

The Bible Among Myths: Chapter One

The Bible in Its World

By [John Oswalt](#)

The Western world has been founded on a certain way of looking at reality. Obviously that way of understanding is an amalgam of many separate contributions. But without minimizing the importance of others, it can be asserted with confidence that the Bible is the single most important of these contributors, especially when its outlook was integrated with the contributions of Greek philosophy first by Augustine and then by Thomas Aquinas. These thinkers showed that the transcendent monotheism of the Bible provided the metaphysical foundation for Greek thought, while using Greek thought provided a means of logically organizing the observations about reality found in the biblical narratives.

Greek Thought

The Greek philosophers of the seventh through the third centuries BC¹ intuited that this is a “universe” and not a “polyverse.” They believed that there must be a single unifying principle in the cosmos. Furthermore, they believed that this is a real world in which effects are the result of observable causes. In addition, they believed that these causes and effects were discoverable through rational thought. At the foundation of this thought was the conviction that something could not be so and not so at the same time.²

Increasingly, this way of thinking brought the Greek philosophers into conflict with the dominant thought of the world up until that time. That thought insisted that this is a “polyverse” in which we live, wherein existence is the result of the conflict of many different forces, most of them unseen, and many of them unknowable. As a result, it becomes all but impossible to determine why anything that happens does happen. There are an almost infinite number of potential causes for any event, and the majority of these are in the realm of the invisible, which is

¹ I am writing as a Christian. Therefore, I will continue to use the conventions of the last two millennia in the West. I refer to the sixty-six books of Christian Scripture as “the Bible,” labeling its first thirty-nine books “the Old Testament” and its last twenty-seven books “the New Testament.” I refer to the time prior to Christ’s birth as BC and the time since that event as AD.

² For a good summary treatment of the Greek philosophers, see volumes 1 and 2 of *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, ed. R. H. Popkin (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005).

the “real” world. Because of the fundamental unreality of the observable world, it is entirely possible for something to be so and not so at the same time.

Ultimately, this conflict between the philosophers and the prevailing religious culture was won by the culture. Socrates was forced to drink hemlock, and while Plato³ and Aristotle, his successors, were able to live out their lives, they were the end of their line. While the philosophic tradition was never really submerged into Greek thought, it was never able to exercise a dominant hold on the Greek culture. Instead, what dominated the culture was the world of myth, with all of the characteristics just mentioned, which had that hold.

The Greek playwright Euripides, in his play *The Bacchae*, portrays this struggle and its eventual outcome in a devastating way. He uses a group of men to represent the rational side of human nature and depicts them explaining why their point of view is much superior to the largely irrational, but ultimately more vital aspects of that nature represented by a group of women. The action centers upon the annual “Bacchanalia” when Bacchus, god of wine, is celebrated. The men want to reduce this worship to a set of rather lifeless ideas and theorems while the women want to participate in the inexplicable, but terribly real experience of unity with the god. Ultimately the women win, hacking the men to pieces in the course of the worship. It takes little explanation to understand the author’s point: rational thought is finally unable to compete with the mysterious and largely inchoate world of affective experience.

There is a certain irony in *The Bacchae* because it was almost the last of the great Greek dramas. These dramas were written to be performed during the Bacchanalia, and they were an attempt to wrestle with the great issues of life, especially as these were exposed in the conflict between the two ways of looking at life that the Greeks were experiencing during this time. As one of the last of these great dramas, *The Bacchae* seems to be a historical statement admitting that the attempt to integrate the two opposing views had failed and that the old antirational way had won.

Hebrew Thought

At the same time as the Greek philosophers were struggling to articulate their point of view, there was a parallel series of events taking place at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Between 625 BC and 400 BC the Israelite people went through the crisis of their faith. While Old Testament scholars continue to argue about the precise historical details of this crisis, the general outlines are clear enough. The crisis was prompted by the rise of first the Assyrian and then the Babylonian empires. The ability of these two groups to achieve military and

³ In Plato we see a learned attempt to integrate the two ways of thinking with his idea of the invisible forms, of which all visible forms were inadequate reflections.

political dominance over large parts of the ancient Near East called Israel's particular faith into question.

