autobiographies of the early modern period. . . . [But] the Psalms . . . are filled with *I*’s: the *I* of repentance, the *I* of anger and vengeance, the *I* of self-pity and self-doubt, the *I* of despair, the *I* of delight, the *I* of ecstasy. . . .

. . . [A]fter many catastrophes, 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.<sup>22</sup>

. . . [The Jews] gave us the Conscience of the West, the belief that this God who is One is not the God of outward show but the “still, small voice” of conscience, the God of compassion, the God who “will be there,” the God who cares about each of his creatures, especially the human beings he created “in his own image,” and . . . [who] insists we do the same.<sup>23</sup>

---

*“[O]ur God is the God of heaven and earth, who has told us that the only acceptable offering is justice like his justice: to treat others fairly and compassionately. . . .”*

---

---

*“[A]fter many catastrophes, 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.”*

---

---

## Endnotes

1. Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 93.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., pp. 12, 13.
4. Ibid., p. 11.
5. Ibid. p. 63.
6. Ibid., p. 3.

7. Ibid., p. 109.
8. Hershel Shanks, "Democratizing the Image of God," *Bible Review* 15, no. 1 (February 1999): 2.
9. Cahill, *Gifts of the Jews*, pp. 71, 72, 259.
10. Ibid., p. 72.
11. Ibid., p. 234.
12. Ibid., p. 76.
13. Ibid., frontispiece.
14. Ibid., p. 93.
15. Ibid., pp. 94, 95.
16. Ibid., pp. 128, 130, 131.
17. Ibid., p. 144.
18. Ibid., p. 147.
19. Ibid., pp. 154, 155.
20. Ibid., pp. 222, 223.
21. Ibid., pp. 251, 252.
22. Ibid., pp. 197-199, 239.
23. Ibid., p. 240.

Copyright © 1999 Worldview Publications