

COMMUNICATION PRIOR TO THE INCARNATION

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Yahweh, the God of our fathers, has never been silent. Although much too frequently our fathers and we their heirs have been deaf to his words and Word, God has spoken often: in creation, in judgment, in a covenant of *torah* (law), and most recently in the gospel of incarnation. But creation ended in rebellion, judgment brought destruction, the covenant of *torah* produced misunderstanding, and promises of a king and a kingdom resulted in four intermittent destructions of Jerusalem. With these results it was a miracle that God continued to communicate at all, let alone by incarnation. One may well ask what was the context and content of God's communication in an infant named *Yeshua* "Yahweh is salvation" (rendered in English through Greek as "Jesus")? What effect has it had and to what end does it now move?

The oldest traditions of our faith introduce God as communicating in creation. The seemingly mechanical repetition in the Genesis text of the words, "and God said . . . and God called" is not without purpose. These words are more than convenient or conventional anthropomorphisms. From the very beginning God is caught in the act of communication! His voice in creation was more than idle monologue breaking the silence of the dark and formless watery abyss. God was in dialogue, communicating with unstructured primeval cosmic matter. God spoke and the formless waste responded in obedience—chaos became ordered and the watery void turned into the beauty of nature. The dialogue between the Creator and the created order ended in perfection. In the succinct words of the biblical narrative, "and God saw all that he had made and it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).

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Whatever the nature of the creative force behind the biblical words “and God said,” and whatever were the dynamics in operation in the remote antiquity of creation, the communication was precise and productive—God spoke . . . and it was so!”

But no sooner was God’s voice of creating quieted, no sooner was the hush of Eden’s paradise perfected when the noise of rebellion shattered the foundations of the establishment. The voices of indignant protest were heard within the created order complaining of God’s restrictive perfection. What was freedom for human beings if one were free only to be in the image of God when one could actually be *as* God? What true dignity would people have if they, with the opportunity to be *as* God, were satisfied with being “a little lower than the angels” (Ps. 8:5 AV) or even “a little less than a god” (Ps. 8:5 NEB)?

Such rhetorical questions ended with radical answers, and man’s initial creative communication was out of order—tragedy out of tranquillity and sin out of freedom. The quest for divinity led to the demonic. God had communicated in creation, and Adam and Eve and their descendants responded in rebellion.

God’s voice was heard again, but not in idle monologue with himself, wondering in frustration what had gone wrong or how could perfection have been subverted. The voice of creation yielded to re-creation. It was a new dialogue: God’s conversation with humanity for redemption and renewal.

But it is easier to create than to re-create. It is easier to make something new than to refinish, remodel or redeem something damaged, distorted, or demented. It was easier for God as creator to get an obedient response out of the benign primeval chaos than it was to communicate persuasively and effectively as Redeemer and Savior with a rebellious and

defiant creation.

Every system of communication which God employed to end the alienation and rebellion proved ineffective. The transmission was excellent! God's words of reproof and discipline were pronounced in the context of love and forgiveness. But the rebellion had damaged man's capacity for reception. Sin had short-circuited spiritual sensitivity and the centers of moral and ethical awareness were either burnt-out or corroded. This was God's dilemma—how to communicate with those who were virtually incommunicado by acts of rebellion.

The familiar traditions of Noah and the flood relate the frustrations and futility in God's earliest redemptive communication. Taking the more obvious option open to him, God chose to abandon the incorrigible rebels and to begin anew through one man whose righteousness gave promise. Following the earlier pattern set by primeval cosmic matter, nature responded unreservedly to God's word and will when heavenly rains poured down and subterranean waters erupted from below. The violent malevolent forces of nature were endowed with a redemptive purpose. Re-creation rested on Noah and his kin!

But by the time the flood waters had dried up, before the rainbow had melted out of view, the wine had begun to flow. Sainly patriarchal Noah had turned sottish. Re-creation had failed! Awakening from a drunken stupor, seemingly not quite sober, a father cursed his innocent grandson for his son's inadvertent invasion of his privacy. "Cursed be Canaan, slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers" (Gen. 9:25). Noah's self-righteous ethics after the flood proved to be no different than humanity's unrighteous morality before the flood.