This faith had been and continued to be drawn in sharp relief by a series of persons we know as the prophets. The prophets had articulated an understanding of reality that was starkly different from that of the peoples around them. The present editions of what those leaders said assert that these ideas did not originate with the prophets, but the prophets were only trying to call the people back to understandings that had been theirs from the very time of their emergence as a people hundreds of years earlier. Among those ideas were the following: there is only one God; God is the sole Creator of all that is; since this world is not an emanation from him, it has a real existence of its own; God has revealed himself to humans primarily in the context of their unique experiences in space and time; he has communicated an explicit will for human behavior in this world; and he rewards and punishes on the basis of obedience to that will.

Much like the positions of the Greek philosophers, these ideas came into direct conflict with the views that were current all around Israel: there are many gods; the visible world is an emanation from them and as such has no real existence of its own; the gods are known through their identity with the great natural cycles of the cosmos; the gods have no purposes except those that humans have: survival, dominance, comfort, and pleasure; humans exist to provide these for the gods; if humans do care for the gods, the gods will reward them; and if they do not, the gods will punish them.

As a result of this conflict in understandings of reality, the eventual capture of Israel first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians caused a real crisis of faith. The Israelites realized that these two different understandings of reality could not coexist. If they had not formally expressed the logic of noncontradiction as the Greek philosophers had, they still understood that if the other understanding of reality was correct, then theirs was false. And surely the fact that the Assyrians and the Babylonians had triumphed over them showed that the Assyrians and Babylonians, and everybody else, were correct. So would the unusual Israelite faith disappear? When Jerusalem finally fell, would the final remnant adhering to that faith in Judah give it all up and admit that they had been wrong?

As a matter of fact they did not! There is no Old Testament version of The Bacchae, for the pagan vision of reality did not triumph in Israel. Why it did not is still, and probably will remain, a matter of controversy. As far as the biblical text is concerned, there were several contributing factors. One was the fact that the prophets had boldly predicted that the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests would be evidence of God's work in history to punish his unbelieving people. But coupled with this prediction of that conquest and the exile was also the prediction of the return from exile, something that had never occurred before during the many centuries in which exile had been practiced as an instrument of foreign

policy. Thus, when the exile and the return did occur as predicted, it certainly became easier for Israelite believers to believe that the interpretation of the exile that the prophets had given was the correct one: it was not an indication of the triumph of the gods, but of God using the pagan nations as his tools.

Another factor that played a part in the survival of the peculiarly Israelite worldview was, according to the text, the survival of an authoritative collection of books that the Israelites understood to record the origin of their faith and the narrative of the ways in which that faith had fared in the Israelite experience. Thus the priest Ezra returned from Babylon with the authority to teach “the Torah of his God,” which was the core of the collection (Ezra 7:25). And one of the early acts of Nehemiah, after the rebuilding of the Jerusalem city walls, was to sponsor a public occasion in which Ezra read that Torah to the people (Neh 8:1 – 3). Thus, in addition to any subjective faith that the people might have had, there was an objective standard that stood over against them and called them to account.

To be sure, it appears that the Israelites swung directly out of one ditch into another. Prior to, and immediately after, the exile, according to the text, there was a tendency to take a rather cavalier attitude toward God’s commands. Many people thought they could live according to the pagan worldview while giving lip service to the biblical one. Because of the work of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi, whom we know, and many others whose names we do not know, there came the conviction that the only way to avoid another dose of divine punishment was to get serious about worshipping Yahweh exclusively. Unfortunately, the understanding of exclusive worship that developed was one of literalistic obedience to the commands without the kind of alteration of attitude that the commands were designed to foster. But be that as it may, the survival of the distinctly biblical understanding of reality was assured.

Combining Greek and Hebrew Thought

What we find, then, at the beginning of the Christian era was, on the one hand, the biblical worldview, which had not been worked out with philosophical consistency, but which had about it a vigor and a vitality stemming from its survival in the crucible of life. On the other hand, there was the worldview of Greek philosophy, which did have the logical consistency but had proven unable to be translated into the common experience. It was when the gospel of Jesus, presupposing the Israelite worldview, penetrated into the Greco-Roman world that the stage was set for the combination of the Greek and the Hebrew worldviews in the distinctively Christian way.

As a result of that combination there was now an explanation for the Greek intuition of a universe: there is one Creator who has given rise to the universe and in whose creative will it finds its unity. At the same time the Greeks showed

the Hebrews the logical implications of their monotheism. In the Hebrew idea of sole creatorship by a transcendent Deity there is a basis for the idea that this world is a real one: God has spoken it into existence as an entity separate from himself; it is not merely an emanation of the gods. But the Greeks could show the Hebrews that in this real world there is a linkage of cause and effect that the Hebrews tended to overlook in their emphasis upon the First Cause.

