

THE GIFT OF THE JEWS
Blessings or Not?
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“The Gifts of the Jews—How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels”. Is the remarkable title of this book by Thomas Cahill a “come-on” or what? How can he hope to defend such a sweeping proposition—the earliest Jews have changed the way everyone thinks and feels?

I read this book with a combination of skepticism and fascination. I have thought about it for months. I have come to think that Cahill is right. We can take his proposition seriously but not exclusively. Over the past six milleniums or so, many cultures have burned their precepts and ways into our collective unconscious—the Greeks, the Romans, and other pagans down through the ages. But when we stop and analyze how we do think and feel, we cannot escape Cahill’s proposition. An obscure desert tribe is the source of ideas and cultural patterns that permeate our thought and our way of living. Not only are we prisoners of these ancient biblical patterns, but these patterns have spread around the world and into other cultures not of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition.

If we need a straightforward example to open our minds to this challenging idea, take the seven-day week with a day of rest. That’s God’s law, relayed to us by Moses. No culture ever had a seven-day week with a designated day of rest before. There is no cosmological reason for a seven-day week as with the month and the year, which are based on solar cycles. Now, all over the modern world, we have a seven-day week with a Sunday or Sabbath accepted and observed in accordance with Moses’ statement of God’s commandment. This, despite the fact that we still honor the pagan tradition to name those days—Saturday, Saturn’s Day, and Sunday, the Sun’s Day. But Cahill’s proposition extends much deeper into our psyche than the traditional weekly day off.

My purpose here is not to discuss the Jews, per se, nor to discuss the Jewish religion. I am following Thomas Cahill’s approach—discussing the stories and teaching which originated in the biblical lands, were passed on orally for many generations, and finally recorded and assembled during the first millenium BCE. We have no evidence that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob actually lived, but their stories have lived. What is fact from those early wanderings of the desert tribe we will never know. But the intellectual, philosophical, and religious heritage of that period is very real, indeed.

Sometime toward the beginning of the second millenium BCE the world’s first civilization, Sumer, emerged in Mesopotamia. In the ancient Sumerian city of Ur, the sacred texts tell us that a man named Terah had a son he named Abram. Ur was a major Sumerian city near the delta of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (now in Iraq), far from the current land of the Jews—Israel, in those days known as Canaan. Ur, a city dedicated to the moon goddess, was as advanced as any in the world, with its brick buildings, defensive works, and monumental ziggurat. But, according to the account in Genesis, Terah decided to pack up and move his family. His caravan took them far northward up

the Euphrates River valley to the vicinity of present-day Turkey, where they stayed and struck it rich in the Sumerian city of Harran. There they remained until after father Terah's death. Then one day, Terah's son Abram, now the leader of the clan, heard a voice telling him to leave Harran and migrate onward—the account does not say that he knew where he was to go, but the reader is told that he would end up in that unknown land of Canaan, an uncivilized region inhabited by desert tribes on the eastern Mediterranean littoral.

From Sunday school, we know the stories of some of their adventures along the way. Many more interesting adventures of Abram and his family are glossed over because of the vivid sex and violence. The gods Abram had been raised with went with him. From the early writings we can trace the Sumerian religious notions. Abram spoke with his patronal god—his guardian spirit—one of the Sumerian's many gods for all occasions and people. These gods were sometimes jealous of each other and, like people, often did as much harm as they did good.

From Abram (later renamed Abraham) onward, down through the recorded generations of Old Testament chieftains, warriors, kings, and prophets, new religious concepts and philosophical patterns emerged that were new in the world, that changed the world, and have become part of us—for better or worse. I will touch on only a few.

The first of these we will note is that the Jews evolved a philosophy that radically departed from traditional culture's cyclical view of life. Abram's journey to Canaan symbolized a break from a universal view held by early cultures around the world. Until then, primitive religions and cultures held the view that life and the world turned in eternal cycles. What had been will be again. The seasons, the lives of men and animals, the patterns of migration, all followed the path of the great wheel. Each generation will be much like the preceding one. Prominently represented in the oldest inscriptions and paintings are the circle, the spiral, and the wheel. Perhaps the earliest of all human art found to date is a 75,000 year-old series of circles engraved on a sandstone monolith in Australia. The idea that everything is and will be as it was permeated the early cultures of the middle east, Asia, and the Americas. There was no expectation or acceptance of the concept of fundamental change; no concept of evolution, of revolution, of uprooting, of progress, nor of invention. These concepts were nonexistent in the early religions and ancient mindsets. The tools and skills they possessed had been given to those peoples by the gods in some unrecorded beginning.

Thomas Cahill describes the outlook of the Sumerians, the people of Abram's homeland, as an example. Although the Sumerians had invented writing, they had no sense of history. The city-states had been founded by gods in unrecorded time immemorial. They believed that the gods had given them all the tools and weapons and marvelous inventions that we now know were invented by them. Everything they knew—their city, their fields, their herds, their plows had always been.

