
DECODING THE BIBLE

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Abstract

Biblical studies run along two parallel tracks nowadays. One is the extensive archaeological investigation, in particular on the Israeli soil, which provides novel, often surprising data, many of them supporting, or at least elucidating biblical narratives. The other consists of the analytical studies of the Scriptures, exegesis in the strict sense. In a sense, both approaches have many common features. As we know, biblical text is anything but clear and finding out the proper meaning and historical facts resembles much archaeological excavations. We present some of the relevant new discoveries, which shed new light on the biblical message. In particular, we argue that the Holy Scriptures narrative appears much less unique and original in view of the mythological folklore and historical records of the surrounding people and nations. We devote particular attention to the Hellenistic religious tradition and emphasize the similarities and differences between these two religious paradigms.

Keywords: Bible, Hebrew, religion, mythology, history

1. Prologue

In assessing a religious subject, one must be aware of what may be regarded as the primordial religious dichotomy. Namely, there is a consensus, though not absolute one, that the faith appears a universal human factor, which is a product of *homo sapiens* evolution [1], inherent in any human being. It is the matter of a personal inference, of course. On the other hand, when one passes from the (individual) faith to the religion, an essentially social phenomenon, one observes enormous diversity which individuals make use of in order to express their individual believes. The principal units of this diversity are particular confessions, which are as a rule lined with organizations called Church. It is not difficult to see that particular Churches appear separate universes within the religious domains, so that one cannot speak of a common religious system, but rather of a collection of confessions, coupled weakly at the dogmatic level, including the specific rituals. Faith might be universal as an anthropic factor, but the same cannot be said of religion as such.

This fact appears relevant when studying particular confessions and try to make comparative studies of various religions. At a most superficial level one is tempted, if not forced, to make conscious simplifications, attributing to

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particular nation a specific religion, as a system (or simply collection) of dogmas and rituals. The case in point is the use of the primordial religious dichotomy in juxtapositioning polytheism *versus* monotheism. Not only it is difficult to prove that a particular religious dogmatic is essentially monotheistic, but it is equally difficult task to attribute to a well-defined group of people that could be considered nation a specific religious dogmatism.

It is equally difficult task to disentangle religion from the nation as such, for in many cases people tend to identify biological and ideological designation, as well as ideological with historical. Every group of people identified as a nation covers a more or less broad geographical area, with local specific features, as the case with Hebrews shows. Moreover, in the flow of historical time religious dogmatic changes, as we shall see it in the case of Hebrews and it is surely superfluous to identify a specific ‘snapshot’ of a long national history with the ‘religious essence’ of a nation.

In a reasonable span of the historical time flow one always selects a specific feature of the religious dogmatism, which matches similar feature of another nation, not necessarily at the same historical time. The reason of such coincidences may be manifold, from mutual borrowings to a common source.

Another distinction should be made when considering believes of various nations, states, etc. Religion, state or otherwise, is a social or political category, whereas faith is essentially intimate, personal phenomenon. The latter is as a rule mixed, or at least connected, with other mental activities, like philosophy and various individuals may have and profess great many outcomes of their personal spiritual endeavours, as the case of ancient Greeks illustrates. In this context, a question as for the character of Hellenistic believes, like polytheism, atheism, monotheism, deism, agnosticism, dualism, etc. loses its sense, for one can find examples for any of them in the ancient Hellada. Homeric Hellada was one thing, post-Aristotelian Greece the other, in this respect.

2. Introduction

Before we start with our exegesis, a few words on the religion as such seem in order. In this context a parallel between Hellenic and Semitic religious paradigms appear instructive. Helens had no unique religious system, apart from their myths. Whether the latter could be thought as a religion, or even a surrogate of it, is the question we cannot dwell here. The question may be put into the one Veyne considered in his monograph under the same title [2]. His conclusion that Greeks believed and at the same time did not believe in their myths may be taken as our interpretation as to the question whether they had religion in a proper sense or not. Greek mythology was deprived of historical factography, what testifies the fact they did not mix rational world with the fictive one. Of course, their beautiful mythic narratives are full of allegories, as it was the central mythic narrative, that of Hesiod [3], whose philosophical depth could not be overestimated. Another synthetic mythological narrative relevant to us here was that called Orphic, whose allegorical representation of the

cosmogogenesis had much in common with other contemporary mythologies, like Hindu one, and with the modern Cosmology too, for that matter. If one is to find Greek counterpart of the Jewish bible in the Hellenic mythology, Hesiod's Theogony and the Orphic tradition are the best candidates.

In the absence of a reasonable account of the emergence of the Jewish ethnicity, the best way to understand the Jewish Bible and its message is to consider Hebrews as a part of a wider region and the corresponding ethnicities. The Bible is almost silent on that subject, but it is still almost the only source of information, albeit rather vague one. Bible is a relevant source of information on many subjects, but not reliable one, and much that we learn from its narratives must be taken with a grain of salt indeed. Various parts of Bible were written in various times, but the final redaction of the sacral text was made at the end of the Old Era, with a definite political project in view. It is this fact which forces us to try to disentangle wishful thinking from possible historical facts and to make use of extrabiblical sources, when available, or to construct both the history of the composing the Bible and the Jewish history beyond the Holy Scriptures narratives.

As we know other people (*goyim* in the latter Jewish vernacular) rarely are mentioned, and if so, mainly as the surrounding hostile environment. This exclusiveness, which might be called collective autism, is one of the features which puzzle many scholars. According to Bible, Jews spend most of their history in isolation, not always splendid one. Whether this isolation was the outcome of Hebrew exclusiveness or the latter was caused by the historical experience of Jews is the question which is not easy to answer, not to mention the ethno-emotional burden it carries with [4]. This puzzle of the type of 'hen and egg' involves an emotional drive and is solved usually along the dichotomy Semitism – anti-Semitism [5].

