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Perspectives on Biblical Trajectories

Oppression in the Bible?

I HAVE TOO OFTEN heard said or seen in print that the oppression of women, the centuries-long existence of slavery, the justification for war, the pollution of our environment, and other woes of human society result from statements in the Bible as well as from the teachings of monotheistic faiths. I have had my college students say as much at the beginning of a course, usually as a prelude to a statement that explains why they have no commitment to the church. Over the years I have written several works to demonstrate the opposite—that the biblical tradition speaks a message of liberation, human freedom, egalitarianism, human dignity, and social reform.¹ Critics of the biblical tradition who attribute the source of such woes to the Bible can indeed point to the message of fundamentalist preachers, who have used the Bible in the modern age to subordinate women, attack homosexuality, attack the theory of evolution, affirm the inferiority of African Americans, and defend the notion of a just war as the solution to most international crises. In the early nineteenth century such preachers also justified the existence of slavery. But I maintain that the fundamentalist use of the Bible on these issues is a misuse of the Bible. A deeper understanding of the biblical text in its historical context reveals it to be a document that elevates

1. Gnuse, *You Shall Not Steal*; Gnuse, *No Other Gods*, 274–97; Gnuse, *Old Testament and Process Theology*, 141–57; Gnuse, “Breakthrough or Tyranny,” 78–95; Gnuse, *No Tolerance for Tyrants*.

humanity, strives for human equality, and attempts to lead society forward in terms of respect for the poor, the oppressed, women, and others so often crushed by the social and economic forces in our world. It is for the purpose of reclaiming the Bible's message of liberation that I have written this volume. I shall contend that the biblical tradition, as it developed, increasingly sought to provide rights and dignity for both slaves and women, so that from our modern perspective, abolitionism and women's equality are the natural outgrowths of the biblical message. In regard to the biblical understanding of homosexuality, I shall maintain that the biblical text itself does not condemn a loving and committed relationship between two free, adult members of the same sex. Those who speak disparagingly of the biblical text as an oppressive document on these issues do not really understand its deeper message.

Critical intelligentsia who so quickly condemn the Bible and its message fail to appreciate two important realities. First, the biblical texts were generated in the first millennium BCE (for the Old Testament) and in the first century CE (for the New Testament). They were products of an era in so many ways repressive, an age of patriarchy and imperial oppression by military empires. The biblical texts cannot help but reflect the values of that age, especially when straightforward narratives describe the everyday happenings of life. If we desire to know the values and the beliefs of the biblical authors, we are best advised not to read the stories, which, of course, reflect the mores of the common society. Rather, we should turn our attention to the laws that the authors sought to impress upon society, to the prophetic oracles spoken by those critics of religious and social values, to the classical prophets, and to the writings of the New Testament—especially to Paul. We should observe where the values of the everyday society lay, and how the values of the biblical authors stood in tension with them. We should compare the writings of the Bible with the culture of that age, and we should not compare them to our own values. We live two thousand years later, and much of our egalitarian progress, which has moved us beyond the values of the biblical authors, was inspired by those very same authors.

The second overlooked reality about the Bible is that the biblical tradition itself reflects ongoing social progress. We would acknowledge readily that in terms of democratic social values our modern society has moved beyond the social values and beliefs of the biblical text. But what is not acknowledged is that an evolutionary process occurs on several issues within the history of the biblical tradition itself. That evolutionary process

or trajectory reflects how the biblical authors increasingly sought to redress the wrongs of society in the oppression of the poor and women. That evolutionary process is what has inspired us over the years. In effect, the evolving trajectory of values in the Bible encourages us to move beyond where the authors were in their own beliefs. The Bible is not to be viewed as a static and timeless work; rather, it inspires an evolutionary trajectory that begins with it and moves forward into the future. Thus, when we read a biblical text, we should ask, what was the point of the author in articulating what we read, and how would that transform itself into our values today? For example, when a biblical passage is critical of slavery in the first millennium BCE without necessarily calling for the elimination of slavery, that message should really translate into abolitionism in the modern era, as it did in nineteenth-century America. The same is true on other issues. We are called upon to go further in social reform than the biblical authors ever could have done with the limitations placed upon them by their society.

