

## ANCIENT MYTHS OR GOOD NEWS?

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### PSALM 82

God has taken his place in the divine council;  
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:  
2 “How long will you judge unjustly  
and show partiality to the wicked?  
3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan;  
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.  
4 Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”  
5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding,  
they walk around in darkness;  
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.  
6 I say, “You are gods,  
children of the Most High, all of you;  
7 nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,  
and fall like any prince.”  
8 “Rise up, O God, judge the earth;  
for all the nations belong to you!”

It was my pleasure in April of this year to accompany my good friend, former student, and colleague in ministry, Chaplain Parker Thompson (Brigadier General US Army, retired, 1982) to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he lectured on the history of the U.S. Army Chaplaincy (having written the first volume of what is now a ten volume history of the chaplaincy)<sup>1</sup> to a large number of newer chaplains and chaplains assistants from across the country. Since I have had no military experience, the visit gave me a chance to learn some military history experience a taste of Army life from a chaplain’s perspective.

Lunch at the NCO club one day with the base chaplain and a Special Forces chaplain who had just returned from the battle zones of Afghanistan was very cordial but quite serious. Some questions about Afghanistan could not be answered for security reasons. But when I asked for the Chaplain’s personal assessment of the Afghan situation, whether He was optimistic or pessimistic, the response was seriously hesitant. The Afghan situation was so “biblical,” so to speak. The chaplain had stepped into tribal warfare, as tribal as the wars in Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. He and the troops he serves had stepped into a holy war—with war lords like Saul, David, Rehoboam, Jereboam, and Abijah—with everyone assuming that God/Allah would honor them with victory if they would just fight hard enough and cunningly

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enough. The chaplain and his men had dropped into (some literally) as peace makers and peace keepers—into a world where *peace* is secondary to *power*.

The chaplain was from one of the more conservative denominations which honors the biblical traditions somewhat uncritically as all of it being the word of God about the way and will of God. But when he experiences the biblical patterns of tribal warfare played out in his moment of history—which could precipitate *his* last moments in this history—there is much soul searching and profound questions of faith about the violence celebrated in the Scriptures and its re-enactment in today's world.

The chaplains' schedules were tight that day in April; lunch was all too short. But there was enough time for me to share with the chaplains my idea that not everything in the Bible is a true word about the way and will of God. The Bible contains many chapters which reveal our human condition. I have expressed some of these ideas before from this pulpit. Do you remember my saying

To affirm that “the Bible is the inspired and authoritative word of God,” is to make an incomplete sentence. The complete sentence needs to include prepositional modifiers which affirm that “the Bible is the inspired and authoritative word of God (1) *about* the way and will of God and (2) *about* our human condition.” The Bible includes case studies about human sin and pathologies—including those of some very religious people—as well as case studies of God's therapeutic intentions and saving activities.

The guideline for distinguishing between the human pathology and the divine therapy in the Bible is to note (1) that whatever *blossoms* in the light of the Cross is the word of God about the divine will and the divine way, and (2) whatever *withers* in the light of the Cross is the word of God about our human condition.

With this interpretive key in focus, I want address an ancient myth which legitimates to this day the celebration of violence and terror and identify that part of the biblical traditions which challenges its truth and offers instead “Good News.”

### A SYNOPSIS OF THE BABYLONIAN CREATION MYTH <sup>2</sup>

Fresh-Water *Apsu* and Marine-Water *Mummu-Tiamat* commingled and produced the gods

Lahmu and Lahamu

Anshar and Kishar

Sky Anu

Nudimud = Earth and Water God Ea, “the all-wise” and Enki (Wisdom)

They became one big noisy family! So noisy and dysfunctional that Father Apsu could not stand it. He wanted the two generations of the gods silenced — by killing them:

Their ways are verily loathsome unto me. By day I find no relief, nor repose by night. I will destroy, I will wreck their ways, That quiet may be restored, Let us have rest!”

Vizier Mummu advised:

Do destroy, my father,” the mutinous ways. Then shalt thou have relief by day and rest at night! When Apsu heard this, his face

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grew radiant because of the evil he planned against the gods, his sons.