The pretension of any religion (and ideology too, for that matter) is its uniqueness. This appears the best, if not only way to protect the confession against the other ones and ensure its durability. It is the reason that no inter-confessional dialogue is possible to arrange, except at the superfluous, political level. As soon as one demonstrates that an essential feature, or particular narrative is common to many religions, that is are just mythemes, the ideological background (though not political) is in danger. In the following, we shall show that it is exactly the case with Judaism as a historical phenomenon.

3. Land and people

A phenotype of a population depends to a considerable extent, (beside its genotype, of course) on the type of the physical environment. The latter, however, not only shapes the physical appearance of the people, but their mental constitution as well. Two principal types of the physical geography may be invoked here: mountains and lowland regions. Another, third type, which will turn out relevant to our study, the desert one, will be discussed shortly later on.

Montagnards live on the hardly accessible soil and their communications, both internal or with the other regions, are difficult and therefore weak. The opposite holds for the plain people, who live on agricultural soil, and easily communicate among themselves. Their attention is more or less confined to the ground, unlike montagnards, whose landscape appears restricted, but whose night sky offers a magnificent awesome spectacle. They appear thus fully aware of the world at large, the Universe and this awareness provokes the thoughts about the Cosmos and their place in it. This is the first step towards contriving religious thoughts and the very religion as such. On the other hand low land population, living on fertile soil is as a rule much better off than their highlander neighbours and is more advanced from the cultural and civilizational viewpoints. Both kinds of populations tend to develop different moral codes and this difference appears to be the background of perennial tension between montagnards and plane people [6].

Desert environment appears surprisingly in many aspects more akin to the mountainous than to the plane environment. It promotes nomadic way of life and constrains considerably the advance of the technical means for everyday life. On the other hand, nothing offers better opportunities to gaze at the night sky and meditate about Cosmos, gods, etc. Hence, no wonder that many great religions found their roots in desert, with their promoters from Gautama Buddha to Moses, John the Baptist, Mahomet, etc.

Owing to the everyday hardship the experienced montagnards develop their physical and mental facilities to a greater extent than the plain people and appear superior in the direct contact with plane people [7, 8]. Since they appear economically inferior too, they tend to exploit the planes by raids and similar violent actions. As a rule, they impose their religious beliefs, as the case with Judah and Israel testifies [9].

Another phenomenon must be mentioned here. If there is interference within the mixed society, there are the highlanders who get the upper hand, as many conflicts within the single state testify, the latest example being that of former Yugoslavia [10].

4. Bible and the Guilt syndrome

The biblical narrative begins with the cosmogony, but this part of the Holy Scriptures is of little interest to the historical research, except for the biblical studies themselves. The most interesting part in this context is the mythological one, which belongs to the proto-history. For the religious studies, the Near-East appears a good example of the so-called henotheism, that is tribal religions. Every tribe adores its own god, who as a rule stems from a tribal totem [11], an animal that is supposed to be tribal progenitor. According to Euhemerus these gods came into existence from a tribal hero, who in his turn usually held the position of a ruler, king or of some other prominent status. The eminent Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria (c 150-c 215) made an extensive use of the Euhemerism, which he applied exclusively to the so-called pagan beliefs,

demonstrating thus the alleged Christian monotheistic superiority [12]. (That Euhemerus was right testifies the common practice of many royal rulers to declare themselves either of divine origin, or divinities themselves. This opposite process has been operative to the present day, with many contemporary political leaders playing the role of (semi)gods, like Adolf Hitler and Josip Broz Tito.)

A common misconception regarding the biblical theology is that Hebrews stuck at the monotheism from the alleged Moses' time, with occasional slipping into idolatry, as mentioned in the book of Exodus. But the careful examination of the biblical narrative reveals quite different picture of the beliefs of the ancient Jews [5, p. 704]. In particular recent study of the biblical narrative and the extra-biblical sources, as expounded by Römer for instance [13], show that ancient Hebrews' religious outlook had much more polytheistic features than one might expect judging from the claims founded on the final confessional conclusions of modern Judaism.

4.1. The Eden episode

This narrative turns out to be multiply interesting to us. First, it is written in the form of a fairy tale, what points towards an early origin. It appears an unique instance where an animal, snake in this case, talks (apart from an episode with donkey). Second, this creature possesses what will be later considered an essential feature of Satan - perfidy. (Why the author chose snake for this role has been elaborated elsewhere [14]). It does no direct harm, but incite humans against superior beings – God in this particular instance. In defying God, the creature acts as almost equal to him; at least it confronts God, albeit in an indirect manner. We see here the first instance of appearance of evil and the beginning of the perennial question of the origin of sin.

This question will remain actual until present day, at least within the realm of Theology, as the case of Leibniz shows [15]. Many solutions have been proposed, logical like that by Leibniz (epistemological aspect), or by resorting to polytheism (usually dualism, as the case of Zoroaster illustrates), or redefinition of the God's attributes, as suggested by Jonas [16].

In an attempt to explain, if not justify, the occurrence of Holocaust, Jonas deprived Yahweh of the attribute of omnipotence, retaining the other two – intelligibility of divinity and an unlimited benevolence. Yahweh did not spare Jews because he had no power to do that. It was the solution Joseph Flavius adopted in order to explain the suffering of Jews under Roman rule [17]. According his (opportunistic) explanation, Yahweh changed Hebrews for Romans as favourite people. This turnover could be also explained as the consequence of Romans having their gods more powerful than Yahweh, what would boil down to the return to henotheism. An explanation in terms of Yahweh's dissatisfaction by his chosen people could be offered too, as it was done in the Bible (the Book of Judges), but such an interpretation would expiate Nazi crime and hence was not offered, at least not publicly.

God's cursing of snake without destroying it appears essential for introducing the most fundamental ethical issue - that of the free will. By punishing it, God admits he is against evil, but retains it as an essential ingredient of the human ethics.