Whatever the precise genre or history of Noah's intra-family feud, it negated God's attempt at redemption and

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renewal. Re-creation was understood to have rested on Noah and his kin, but they failed. Noah's lingering contribution to humanity has been his drunken curse, and it has been a plague upon human morality, especially for Canaanites, Jews, and Negroes. For on the authority of this curse the early Israelites ravaged Canaan with religious fervor until the Canaanites were politically extinct and physically annihilated. The Jews, in time, tasted the fury of the curse at the hands of Christians who summoned the more appropriate "curse of Cain" to persecute Jewry. In the infamous words of Peter of Cluny, "God does not want (Jews) to be destroyed, but like Cain . . . they are to continue to exist under great suffering and in great shame so that life may be more bitter for them than death."

More recently during the past two hundred years many pious white folks have felt free to correct Noah's curse by removing it from Canaan and placing it on Ham, the real culprit. This provided a fictitious but easy identification of the Hamitic peoples of North Africa with the Negroes from all other parts of Africa and thereby justified the slavery of blacks by whites. Thus, creation's perfection perished all the more, for judgment's flood failed when Noah's curse ushered in mass inhumanity on the authority of faith.

If God could not communicate with humanity in general perhaps he could depend on a particular people. Evidently God thought it was worth a try. For reasons known only to God's self, God decided upon a mixed multitude which in time came to have the name of Israel. With this choice of Israel, the God of creation became the God of history. For it is within the historical period, early within the second millennium B.C.E. (which is rather late in the history of man when one considers, for example, that Neolithic Jericho flourished as an urban center about 7,000 B.C.E.) that God enters into a covenant relationship with Abraham, the father

of all Israel and all of Ishmael.

The biblical traditions retain brief summaries of several covenants between God and Abraham (or perhaps dispersed *fragments* of one covenant). They may be characterized by the words of Genesis 12:2–3 ‘I will make you a greet nation, and I will bless you . . . and by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves,’ and Genesis 17:8, “I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

If these two passages reflect two separate covenants, or even if they represent two elements within a single covenant, history is witness to the fact that the idea embedded in the latter, Genesis 17:8, captured the imagination and controlled the aspirations of Israel, almost to the total exclusion of the idea presented in Genesis 12:3 that “by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves” (RSV) or ‘in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed’ (KJV), or even ‘all the families on earth will pray to be blessed as you are blessed’ (NEB). Early Israel’s primary concern, however, became real estate—the acquisition of the land of Canaan.

It would have been very difficult for the average Israelite to have convinced a typical Canaanite that according to the covenant between Yahweh and Israel *all the families of the earth*—certainly including Canaan as a legitimate family on earth—would be blessed by Israel or as much as Israel. Indeed, the Canaanites may have had some valid questions and harbored legitimate doubts about that promise. By what definition of ‘blessing’ can one bless through wars of extermination?

We too may well ask by what polemic was the God of blessing turned into a God of war? On what authority was the presumably peaceful settlement, assimilation, acquisition and

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possession of the promised land turned into a holy war of death and destruction. To what degree had the Israelites borrowed from the religion of their neighbors in making Yahweh a god-of-war? Was Yahweh being fashioned in the image of Amon-Re, the god of Egypt? (It was Thutmose III, for example, who sang in victory upon the conquest of Megiddo, around 1468 B.C.E. of “extending the frontiers of Egypt according to the command of his father Amon-Re,” the god of Egypt.)

To the degree that these questions—whether real or artificial—received an answer in the affirmative, God’s communication through the covenant was being distorted. To be sure there were unpredictable adversities which gave Israel sufficient reason for uncertainty and doubt. The patriarchs were given a land without being told how or when it was to become the possession of their heirs. Upon their arrival they found it more a land of drought and famine than anything else. Dependent on foreign-aid from Egypt and on the generous hospitality of a benevolent pharaoh, the seed of Abraham found itself living not in the land of promise but in the courtyards of Pharaoh.