But Ea, learning of Grandfather Apsu's desire to silence/eliminated the family, slew Apsu before Apsu could slay them. The murdered Apsu becomes Ea's abode. The god Kingu (also called Weila) married "widow" Tiamat and inspired Tiamat to avenge Apsu's death. Concurring with Kingu, Tiamat sought to destroy her offspring, so her children and grandchildren wanted to kill her before she can kill them. But Tiamat was too powerful for any or all of them until Marduk ("My son, the Sun! The Sun of the heavens") was born of Ea and Daminkina. The mighty Marduk was strong enough to slay Tiamat. He used the four winds (Whirlwind, Hurricane, Cyclone, Tornado) and four horsemen (Swift, Relentless, Trampling, Killer), which "bearing poison they were versed in ravage, in destruction skilled" (see Tablet III, lines 30-66, *ANET* 61-67).

When Tiamat opened her mouth to consume him [Marduk], he drove in the Evil Wind that she close not her lips. As the fierce winds charged her belly, her body was distended and her mouth was wide open. He released the arrow, it tore her bell. It cut through her insides, splitting the heart. Having thus subdued her, he extinguished her life. . . . With his unsparing mace he crushed her skull . . . he split her like a shellfish into two parts: Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky.<sup>3</sup>

## THE ISRAELITE RESPONSE TO BABYLON'S MYTH

The creation story above asserted that creation was born out of violence. Violence *was* normative, therefore violence *is* normative—it is the way of the gods, the way of heaven, and the way on earth.

By contrast, the Israelite theologians who crafted the Genesis story, affirm that God's creative power transformed chaos into cosmos, simply by the power of the word: "and God said, 'Let there be . . .'" It was radically non-violent. The pre-existent Power (in Hebrew the noun for "God" means "power"), through a word created Wisdom (Proverbs 8:22). And then, with Wisdom, "the Power" made it all. It was all good! Non-violence was normative in the act of creation and within the creation, itself. The same tranquility is found in the Prologue John's Gospel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being in him was life,  
and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

## PSALM 82 AND LUKE 10:17

The Psalmist who penned Psalm 8, in a mere eight verses, attempted to demythologize Israelite traditions by a literary mini-drama cast in heaven's supreme court, where the Divine Chief Justice put on trial all of heaven's lesser gods and charged them with showing partiality to

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the wicked and not providing justice to the world's poor who lived under their jurisdiction. It was a capital offense and all were found guilty. There was a sentence of death—but there was no killing, no violence! As Douglas McArthur said at his retirement speech in the Congress, “Old soldiers never die, they just pass away.” The Psalmist’s drama concluded with the affirmation of monotheism, divine justice, and universalism: “Rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations belong to you!”

In a similar manner, Jesus on the occasion when the seventy disciples returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” was able in just eight words end the rule of Satan, saying: “I watched Satan fall (πεσόντα) from heaven like a flash of lightning”(Luke 10:17). Satan, Jesus announced, was no longer in heaven, no longer in power. The Psalmist did not give a lecture on monotheism or social justice; nor did Jesus argue about the ontological reality of Satan. Without arguing theology or belittling anyone, the Psalmist and Jesus with simple words dethroned the gods and demi-gods created by other to legitimate terror and validate violence.

But the Psalmist of Psalm 82 and Jesus with his disciples were not taken seriously. Although Deutero Isaiah (45:7) would agree with the Psalmist an quote the God of Israel saying to Cyrus, the king of Persia: “I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; . . . from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe, I am the LORD, who do all these things,” other Jewish religious leaders would repopulate heaven with angels, fallen angels, demons and devils, Satan and his angels—providing the characters for revived myths which, directly or indirectly, legitimate violence and terror as much as they offer are supposed to offer hope to the oppressed.

## MODERN MYTHS

On August 6, the anniversary date for the dropping of “Little Boy” on Hiroshima by the Enola Gay in 1945, I reread the Imperial Rescript sealed by Emperor Hirohito which declared war on the United States and Great Britain, which is grounded in Shinto myth:<sup>4</sup>

WE, by grace of heaven, Emperor of Japan, seated on the Throne of the line unbroken for ages eternal, enjoin upon ye, Our loyal and brave subjects: . . . We hereby declare war on the United States of America and the British Empire . . . The hallowed spirits of Our Imperial Ancestors guarding Us from above, We rely upon the loyalty and courage of Our subjects in Our confident expectation that the task bequeathed by Our Forefathers will be carried forward, and that the sources of evil will be speedily eradicated and an enduring peace immutably established in East Asia, preserving thereby the glory of Our Empire.

