



## “The Power and the Glory”

*Editorial Note:* In a previous *Outlook* article<sup>1</sup> we examined the evidence that the Mosaic wilderness tabernacle symbolized the promise of YHWH’s own human manifestation — his sacrificial death, embodied resurrection and ultimate enthronement. The tabernacle symbols also foreshadowed the promised new Creation, in which YHWH as the Human One would fully share his kingdom with humanity. Through his own condescension to utter powerlessness, YHWH chose to disclose the ultimate power of his coexistent purpose. This provides the background to mankind’s delusional self-exaltation and our age-long struggle to manifest the presence, possession and demonstration of self-existent power.

FROM THE DAWN of human consciousness, mankind (male and female) has been greatly impressed by the forces displayed in the heavens above and on earth below. Mankind also has been gravely troubled by those unseen and unpredictable powers that bring death and destruction to Creation. Not surprisingly, these forces have long been identified as the manifestation of supreme being(s) or gods. In fact, in ancient times every real and imagined power was associated with a particular god or gods. Frustrated by its own powerlessness, mankind determined to possess and control these powers by becoming the human manifestation of the gods.

From this primal concept emerged the imperial cultures of ancient times. Organization was vertical. Those who were dominant claimed to be the human manifestation of divinity, with the right to domesticate their subordinates. Walled cities and citadels were developed to assure independence, protection and submission for imperial activities.

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In Greek, the root word for *citadel* or *wall* is *pele* or *polis*. *Polis* occurs in such words as *metropolis* and *megalopolis*. It also is used in such words as *politics*, *political*, *politicians* and *police*. Citadels and walls not only provided protection; they symbolized autonomous “political” power — power that the ancients believed to be the human manifestation of pagan gods like Atum-Ra, Baal and Marduk. Worship of these gods, in turn, represented submission to existing political power structures as the human manifestation of divinity.

## Israel and the Politics of an Imperial Power Structure

With their exodus from Egyptian imperial rule, the Israelites became desert nomads, wandering in the Negev for nearly 40 years. They then crossed the Jordan and settled in the highlands of Canaan. As the Israelites increased in numbers, they became increasingly confined and sought to expand their territory to the coastal plains and valleys. These plains and valleys formed the historic Middle Eastern trade routes between Egypt and other lands in the southwest and the great empires, like Babylon, that lay to the northeast. When the children of Israel entered Canaan, neither the southern nor the northern empire controlled these routes. Rather, they were held by the native Canaanites and by Greek colonists called Philistines, who had come from Crete and the Aegean Islands.

The Philistines, in particular, were equipped with iron tools and weapons together with wagons, chariots and horses. This made the Israelites look primitive by comparison. How could backward tribesmen conquer such a sophisticated culture? The Israelites soon concluded that, if they were to succeed, they had to adopt the Canaanite fertility god, Baal, or the Philistine fish god, Dagon. The adoption of these divinities involved not so much their worship but, rather, adaptation to their manifest political cultures and power structures. It should be no surprise that the Israelites were tempted to covet the gods of power and privilege and to abandon the tented YHWH, who reminded them of their primitive nomadic pilgrimage through the desert.

## Israel and the Politics of a Theocratic Power Structure

Therefore, it was not long before the Israelites attempted a new beginning. Toward the end of the era of the judges (ca. 1100-1000 BCE), the sons of the high priest, Eli, were asked to carry the sacred Ark into battle against the Philistines. Hophni and Phinehas confidently expected that YHWH’s presence would give them military and political advantage over their adversaries. Tragically, however, thousands of Israelites were slain, including Hophni and Phinehas themselves. Even worse, the Ark was captured and taken to the Philistine city of Ashdod. Only after further tragedies was the Ark finally returned to Israel (1 Samuel 4-6).

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The Israelites then determined to form their own kingdom, to establish their own “polis,” and thus to create new political power structures claimed to be the earthly manifestation of YHWH himself. Over the next 400 years, whether united or divided, the Israelites oscillated between adherence to the political structures of their pagan neighbors and the political system they had developed from their own tradition. However, in both cases they abandoned the covenantal promise YHWH had made with them, thinking that he was a political god like those of the nations around them.

Not surprisingly, YHWH was displeased with the distortion of his covenantal promise and purpose. He therefore allowed the northern kingdom of Israel to be taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. It never fully reappeared in history. The southern kingdom of Judah survived until 586 BCE, when Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, breached its wall, and destroyed the Temple that Solomon had built (2 Kings 24, 25). The Judahites (Jews) remained in captivity until Cyrus I of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BCE and allowed the exiles to return. The first of these returned to Judah under Zerubbabel, a descendant of King David, and Joshua, a descendant of the high priest, Zadok. The Second Temple was built and dedicated in 515 BCE, but the Most Holy Place was empty and the Shekinah was absent, for the Ark had been lost. For unknown reasons Zerubbabel, the governor, shortly disappeared from history, leaving the high priest alone in Jerusalem under the Persian government (Ezra 1-6).

