



THE DIVINE STRUGGLE FOR “I” AND “THOU” VII: Silent Presence

SOON AFTER THE PERSIAN KING, Cyrus, conquered Babylon (539 BCE), he encouraged the return of the Jews who had been exiled from their homeland. The initial returns were led by the scribal priest, Ezra (ca. 538 BCE), and a later return was led by Nehemiah, cupbearer to Artaxerxes I. Under Ezra the Temple was rebuilt and the written Torah was restored as the standard of strict conduct, and under Nehemiah the city walls of Jerusalem were restored. Meanwhile, the kingship was abolished and the prophetic office quickly terminated. Only the Zadokite priesthood survived.

In the succeeding five centuries Judah remained largely under the secular rule of Persia, Greece, the Ptolemies (Egypt), the Seleucids (Syria) and Rome, except for the secondary Maccabean and Herodian eras (ca. 164-4 BCE). Meanwhile, the priests remained largely secluded while claiming their own possession of divinity.

Jewish Sectarianism and Messianic Claimants

This led to the emergence of a number of sectarian groups. The Sadducees strove for secular power and denied an afterlife. The Pharisees sought spiritual domination in this life and believed in the resurrection of the dead. The

Essenes lived in isolation and devoted themselves to apocalyptic thinking that presaged the end of the old age and the appearance of a new Creation. The Zealots determined to overthrow all foreign domination by force if necessary. The Ophites lived in Egypt and believed that the highest god (Ophis = “serpent”) was imprisoned in their fallen human bodies. They were, therefore, the founders of Gnosticism.¹

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Meanwhile, Messianic claimants began to appear, seeking to deliver the Jews from all foreign secular and religious domination. Without exception the efforts of these claimants failed and were terminated by the existing regimes.²

God's Silent Presence

The most poignant aspect of this period in the history of the Chosen People was God's peculiar and unobtrusive silence. There was little evidence of his direct intervention. At the same time, he allowed the emergence of apocalyptic or end-time thinking, he encouraged belief in the future resurrection of the dead, and he permitted the role of Messianic claimants. Otherwise, God allowed the "I" of self-consciousness to take its course through domination or submission, with little or no evidence for the interaction of the "I" and "Thou."

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Meanwhile, God must have pondered his own future incarnation as the ultimate self-conscious human "I" who would interact with the "I" of all others. While the preceding earthly events were only precursors of his ultimate coming, it is interesting that foreign religions explicitly predicted the coming of the Savior. The Persian prophet, Zoroaster, who lived about the time of King David (ca. 1000 BCE), predicted the birth of the world Savior by a virgin.³ Furthermore, the Persian magi, who were familiar with astronomy and astrology, predicted the coming of a Western Semitic royal Savior about 7 BCE.⁴

Conclusion

Thus, while God maintained his silent presence, earthly events were rapidly converging on his intended incarnation, life, death, resurrection and eternal humanity. This would inaugurate and ultimately fulfill the loving, egalitarian interaction of all self-conscious "I"s with all self-conscious "Thou"s.

Endnotes

1. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. (1997), s.v. Gershom Scholem, "Samael."
2. See "Messianism V: Claimants," *Outlook*, Context for the Christ Event (2006.12).
3. See Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2001), p. 42.
4. See Simo Parpola, "The Magi and the Star: Babylonian Astronomy Dates Jesus' Birth," *Bible Review* 17, no. 6 (December 2001): 16-23, 52, 54.