What might be the allegorical meaning of the banishing of Adam and Eve from the Paradise Garden? Did the authors of the narrative realize the creative force of evolution and the role the labour played in shaping the human beings and their social advances? May we interpret Exile as an allegorical picture of passing from the animal to *homo sapiens* nature? Alternatively, possibly transition from the period of hunters and gatherers to the agricultural economy, which is from the prehistory to civilization?

In view of what will happen to Abel and Cain, the punishment may bear another message, which could be important for our interpretation of the social economy of tribes and nations. Namely, God gives preference to Abel's lamb as the offering, as opposite to his brother's agricultural product (wheat). The narrative was surely written at the time of the struggle between the cattle cultivating Judah and predominantly agricultural Israel for state dominance [9, p. 241]. We know that on Judean hills, only sheep and goats were domesticated and no vestiges of pork and cattle have been found. The reason for the absence of former may be that pork (boar) might have been the tribal totem and thus taboo [11]. Equally, cattle do not appear convenient for the nomadic way of life, unlike sheep and goats, as the case of Bedouins shows.

4.2. The concept of Original Sin

By expelling humans from the Eden, God achieves at least two aims. First, he justifies the human conditions, which are hard to accept, coming from the fatherly, benevolent Creator. Second, this act is supposed to ensure the strict obedience of the human species under the rule of their god (Lord). As it will be elaborated in the further development of the Theology, Hebraic or otherwise, to be righteous means to be obedient to the Lord, conceived as a master. To be right means to be entitled to stand upright before the Lord, having not broken any of Master's commandments.

Formally, the concept of the Original Sin ensures the following theological stratagem: all men and women are born as sinful, owing to their progenitors' defining the Lord in Eden. So, every human starts his/her life not from a zero level, but from some negative ground level. His task as human endowed with the free will be to move upwards, expiating the inherited guilt. All humans are in debt to the Lord and any hardship they experience in life is thus justified.

4.3. Christianity and the Primordial crime

The concept of the Original Sin has been developed further by New Testaments authors, albeit in a modified form. To Christian believers Jesus

played the role of a redeemer, somebody who suffers for human sins instead of themselves. The latter are supposed thus to be obliged to him for his taking over their sins. Everybody should feel guilty for the crime committed in Jerusalem in 33 AD. It is exactly the role of the cross replicas one encounters everywhere in the Christian dominated world, from shrines to miniature crosses people are carrying on their bodies. The latter crosses are nothing but Christian version of fetishes, we all are despising when we see them on African and other 'primitive' people. With one difference: beside the role of a fetish, which just helps the owner, the cross represents the very crucifixion. It reminds the owner of the primordial guilt and ensures Christ he/she is aware of that and begs mercy for his/her part in otherwise collective sin. It is this feeling of collective guilt that provides the motive force of Christian religion.

More precisely the bowing before the crucified Jesus or carrying the replica of the crucifixion appears not very sublime manifestation of the *imitatio Christi*. It is this form of idolatry, Judaism in its final form wanted to eradicate. To anthropologists, Christian idolatry was an atavistic return to the religious practice of the traditional society; we shall return to this issue later on.

4.4. Judaism and the Christian crimes

If one accepts Jewish bible as a historical record, albeit an unreliable one, it turns out that Hebrews used to be object of persecution from the time they entered the historical scene. The Bible testifies, further, the accompanying *syndrome of martyrdom*, which Christians aptly adopted (after all the first Christians were purely Jews). Modern European history testifies that massacres, pogroms, etc used to be true accompanies of Jewish population, at least within the Christian part of Globe. The apogee of these persecutions, of course, was *Holocaust*, word borrowed from Greek religious practice. Original meaning of the term was a sacrifice to gods, usually as a burned meat. This designation was not chosen by chance, for it offers plenty of room both for anti-Semitic and Semitic interpretations. To some people it represented mankind's sacrifice to the Lord (Christian, of course). Jewish term for Holocaust is *Shoah*, disaster, which points to a quite different interpretation. But the most plausible (though not convenient) explanation may be found within the New Testament theology. Here it is what the founder of Christianity, Saint Paul, writes to Romans: "I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy. Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles how much more their fullness?" (Romans 11.11,12)

In other words, Jews by turning down Jesus Christ committed crime, and they will suffer for that, but at the same time they provide benefit to Gentiles, who join the true religion. If Jesus suffered for all individuals of the mankind, Jews as nation suffer for the benefit of all other nations. It is, again, the sacrifice, martyrdom which is operative. From such an explanation to the 'justification' of

Holocaust as a collective Jewish sacrifice for the benefit of mankind there is just a step, which some scholars nowadays do not fail to make.

Otherwise, Holocaust as a historical phenomenon has been used in the same sense as the Original Sin and/or Crucifixion, to impose to Gentiles the feeling of guilt. The first, immediate outcome of this syndrome was creation of the state of Israel, and the first victims have been Palestinians. Consequently, Christians have good reasons to feel guilty: first owing to Eve and Adam, then for the Crucifixion and finally because of Holocaust. They have every reason to feel attending a Kafkian *Process*. The fact that neither Adam, nor Jesus, nor European Jews were aware of their 'guilt' may be hardly taken as a consolation.

Generally, the martyrdom syndrome aims at humans feeling of mercy from their God and should be aware that it is the act of Lord's benevolence they exist. In an extreme representation the Universe is not taken for granted, to the point that it is only by the continuous divine support it retains its existence. Any moment God abandons his support our Cosmos would vanish to nothingness (see, e.g. [18] and references therein). We mentioned here that this status of transient, potentially disastrous state does not appear unique to the religion. In the modern Cosmology, there exist models that consider that the Universe appears in the state of metastable balance, which may be perturbed by human or others' intervention and destroyed. This catastrophic event may even be initiated by uncontrollable fluctuations of the underlying physical fields, so that we are all at mercy of the aleatory forces [19]. How much such apocalyptic schemes owe to (unconscious) religious intrusion into Cosmology is an interesting subject, which goes beyond our theme here.

