

Philosophical Thought and Biblical Literature

Understanding the Foundations of Christianity

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Introduction

Each Bible text was written to communicate a message to a specific audience contemporary to the author, in a specific geographic region, and immersed in a specific culture. Each was written to be understood by that audience. The writing styles of ancient writings reflect the schools of philosophical thought prevalent in the day. It is nearly impossible to understand the writings without understanding the thought. Failure to do so invites misinterpretations of the most flagrant kind. Those misinterpretations persist when their fate is intertwined with the fate of a treasured doctrine.

Understanding the Bible requires an understanding of Literature. The reader needs to understand and recognize allegory, legend, myth, hyperbole, the vassal suzerainty treaty, wisdom, Hebrew poetry, Hebrew parallelism, Hebrew prophecy, Hebrew acrostic, apocalypse, parable, the epistle, Greek polemic, the sermon, and for the gospels, ancient bios narrative.

I strongly recommend course 6340 from The Teaching Company, Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World. It does a very thorough job of tracing the history of the religious thought of this region.

Polytheistic Worldview

The history of religious thought in the ancient Mediterranean region shows the prevailing view that people believed the gods controlled or influenced the events they couldn't control, like the rainfall. To get good treatment, they needed to please or appease the gods, usually with sacrifices. As noted in the Martyrdom section below, even the Roman Empire enforced this requirement.

Covenantal Worldview

Torah conveys the Jewish Covenantal Worldview to explain their view of the relationship of Israel with the God of Israel, as viewed by Israel at the time of the Persian period (539-334BC) (though some argue for earlier dates, such as that of David around 1000BC). It is described as an offer made by one of the popular deities of the time to the tribes which were to call themselves Israel, which was also the name of the geographic region wherein they dwelt. If you choose to worship me as your only god, then I will grant you certain blessings and protections. El was not claiming to be the only god in existence. Instead, El was requesting an exclusive relationship. Make me your god, and you will be my special people. That kind of relationship was unusual (perhaps nonexistent) in the ancient Mediterranean world, and it sounds a bit like another relationship we know about, called marriage. It's not surprising, then, that when Israel was accused of not holding up their end of the bargain, the accusation was one of marital unfaithfulness.

The word "torah" referred to instruction from God. Eventually that term was applied to the collection of writings called the Book of Moses, today called Torah or Pentateuch. That collection of writings represents religious thought of the Semitic tribes called Israel. It might have incorporated earlier writings, but writing was still a novelty at this time, so an oral tradition is more likely. The Aramaic alphabet began to diverge from the Phoenician around the 8th century BC. The Hebrew alphabet then began to diverge from the Imperial Aramaic script of the 5th century BC. Writings unique to these tribes would not likely have appeared before then.

The expressed philosophy is the Covenantal worldview. Obedience brings blessing; disobedience brings cursing.

Prophetic Worldview

The Jewish prophetic worldview was a natural consequence of their covenantal worldview. If Israel is suffering, why? They were forced into the conclusion that if they were suffering, they must have disobeyed. They wrote prophetic literature to offer their explanations (or rationalizations). Oracular literature, also called Orphic or prophetic literature, was practiced by many ancient cultures. The writer or or poet acts as a medium between humanity and another (supernatural) world. Moses is described as a prophet (Deut. 18:15, 34:10), acting as a communication medium between God and the people. In that sense, much of Torah could be described as Israel's earliest (as far as we know) prophetic literature.

As the term is more commonly used, biblical prophetic literature refers to later writings. It has a common theme. The foundation (sometimes unspoken) is that contract between God and his people. Torah gives the details of the contract by specifying the obligation of the people to obey God by behaving according to certain rules and principles. The theme is an accusation that the people are failing to meet that obligation. Thus the prophet is holding people accountable. The prophet makes the obvious threat: If you don't repent (change your behavior), then God will stop giving Israel the promised covenantal blessings and will start giving Israel the promised cursings for disobedience. The most common threats are the loss of natural resources needed for their livelihood and prosperity, or attack by foreign powers. The solution is always the same. Stop doing the bad stuff. It's usually social injustice in some form. Though this writing is before the

fact, it isn't magic. It doesn't require any special revelation. If you steal that car, you're gonna get caught, and you're going to jail.

Most prophetic literature of the ANE was written after an event, to explain why it happened. Thus it isn't even predictive, though it's often written in the form of a prediction by a well-known prophet. The very clear emphasis of all these writings is that God has a very strong affection for his special people, and is very anxious to stop the curses and bring on the blessings if only the people will stop behaving badly. With the Prophetic worldview, if you suffered famine or were defeated by your enemies, you must not have obeyed God.

