

Roots of Christianity

I. The Jewish Roots of Christianity

Kenneth Alonso, MD, PhD



Burning Bush

The Tanach. Old Testament?

- The Tanach is the “Jewish Bible”. It differs from the Septuagint “ (Christian Old Testament).
- The Bible is not a history text.
- The Bible is not a science text.
- The Bible is a theological reflection of the experience of a particular people and its relationship to its God.
- The “final” editing of the content of the Tanach occurs at the time of the Maccabees (2nd Century BC)

Stages of Biblical writing

- Song of Deborah (Jgs 5) and Song of Miriam (Ex 15) are oldest fragments in the Bible (12th Century BC)
- “First” Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, Amos, and Hosea committed to writing after the fall of Samaria (721 BC)
- Josiah “discovers” the Book of Moses (622 BC). Presumably this is Deuteronomy.

Stages of Biblical writing

- Nahum, Habbakuk, Jeremiah, and the early writings of Ezekiel are compiled prior to the Exile to Bablyon (587 BC)
- “Second” Isaiah and Wisdom literature integrate Exile experience
- “First” and “Second” Zechariah, Haggai, Malachi, Obadiah, Joel, Jonah, and Job compiled during the restoration to Israel.

Stages of Biblical writing

- Genesis through Kings compiled and edited by 562 BC. Northern and Southern traditions blended and refracted through the lens of Exile experience.
- Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles compiled (450 BC). Ezra brings the Pentateuch to Jerusalem.
- Daniel 1-6, Esther, Tobit written in 3rd Century BC. Genesis through Chronicles and the Prophets are reworked.

Stages of Biblical writing

- Maccabees, Daniel 7-12, Judith, Sirach written in 2nd Century BC.
- Wisdom written in 1st Century BC.
- Sadducees held only Pentateuch (Torah) universally binding.
- Pharisees held Oral Tradition of equal weight as Torah, Prophets, and Writings (Tanach)

Ancient trade routes



History of Israel

- There is historical evidence for a Flood about 5500 BC, but not for Noah.
- Civilization (the legacy of Cain) begins in the Fertile Crescent about 5500 BC with agriculture and animal domestication.
- Amorite migrations about 2000 BC collapsed the Bronze Age settlements in Mesopotamia. The history of the Patriarchs is cast against this background.

History of Israel

- There is no independent evidence the Patriarchs existed. These are founding myths of the southern (Abraham, Isaac) and northern tribes (Jacob).
- An Asian migration to Egypt is known in the 14th Century BC). The rise of non-Egyptians to power is documented. This is compatible with the Joseph story. There is no independent evidence that Joseph existed.

History of Israel

- The Israelite occupation of Canaan begins in the 13th Century BC. Egypt was subject to external invasions throughout the 12th Century BC, a period of great instability.
- There is no independent evidence to support the Exodus. The varying accounts in Joshua and Judges support immigration with military action as models for occupation of Canaan.
- The Exodus was regarded as allegory by important Church Fathers following the lead of the Jewish thinker, Philo.

History of Israel

- The story of the United Monarchy (1000 BC) represents an idealist view.
- In a period of Egyptian restraint, David leads a revolt against Palestinian domination. YHWH worship is centralized in Jerusalem.
- Under a Phoenecian umbrella, Solomon expands commercial contacts; organizes his reign on an Egyptian model
- Upon the death of Solomon, Jeraboam, with the support of Egypt, separates northern and southern tribes. Traditional worship patterns are re-instituted (Dan, Beersheba as cult sites).

History of Israel

- Omri restores the monarchy. Independent sources regard him as one of the most successful rulers of the era. Biblical editors dismiss him with only a few lines (1 Kgs 16:21).
- Northern tribes are removed from the land with the Assyrian conquest of 721 BC.
- Southern tribes are removed from the land with the Babylonian conquest of 587 BC.
- The suffering servant of Isaiah is Israel.

History of Israel

- Jerusalem was restored following the conquest of Babylonia by the Persians (5th Century BC).
- The definition of who was a Jew was concretized and a restrictive view of interaction with Gentiles was developed.
- The inclusive theology of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are interpreted within the rubric of adopting Jewish practices.
- Fasting and community worship are introduced; Temple sacrifice remains the ideal.

History of Israel

- Alexander conquers the known world (4th Century BC). His single purpose is to Hellenize the world.
- Ecclesiasticus and Sirach oppose this Hellenization.
- Israel, however, is Hellenized.
- Jason (175 BC) receives permission from Seleucid kings in Syria to turn Jerusalem into a Greek polis.

History of Israel

- Antiochus IV profanes Jewish worship. Maccabee resistance begins.
- Hasmonean dynasty (non-Davidic) rules in Israel because of success in resistance to Antiochus and defending Judaism.
- Hasmoneans combine roles of priest and king.
- In contrast, King Uzziah was rejected by God when he attempted to usurp the role of priest (2 Chr 26:16). King and priest each have their own sphere of activity given by God.

