



“From the House of Bondage”

In all theological systems, both language and patterns of thought must exist before any specific theological or religious formulation can be produced . . . ¹

We have recently addressed contemporary biblical research which shows that Jesus Christ is himself the human manifestation of the One-and-Only God — YHWH or Jehovah.² In the Christ event God abandoned his own self-existence and inaugurated human history by adopting relational coexistence for himself and for the mankind he created in his own image. We have also introduced some of the

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fearful implications of a continuing commitment to self-existence.³ In the presence of an “other,” the principle of self-existence inevitably results in the attempted domination, exclusion and ultimate annihilation of all else. We will now turn our attention to the historical beginnings of mankind. We do so in order to recover the “language and patterns of thought” essential to understanding the new reality of the Christ event and the remarkable journey of both God and man toward human coexistence.

Instinctual Presence

As Princeton scholar, Julian Jaynes, has shown, archaic man (male and female) was not conscious of himself or of others but possessed an instinctual consciousness of god.⁴ This god-consciousness was natural, universal, and constituted a major governing factor in the life of mankind. It enabled man to survive personal vulnerability, the threat of predatory animals, and the prospect of natural catastrophe. This gift of innate god-consciousness also enabled man to domesticate plants and animals, construct tools, navigate oceans and continents, and otherwise maintain ascendancy over nature. However, the possession of god-

consciousness — the instinctual presence of god — had decided shortcomings. It gave mankind no awareness of history, no power of will or volition, no choice of relationships, and no personal freedom or responsibility.

Then, about 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.

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This divine action was intended to move man beyond the past of an instinctual animal possession of god toward a future of human relationality.

Nevertheless, the sudden loss of an instinctual god-consciousness came as a great shock to mankind. In fact, so great was this loss that it was perceived as the original “Fall” from divine favor (cf. Genesis 3). When the instinctual presence of god was withdrawn, man became conscious of history and its uncertainties, of loneliness and a sense of alienation from God, of death and destruction, and of the loss of an assumed self-existence.

Possessional Presence

In the aftermath of the “Fall,” mankind determined to repossess their lost god-consciousness. This attempt is reflected in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). Here, armed with one universal language and assembled on the plain of Shinar, mankind determined to build a tower that would reach to heaven so that they could “religion” (re-ligate, reunite) themselves to god, repossess god, and thus establish god’s possessional presence.

The Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 is very sound historical linguistics, if one grants that the “one language” was only that of the political power structure. (Someone once observed that a “language” is merely a dialect with an army and a navy.)⁵

But God had a better purpose for mankind. Coming “down to see the city and the tower” (Genesis 11:5), he confounded the language of the people and scattered them abroad across the earth. Whatever the cost, God determined to move Creation beyond possessional god-consciousness to full, free and relational humanity.

After mankind’s futile attempt to repossess their lost god-consciousness by reaching upward to grasp celestial reality, the various imperial powers, defined by their own peculiar languages, developed alternative means of dealing with the loss of god-consciousness. They concluded that the god they once possessed was no longer present. In fact, he was so remote that he was confined to his own self-existence — devoid of relationship and action — and

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therefore immovable, unapproachable and impassible. However, although this self-existent god could not act, his uncreated archetypes, agents or brokers could come down — emanate or radiate downward — as law, soul or spirit. It was thought that these divine emanations possessed designated individuals, such as the emperor, Pharaoh, priests and nobility. Like the god of their imaginations, these “possessed” individuals believed that they enjoyed divine self-existence and the right, in turn, to possess others. Just as emanated souls possessed fleshly bodies, so fleshly bodies could possess corporate bodies — the great power structures of the ancient world. Thus, like the god they worshiped, these power structures were an inhuman projection of mankind’s own predatory or possessional instincts. Moreover, since they declared that they embodied the possessional presence of the gods, the power structures themselves came to be regarded as gods.

These deified powers believed that they had the right to possess and dominate all Creation. They thus extended their efforts not only to domesticate plants and animals, but to domesticate their fellow human beings as well. War and law became the “divine right” of kings and the means of possessing others. It was in this setting that the biblical account of Israel’s age-long bondage in imperial Egypt took place.

Not only Egypt, but all archaic civilizations, were united in their conviction that god — and selected men in the image of god — were constituted as

- self-existent, nonrelational beings — apart from others;
- essences or impersonal beings — apart from personhood;
- nonhistorical beings — apart from history;
- speaking but passive beings — apart from action;
- “brokering” all action through surrogates, such as the body politic — apart from relational, personal, historical and ethical action.