Determining date of authorship of works of ancient literature of most cultures is extremely difficult. Two dating fallacies are far too commonly applied. The writing describes a specific event (such as the Babylonian captivity). One fallacy says the writing is predictive, therefore must have been written before the event; the other says the writing is descriptive, therefore must have been written after the event. Both are a single presumptive fallacy. The descriptive argument is much stronger. A very common explanatory writing style of the day was to write in the name of, and from the viewpoint of, a respected historical figure, and to write it as a vision predictive of the event as if it were future. The writing explains the event by having the prophet proclaim what will happen to you if you don't change your behavior. Sometimes the writing goes on to predict truly future events. The transition is usually clear, as the descriptions change from the detailed and plausible, to the general and absurd. The case for any instance of such a work successfully and meaningfully predicting a future event is extraordinarily weak. But for the sake of argument, let's assume it did happen. The entire Old Testament is about Israel. No prophecy was about anything but Israel. Other nations are involved only in their connection with Israel.

Apocalypticism

Eventually, people realized that even when they obeyed God, they sometimes suffered famine and defeat from their enemies. A comparable situation arose in Egypt. Eventually the people realized that the Pharaoh didn't have any special influence on the annual flooding of the Nile, or on the gods who controlled that flooding. At that point, the Pharaoh lost his totalitarian influence over the people. This led to the decline of the Prophetic worldview, and the rise of the Apocalyptic worldview, Apocalypticism. It incorporated a form of dualism, and explained away the defeats as a cosmic conflict between the powers of good and the powers of evil. It tried to give hope by saying that someday, evil will be defeated. Apocalyptic literature expressed that worldview by telling stories showing that in the end, evil is defeated and punished, and good prevails. An apocalyptic text also isn't really trying to predict specific future events, only that eventually good prevails, and the bad are punished. "The sky is falling" was typical apocalyptic language, referring to the apocalypse. For most of the first century, everyone (not just the Jews) thought an apocalypse was near, within a few generations. Today, with benefit of hindsight, we know they were all wrong. When even the ancients figured out that it didn't happen, they spiritualized it, saying it would happen in an afterlife. That, of course, is untestable.

In the gospels, Jesus is portrayed as (among other things) an apocalyptic preacher. He was in good company. There were plenty of them. Of course, we have no historical evidence to confirm any such claims about Jesus. The best known apocalypse of Jewish literature is the Apocalypse of John ("Revelation"), but there were plenty of others in the early first century, as well as the

previous couple of centuries. The prophetic portion of Revelation is a tirade against the factions of Judaism which forsook the purity of Torah to 'play the harlot' with Rome and cooperate with Roman rule, rather than rebel. It calls them the worst imaginable name: Babylon. It describes the destruction of Jerusalem (including the temple) in AD70 as a judgment of God on unfaithful Israel. These 'unfaithful' were the ones slaughtered by the troops of Titus. But even though God used Rome to execute judgment on the unfaithful of Israel, it offers some consolation by saying that God will punish Rome for what they did. That part could be considered a prediction of the future, but it didn't happen. Rome dominated government, law, and culture of the entire region for a long time, eventually collapsing on its own. The apocalyptic portion says that in the end, even Rome will be punished for its wicked actions.

Snippets of this particular apocalypse appears in the synoptic gospels, and attributed to Jesus in the form of the Olivet Discourse. They are written into the bios writings as predictions for 40 years into the future.

Endtimes Prophecy

There is no endtimes prophecy. Everything discussed in Jewish prophetic literature was completed by AD 70, at the latest. As noted above, apocalyptic literature speaks only of an indefinite 'in the end'. The standards are generally quite clear. The righteous are rewarded and the evil or wicked are punished. None of the biblical apocalyptic authors held the concept that everyone was wicked. That is strictly a later, Christian idea.

The apocalyptic authors had no clue what the details would be for the final judgment. What Christians call the 'rapture' is just a colorful description of how it might happen. The purpose of the writing was always to encourage the righteous and to scare the wicked into better behavior. You see that also in the wisdom literature, though most of those authors expected their retribution to happen to their enemies here and now.

Wisdom Literature

This was a very popular genre in the Ancient Near East (ANE). Wisdom was often personified, as we see throughout Proverbs. Much of the literature was codified common sense. It was an accumulation of observations about ways humans can interact and cooperate with each other for the betterment of society as well as each individual. The process never stopped. Much of what is written and popular today would fit in the genre of wisdom literature. It's the formation of a social contract at the grassroots level. If we can all agree to these sacrifices of our own personal self-interest, we will all be better off.

Central to ancient Jewish thought was their henotheistic covenant. If we choose to worship Yahweh our Elohim exclusively (which they did), then we receive certain benefits. But if we fail to meet the terms, we receive certain punishments. The histories were written to show this playing out in Israel and Judah. The people couldn't help but observe that it didn't always work out this way. They were continually asking that age-old pair of questions. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do good things happen to bad people? Wisdom literature, especially Psalms, is full of poetic expressions of these questions and possible answers. Understanding these thoughts is key to understanding the wisdom literature.