History of Israel

- Hasmoneans intolerant of Samaritans, Edomites, Galilleans.
- Economic and political control centralized with Sadducees.
- Pharisee party arises, opposing loss of Hasmonean idealism and concentration of economic and political control.
- Essenes, also Sadducees, rejected usurpation of priesthood.
- Clash of interests led to civil war in 75 BC.

History of Israel

- Rome invited to intervene in civil war in 64 BC.
- Pharisees sought abolition of kingship as a means of ending dynastic wars. Rome agreed.
- Herod, an Idumean, a non-Jew, was appointed king by Rome. He split the priesthood from the throne; was a major employer through public works; tolerated no political dissent. He was thoroughly Hellenized.
- Apocalyptic ideas were rampant; a Messiah was awaited.

Biblical canon

- Septuagint is oldest Biblical text.
- Greek translation from the Hebrew (2nd Century BC)
- Quoted by the Apostles and Church Fathers
- Very high agreement with Hebrew scrolls found at Qumran.
- Is the received text of the Eastern Church.
- Is the basis of the King James translation (with the Latin Vulgate).

Biblical canon

- Samaritan Pentateuch existent.
- A version of Isaiah found at Qumran differs from the Septuagint and the Masoretic text.
- At the time of Christ there is no one definitive version of the Tanach (Christian Old Testament).
- Important differences are noted in the Septuagint and Qumran versions of Is 7:14 as opposed to the Masoretic text. Ps 96 also differs in the Masoretic text.

Biblical canon

- Masoretic Text is a Hebrew reconstruction from Aramaic (2nd Century AD).
- Excluded all Greek works and recent Hebrew works: Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Wisdom, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, Esdras, and Greek portions of Daniel and Esther. This is the Deuterocanon.
- Excluded Book of Enoch (in canon of Copts)
- Deuterocanon not used for doctrinal purposes. Are of spiritual value.
- Masoretic text adopted by Protestants (16th Century AD).

Biblical canon

- Torah written without vowels and punctuation.
- Variant readings are possible and permitted as it often draws out subtleties in the text.
- The Bible is used to interpret the Bible. If a word is obscure, its usage elsewhere in the text provides its meaning.

Monotheism is not a philosophical concept

- It is God Who reveals Himself.
- “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul.” (Dt 6:4-5)
- Gen 1:1 assumes there is a God outside space and time and that apart from God there is no other existence. No dualism.

Monotheism is not a philosophical concept

- God is transcendent. On the seventh day he rested from the work he had made.
- God needs no intermediaries.
- God is immanent. He is shown as visiting Sodom to see for Himself what is transpiring (Gen 19). He accompanies His people fleeing Egypt (Ex 13:21-22). His glory fills the Temple (1 Kg 8:10-11).
- God sustains his creation directly. (That is the point of Jesus' healing on the Sabbath. Jn 5:17)

Man is a psycho-physical organism

- Man is made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27)
- Animals and man have life (nefesh). That manifestation of life and wholeness is in the blood (Dt 12:23).
- There is no division of soul and body. Man is a whole being (Gen 1:29-30). God breathes spirit into man (ruach, Gen 2:7). That spirit is the power that moves Man.

Man is responsible for Creation

- Creation is made for Man (the just man).
- Man is responsible for Creation.
- Life is sacred. Man must answer for blood. (Gen 9:4; Lev 17).
- This is the basis for all human rights and for animal rights. This is a concept not found in other religious traditions.
- That the fetus is a whole being from the moment of conception is a Stoic doctrine.

Woman

- Equal status with man (adam) before God as she is created from the side of man (adam).
- Subordinate to man (adam) who was created directly by God.
- Woman (eve) is the mother of all living.
- Limits are placed on what man may do with women and children.

Stewardship of Creation

- Noah's first actions are to care for the animals, then to raise an altar to praise God, and lastly to care for his own needs (Gen 8:18).
- Implicit in this new covenant between God and Man is the need to establish courts of justice.
- The obligations are universal.

Children

- Children are a gift of God (Gen 4:1).
- In the continuation of the People of God is found immortality. This is the point of the Levirate marriage (Dt 25:5). The sin of Onan (Gen 38:8) is his refusal to provide children to his brother's widow.
- The point of marriage is procreation.
- It is a Stoic doctrine that each sexual act must lead to conception.

Sin of Adam

- Man would be god without God.
- It is not the knowledge of evil but the succumbing to it that is deadly. Man freely chooses.
- The serpent is the evil tendency in man (concupiscence).