In a previous work I observed how the biblical texts inspired political thinkers in America in the eighteenth century. From 1760 to 1805 American political authors drew 34 percent of their citations from the Bible, compared to 22 percent drawn from Enlightenment thinkers, 18 percent from Whig authors, 11 percent from common law, and 9 percent from classical sources.² Democracy did not exist in the first millennium BCE, but biblical ideas carried to their logical conclusion ultimately resulted in the emergence of democratic thought. I observed that eighteenth-century American political thinkers quoted the biblical text more than any other resource. (They were, of course, deists, not Christians in the traditional sense.) That is what I mean by an evolving trajectory. The Bible invites us to move beyond where the biblical authors were intellectually; the Bible invites us to participate in an ongoing evolving trajectory. The evolution we can observe in the Bible is an ongoing process that has surfaced most dramatically in Western society over the past four centuries (after the interlude of the Low Middle Ages and the High Middle Ages between us and the biblical era). These intervening centuries between the biblical era and ours may have kept some radical concepts in the biblical text from surfacing.

What I will seek to explore in this short book are those aspects of biblical expression in behalf of the poor and the oppressed that appear to demonstrate development within the biblical tradition. The two issues

2. Gnuse, *No Tolerance for Tyrants*, 6–8; Lutz, “Relative Influence of European Writers,” 189–97, esp. 192.

addressed by biblical texts, which appear to reflect an evolution of thought primarily, are the amelioration of the woes of slavery, along with the concomitant causes of enslavement, and the rights of women in a patriarchal culture. To me, the texts connected to these two issues reflect the dynamic nature of the biblical text as an ever-changing and evolving intellectual tradition seeking to elevate the dignity and the rights of all human beings. We should never quote the Bible as a static resource to tell where we should stand on social issues; rather, we should observe the spirit of the biblical text and ask: What is the deeper message, and where is it telling us to go with our own actions?

Intellectual Revolution in the Bible

Over two and a half thousand years ago a religious and intellectual revolution began. We still live in the midst of that ongoing, not-yet-finished revolution. Perhaps because our individual lives are so short, or because we do not readily sense the great patterns of history in our everyday lives, we fail to realize that we still live in that continuing revolution, which is changing the religious, intellectual, and social assumptions of human culture. Historians speak of the Neolithic Revolution, a period of time approximately from 9500 to 4500 BCE when agriculture spread across the Old World, and it encompassed more than four millennia in its process. But historians still call it a revolution. Analogously, we are into the third millennium of this yet unfinished revolution, and though slightly over two thousand years might seem to be a long time, it is still a revolution.

The revolution of which I speak is the emergence of monotheistic religious beliefs with their concomitant intellectual and social values. We might be tempted to refrain from applying the term *revolution* to a process that endures for millennia and appears to us to have been an established part of our worldview. But in reality, the religious and moral revolution generated by the biblical authors has been going on for a short period of time compared to the vast eons of time involved in human evolution. Human history, which has elapsed since we first settled in villages around 9500 BCE in the Near East, is but a cosmic wink, and the period of time involved in the emergence of monotheism is but a fraction of that.

The emergence of the values of justice and egalitarianism in the biblical testimony was not only revolutionary for its age, but evolutionary: that is, we may observe the stages of development within the biblical tradition,

especially as we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament. An intellectual or religious breakthrough requires many years to unfold as the implications are worked out in the social-cultural arena of human existence. Thus I speak of the monotheistic process, which we can observe in the biblical text, as one that is still emerging in our own age as we continue to develop the implications of the text. For example, the Old Testament was critical of the oppressive aspects of slavery, the New Testament sought to abolish the distinction between slave and free in the Christian community, and ultimately Christianity in its liberal social manifestation gave rise to the modern abolitionist movement. For years I have used the expression “emergent monotheism” to describe the process wherein the beliefs and social values of monotheistic faith have been unfolding in society. Recognition of this process in human culture should lead us consciously to will to continue and advance the monotheistic “revolution” and “evolution” in our own age, as we advocate justice and equality in our modern world.