5. Palestine in the Near-East

Whatever was their origin and history, Hebrews were not the only people inhabiting the region around Jerusalem. What makes them unique in this context is the Jewish bible, as a synthetic record of Jewish mythology, religion, history, ideology (Judaism), literature, etc. The best way to expound exclusive features of the Judaism, both real and fictive ones, would be to compare biblical narratives with the Hellenistic mythology and religion.

The choice of the Greek paradigm needs no justification, but the very procedure requires some elaboration. We mentioned above that religions (and any other instance of human culture associated to a nation) can't be represented as a point in a cultural space. It changes in time and varies from a region to region, from a tribe to tribe. We have hence to pick up representative points from both cultures. We shall choose 7th century BC as representative phase of the religious developments within both societies. In Hellada it is the final phase of the Homeric theology, whereas in Palestine Judah experiences the final formative period of Judaism under the king Josiah [9, p. 313]. Hence, when referring to a religious paradigm we must have in mind the restricted domains of such a notion.

5.1. Hellenic paradigm

No nation on Earth possesses such a versatile and valuable mythology as Greeks [20]. It appears an outstanding treasure of prehistoric human culture, whose anthropological value cannot be overestimated. Apart from Hesiodic and Orphic mythopoetic narratives, no religious systems were attempted to build upon the mythic sources. This Hesiodic mythic picture could be designated as pre-Homeric (or Hesiodic) paradigm, whereas later mythic constructs may be called Homeric paradigm. What is of interest to us here is the religious practice built upon the mythic Homeric underlayer.

Greeks did not build a sclerotic religious system which could be destroyed. Their Pantheon, though universally accepted by the Hellenic tribes, was the source of local deities, as venerated by various polises. Each polis had its own sub-Pantheon, whose central deity was the patron of the local community. Athens had Athena Parthenos, Ephesus Artemis, Delphi Apollo, etc. The choice of Athenians turned out to be prophetic, since, out of three cities which contributed the most to the Western culture, Athens (Philosophy, drama), Alexandria (Science) and Florence (arts), it was Athens which provided the wisest men, like Solon, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The collection of all local patron-deities formed the all-Greek Pantheon, with Zeus as the supreme god (God), god of thunder and mountains. He ruled the gods and humans from the mount Olympus, together with his wife Hera, who was at the same time his sister. Incidentally, Zeus gave birth to Athens, who sprang out of his head, in a sort of 'immaculate' conception, *parthenogenesis*.

Parthenon housed the statue of Athena by Pheidias. The monumental Zeus statue by the same author was built up in the Zeus temple at Olympia, and was one of the seven world wonders. According to artist, he was inspired by Homer's verses in Iliad. The statue vanished in 5th century AD, either during the fire, when the temple was burned, or was moved from Olympia to Constantinople and was destroyed by fire there. As we shall see later on, similar destiny was allotted to Yahweh' statue [13, p. 260] in the temple in Jerusalem.

Two things should be emphasized here concerning the local divinities in the ancient Greece and in the Antique generally. First, they are venerated by the local communities and respected by the others. Religious practice was very liberal generally and everybody appreciated foreign religious feelings and rituals. Greeks did not take Zeus as their exclusive divinity, who would protect them from their enemies, surely not from the corresponding divinities of the foreigners. This is the most reliable answer to the perennial question: did the Ancients really believe in their gods. Or put it in another form: could we identify the notion of faith the Ancients had with our contemporary religious phenomena? One thing is sure: the Ancients (Greeks and Romans) were not fanatic about their faith and divinities, unlike some present-day populations [17, p. 480-481]. This situation will be drastically changed when on Near-East and European soil so-called announced religions appear, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Another instance must be mentioned here too. It concerns the so-called idololatri (idolatry), veneration of divinities represented by material items, like pictures and statues. It is a modern hypocrisy to assign to ancient polytheistic believers that they took the effigies as gods themselves. It amounts in fact to take that the modern Christians believe the icons they venerate (kissing them and the like) are in a direct contact with Jesus, Mary, etc. We shall come to this point late on. We shall underline here one point only, the fact that the ancient world, Greece in particular, was flooded by divine statues of every kind. The reason for this situation appears as outcome of a paradoxical phenomenon. Namely, when the Stone Age passed into the Bronze Age, it resulted in an enormous proliferation of the stone artefacts, owing to the invention of the metallic tools. The metal objects themselves disappeared from the ancient sites, due to corrosion, whereas the stone artefact survived, at least in overwhelming numbers. Thus, we do not find, except exceptionally bronze or iron from the Iron Age, unlike stone artefact from same period, much more abundant than from the Stone Age.

According to the ancient records [21] Greece was full of shrines, dedicated to various divinities, many of them being acknowledged to have been originally humans. The struggle for political supremacy or the rivalry between polises was the constant of Greek history, but never the shrines and effigies were the victims of the *agony*. What was the most important, Ancients did not lead religious wars. They were well aware that gods are human inventions and the fighting under aegis of various divinities was considered senseless. Before the so-called monotheism arrived on European soil, notions like *false gods* were unknown.

Greeks took their myths as allegorical tools, useful besides other things to enrich human experience, just as we take science fictions today, for instance. Contrary to general belief that Plato was hostile to Homeric mythology, he simply was against feeding minds of young people with mythological content, before they are capable to fathom the deeper layer of these narratives (Plato, *Politeia*). This appears in stark contrast with many contemporary religious practices, when children are forced to learn particular religious narratives, without understanding the meaning of the dogmatic postulates and rules.

Gods did interfere in battles before Troy, but they did it through the human heroes. Nothing would be essentially changed if one would delete any mentioning of gods in Iliad, unlike Yahweh' help to Joshua in conquering Canaan, for instance. Nothing in Iliad points towards Homer being Greek (Danaid). There is no sign of hatred towards anybody in the Poem, all divinities and all heroes being equal before Homer.