The Imperial attempt to eradicate evil eventuate in 2.5 million war dead being venerated as deities at the Yasukuni Shrine. The power of myth was powerful enough that Yoichi Nakamura, 75, remembers that “Back then, even my mother and teachers were telling me to go to war and die for the emperor.”<sup>5</sup>

Few of us were prepared for the “kamikaze Muslims” of today who are encouraged by their family, friends, and clergy today to take the fast track to heaven by becoming suicide bombers and terrorist. (N.B. those who hold clergy under suspicion or contempt have been quick to note that the clergy opt not to take the fast track to heaven, contenting themselves to get the youth to

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kill others and themselves.) How many thousands—perhaps millions—will be venerated as gods or saints fifty years from now for dying, killing, or being killed by the myth vendors of today.

The Christian community has its own “theology of terror” and myth vendors. According to Nancy Gibbs reporting in the July 1, 2002 issue of *Time*, with a cover page entitled, “The Bible & the Apocalypse: Why more Americans are reading about the end of the world,” 50 million copies of the *Left Behind* series (by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins) have been sold; and the tenth book, *The Remnant*, is coming out now with an initial 2.75 million copies. My first observation is that myth is both *popular* and *profitable*, though not *prophetic*. Sooner or later I will have to read some of these books so I can honestly evaluate them. Until then I will have to be satisfied with having read the apocalyptic literature in the Bible which is the source of LaHaye and Jenken’s inspiration.

In my opinion, biblical Apocalyptic literature, including, the *Book of Revelation*, is that part of the authoritative inspired word of God which tells us about our human condition—we want our enemies to suffer more than we have suffered and if we do not get chance to torture them we can be certain that sooner or later God will get them. By comparison, I find the *Epistles of John* to be that part of the biblical revelation which tells me about the way and will of God. It is no coincidence that the word “love” occurs thirty-three times in the six pages of the *Epistles of John* compared to just three times in the twenty-two pages of *Revelation* (2:14, 19; 3:19).

When I read the *Revelation* I am remind of the *Enuma Elish* and its tales of violence in heaven. Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature reworked the ancient myths and transferred heaven’s violence and terror to earth, assuring the suffering saints that justice would be done, that they did not suffer in vain. Armageddon theology which envisions nuclear warfare as the ultimate will and way of God finds no support in the *Revelation* of John. Whatever violence is anticipated in *Revelation*, none of it involves people killing other people. As John saw it, God has at his disposal sun, moon and stars; puny nukes are not needed. If used it will not be God’s will, but just another example of human sinfulness, a re-enactment of Cain killing Abel on a grand scale.

Fifty million copies of *Left Alone*, no withstanding, the *Good News* cannot be found in ancient myths, even when modernized. Succinctly stated the *God News* is that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (II Cor 5:19). It is the reconciliation promised in the vision of the peaceable kingdom on earth, when our requests in the Lord’s prayer—“Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven”—becomes actualized, i.e., when, as stated in Isa 11:6–9,

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall feed;  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.  
They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;  
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.

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### NOTES

1. *From its European Antecedents to 1792: The United States Army Chaplaincy*, Washington, D.C.:Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Department of the Army, 1978.
2. See <http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/enuma.htm>. To read the biblical stories of creation without consideration of their original purpose can only result in a misunderstanding of their intent. The “Big Bang” which concerned the theologians who crafted the Genesis creation stories was not the theory of contemporary astronomers but the “big bangs” when Ea slew Apsu and Marduk with his unsparing mace crushed Tiamat’s skull. The Babylonian creation myths and the biblical creation stories were making faith statements about the nature of ultimate reality. For Babylon creation was characterized by violence in heaven and on earth; for Jerusalem creation came about by words and wisdom without any hint of violence in heaven or in Eden.
3. Marduk was the state god of Babylon to whom were transferred the exploits of the storm and creator god, Enlil, the chief god of Nippur. Marduk becomes the creator of *lulu* “human beings.” *Lulu* is a mixture of clay and the blood and spirit of Kingu, who was condemned for instigating Tiamat to avenge the death of Apsu. (See Tablet VI, *ANET* p. 68)
- 4 For the text of the Rescript see <http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Rescript.pdf> (Japanese) and <http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/Rescript-English.pdf> (English translation).
5. Hans Greimel, “Japan Offers Controversial WWII Story,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* A18, August 15, 2002.