Modern scholars in the past generation have begun to sense that monotheism did not emerge among the Israelite people with Moses in the thirteenth century BCE, as once we assumed in the scholarship of previous generations. Rather, Israelites or Judahites did not become monotheistic in a real sense until the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BCE or even later. The religious experience of the people until then was one of polytheism. Great religious spokespersons, such as the classical prophets, and religious reform movements of Hezekiah and Josiah, provided the preliminary stages for the emergence of monotheism among the Judahites during and after the sixth-century-BCE exile.

The new scholarly view that polytheism was regnant among Israelites until the exile has been undergirded both by archaeological discoveries and by a fresh look at the various texts in the Bible that testify to the diversity of religious belief in Israel and Judah. Much of this information we had in our possession for years, especially the biblical texts. The breakthrough in our scholarly paradigms emerged as scholars were willing to look at all the information in a new way. Now scholars are more willing to speak of a development of monotheism in ancient Israel until the time of the exile, and some speak of a developmental process that continued down even into the Maccabean period of the second century BCE or even into the Christian era.

Certain assumptions and ideas in the biblical text could not be fully developed in that initial biblical age. They would be realized only in the

“fullness of time,” or when human culture was ready for their fuller actualization in the social arena. To put it another way, emergent monotheism creates a trajectory, an ongoing developmental process of religious beliefs and social imperatives. This process over the years would bring about greater equality and respect for all people, the abolition of slavery, concern for the poor, the affirmation of human rights for everyone, and various social reform movements. It might appear that it took a long time for the monotheistic beliefs of Judaism and Christianity to bring about these advances in western European society; but ideas and practices cannot be implemented immediately by an initial monotheistic breakthrough, nor are all the implications to be found in the minds of those initial contributors to the movement. Such values reside in the overall belief system latently, and they await the time in human history when they can become manifest. In the past few centuries, Western culture has become ready to work out the fuller implications of monotheistic faith in the social arena.

My Response to Critics

My thesis may be dramatically challenged by contemporary authors who maintain that biblical religion and monotheism do not represent a great intellectual and religious breakthrough that brings equality and justice, but rather that biblical religion and monotheism engender the repression and even violence that has plagued Western culture for those many years. My critics would postulate that monotheism has justified tyrannical governments, the institution of slavery, and the subordination of women to men in society. In part, this entire book has been written as a response to their observations.

A classic advocate of these views is Regina Schwartz, who has issued a stern challenge to the biblical tradition by declaring that monotheism produces violence and oppression.³ She opines that belief in one God implies that God favors a group of people, gives them a unique identity, and inspires them to exclude or attack others. This attitude has been passed from the Old Testament to Christianity. Covenants in particular lead the religious community to focus its identity and thus scapegoat others outside that community. The Bible mandates love of the neighbor only until the neighbor challenges our identity, and then that “neighbor” must be resisted

3. Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*. I have responded to her arguments in the past in greater detail, “Breakthrough or Tyranny,” which provides the basis for much of this chapter.

and opposed. Monotheism brings people together so they do not fight each other for scarce resources such as land and wealth, but when monotheism is combined with the “particularism” of a covenant relationship, it becomes oppressive. The gods of other peoples are idols, and if those people worship idols they become abominations.⁴ Thus, Schwartz can say that God prefers some (Abel, Israelites) and excludes others (Cain, Canaanites)—hence the title of her book: *The Curse of Cain*. Since Schwartz refers to examples such as slavery and the oppression of women, reference to her thesis is appropriate for the scope of this volume.