Sin of Adam

- Choosing to be god without God disrupts man's relationship with God. It is this choice that contaminates man's nature and leads to death.
- No man is without sin (Pss 14, 53; Job 4:17).
- Man is called to be righteous (Hos 10:12; Ps 11:7; Hab 2:4; underscored, 1 Pt 1:16).

Sin of Adam

- Hypostasis is a philosophical term that denotes the concrete existence of a nature or essence.
- Sin fractures the hypostasis of Man, manifesting as individuality and not as unity (the point of Rom 5:12).
- Sin, then, has a communal dimension.
- Death destroys sin as man is not immortal.

Sin

- Sin is a free choice.
- Repentance is a return to God.
- The Law is the guide to working through one's salvation (as explained in Jas 2:6).
- Salvation is a grace of God.
- The Augustinian notion of original sin has no basis in Jewish thought; it is a Stoic doctrine.

Sin

- There is a time for repentance. Cain let it pass.
- Yet even the wicked are not abandoned by God (Gen 4:15 and Pharaoh generally).
- God will not destroy his creation if 10 righteous men are present (Gen 18).
- Sin has consequences: the Flood, Babel, Exile.

Righteousness

- It is still possible to be righteous in the midst of evil.
- The descendants of Seth were righteous.
- Enoch was righteous and taken to God (Gen 5:24).
He did not see death.
- Elijah was righteous and taken to God (2 Kg 2:11).
He did not see death.
- Noah was righteous in his generation (Gen 6:9).

Abraham and Isaac

- Implicit trust in God's word (the call, at Gen 12:1)
- Complete moral surrender to God (the binding of Isaac, at Gen 22)

As child sacrifice is condemned (Dt 12:31), and the firstborn is redeemed by substitution (Ex 13:2), this incident is understood as a call to martyrdom rather than embrace apostasy (2 Macc 7).

“The righteous live by my God's faithfulness.” (Hab 2:4 Septuagint).

Jacob

- Esau did not value the dignity of priesthood that went with being firstborn.
- Esau is praised for his filial piety.
- Jacob is the maturation of the human in his relationship with God. When he struggles with God he is called Jacob; when he adheres to God he is called Israel, receives visions and prophecies.

Moses

- Egypt is human and occult wisdom. Israel is God's revelation. They are diametrically opposed and irreconcilable theological views.
- The contest between Moses and Pharaoh is the contest between God and those who would be god.
- As with much of the Pentateuch, the story of the Exodus is allegory. (2 Cor 3:13; Gal 5:21; Heb)

Moses

- Saved in an ark cast on the waters.
- The three uses of the word “ark” in the Torah are with Noah, here with Moses, and with the cabinet that will hold the Tablets of the Law dictated by God.
- Grows in human and occult wisdom but flees into the desert solitude (an ascetic life). Here he finds God.

Moses

- The name of God is revealed as YHWH.
- We learn of God through his operations. God is a verb, not a noun than can be objectified. We do not reason our way to God. God gives us the Law.
- Moses preaches repentance. For those who choose God, God accompanies them as they cross through the sea at the end of the world (Ex 14). He feeds them with the bread of Heaven (Ex 16:4).

Exodus

- When the people called by God rebel against God, the Tablets written by God on stone are destroyed.
- Atonement by the community and the individual sinners restores the relationship with God (formalized at Lev 16).
- A male priesthood is instituted. Usurpers are punished (Lev 10; Lev 16:25; Num 12).

Reward and Redemption

- The “day of the Lord” is a day of destruction of the present world (Zeph 1:15; Jer 4:23). This conditions the transition to redemption.
- The “end of days” regards the future as the time when the existing world would be perfected, when it would be freed of its faults, from wickedness and injustice, from wars and catastrophe. The spirit of the Lord would be poured out on all flesh (Is 4:2-6; 11:6-9; Joel 3:1-4).

Reward and Redemption

- There is a general resurrection of the dead at the end of days.
- There is reward or punishment (2 Macc 7:14). “For everyone will bear his own righteousness or unrighteousness (4 Ezra 7:105).
- The unrighteous shall have no resurrection.
- It is not the personal redemptive act of the Messiah that liberates the world from sin, but a precondition. It is God alone who redeems (Ps 23:4).

Summary

- There is only one God.
- This absolutely transcendent God has intervened directly and immediately in history, and has revealed Himself in His total control of the historical process.
- God made a covenant with Israel in which He formally stated that He would be their God and they would be His people. The Law is the condition of that agreement.
- God's plan embraced all creation and Israel was destined to play a special role in asserting God's lordship over creation. It is the basis for the Messiah.

Suggested reading

- Hershel Shanks (ed.), **Ancient Israel**. Biblical Archeology Society. Washington. 1999.

An excellent review of modern understanding of the history of ancient Israel.

- Ephraim Urbach, **The Sages**. Harvard and Cambridge Press. Boston and London. 1979.

An excellent presentation of rabbinic thought.