5.2. Semitic paradigm

From the Bronze Age the region around Jordan river has been inhabited by Semitic people, who consisted of various tribes and spoke similar languages [9, p. 54]. The latter comprised Egyptians too, but they constituted a nation

apart, due to their geographical position and especially the presence of the river Nile. The only people who disturbed this otherwise ethnically compact area were Philistines, who came from the sea and occupied what is today called Gaza region. Their ethnical origin remains uncertain, though presumably they came from the Hellenistic cultural niche.

In the period we are dealing with a number of distinct tribes appeared (with their gods), like Judah, Israel, Moabites (Kamosh), Edomites (Quos), Ammonites (Milkom), Canaanites (Baal), Phoenicians (Baal/Astarte), Arameians (Adad), Medians (Yahweh), etc. From the historic-religious viewpoint during the Bronze Age, the region was in the phase of *henotheism*, when each tribe had its own patron-divinity, who cared for the tribal wellbeing. In particular, during a conflict with a neighbouring tribe the tribal god was supposed to lead the tribe and help the enemy is defeated. In Deuteronomy 33.26-29 we read [22]:

*There is non like unto God, O Jeshuron,
Who rideth upon the heaven as thy help.
And in His excellency on the skies.
The eternal God is a dwelling-place,
And underneath are the everlasting arms;
And He thrust out the enemy from before thee,
And said: 'Destroy'.
Happy art thou, O Israel, who is like unto thee?
A people saved by the Lord,
The shield of the help,
And that is the sword of thy excellency!
And thy enemies shall dwindle away before thee;
And thou shall tread upon their high places.*

This passage appears full of promises, but from the present day perspective they turn out to be more like anticipations. We can not dwell much on this point, but just notice that 'high places' are a metaphor for shrines. The latter appear almost universally to be locations of religious constructs, like temples. The last line in the above passage means unmistakably the overpowering of other religions. As we shall elaborate later on this concerns, first of all the Christian elimination of polytheism in Europe and neighbouring regions.

5.2.1. From polytheism to monotheism

If we take the Semitic region as a cultural whole, we can make parallel with the Hellenic paradigm we considered above. We notice the notion of *El*, with meaning *divinity* in the most general sense, as used by Plato, for instance. It seems that parallel with the system: one tribe – one god (protector), testifies there was at least an intuitive notion of the supreme divine entity, the God, unique and omnipotent. Such a divinity might be imagined as the entity Hindu called *Brahma*, who (or which) was venerated as a principle (*Brahman*, world

soul), something like (Holy) Spirit, in a sort of pantheistic sense. All other divinities were lower gods, gods patrons or likewise. One of them was initially Yahweh, god of Medianites, whose chief priest Yethro was Moses' father-in-law and who, according to Bible, initiated Moses into his religion. Yahweh was shared presumably both by Israelites and Edomites, but the latter abandoned him for Quos (or simply adopted new name for the same divinity) [13, p. 233]. Yahweh was god of war and storm, just as Zeus was god of thunder and justice. Why Greeks chose thunder and Medianites (sand)storm for the attributes of their supreme gods is no difficult to explain, considering the physical geography of the respective habitats of their subjects.

If we take this Semitic region as a whole, what kind of religion one can ascribe to it? It venerated many deities, but this was not polytheism, but rather multiple monotheisms. Each tribe had single different unique god, not shared with other tribes, but other gods were respected, though not venerated. It seems that there was a silent consensus about a supreme common divinity, *El*, who stood above the congregation of lower-rank gods-patrons (70 in number). As Römer points out [13, p. 228] Jacob and his god Yahweh stood at the bottom of the heavenly scale, ascending towards the supreme deity, *El*. It is not by accident that Jacob wrestled with Yahweh, who allotted to him the name Israel ('one who struggled with God'). Later exegesis interpreted this particular instance as wrestling with an angel instead, but the original meaning appears clear nevertheless.

That the term *El* has a special divine meaning testify many instances. Hebrew term for *God* is *Eloah*, plural *Elohim*. Many terms in Hebrew have *el* as suffix, like *Beth-el* (House of God), personal names (Daniel, Rafael, etc). 'High places' mentioned before, are designated as *tel*.

It is interesting here to note that Bible has two distinct sources, used to compose the version we possess today: one where god is called Yahweh (Y source) and the other with Elohim (E source). The former refers presumably to the later monotheistic phase, whereas the latter relies on the older tradition. It is of interest here to observe that nobody claimed a direct contact with Elohim, unlike those who encountered with Yahweh. It is conceivable that the plural *Elohim* is an echo from the earlier times, when there was polytheism in the proper sense. The henotheism as a system reflects, in fact, the earthly state structures, projected onto Heaven. As noticed by many authors [23] the First Commandment is, in fact, a preamble, which introduces the contract between the supreme ruler and subsidiary governors, as the case with the feudal contracts with serfs was. Israel was one of the small states, subordinated to the powerful empires, like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, etc., together with other small nations around. The first Commandment requests in fact the loyalty of the vassal state to the central power.

In fact human did nothing but project earthly state of affairs onto Heavens. In the Asaph's psalm (82.1-2) we listen: "*God presides in the great assembly; he gives judgment among the gods: How long will you [The Hebrew is plural] defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Selah*".

It is important here to note that psalms used both *E* and *Y* biblical sources. The above psalm refers evidently to the former.

The central figure of the Judaism in its formative phase was king Josiah (639-609 BC), who exterminated all local shrines outside Jerusalem, including the principal rival to the Temple – that at Beth-el (whose meaning ‘House of God’ speaks for itself). Josiah abolished partly idolatry, destroying all effigies of God, except the statue of Yahweh at the Temple, which was presumably accompanied by the statue of Asherah, the female companion of Yahweh. According to some interpretation the statue represented seated Yahweh similar to the statue of El at Ugarite, and similar to Zeus’ statue at Olympia in Greece.