The idea of pursuing an elusive ideal, the promised land, which occupied life and thought from Abraham, down through Moses and Joshua, was revolutionary. Cahill contends that

the Israelites were the first people to live—psychologically—in real time, to value the new, and to expect surprise. This is what impelled the Israelites to take such care with genealogies in documenting their culture—the world as a directional journey rather than a constant circling.

The concept of the linearity of time, of progress, and of change is so deeply rooted in us we cannot imagine otherwise. We expect progress, we seek change, we make great journeys, we pursue lives different from our parents, we expect the new, the different. You can hardly sell a product in the supermarket without labeling it “new”. We expect each generation to break the mold of the previous one. We hate to run in circles; we want destinations. Our society honors those who invent something, or accomplish something that has not been accomplished before. We are fascinated by the Guinness Book of Records. We believe in progress toward some eventual, undefined, perfection. And the Jews first brought this concept to the world.

A second example of how the Jews changed the way we think and feel is in their development of a new concept of God. As they journeyed their idea of God changed drastically from the patronal god that Abram brought with him from Sumer. This new understanding of God that evolved is embedded in our collective psyche today. As Abram and his tribe journeyed, first to Canaan, then—due to drought—on to Egypt, then back to the Trans-Jordan area, then back to Canaan, their concept of God evolved along the way. At first Abram’s God was one of many. Even generations later, Moses relayed God’s commandment that He was the one that the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must worship, and they should not worship the gods of other tribes (you shall have no other gods before me). This attempt to establish monotheism was a difficult change for the descendants of Abraham for many generations.

The Israelites frequently violated this imperative and they were often punished by the god Yahweh for their infidelity. Perhaps in times of famine or disaster, they became discouraged and doubted that Yahweh was really helping them, so they turned to other gods for help. In some cases, other gods may have been preferred because they were not so stern nor required such morbid rituals. They often yielded to the temptation to worship a god whose rituals included orgiastic parties with excesses of feasting, drinking, and sex. But, as we trace the story of the Israelites down through the ages, the one-God idea gradually took hold. Today, monotheism is practically a universal concept, especially in the western world.

As the god of the Jews evolved to become regarded not as one of many gods, but as the one and only “true” god, the one-god belief gave the Jews and the other inheritors of their god—the Christians and the Muslims—a strong sense of intolerance toward people who do not worship the “one true God”. This idea of only one true God that all must worship has taken powerful root in western society in particular, and over the years has justified bloody conquest. When we try to account for our ancestors’ brutal destruction of the indigenous American population, we learn that such depredation was considered by the righteous to be justified because the Indians were “heathen”—they did not worship the “one true God”. The bloody crusades, the repeated slaughter of the Jews, and the wanton

destruction of human beings in countries conquered by the western colonial powers, all serve as grim reminders that such slaughter was deemed justifiable because the victims did not worship the one “true” God. Militant Muslims today justify terrorist violence in the name of serving the one true God. Even in Christian society in the United States today, in less overtly violent ways, we see this same intolerance manifested by those who want to enforce respect for the “one true God” by mandating prayer in the classroom, at sporting events, and at public functions of all kinds. This “one true God” culture pervades our civilization to the core.

A third concept that we can observe developing during the course of the Old Testament wandering, and that permeates our culture today, is the idea of an omnipresent God. In the early days of the Israelite nation, God was confined to a particular place, just as He had been in the Sumerian homeland. In the days of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, He (always represented as male) could be found on a fiery volcanic mountain, or in a high temple, or in a burning bush, or ark. People came to God’s location. But, as time went on, and in the later generations of prophets, the Lord tended to deal with his prophets and even lay people more subtly, and at a distance. He, and his angel messengers, tended not to speak face to face with man any longer as he had with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and even the ill-fated Lot. The idea evolved that God can be in more than one place at one time—everywhere simultaneously, in fact. This revolutionary concept took root particularly when the Jews were exiled and taken into captivity by the Assyrian Empire and later by the Babylonian Empire after starting about 700 BCE. Far from Jerusalem and the Temple, the Jews’ religion can accept that God could be wherever his worshipers were. This concept, so familiar to us today, had a powerful impact. Wherever one is, that person can still be helped, watched, and yes, punished by God. With Jews scattered around the world in the Diaspora, they could take the lead in international commerce because deals could be made at a distance—God was watching over all. No other culture had the advantage of an omnipresent God. Jews who were scattered in many countries and had never met could trust each other at a distance because they knew they were accountable to the same God. Today, everyone who believes in God accepts the idea of God being everywhere—wherever people are.

Concept: Western peoples today still harbor many of the characteristics of the Jewish God. Many of these are little changed from God’s pagan antecedents. People still accept the supernatural interpretation of the world around them. People pray for God to intervene and save them from danger, or to bring rain, or to defeat their enemies, to let their children be born healthy, to prevent natural disasters from occurring, or to provide individualized help when needed. In just about anything that is beyond human control, God is asked to get involved. God is even called on to rescue people from problems of their own creation. People see God’s hand behind plagues and epidemics, earthquakes, tornadoes, and children born deformed.