Schwartz observes that identity is connected to owning land, which reinforces human desire to possess, defend, and conquer. Monotheism becomes political when divinely promised land is bequeathed from God and its possession is maintained by obedience to that God. For then people will defend the land militarily to prove they are obedient. After Judah’s sins sent the people into the sixth-century-BCE exile, the return and renewed obedience, especially with the increased emphasis upon purity for the people, led to xenophobia. The exodus freed the slaves, which then led to the conquest of Palestine, wherein the formerly oppressed slaves became the oppressors who killed Canaanites. We have seen this same phenomenon happen again in the twentieth century; the once oppressed become the oppressors.

The biblical story of exodus, conquest, and Davidic rule created a nationalistic particularity in the form of a tradition for the later Judahites, and the narrative still influences our thinking today. Past oppression, such as slavery in Egypt, justifies violence against others. Universalism, proclaimed by a monotheism that declares that all people worship the same God, theoretically could create a toleration of others, but often it generates imperialism that seeks to conquer and absorb others.

Schwartz articulates the rebuttal to her own thesis, however, when she says that the biblical text must be interpreted differently. Ethical values are affected by scarcity of food, water, land, and other precious resources, which must be shared by people for self-survival. Monotheism proclaims that the resources are to be had by the chosen few, and others are to be excluded. Schwartz declares that the biblical text must be plumbed so that an “ethic of scarcity” may be replaced by an “ethic of plenitude,” in which all humanity shares in the world’s resources. I would declare that the biblical text indeed proclaims such an ethic, and monotheistic universalism may generate toleration rather than imperialism. Schwartz observes that

4. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 33.

the worship of one god does not necessarily produce a violent notion of identity, but when monotheism is combined with particularism, the combination creates a collective identity for people to set themselves apart from others.⁵ I agree, but I would say that the problem is not with the Bible but with how the Bible has been used and interpreted. The greatest misuse occurs when the biblical message is taken out of its social-historical context, and especially when the message of certain biblical texts is no longer seen as part of an evolutionary trajectory that calls upon us to “move beyond” cultural values contemporary with those biblical authors. I hope to show that the biblical texts on slavery and women encourage us to move beyond the reform that those biblical authors initially envisioned and to affirm an even greater degree of equality and freedom.

What Schwartz really attacks is a misuse of biblical accounts by modern believers who use them literally to address contemporary issues and call for some form of continued subordination of other people. Old biblical narratives must be understood critically as an earlier stage in the history of religious evolution. Modern Jews and Christians view the narratives of the Old Testament through later texts: Jews use the Talmud, and Christians use the New Testament, as the hermeneutical key by which to understand and appropriate the values of those older biblical texts. Thus, some values of the older texts, such as war against one’s national enemies, have been transcended by later traditions of Christianity and Judaism. Schwartz forgets, as do most believers in the Judeo-Christian tradition, that earlier and cruder values espoused by the biblical text are overturned by later revelation and human religious insight in the evolutionary trajectory, which are inspired by that very same biblical text. The problem lies with modern believers who fail to use the later biblical traditions to reinterpret the more primitive early elements in the Bible. We must view the biblical tradition-generating process as truly an organic, ever-changing, evolutionary process.

Robert Goldenberg also directs his attention to authors who declare that there is monotheistic intolerance in the Old Testament and Judaism, and his observations also can be used to respond to Schwartz’s position.⁶ Goldenberg admits that preexilic Israelites were largely polytheists and that only after the exile did Judahites become monotheistic. After the Judahites became truly monotheistic, they had mixed attitudes toward other religionists from the late biblical period through the rabbinic period. While some

5. *Ibid.*, 31

6. Goldenberg, *Nations That Know Thee Not*, 1–108.

condemned the religions of the Gentiles, other Judahites believed that all people worshipped the Judahite God indirectly. This became especially true during the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Some Judean authors called for the conversion of Gentiles, while others advocated leaving them alone, as long as they did not convert Judeans to their Graeco-Roman values. With such mixed opinions expressed by Judean authors, one cannot declare that the religion of the Judeans was an intolerant religion, as Schwartz and others do. Goldenberg's thesis argues only that Judean monotheism does not give rise to intolerance; it does not discuss whether monotheism legitimates tyranny and patriarchal oppression for its own believers. Following Goldenberg, if monotheistic Judean religion is not monolithic about other religions, by inference neither does monotheistic Judean religion legitimate oppressive values on other social issues, such as slavery and women's rights.