“And the king commanded Hilkiah the high priest, and the priests of the second order, and the keepers of the door, to bring forth out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels that were made for Baal, and for the Asherah, and for all the host of heaven; and he burned them without Jerusalem in the fields Kidron, and carried the ashes unto Beth-el. And he put down the idolatrous priests, when the kings of Judah had ordained to offer in the high places in the cites of Judah; them also that offered unto Baal, to the sun and to the moon, and to the constellations, and t host of Heaven. And he brought out the Asherah from the house of the Lord, without Jerusalem, unto the brook Kidrom, and stamped it small to powder, and cast the powder, and thereof upon the graves of the common people. And he broke down the houses of the sodomites, that were in the houses of the Lord, where the women were covering for the Asherah. ...Moreover them that divined by a host or a familiar spirit, and the teraphim, and the idols, and all the detestable things that were spied in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, did Josiah put away, that he might conform the words of the law which were written in the book that Hilkiah the priest found in the house of the Lord.” (II Kings 23.4-7, 24).

We can’t dwell on this insert here, not because it is not important, but on the contrary, it appears of such an importance that it deserves a much more thorough analysis, which goes beyond our subject. In particular the role of priest Hilkiah in the Josiah’s reform can’t be overestimated. We mention just a few instances here.

- (i) Judah was fully submerged into idolatry, as practiced by all neighbouring people.
- (ii) Asherah had a statue in the temple, presumably beside that of Yahweh and was particularly venerated by the female part of the Judean population. In the Book of Jeremiah (c. 628 BC) we read: “pray thou not for this people...the children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough, to make cakes to the Queen of Heaven, and to pour out drink offerings to other gods, that they may provoke me to anger” (Jeremiah 7.18 and Jeremiah 44.17–19), with probable reference to Asherah.
- (iii) Apart from tribal deities, there were familial idols, *teraphim*, and the class of private divinities, which will play role in the European religions long time after Josiah’s reforms. In particular we encounter them as Roman

genii, and in Serbian tradition, within the Greek-Orthodox confession, where they are called *saints*. In the latter case a particular saint is the protector of a family, what holds for the ancestors and progeny too. Once a year, there is a feast in honour of the saint-protector, which gathers people from the other-saint people.

What was the reason to abolish figurative representation of Yahweh, and divinities in general? We stress that the later abolishing visual representation of living creatures could be explained by theological aims, but the original Josiah's motivations were purely political ones. His credo could be written down as: *one nation—one king—one God*, the slogan we know very well from the recent European past (with *God* substituted by a more vague entity *Providence*). We cannot fail to notice the parallel with Emperor Constantine and his role in establishing monotheism in the Roman Empire. By abolishing idolatry Josiah cut off the Israelites from the neighbouring tribes, which strengthened his control over the subjects. The same rationale stood behind the *kosher* food restriction, whose significance will come to light during the dispute between Saint Paul and Saint Peter, in the formative phase of Christianity.

In fact Josiah's destruction of idols around the Israelite territory was not because he thought they were false, but to the contrary - those statues were powerful adversaries of Yahweh, as represented by his statue at the Temple [13, p. 260]. It seems, judging from the biblical narrative, that the couple Yahweh-Asherah was venerated as Zeus and Hera were in Greece. First reformative step was to separate them and ultimately to discard Asherah altogether, as the Bible testifies (II Kings 23.6).

5.2.2. *Stone versus letter*

After the Exile, Hebrews became aware how risky and inconvenient was sticking to idols and temples. During the Josiah's rule, when *Deuteronomy* was 'discovered', religious ritual was mainly reduced to offerings and reading of the Holy Scriptures. We must note here that after inventing writing, the Ancients used to read the text loudly, unlike the modern man, who reads silently in private. The ceremonial at Jerusalem consisted of loud reading of the scrolls of the holy texts. Hence, instead of dummy idols, which could be seen but not heard, believers could here the voice of their gods, without seeing them. Scriptures became new idols. The scrolls were voluminous staff, as we witness it today, when visiting synagogues, and appear impressive in particular during religious processions. Situation appears the same with the Christian rituals, though not so conspicuous, but less voluminous Bibles still can be taken as 'speaking idols'.

Ido(lo)latry still had exciting history after Josiah's 'political iconoclasm'. Early Christianity stuck to iconoclastic practice for the first two centuries, what was not surprising considering that during this period Christians were predominantly Jews. No wall picture could be found at the Roman catacombs or Cappadocian underground, except the signs of the Cross. As we know

iconoclasm took a full swing a few centuries later in Byzantine, but was ultimately overpowered and visual arts flourished in Europe, particularly during Renaissance and ever since.

The Christians got away from this religious prohibition, but Jews will suffer for two millennia from abstaining from visual arts. The outcome was that the musical art flourished within Diaspora, whereas painting and sculpt remained very rare among those who converted to Christianity, as we witness even today.

6. Hellenic and Hebraic paths – the great divergence

Hellada was essentially a secular society, whereas Hebrews lived in a society, which though not formally, was of a theocratic character. If we take the 7th century BC as crucial for the formation of Judaism as an ideology and important period of the Greek religious orientation, we can compare the paths both societies took in the further development of their religious life.

Why 7th century happened to be crucial for the formative phase of the religious theory and practice? The reason was the invention, or adoption, of the new communication channel, both in the synchronous and diachronous sense - that of writing. With letters memory, collective or otherwise, ideas, etc. were now possible to preserve and disseminate. How the two societies made use of these new cultural tools?