For the Israelites it was bad enough to be aliens; but how much worse when “there rose up a new king who knew not Joseph” and slavery became the cruel fate of God’s elect. Just what was God trying to communicate in the covenant? Was it by slavery in the land of Egypt that the seed of Abraham was to be a blessing to all the families of the earth?

Precisely when the burdens were the heaviest and despair was at its greatest, the God of the fathers spoke most emphatically. The God of creation acted unmistakably as the God of history in the Exodus—that mighty work of salvation which was to become the central theme of the covenant with Israel.

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God spoke in the Exodus, and his communication was unmistakable. In history's first massive protest march against slavery and servitude the children of the Hebrews walked out on Pharaoh and claimed their freedom. The march from Egypt called for no Hebrew army, nor the destruction of the Egyptian kingdom. Israel reached the banks of the Jordan with clean hands for no blood had been shed.

But from that point on who could have predicted the stream of events which were to compose Israel's history and the expression of her faith. The promised land bequeathed to the seed of Abraham flowed more with blood and gall than it ever did with milk and honey. It became a veritable merry-go-round of war. Each doing to his neighbor what some other neighbor had done to him. Caught between the east-west power blocks of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and subject to the warring jealousy of adjacent city-states, the promised land held little promise. Canaanites, Israelites, Philistines, Syrians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Babylonians, Judeans, Persians, Greeks and Romans—each in their own time kept the dust settled by the blood of their neighbors, and all in turn sacrificed themselves vainly to their gods of war. And if this were not bad enough for the people in covenant—for the people selected by God himself—internal moral and spiritual decay sapped whatever religious or ethical integrity survived the foreign assaults, domestic strife, and civil wars.

The Old Testament historical books read much like the military chronicles of any other nation, and for this reason old covenant history erroneously makes God appear as a divine warlord. As the lord of history God seemingly stood deliberately or indifferently behind the scenes, content to let kingdoms rise and fall. For many he was viewed as being the *cause* of it all since he was *the* God of history.

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There was little awareness within Israel that God could control history without dictating or directing the entire drama. (Perhaps they lacked the convenient analogy of the chess master frequently cited by Christian writers wherein the chess master controls the chess game but never dictates nor directs the other's move. Whatever the move, he can work it into his purpose.)

But war's conquest was neither the intent nor the content of God's communication in history, in covenant, or in Torah. This communication was for *life and blessing*: "in thee shall *all the families of the earth be blessed!*" Of all the Israelites it was seemingly only the prophets who fully understood what God was trying to communicate. And to the degree that Jonah was partly typical of the prophetic mood, not all the prophets comprehended. But granted that the communication between God and his prophets was generally successful, the communication between the prophets and the people lack the necessary response. The people were deaf and could not hear, or hearing just would not believe. Israel refused to learn from either history or prophecy. Thereby they forfeited communication with God, and what should have produced faith and faithfulness yielded only the despair of sin and judgment's bitter consequences.

Delbert R. Hillers, in his very significant work entitled *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea*, shows something of the implication of this turn of events in Israel's history.

The religion of Israel assigned an important place to history. This lent a wonderful concreteness to her credo: Yahweh was her God because at a particular time and place he had delivered her from Egypt . . . All the sacred institutions of Israel found their justification in some act of God in the past. . . . But this meant that the passage of time and the chances of history could make questionable every precious tenet. . .

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It was especially easy to question the continuing significance of the Exodus when the Israelites found themselves, quite unexpectedly, in exile, in a different house of bondage. It was hard to maintain a lively faith in the election of David's house when the reigning king was an apostate tyrant, or when the monarch was himself a prisoner in Babylon; and hard to be a fundamentalist about the inviolability of Zion when the city was in ruins. . . . So as the foundations of Israel's life eroded and crumbled, a process of reinterpretation began. (p.166)

As Noah proved to be a disappointment as a channel of communication, and the flood waters failed to drown man's propensity for sin, so Israel—law and covenant included—proved to be equally disappointing. God just could not get through to the hearts of the people. All lines were busy, for Israel was content to talk to herself or with others as bad off as she was.

The destruction of Israel in 721 B.C.E., the fall of Judah and Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E., and even a second exodus from exile in Babylon failed to open clear channels of communication.