Concept: Although God is super-powerful, He makes mistakes. Sometimes he punishes the innocent. The early Jewish writings convey the idea that God can make mistakes as we learned from Adam and Eve’s disobedience. Would he have created them if he knew

they would betray his trust and disobey him? In Noah's time, God acknowledged that he made a mistake in putting man on earth.

“The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So, the Lord said, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth...” (Gen 6:6-7)

And today, we still explain our world by holding to the idea that God sometimes punishes the innocent, so we must take pains to avoid his capricious doings. God punished Noah's grandson Canaan and ordained that Canaan's descendants should be enslaved to the offspring of his other two sons, because Canaan's father, Ham, had found his father, Noah, drunk and naked in his tent. So God and Noah put a curse on all the future generations of this innocent grandson, Canaan:

“Cursed by Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.” (Gen. 9:24-25)

Another deeply rooted idea we inherited from this period is that God's blessings and justice are selective—there are “chosen” people, and God creates some people that he hates. The early Biblical narratives teach us to accept this injustice. We are taught that some nationalities as well as individual people are chosen peoples. Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Isaac, and other prophets were told by God that out of all the peoples on Earth, they had been especially selected to be blessed by God. This little tribe was not selected from all the tribes on earth because they had earned special merit. Far from it. God does not have to explain how he chose this nomadic band. But because they were God's chosen ones, they were directed by God to kill other peoples, to take their lands, and to confiscate their livestock and all of their goods. This was not murder, or stealing, in the sense that God had given commandments to Moses against killing and stealing. These were deeds to be done to God's non-chosen peoples. The Bible teaches us that even before we are born, we can be chosen or not. God is reported to have said about Isaac's boys, Jacob and Esau, that even before they were born, God loved Jacob “but Esau I hated.”

When God made his original covenant with Abraham, God gave Abraham and his descendants a promise that they would subjugate all the lands and peoples of what is now Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, portions of Turkey and Egypt, and half of Iraq.

“To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates.” (Gen. 15:18)

Later, God made a second covenant with Abraham. God's part of the covenant would be to endow Abraham “with the whole land of Canaan as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants.” (Gen. 17:8) Abraham's part of the deal, “the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.” on the eighth day of life.

To implement god's blessing of the chosen ones, this wandering tribe of Abraham, God would help them conquer the seven nations that inhabited the lands he promised. God

said, once “you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make not treaty with them, and show them no mercy. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” (Deut. 6,7) (Sounds familiar?)

When the nation of Israel, under Joshua, was implementing God’s mandate as the chosen people, God, with His selective—rather odd—sense of justice, helped the Israelis by getting into the heads of the leaders of the condemned nations. We are told that God made the beleaguered nations stubborn and to resist negotiation with the Israelis to save their own lives and the lives of their families and children. “For it was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the Lord had commanded Moses.”

In New Testament times, the early Christians did question some of these object lessons about the justice of God. Paul dealt specifically with this in his writing:

“Rebekah’s children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad...she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger’. Just as it is written: ‘Jacob I loved but Esau I hated.’ What then shall we say: Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’” (Rom. 9:10-15)

At the level of individuals, the Biblical narrative makes us comfortable with the idea that some people suffer just because it is their fate—God must have meant it that way. Or, more dangerously, people get comfortable with the idea that as a chosen person, they are justified in the exploitation of others. Western peoples justified slavery for centuries. Western peoples justified colonization around the world, the subjugation of others, who, if they resisted, they could be killed. The U.S.’ own doctrine of Manifest Destiny in the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought our violence to bear on peoples of Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, the Philippines, and the native peoples of our own land. Nor are these matters that we have grown out of. Even as we speak, our nation is contemplating starting a war with Iraq. Last week, to the embarrassment of the national leadership, it was disclosed that a principal motivation for such conquest is the acquisition of the oil supplies of that region. According to opinion polls, as a people we are comfortable with the idea of destroying other people to enhance our own economy.

Many nations and peoples, the United States included, have stated that they considered their country to be chosen by God to conquer other peoples, killing them if necessary. Based on what we read in the Old Testament, chosen people are justified in determining the world order, including who lives and who dies. Justice, in its ideal manifestation, has no role to play.

Here we are today, recipients of so much that has gone before. The religious and philosophical heritage to us from the ancient, wandering, epic of a small tribe of Semites does have a disproportionate effect on the way everyone thinks and feels. This can be

positive—the belief in the possibility of progress—or it can be negative. Rationalizing that we are a chosen people caters to our least civilized impulses and justifies our tendency toward the acceptance of injustice. As an enlightened people, it is up to us to reframe our concepts when necessary. The second of our Unitarian Universalist principles is a covenant to promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations—our heritage notwithstanding.