6.1. Hellenistic paradigm

With the introduction of the new cultural tool, that of writing, a new era in the Greek society began, that of Hellenic paradigm. Traditional religion continued to play pivotal role in the state affairs, but new field of human activity arose – that of Philosophy. From the Hesiodic mythopoetic allegorical narratives, the so-called pre-Socratic philosophy took the ground, first in Asia Minor and then in the Central and Western Greece. The central issue was the origin of the World, of human race, social ethics and other subjects, freely worked out and entertained by free minds. With Socrates, Plato and Aristotle freethinking reached the apogee in the ancient Philosophy and marked the beginning of Science as such. Within this *classical period*, it was human who was put into the central position, as eloquently expressed by agnostic Protagora: πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν (human is measure of all things, for those which are that they are, for those which are not that they are not).

On the religious side, the notion of *divine*, more abstract but equally vaguer, took the role of gods within the social elite, as the case of Plato and Aristotle illustrates. What the Greek people adored the most was *beauty*, as an expression of the divine emanation. Human beauty in particular was venerated, as numerous preserved artistic artefacts testify.

What appears the most remarkable feature concerning the issue of religion was the Greek tolerance in that matter. The intellectual elite not only tolerated the religious practice of common people (intratolerance), but Greeks turned out to be tolerant towards the other religions of the surrounding nations. This feature appears somewhat in contrast with Greek political behaviour, which was not a paradigm of interpolitical tolerance. One of civilization pillars of the Greek culture was competition, expressed in political matters by the notion of *agony*. Greeks never occupied foreign people, whom they called *barbarians*, and never tried to impose their Pantheon to others. In fact, as Macedonian pupil of Aristotle eloquently expressed in his famous *Proclamation* to the subjects of his enormous multiethnic Empire, all subjects were equal before the law and gods. Alexander himself not only tolerated other confessions and shrines, but used to attend many of them, as in the case of Egypt, as a sign of his benevolence.

As we shall see later on these features of the Hellenic paradigm appear in stark contrast with the Semitic paradigm, where the political intratolerance was absolute, but religious was burdened with utmost intolerance, after Josiah's reforms.

6.2. Semitic path

Decisive role in paving the new path through the history played the strong coupling of the royal power and priestly cast in Judah. Their tribal god Yahweh, who was the most important among otherwise equal tribal deities, became first the most powerful of them, then the only true god, God. This late phase introduced hitherto unknown (or at least illegitimate) notion of false gods. In this way, Judaism took the form of a new category of religions – the passive aggression. When Paul from Tarsus endeavoured to make Judaism a world religion, the concept of a unique god, god Creator, God, was an inevitable outcome of the reform initiated by King Josiah.

6.2.1. Forgotten revolution

Religion became the quintessence of Jewish society, both at home in Palestine and abroad, in Diaspora. It helped the national leaders to form and preserve a new type of the state, called Diaspora, the state without boundaries, government, army, these essential attributes of the standard political units on the Globe. The only force which kept the newly conceived society was Judaism as faith, which even overruns the religious practice, bound necessarily to the state as such. It was the Judaism, as the deep conviction that the Hebrews were a special people on Earth, (whose god, God, created the World) and left the latter to take care of his creation.

The new situation, which Paul of Tarsus inaugurated, perhaps inadvertently, put the Jewish Bible in an awkward situation. From one side, it took status of a Holy Scriptures, whose content was not to be changed and therefore immune to new historical situations and evolution in general. On the

other hand, those parts which were brought about in earlier formative phases, but were not written down in the Bible in a chronological order, appeared to the contemporary minds as mere superstitions. It concerns, first of all, the two first books of Torah, Genesis and Exodus, which sound to an educated mind as fairy tales. These naive parts of the Jewish Bible never appear in the theological discourse, but constitute the important part in preaching the Holy Script to common believers, as they appeal to human heart more than any theological argumentation.

It is important to stress that unlike Greece, there was no partition of the Jewish society into educated (elite) and common people. Rabbis were well versed in the Holy Scriptures and were held in high esteem as wise men, but they did not possess particular, higher knowledge. Moreover, as the allegorical passage from the Book of Genesis emphasizes, knowledge turns out to be almost equivalent to sin and nobody was encouraged to develop anything what be outside the Bible. It is this prohibition, which will keep Hebrews well below Hellenistic intellectual standards, as we shall see later on.

But before we pass to the other religious paradigm, a few words on the perennial question of the reality of faith seem in order. The confessional tolerance within vast empires could be equally well explained by political opportunism. But this observation does not exhaust the issue of the faith as such. Religious tolerance appears tantamount to religious indifference. It takes only one step to reach the niches where gods of atheists reside. It might sound absurd, but monotheism appears closer to agnosticism than to theism. Ancient Greece witnessed all sorts of –isms on that matter, from Democritus' *atheism*, stoic *deism*, Socrates' *demonism*, etc. (see, e.g. [24] and the introduction by H. Chadwick, p. xi-xii). As for the common people, they enjoyed political rituals and feasts, as a communal gathering, which strengthens the feeling of common interests and fate, not to mention common origin. As the historic time passed religious practice became ever more mere ritual without faith, whereas the opposite was true for Jews in Diaspora, who had little opportunity to exercise religion (in its original meaning) but stuck obstinately to their faith, as written down in Torah. Jews in Diaspora had no their own proper state, had no courts, police, etc. which could impose socially acceptable behaviour, and they invented a surrogate – Yahweh and Torah, instead.

6.2.2. Out from the black hole

From Josiah's time all cultural activities reduced to fixing the written divine words and adorations of Yahweh, whose name became forbidden to pronounce, but who retained his dominant position in Jewish mind. Music and poetry were dedicated to the religious paying tribute to the tribal divinity, the more so as this divinity was ever since promoted as the world ruler. Technically one may say that the Hebrew collective mind underwent a psychological collapse, like that described in modern theory of gravitation as the formation of the so-called *black holes*, which can be entered but not left. When the Hebrews

encountered the Hellenic philosophy, first of all at Alexandria, their principal concern was not to develop their own theoretical constructs, but solely to interpret the philosophical teachings in terms of their faith, that is their Holy Scriptures, as the case with Philo of Alexandria shows [25]. As the superiority of Hellenic mind could not be denied, the only way to *save the phenomena* was to absorb the teachings of Plato, Aristotle, etc., digest them and spit it out as ‘secondhand’ Moses’ wisdom.