Nearly a century later, Nehemiah, cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia, secured permission to return to Judah and to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. Nehemiah succeeded in this project but excluded the Samaritan remnants of the northern kingdom from any involvement, even though they also worshiped YHWH and observed the Torah. By rebuilding the

wall, Nehemiah was intent on dedicating Jerusalem as the manifest “polis” or autonomous political center for YHWH (Nehemiah 1-7).

About the same time, Ezra, the priestly scribe, also received permission to return to Jerusalem with a group of exiles. Ezra’s purpose was to restore the theocratic autonomy of Temple worship and obedience to the Torah (Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) in reverence for YHWH. Ezra brought the Written Torah with him and read it to all the people within the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 8). He and Nehemiah also enforced rigid adherence to the Sabbath by closing the gates of the wall and preventing traders and farmers from entering or leaving on the Sabbath day (Nehemiah 13). Moreover, Ezra assembled the people and required those who had married foreign women to divorce their wives and forsake their children (Ezra 9, 10). (The book of Ruth the Moabitess — of foreign blood — was written in opposition to this injunction.) Ezra further supported Nehemiah in the exclusion of the Samaritans from any participation in the restoration or worship in the Temple. These

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developments marked the end of the prophetic era and the beginning of the sages, who interpreted the existing canon in what later became known as the Oral Torah.

Persian rule continued for another hundred years, until Alexander the Great invaded the Persian Empire, besieged Tyre, and conquered the land of Palestine. Since the Samaritans had assisted in the siege of Tyre, Alexander granted them permission to build their own temple on Mount Gerizim. Also, because he respected the human manifestation of all the gods, Alexander allowed the people of Judah to maintain their theocratic government under the high priesthood.

After Alexander's death, two of his generals eventually divided the empire. Ptolemy controlled the south, including Egypt and Palestine, from his capital in Alexandria. Seleucus controlled the north, including Babylon and Syria, from his capital in Antioch. The Ptolemies held Palestine until 200 BCE, when the Seleucids took control.

Then, in 175 BCE, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid emperor, offered to make Jerusalem a Greek "polis" with the benefits of Greek institutions such as the gymnasium, the academy, the theater, the athletic fields and the bathhouses. The benefits also included lower taxes and licensure for international trade. However, the Jews emphatically declined the Seleucid offer, since it implied submission to

Greek gods. Antiochus was so deeply offended by this refusal that he placed the god Zeus in the Jerusalem Temple, outlawed the Torah, offered pigs on the Temple altar, and forced the Jews to abandon circumcision on pain of death.

In response to the desecration of their Temple and their own Jewish "polis," the Jewish peasants, known as Hasidim (pietists), engaged in a violent rebellion. They fought the Syrian troops stationed in the citadel of Jerusalem — except on the Sabbath when the Hasidim hid in caves. Soon the Syrian soldiers learned to stay in their Jerusalem citadel until the Sabbath, and then venture out to kill the Hasidim. Under these circumstances the Jewish patriots could not win. However, Mattathias and his five sons — of the Hasmonean priestly family — soon solved this problem by modifying the laws of Sabbath observance to permit personal defense on the holy day. Thus, when the Syrian warriors again came to the caves of the Hasidim, they were ambushed and murdered. These Jewish fighters were so tough and successful that they were called "Maccabees" — the Hammers.

Not long afterward, the Seleucids allowed the Jews to retain their own "polis" in Jerusalem. The Hasmoneans immediately assumed the secular governorship of Judah. They also expelled the Zadokite high priesthood and held it for themselves. Meanwhile, they cleansed and rededicated the Temple and instituted the Festival of

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Lights (Hannukah). Under the Maccabees, Judah became a full theocratic political system as the supposed manifestation of YHWH. Nevertheless, the Maccabees themselves became utterly corrupt and cruel, leading to the complete frustration of the Jewish people with the Maccabean political structure. In 63 BCE the Romans under Pompey opportunistically assumed the secular rule of Judah. The Romans also gained control of the priesthood by requiring the high priest, whom they politically appointed, to store his vestments each day in the royal palace.

Thus, for nearly a thousand years, the Israelites either ignored or openly rejected their covenant with YHWH. They oscillated between adopting the political power structures of the nations around them and distorting their own tradition to create a comparable political power structure as the supposed manifestation of YHWH.

## Israel and the Politics of a Democratic Power Structure

Finally, under the Hasmoneans and Romans, the Jewish people attempted another new beginning. Independently of both foreign and domestic political systems, they launched what became known as sectarian Judaism.

1. One group of sectarians, called the Essenes — named after the Hasidim — rejected all existing power structures and left Jerusalem entirely.

Abandoning the power structures of Temple, priesthood and the existing theocratic system, they established a monastery near the desert cliffs overlooking the Dead Sea. Here they engaged in an ascetic and celibate

lifestyle, with prayer, meditation, communal meals, baptism by immersion, and menial labor. As apocalyptists, they believed in a final war between “the children of light and the children of darkness” in which they alone would be saved. In 1947 their hidden records were discovered in the Qumran caves and became known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

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2. A second sectarian group, called the Sadducees — named after the Zadokite high priest — remained in Jerusalem. They were composed of the wealthy upper-class aristocracy, the military, and the high priests, who acted as Temple bankers. The Sadducees collaborated with the Romans and the Hellenists and merely hoped for the eventual restoration of the hereditary Zadokite priesthood and its theocratic power structures. The Sadducees believed in the Written but not the Oral Torah, and held that the purity laws were only for the priests. They did not accept either resurrection from the dead or an afterlife.