Despite universal claims that such nonhistorical self-existence was “goodness,” it was — and is — in fact, ultimate evil. “God intended man to have all good, but in his, God’s, time; and therefore all disobedience, all sin, consists essentially in breaking out of time.”⁶

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Relational Presence

By the time of Moses, however, conditions in the ancient world had changed. Little is known of the actual history that occurred then. However, “[i]n the transition from the Late Bronze to the Early Iron Age the . . . old city-state and empire structures were either totally destroyed or so weakened that they could not expand their imperial control for nearly a century.”⁷ “. . . [T]he Israelite federation of tribes did not come into existence until a generation or two after the

destruction that attended and probably brought about the transition that archaeologists have labelled Late Bronze II and Iron Age I.”⁸

As a result of this cultural collapse, a new and striking development occurred. The conviction that the gods were self-existent and exercised their powers through possession and domestication was challenged. In its place came “the Sinai covenant . . . [as] the only unique feature of ancient Israelite society, culture and religion.”⁹ “ . . . [T]he Sinai Covenant furnished the ideological foundations for a new society rising from the ash heaps of destroyed cities and empires.”¹⁰

This fundamental change involved a rejection of “possession” by the gods and an affirmation of God’s personal relationship — God’s relational presence — to mankind. With this change,

Yahweh was not merely the personified projection of the existing political system. . . . Yahweh was not simply a Baal — the metaphysical, mythical symbolization of the existing body politic. Exactly as it was Yahweh who uttered the covenant relationship in the prologue to the Sinai covenant: “I am Yahweh your God . . . ,” so also it was Yahweh who created the society according to its own premonarchic sources; “is not he your Father, your Creator? He made you and established you.” (Deut 32:6b).¹¹

When God inaugurated the covenantal relationship with Israel, he called for free, responsible and ethical action.

. . . [T]he “timeliness” of the Sinai covenant is of primary importance. . . . Those values that were essential to the nature of Yahweh himself, and therefore upon which depended the life or death of the society (individually as well as corporately), were described in the text of the covenant. . . . [Thus] the Decalogue described . . . those standards of individual behavior that were necessary to any social tranquility and cultural well-being. At the same time it furnished a definition of individual integrity (“You [2nd person singular!] will not . . .”) . . .

To sum up, . . . the mainstream of ancient Israelite religion was a rejection of the common ancient (and modern) paganism that deified the monopoly of force and I call the body politic.¹²

Furthermore, with the inauguration of covenant, history was no longer regarded as simply the occurrence “of mere random and meaningless events of no further significance . . .”¹³ Rather, history became the essential foundation for ongoing relationship.

[The emphasis of the Israelites was] upon the course of history. This emphasis upon the meaningfulness of history is the most important contrast also between biblical thought and the ancient Near Eastern paganisms.¹⁴

. . . [T]he entire biblical faith had profound foundations in the identification of Yahweh as that factor in human experience that governed the course of history. . . . [T]he result was inevitably a moral interpretation of history that reached a climax . . . with the Deuteronomic history . . . ¹⁵

Conclusion

The contrast between the possessional views of ancient imperialism and the relational views of the Israelites is now clear. Projecting mankind’s own predatory instincts, all ancient imperial civilizations existed in the conviction that god was

self-existent and possessional. Man in the image of god was likewise regarded as self-existent and possessional. The principle of self-existence required that both god and man maintain separation, immovability, unapproachability and impassibility by excluding relationships with all else. Being devoid of relationship, neither god nor man could act personally but could exercise their powers of possession only through the action of surrogate agents or brokers — the body politic.

Then, at the time of Moses, after centuries of Israelite bondage, it became evident that God is not self-existent. God is not incapable of action. God, therefore, is not possessional, nor is he active only through brokers.

God is the God of history, the God of action, the God of relationship.

Rather, God is the God of history, the God of action, the God of relationship. God is relationally present. God is a person, as mankind in God's image are persons. God is free and responsible, and intends for man also to become free and responsible.

Unlike the ancient imperial civilizations, with their imagined self-existence and their possessional consciousness, Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, introduced coexistence and a relational consciousness. This relational consciousness acted in history. It acted personally, apart from brokerage. It acted freely and responsibly, in love and compassion for others.

We have therefore defined the fundamental issue bequeathed by the ancient world to modern and postmodern mankind. Are God, and thus man in God's image, self-existent, and do they therefore act only through possessing subordinate agents? Or are God, and man in God's image, relational individuals in history who act responsibly, freely, ethically and compassionately as covenantal partners? These patterns of thought are symbolized by the biblical stories of Israelite enslavement to the imperial power of Egypt, followed by liberation "from the house of bondage" (Exodus 13:14). The bondage of Israel to the evil of self-existence and possession, and then Israel's deliverance to covenantal goodness inaugurated by Yahweh, provide the "language and patterns of thought" needed to address the history of the subsequent axial age, leading up to the coming of Christ.

Endnotes

1. George E. Mendenhall, "The Suzerainty Treaty Structure: Thirty Years Later," in Edwin R. Firmage, Bernard G. Weiss and John W. Welch, eds., *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), pp. 86, 87.
2. See "It is Finished," *Outlook* (Prequel 1998.2).
3. See "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).
4. See Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990).
5. Mendenhall, "Suzerainty Treaty Structure," p. 87.

6. Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), pp. 36, 37.
7. Mendenhall, "Suzerainty Treaty Structure," p. 87.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 91, 92.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

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