On the ethno-political side the opening of the Judaism to the outer world (goyim) was marked by a number of steps, whose significance will be appreciated much later (if ever). The first step was the translation of Torah into Greek, during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelph (309–246 BC). The legend of this translation is now well known, as well as the assertion that this particular myth is the historical fact [17, p. 199-226]. The next decisive step was taken by Paul of Tarsus (Saint Paul), who initiated writing what is today known as *The New Testament* (what could be justifiably called *goyim bible*). All parts of this Christian Holy Script were written originally in Greek (except, possibly Saint Mathew Gospel, which might have been originally in Aramaic, the vernacular of Jews of the time, including Jesus from Nazareth).

Almost all subsequent Christian literature was written in Greek or Latin. Hence, Judaism entered the upper floor of the Ancient West through the Hellenic door and the basement via the Roman gate. (We recall that, unlike common people, Roman patricians spoke Greek. To the Roman elite Greek was perceived as the language of gods. During the Middle Age it held for the entire European aristocracy and men of science, to descend to the middle class during Renaissance.) If one is allowed to use a metaphor in these delicate religious matters, the entire ‘operation’ resembled much the spread of a disease *via virus*, which enters DNA of the host cell and substituting a part of the genome by its own genes makes the cell produce extraneous substances, including the very virus. In his Epistle to Romans (11.22-24) Paul from Tarsus is almost explicit (as much as an allegorical discourse allows). “*Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness; otherwise thou also shall be cut off. And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again. For if thou wert cut off of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?*”

We quote here an illustrative particular instance of this parasitic use of the Hellenic culture. Though it is questionable if Paul of Tarsus ever visited Athens, we read [25, p. 290]: “*Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription. 'To an unknown god'. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.*” (Acts, 17.22, 23)

As can be seen in Pausanias [21, p. 12] the pedestal inscription was “To unknown gods”. (In fact, Pausanias writes about many such altars). It could not be otherwise, since this was a public monument. In a case it was a private artefact, it would make sense, since it would mean somebody addresses somebody else and refers to somebody she is acquainted with, unlike the person she is addressing. This episode deserves some elaborations, both from the ethical and theological sides.

The Greek inscription bears a number of various meanings and intentions. Taken seriously, as it stands, it supports the interpretation that Helens displayed an unlimited religious tolerance, paying respect to whichever god. It can be interpreted, within this context, as a tribute to the concept of god as such. Gods without names and attributes can hardly be taken as gods in a proper sense. It is a sign of agnosticism, rather than of polytheism, as we argued above.

Another less lofty interpretation would be as an expression of pragmatism, if not opportunism. Any god might be of some help. And since we can't know all of them, let us prey to all, known or unknown. Finally, one cannot help sensing in the inscription an ironical overtone, something we do not find in any other world religion. Greeks were well aware it was man who created gods, not vice versa. Then, why not communicate with our creations on equal footing. It was this world outlook that made Helens, like Pheidias, to represent humans feasting with gods on those beautiful phriezes of their magnificent temples.

Now, a few words about the ethical issue seem in order. Whoever was the author of that misinterpretation of the alleged Paul's visit to Athens, he/she didn't evidently count on the possible later exegesis of her message (Exegesis), or otherwise she would not try to offer such a fake assertion. To us it serves as another example of the parasite effect we elaborated above. Since Hebrews were almost unknown in the Roman Empire, or at best a marginal population, and Hellada was venerated like cultural Olympus, it was very profitable to convince the prospective proselytes that even godlike Greeks actually venerated Yahweh, though not aware of that! With the Septuagint in Greek world, dissemination of the Semitism started its triumphal advance.

7. Similarities and differences

As we noted, Hebrews and Helens traced different paths in their religious history. Helens invented much-diversified Pantheon, but soon deprived it from the political and social domination, though not from the political role. The fact their polytheism did not converge towards monotheism testifies the remarkable feature of the Hellenic people – they were essentially agnostics. On the contrary, Hebrews established religion in the proper sense (as we understand it at present), for the first time in the World history, and possibly for the last time. By introducing the concept of false gods, that is false faith, they impregnated the mental fancies into the real, physical life. It was this phenomenon which Freud would call *obsessive neurosis*, but in the Hebrew case, we witness in fact the phenomenon of *collective paranoia*.

According to the Jewish bible this phenomenon started with *family god* (the case of Abraham, later *teraphim*), then tribal god, to be followed with the single god, the God, god who exterminate all other deities. The curse of extermination will be an eternal companion of the people who believe it was their tribal god who created this world and left it to them to govern.

Hellenic gods have disappeared from the realm of religious, though not obliterated. Achievements of these people have been adopted as foundation of the world culture, in particular Science and Philosophy, then sport and Arts. The point of difference with the Semitic paradigm is the *universality* of the Hellenic inheritance. It is the entire world that shares the miraculous achievements of the Greek Miracle.

8. Epilogue

If one would want to point to two most significant events in the global world history, at least the Western one, two phenomena would show up: (i) Hellada and (ii) Hebrews. The former has achieved such prosperity in every sense, that she has impregnated into world culture an incontestable mark, that she has been referred in the contemporary history as *The Greek Miracle*. The latter happened to fall into an inescapable psychological trap, as a consequence of what could be called collective autism, which prevented this, otherwise very gifted population, to provide any measurable contribution to the world culture. It was the Mosaic Law that kept the genus of the Jewish population buried under the strict religious regulations. The rely of hindrance was taken over by Christians, via Saint Paul and the Europe will wait another millennium the torch of the Hellenic fire to blaze again in the in the Renaissance. The irony of history was that it was mainly Jews who took over the fire and thus contributed so much to the contemporary world culture.

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