3. A third sectarian group, called the Zealots, were revolutionaries who came out of the Galilean hills. They were filled with “zeal” for the Jewish theocracy and Law. Among them were the Sicarii terrorists, who carried hidden swords used to



assassinate their adversaries. The Zealots were determined to forcibly gain independence from foreign rule and to secure the restoration of their sacred “polis.”

4. A fourth group of sectarians were called Pharisees (perushim or “separatists”). They were not opposed to either the Temple or the existing priesthood. Furthermore, they tolerated the secular rule of the Romans, because they saw themselves as the fulfillment of YHWH’s promise to Moses and thus believed that they had become a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). The Pharisees aggressively promoted both the Written and Oral Torahs and, as “priests,” practiced the purity laws.

The Pharisees made impressive contributions to society. They instituted universal public education for males. Moreover, for divorced or widowed women they instituted the “ketubah,” which assured such women of appropriate compensation and livelihood.

Beyond this, the Pharisees believed that they themselves constituted, not only the sacrifices and sacraments of the Temple, but the Temple itself. They therefore saw themselves as the human manifestation of YHWH.

The Pharisees held that Moses had risen from the dead and ascended to heaven, where he had been placed in charge of the Torah. They believed that, after they died, they, like Moses, would bodily rise from the dead and eventually enjoy the world to come.

The Pharisees believed that YHWH was the incorporeal, invisible, intangible and incomprehensible God who dwelt in heaven. They held that they possessed YHWH’s uncreated, divine emanations in the form of souls or spirits. It was because of their conviction that they possessed these souls or spirits that they saw

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themselves as the fulfillment and manifestation of the tabernacle metaphors.

The Pharisees represented a radical departure from the past history of Israel. Rather than assuming a divinely ordained vertical and external “polis” or political power structure, they extrapolated the concept of “polis” to themselves. They were the citadel. They were the wall. For the Pharisees, theocratic power rested with the people. In this respect the Pharisees reflected the democratic tendencies associated with the Greeks. Together, the people would create and constitute their own “polis.” Moreover, the Pharisees believed that this democratic “polis” or power structure would eventually embrace the entire world.

## Conclusion

Thus, over a millennium, Israel’s concept of autonomous political power shifted from one model to another. The imperial model reflected their concept of the pagan gods of surrounding nations. The theocratic model ostensibly represented YHWH. Finally, the “polis” emerged as a democratic model —

particularly under the Pharisees. The Pharisees and other sectarians believed that a humble, lowly, poor man, anointed by the divine Spirit, would become the Messiah and bring the restoration of the Mosaic office, the Davidic kingship and the Aaronic priesthood. Such a restoration, however, would symbolize the reality that already existed democratically in every devout Israelite. This ultimate political power structure would finally consist of a global empire, with each individual possessing and manifesting the divine presence.

As a means of assuring their unique identity, the Pharisees declared that blasphemy against YHWH was defined by the denial of his incorporeal, invisible, incomprehensible and unapproachable attributes. Such “blasphemy” was considered deserving of immediate execution. Of course, the real issue was not blasphemy against YHWH but blasphemy against the Pharisees’ own self-image. For they believed that they themselves — not YHWH — constituted the corporeal,

visible, comprehensible and approachable manifestation of the otherwise incorporeal and invisible God. Even though a delusional fantasy, the Pharisaic representation of mankind has proven incredibly attractive — especially in our own day. Quite apart from Judaism, witness the “Spirit-possessed” self-image rampant within the Christian movement and the popular idea — both within and without Christianity — that God is the “ground of being” who rises to democratic human expression in all mankind.

With the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, the Essenes, Sadducees and Zealots disappeared, and only the Pharisees survived. The Romans granted them refuge in Javneh, on the Mediterranean coast, and there they developed what became known as Rabbinic Judaism.

So it was that, in the millennial journey from the Exodus to Javneh, Judaism gradually evolved its power structures. From the beginning, YHWH had granted his chosen people covenantal status in which he promised to dwell among them, to offer himself as the new sacrificial Creation, to reveal himself in embodied human resurrection, and to ultimately occupy the throne with and on behalf of mankind. As Solomon declared at the dedication of the First Temple, “*Thine . . . is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty . . .*” (1 Chronicles 29:11, emphasis supplied). But the chosen people departed from this promise. For centuries they wavered between allegiance to the political power structures of their pagan neighbors and allegiance to the imagined power structures of their own commonwealths. Ultimately, under the Pharisees, they concluded that they themselves were the templed manifestation of YHWH. “*Thine is the power and the glory*” was replaced with “*Mine is the power and the glory.*” This new democratic delusion finally brought the “fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4, NRSV) and YHWH’s own human disclosure of utter powerlessness as that which truly exists in the presence of ultimate power.

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