Monotheism and Equality

Some authors and historians suspect that the rise of monotheistic religious belief elevates one deity and subsequently legitimates the elevation of one ruler on the earth. When that one ruler declares there is only one true god, and he or she worships that deity, that ruler will forcibly convert other people. Thus, a monotheistic state will conquer and absorb other peoples into its own political and religious structures. Monotheistic faith, then, lends support to the national goals of imperial conquest. Zealous monotheists create an irony in their desire to convert all people. For if you reject the religion of others, conquer and convert them, this shows that you fight for a particular religion and a particular deity, not a universal and loving God of all people. According to critics of monotheism, when a multitude of gods is present in the universe, individual believers can exhibit diverse lifestyles because each person is excused from the demands of one particular jealous god. This permits greater freedom of human actions. Monotheism, by contrast, demands submission of the will to one God and the ritual and ethical demands of that one deity. Polytheism thus permits greater diversity and human religious individuality.⁷

These observations may be true for the Achaemenid Persian Empire (550–330 BCE) and the Sassanian Persian Empire (100–600 CE) with Zoroastrianism as the imperial faith, and for the various Arabic empires

7. Marquard, "Lob des Polytheismus," 40–58; Comblin, "Monotheism and Popular Religion," 91–99; Veyne, *Roman Empire*, 216; Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 37–60.

(630–1918) with Islam. Christians likewise used religious belief to sustain empire. Constantine the Great of Rome in the fourth century CE saw the use of Christianity as a tool to rule a united Roman Empire and to marshal its energy in order to conquer Sassanian Persia.⁸ This pattern of Christian imperialism may be observed throughout western European history, including Western colonial expansion into the Third World in the past five hundred years. It appears that empire and monotheism go together to produce oppression, at least historically.

On the other hand, some authors suggest that monotheistic thought may introduce both intolerance and openness into various religious communities.⁹ What may be stressed for a people in a particular situation depends upon who is most responsible for articulating monotheistic faith and bringing it to the masses.

If monotheistic belief is supported by the state or an empire, it will stress the monarchical aspects of the one deity in order to legitimate kings and the institution of the monarchy. This form of monotheism articulates the analogy of one God in the heavens ruling all people as the parallel to one ruler on the earth ruling all his subjects. This is monotheism “from above,” a religion imposed upon the subjects by the elite to legitimate their power. But if monotheism is generated from the people, especially poor and marginal people, such as the ancient Judahites or early Christians, the existence of one God in the heavenly realm implies that all people in the earthly realm must worship that one deity and stand as equals before that one deity. This metaphor will be critical of kings and kingship, for the ideology legitimated by “monotheism from above” puts the king into a more direct relationship with the deity, and the monotheism of the people rejects such an exaltation of a mere human being to divine or semidivine status. This is why there is so much critique of kings and kingship in the biblical tradition, as I have elsewhere sought to demonstrate.¹⁰ The biblical tradition contains monotheism “from below,” a faith system from the people. For the biblical texts were generated by people who were the underdogs and the oppressed folk of their age.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky aptly observes that the biblical narratives speak of women and honestly acknowledge their subordinate status in the

8. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*; and Harris, *World of the Bible*, 164.

9. Petersen, “Israel and Monotheism,” 92–107; Michaels, “Monotheismus und Fundamentalismus,” 51–57; Gross, “Religious Diversity,” 349–55.