Now there is a basis for the law of noncontradiction in the recognition that God is not the world and the world is not God. There is such a thing as truth because the one Creator of the universe is absolutely reliable and faithful to his Word. The idea that the Creator is primarily known in this world and especially in relation to unique events in human-historical experience provides the basis for the concept of historical responsibility.

To be sure, the full development of this combination was a long time in coming. The platonic cast of much of early Christian thought perhaps did more to hinder it than to help it. It is only with the recovery of Aristotle that resulted from the various interactions with Islam⁴ (beginning with the Crusades) that the full implications began to be worked out. Then for the first time logic and science began to be worked out in detail. At last logic and science had an understanding of metaphysical reality under them that was fully consistent with them. At the same time the Christendom of the Dark Ages was called back from the bifurcation between heaven and earth that had sprung up from an essentially magical view of faith.

The Necessity of the Biblical Worldview

One important conclusion that must be drawn from all of this is that contrary to the nineteenth and twentieth-century delusion, science and logic are not self-evident. They cannot stand on their own. It was not until the biblical idea of one personal, transcendent, purposeful Creator was allowed to undergird them that science and logic were able to be fully developed and to come into their own.⁵ Without that undergirding, they fall to the ground under a barrage of contrary data, just as Euripides' pale, rationalistic men fell under the knives of the vital, earthy women. We in the last two centuries have shown the truth of this statement. We have tried to make logic and science stand on their own, and they have begun to destroy themselves.

The unique linkage of Greek and Israelite thought led to several characteristic features of Western civilization. Included among these are: the validity of reason,

⁴ Aristotelian philosophy was preserved in one form or another in Islamic schools because of Islam's rigid monotheism. Christendom was at first more attracted to Platonic thought with its idea of invisible universal ideals.

⁵ Stanley L. Jaki, *The Origin of Science and the Science of Its Origin* (South Bend, IN: Regnery/Gateway, 1979).

the importance of history, the worth of the individual, and the reality of nature. But in the revolt of the Enlightenment against what it saw as the stultifying strictures of Christian dogma, these and other results were made ultimate values.

What has happened? Rationality has become rationalism. We have made the human mind the measure of all things and the result was a century in which two of the chief accomplishments were Buchenwald and Hiroshima. Rationalism has taught us that there is nothing worth thinking about. History has become historicism, in which we assert that finally we can know nothing about the past except what we make up to serve our own historical fictions. Individuality has become individualism, in which we assert that individual rights come before everything else, with the result that we are each locked in lonely isolation. Nature has become naturalism, in which the cosmos becomes an end in itself serving its own implacable, mindless, and deterministic ends. In many ways Western culture and civilization is playing out *The Bacchae* again. We can no longer answer the "so what" questions. Reason for what? History for what? Individuality for what? Nature for what? In the absence of these answers we fall back to the pursuit of survival, dominance, comfort, and pleasure.

How has this happened? It has happened because the leaders of the Enlightenment thought Greek logic and science could stand on their own. They thought that the biblical understanding of reality was a hindrance that must be cut away so that rationality, history, individual worth, and natural reality could stand forth in their true worth. Surely there was some reason for this attitude. The church of the late eighteenth century, whether Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant, was an intensely conservative institution intent on preserving itself and on putting down all those who wished to think for themselves. But tragically, the understanding of reality that the Enlightenment thinkers took to be a hindrance was the absolutely necessary underpinning. By stripping it away, they left logic and science defenseless against all the old gods.

In this book I want to examine the distinctive view of reality that is first found in the Old Testament as it presently stands and which provides the underlying assumptions for the New Testament. I will show why current attempts to describe the Bible as one more of the world's great myths are incorrect. I will argue that in the end there are only two worldviews: the biblical one and the other one. I will demonstrate why the Christian faith cannot be other than exclusivist. I will show how current trends in the United States in particular are the logical result of the loss of biblical faith. In passing, I will ask whether any other explanation than the one the Bible claims (direct communication with the one God) can explain where this understanding of reality came from. In the end I hope to have convinced younger readers especially of the necessity of standing absolutely firm on the biblical understanding of reality and of giving no quarter to what is, in the end, the enemy.

*Taken from The Bible Among the Myths by John N. Oswalt.
Copyright © 2009 by Zondervan. Used by permission of Zondervan.
www.harpercollinschristian.com*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).