In the biblical literature of this genre, Ecclesiastes epitomizes the cynicism which often results from asking these questions. Gaining riches is vanity (empty, fruitless, futility, in vain). Why? Because it does not produce the promised result. Same for wisdom. And if the preacher is really Solomon, it's the wisdom given by God. Yet in 8:12 he says, "yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him." In the rest of the chapter, he acknowledges that the wicked receive blessings just as the righteous do, and then resigns himself to not understanding it. Chapter 9 (reiterating 2:34) is the likely origin of the epithet, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." That's what's cited in Luke 12:19 and 1 Cor 15:32. His final conclusion: "Fear God and keep his commandments." Even though you do it in vain, do it anyway. God will judge, even though he has already lamented that it doesn't happen. The apocalypics had another explanation: The accounts will be settled in an afterlife.

Martyrdom

The predominant religious attitude of the Roman Empire was polytheism. The earliest notions of gods prevailed. They were supernatural entities which controlled the things man couldn't control. Offering them the kinds of worship and sacrifice they wanted was a way of cultivating their favor, for the benefit of your society. The official Roman position was that it didn't matter which of the gods you choose to worship, as long as you worshiped some of them.

The Jews were recognized as a *religio licita*, a legitimate non-conforming religion. But the Jews were popularly considered to be superstitious, and their avoidance of traditional religion was considered eccentric and cultural. They came to be considered atheistic, since they refused to worship any of the traditional gods upon whom Rome depended for favor and protection. This eventually led to persecution.

Jews who stayed true to their faith despite persecution, even to the death, were considered worthy of special reward. Apocalyptic literature was already portraying that reward as coming in some indefinite future, perhaps on earth, perhaps not. A martyr clearly could not benefit from a reward coming on earth. This fostered the idea of a resurrection, a future instantiation of an individual life in a body (their own or a new one). This provided a way for a worthy soul to enjoy a future reward. Within Judaism, the Pharisees tended to believe in such a resurrection, whereas the Sadducees did not.

Through at least 90-95AD, the followers of Jesus were considered just another sect of Judaism. Around that time, they diverged enough from Judaism that starting in Jerusalem, they were no longer allowed to meet in the synagogue. As they separated from Judaism, they became a separate religion, and were no longer under the protection of the Roman *religio licita* status. They were then eligible for legal prosecution for refusing to worship the traditional polytheistic gods. They too looked to a resurrection as a reward for martyrdom. This followed naturally from their philosophical descent from Pharisaic Judaism. Before that rift, followers of the Jesus movement did not believe (or at least did not say) that Jesus was God. If they did, they never would have been allowed to meet in either the temple or the synagogues. This is an example of falsifiable retrodiction.

The Jews of Masada weren't proud and independent. Their apocalyptic worldview convinced them of heavenly rewards for martyrdom. The zealots convinced themselves that being under Roman government was disobedience to God. They chose self-inflicted death rather than do that.

Ironically, most Jews of the Diaspora were quite content living under 'foreign' political rule.

Literary Style

The Prophetic and Apocalyptic genres use a figurative and hyperbolic style. Nations or powers are represented by animals. Blessings and punishments are both exaggerated and portrayed as comprehensive. This is most clearly seen in writings about specific historical events. Yes, Israel was carried into captivity by the Babylonians, but the moon didn't really turn to blood, and the stars really didn't fall out of the sky. Mythic discourse provides economy of expression when it is widely known within a society. Myth does not necessarily mean fanciful. Earlier in US history, one could say "Noah" and people would instantly know exactly what you were talking about.

Universal Sacrifices

One thought of certain religions in the region was the idea of a one-time, once-for-all sacrifice. Most believed that only a god was qualified to make this kind of sacrifice. Along comes Paul, with the idea that Jesus was that sacrifice. Thus the motivation for the idea that Jesus was God. Luke 24:52 and other places are explanations for why the ideas of Christianity were heretofore unknown, especially throughout the lifetime of Jesus. I think this was the driving force behind the growth of Christianity in the world of Greek thought. Here's a new religion that doesn't require a sacrifice. The world's first popular free religion!

These ideas birthed the perceived need for explanations about the person and life of Jesus. Thus the bios narratives of the gospels. They would need to support the idea that this ordinary rabbi, executed by Rome probably as an instigator of rebellion against Rome, could turn out to be God.

First Century Thought

There was a huge sea of philosophical / religious ideas floating around at the time. That a pair of ideas is similar does not imply that one led to the other. Many Jewish ideas of the time were Greek. That trend was so rampant it fostered its own major demographic, Hellenistic Judaism. Hearing an idea from a Jewish source doesn't imply it's a Jewish idea.