10. Gnuse, *No Tolerance for Tyrants*.

patriarchal society in which they lived. However, the biblical narratives never characterize the women in a prejudicial fashion, disdaining them for their weak and subordinate status, as was common in the Hellenistic literary tradition, but rather portray them in ways very similar to how men are described. This, says Frymer-Kensky, is because the biblical authors belonged to the people of Israel or the later Judahites, who themselves were a weak and subordinate people in an age of oppressive world empires. Hence, the women in their roles were analogous to the people of God, and so no prejudicial portrayal of women is forthcoming from the biblical narratives, but instead the women often seem to be lauded for their ability to survive as “tricksters.” The portrayal of women, to a certain extent, serves as a model of behavior for the biblical audience, people also trying to learn how to survive in an overwhelming world as underdogs.¹¹ The biblical tradition reflects the vision of the world from the perspective of the underdogs, the slaves, and the oppressed. Theirs is truly “monotheism” from below. Hence, in the legal tradition, as we shall observe later, there is special attention paid to elevating the status of slaves and women.

Critical historians recently have observed that the monotheism of the Judahites was brought to the masses due to the efforts of the scribal and priestly elite, and perhaps was abetted by the government in Jerusalem in the postexilic period after 500 BCE. Prior to the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, Hezekiah’s (710–700 BCE) and Josiah’s (622–609 BCE) reforms in Judah used strong-arm methods to accomplish what appears to have been monotheistic reform. After the exile, the efforts of Ezra, such as the exclusion of foreign wives, appear rather abrasive and tyrannical. Nonetheless, in the great scheme of power politics of that age, the preexilic Judahite kings and postexilic Judahite priestly leadership must still be accounted as part of the oppressed, small powers in a world of gargantuan political forces, even when their religious reform was sponsored by those foreign powers (as with Ezra and Nehemiah). They are still the “underdogs.” Thus, their efforts can be seen as giving rise to a “religion from below,” a religion of the masses and the oppressed.

A healthy monotheism encourages freedom of the deity in the divine realm to act without the constraints of the other divine wills, but it should also affirm freedom and equality of people in the human realm as believers relate equally to that one deity. As that God is free in the divine realm, so also the devotees are free in their actions in the earthly realm. When the

11. Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, xvi–xvii, xxi.

tiered class system of the gods in the heavens disappears, the tiered class system of people on earth disappears. In a polytheistic system you have high gods and the lesser divinities, who are ranked by importance and according to their function in the natural order. Gods of the sky, sun, and storm are usually supreme; gods with specialized functions, such as a deity of dreams or the seamstress goddess, hold lesser rank. Lesser deities serve in the court of those high deities, and similarly on earth you have the elite leaders and the rest of the members of society, who serve them. Often there are three classes of deities in the divine realm and correspondingly three classes of people on the earth (rulers and military elite, merchants and craftsmen, and laborers and peasants). There are high gods, who are distant in the heavens; there are the powerfully active gods below them; and, last, there are the local deities and numina, who are accessible to humans. This framework parallels the human social classes. One deity in the divine realm undercuts the notion of elites and subordinates on earth by removing those distinctions in the divine realm.¹² One God in the heavens implies that there is one single, universal basis for religious belief and human morality, which in turn becomes a standard for all men and women to adhere to, regardless of class or status. This promotes equality of all believers before one deity and one unified natural order of things.¹³ Egalitarian values then surface in the literature that is produced.¹⁴ One can observe such values in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Unfortunately, bad things sometimes happen in history. Constantine and others used the Christian movement for their own political purposes, even though that did not reflect the deeper spirit of Christianity. Christians contemporary with Constantine supported his actions, for it helped spread their faith. Combined political and religious imperialism often occurs in Christian history, and Christians have been willing to allow political leaders to use the Christian faith for repression in return for political favors for the institutional church. We have seen this in Nazi Germany, Communist Eastern Europe, and Latin America. We would like to believe that this is not true and pure Christian practice, but it has happened too many times in history. Christians must become aware of the frequent oppressive use of their religious beliefs against other people and learn to live the spirit of the message they preach and so oppose such regimes.

12. Gnuse, *No Other Gods*, 242–63.

13. Dever, “How Was Ancient Israel Different?” 62–67.

14. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 129.

Biblical scholars affirm that the monotheism of the Old Testament and the Judahites, as well as the New Testament, at its heart does not legitimate political empire, but rather encourages solidarity with all humanity. The believers who generated these texts were often the oppressed and victims of political systems in their own age. For example, the prophets spoke of a universal deity who would bring a state of peace and prosperity to all people someday.¹⁵ The following oracle is found in both Mic 4:3–4 and Isa 2:4,

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid.

This is a religious oracle that truly comes “from below,” from the voice of a defeated and conquered people under the heels of the Assyrian Empire. There are monotheisms that are imperialistic, such as that used by Constantine, and then there are monotheisms of peace and human unity. There are monotheisms “from above,” defined by a monarch, pharaoh, emperor, or tyrant who uses the religion for political advancement, and there are monotheisms “from below,” from the people crying for dignity, toleration, and peace. This prophetic text just quoted expresses hope in overcoming war between people by the recognition that there is only one God over all humanity. This is an oracle reflecting religious faith “from below,” even if the prophetic author, Isaiah or Micah, was not yet a monotheist in the fullest sense, but was evolving in that direction. In the polytheisms of the ancient Near East, the wars between peoples reflected the wars in the heavens between the gods, but according to the vision of this oracle, the emergence of one God should spell the end of wars and oppression and create a vision of all people as equals under that one deity.¹⁶

15. Lang, *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority*, 55; Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 71; Albertz, *History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, 2:425; and Dietrich, “Über Werden und Wesen des biblischen Monotheismus,” 25–27.

16. Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, 71.

Perhaps the spirit of this prophetic oracle has yet to permeate the consciousness of believers in those faiths. There is an evolutionary trajectory in the monotheistic process that is still seeking to come to fruition. The monotheistic breakthrough of ancient Israel is still unfolding, and we are still in the formative stages. When religion is no longer used to justify war, imperialism, conquest, and as the apology of one race of people for enslaving another race, then monotheism will have actualized one of the most significant components of its ideological matrix. Then we shall look back and see that imperialistic monotheisms were merely an evolutionary dead end. Monotheism “from below” which unites people by the power of the human spirit rather than by the sword will be seen as the true heir to the biblical tradition.

Monotheism and the Dignity of Women

Another aspect worthy of mention in this preliminary chapter is the critique that monotheism leads to the suppression of women. The assumption here is that a religion with one God will portray that deity as masculine, usually as a divine father. This excludes the feminine from the divine realm. Furthermore, if that one deity is zealous and demands that all people worship “him,” then even more the feminine will be viewed with suspicion, and people who worship female deities become targets for oppression. Historically, the monotheistic faiths converted peoples who had goddesses and high priestesses and subsequently excluded the female gods and the priestesses from worship. A very critical attitude toward the presence of women in the cult was assumed by the newly ascendant monotheistic faith in postexilic Judah, for example.

Some scholars believe that the polytheistic faiths (with their inclusion of female deities) were more tolerant of women in the cult, especially given the presence of female votaries in the various polytheistic faiths. Marija Gimbutas in her study of primitive religion suggests that once religion elevated the mother goddess, but with the rise of a patriarchal religion there came the subordination of women.¹⁷ However, it should be questioned whether polytheism or a mother-goddess-oriented religion gave women dignity in the ancient world. In the ancient Near East the cults of Inanna/Ishtar in Mesopotamia and Isis in Egypt were extremely significant, but the status of women was still very poor in both those societies, and male

17. Gimbutas, *Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*.

leadership was the norm.¹⁸ Polytheistic societies did not challenge the patriarchal assumptions in those cultures.

In fertility religions where a goddess was significant, it was possible for a young woman to obtain a respectable position as a priestess. One fortunate lady ultimately became the high priestess, but the other women did not. Furthermore, if the role of priestess involved sexual activity in the cult, such advancement was hardly ennobling. Most women in society did not become priestesses; they simply remained totally subordinate wives to their patriarchal husbands. Religions with feminine imagery did not liberate them, for not all women could become priestesses, much less the high priestess.

Biblical archaeologists have observed that devotion to the Canaanite goddess Asherah was a mode of pious expression. Jeremiah condemns the actions of women who bake cakes in their homes to venerate Asherah (Jer 44:15–19). Yahwism crushed this popular piety only after many years, and its suppression might be seen as a blow against women. The cult of Asherah was a private, woman's religion in the home, and its status points to the inferior status of women. That worship of Asherah was a home cult implies that it was not worthy to become part of the official state cult. Whereas the home cult of Asherah ostracized women, a monotheistic faith, in theory, granted more dignity to women by including them (as Christianity did) in public worship.

The significant question is what really caused the subordination of women in ancient Israel. Did the religion subordinate women primarily? Did emergent monotheism subordinate women? Or were women subordinate in a patriarchal society before Yahwism arose? I would say the subordination of women existed before emergent monotheism, and that monotheism helped ameliorate the low status of women by seeking to give them more rights. A consideration of the biblical laws will bear this point out. Preexisting patriarchalism was so strong in society long before Yahwistic monotheism that it would take years to lessen this patriarchy. In fact, we are still attempting to do this today. The emergence of state structures and social organization, including temple hierarchies, strengthened patriarchalism in society. Hammurabi's laws imply that in the early second millennium BCE women were the property of men, and their sexual behavior was highly regulated by legal guidelines and social customs. Women were precious property because of their childbearing capacity and the ability to

18. Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—the Patriarch*, 93.

create heirs who would inherit the family wealth. Do not blame monotheism for the subordination of women; it was there thousands of years before emergent Yahwistic monotheism. The rise of the Assyrian and the Babylonian empires in the eighth through the sixth centuries BCE brought great economic oppression to Israelites and Judahites, and marginal people, including women, were hurt the most in such circumstances. Finally, priestly assumptions about female impurity connected to menstruation existed before monotheism arose. The biblical tradition recalls the memory of those assumptions, which were really the generic assumptions of other cultures in the ancient world, also.¹⁹ Once monotheism arose, old values from the prior age still endured. Monotheism cannot change society and the minds of people all at once, especially in regard to matters that affect home and the family.

Though the subordination of women continued through the emergence of Christianity, throughout the years religious articulations inspired by the biblical texts arose to stress the dignity and rights of women. The evolution of biblical values takes time to unfold, and the liberation of women takes time to develop in the hearts and minds of people. It takes longer to radically change family values than social or economic values.

I believe that the biblical tradition does not subordinate women, for when the biblical text reflects the subordination of women, it is portraying the culture of that age. To be sure, for two millennia men have quoted the biblical text to subordinate women, but they were missing the point of their religion, which declares the equality of all people before God. Too often men appealed to the masculine portrayal of God to justify their patriarchal beliefs. When the Bible characterizes God as masculine, it is because there is only one deity, and you no longer have the luxury of assigning sex to different divine beings. However, at times in the Old Testament God is metaphored as both masculine and feminine, a sign that the metaphor of gender is only symbolic. Erhard Gerstenberger said, "I find untenable an attempt to reconstruct a direct monocausal relationship between the rise of monotheism in Israel and the denigration of women . . . belief in God includes the greatest possible openness to the justified claims of equality of all people."²⁰ Gerda Lerner noted that it was tragic that monotheism emerged in a society with strong patriarchy, for the religious belief then

19. Lerner, *Creation of Patriarchy*, 88–91.

20. Gerstenberger, *Yahweh—the Patriarch*, 94, 110.

unfortunately affirmed that patriarchy in many ways.²¹ I would agree, but I would respond immediately that monotheism also planted the seeds to undercut that patriarchy ultimately.

I shall direct my attention to particular themes that I believe reflect the monotheistic evolutionary trajectory as it seeks to affirm the basic equality and dignity of all people. In particular, I believe this can be demonstrated with biblical passages that speak about the economic rights of the poor, the rights of slaves, and the rights of women. Herein we may observe how the biblical tradition addressed social issues in such a way as to plant seeds of reform in human society, so that over the centuries the radical egalitarian values of the biblical tradition would unfold and make their impact upon people and society.

SAMPLE

21. Lerner, *Creation of Patriarchy*, 198.