

**WHO DO YOU SAY THAT “I AM”?**  
**(The Growth of God In The Judeo Christian Tradition)**

by  
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We live in an interesting and unprecedented time in history, one in which some of the fundamental aspects of our culture are not in sync with each other. In former times, the systems which explain the nature of our experience (science and religion) were in harmony. In today's world we see that science and religion have been on divergent paths for 400 years. We now have a dangerous rift between the power of our technology and the moral/ethical restraints needed to control that power. The following comments are meant for those who want to reconcile their metaphysics with the discoveries of modern science. I hope the same material might be helpful for anyone trying to develop a workable metaphysical structure.

Let me begin by stressing that I am a theist, who believes in and who has experience of God in my life. There may be other explanations for my experience, but I am satisfied with the knowledge and belief in a God who knows and loves me intimately. However, I grew up with images and stories that were intended to make me afraid of God. In my experience, God was infused with all manner of human attributes that often weren't even as good as some of the people I knew. Like many people, I had God in a conceptual “box” where I knew what “he” expected of me, and if I didn't give it to “him” I would pay.

One of the things I noticed, that bothered me immensely, is that bad things happen to good people (in spite of their actions), and good things happen to bad people (in spite of their actions). That's not right, doesn't God care? It's taken me a long time to come to the understanding that “God has a plan.” That's not something we just tell ourselves when confronted with unwanted reality, but something to celebrate always. Everything we experience has meaning and purpose, neither of which do we fully comprehend or appreciate. I came to realize this contemplating the cross.

As I mentioned in another section (see Ontogenic ThemeScape), “Jesus never did anything to ‘deserve’ crucifixion. Even Pontius Pilate admitted his death was not ‘justifiable’ in any normal sense of the term. However unjustified, his death was ‘necessary.’ God does not seem to be ‘troubled’ by injustice, but uses injustice to accomplish that which is *necessary* to fulfill the plan. God uses saints and sinners alike. All are part of the immense plan of the cosmos. Judas was just as necessary as Jesus, regardless of how we feel about Judas or his actions. Within that context I now understand the prologue of John's gospel to mean: *‘In the beginning was the plan, and the plan was with God and the plan was God. The Plan was in the beginning with God and through the Plan all things came into being.’*<sup>1</sup> Granted, this is not the Neo-Platonic understanding of the “Logos” that most people understand, but in my understanding of the lexographic possibilities of the word ‘logos’ is certainly defensible.”

As one can see, my approach is a little bit off the “beaten path” but certainly still within the overall Judeo Christian journey. What I have come to realize is that we need to take God seriously when scripture says: Is. 55:8-9

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.”*

If this is true, why do we keep attributing human characteristics to God? I think the answer lies in the fundamental understanding that we have inherited from prior ages, an understanding that may no longer be helpful to us. If we look at the history of our concept of God (within the Judeo-Christian heritage), we can see that God has changed (or people’s perception of God) according to historical circumstances; at least, that has been true up to the present age. Since the fall of Rome, our perception of God has remained largely unchanged regardless of how much our view of the world, and the universe, has been altered in the course of that 1500 years. We stand at a moment in history where that may need to change.

But first, let us look at some of the basic ways God has changed over the course of history:

### **BIBLICAL BACKGROUND**

However, before we begin, it would be helpful to have a little bible background to work from. We’ll discuss the nature of “revelation” later, for now we need to have a look at the history and formation of the bible. As you may know, the bible wasn’t written all at once, nor from cover to cover. The Old Testament covers a span of about 20 centuries, and had many hands at work in the composition and editing of the text. We often think of it as historical, and it is, but not historical in the sense of twenty-first century AD history. Some of the “historical” parts were written hundreds of years after the events depicted took place. Historical “facts” are not as important as “meaning.”

A generally accepted, but by no means “universally” accepted, approach to the text of the bible is called “literary criticism.” This doesn’t mean “critique” but a method for understanding various layers of composition within the text. Within this system, there are considered to be four basic “authors,” “editors” or “redactors” whose hand can be discerned in the writing and compilation of the Old Testament. They are the “Yahwist” or J, the “Elohist” or E, the “Priest [for Priestly source]” or P, and the “Deuteronomist” or D. J and E are known by the name they call God: J calls God YHWH, and E calls God Elohim. P and D are a little more complicated. J and E are the oldest writings in this schema, and P and D do quite a bit of editing. A wonderful synopsis of these different sources is contained in the book *Men and Message of The Old Testament* by Peter Ellis. I will mention in the following discussion some of this material.

The dating for the beginning of Judaism is the call of Abram, which is thought to be about 1800 BC, but could have been as early as 2300 BC. The following is a rough outline of the Evolution of God from before Abraham to the present day.

## EVOLUTION OF GOD

One of the interesting things about reading the Old Testament is that we retrospect backwards the image we have of God from today, as if that was the image that people in former times had. My hope in the following synopsis is to convey in a simple way the basic images of God that people in former times may have held when they were actually alive. Granted, there's a lot of generalization presented, but overall I think it's valid. Let us begin with the very earliest times of human existence, before cities and civilization as we know it, possibly 5000 BC.

**Phenomenetic Deity**—*Sun/Moon/Earth/Wind/Ocean, etc. This is the way early man experienced God.*

Once upon a time, very long ago, people sat beneath the stars around a campfire contemplating their surroundings. They knew that the earth and the mountains were bigger and more powerful than they were, as were the sun, the moon and other phenomena they observed. Knowing how small they were and how big the earth was, they imagined a relationship with the earth as a deity, as well as other natural phenomena. They worshipped the sun, the rivers and the land, and felt themselves to be in communion with their gods. An accessible way to explore this view of the world is the delightful film, "*The Gods Must Be Crazy*," which explores in a semi-documentary way the lives of the people of the Kalahari Desert, which have remained unchanged since the dawn of humankind. I believe this natural metaphysics served people until they started moving into cities and fixed settlements. With changes in the culture came changes in their relationship with the gods.

**Anthro-Phenomenetic Deity**—*Gods of specific phenomena with human characteristics. This is essentially the way the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and others experienced the Gods.*

Once people began living in cities and fixed settlements, it became increasingly difficult to be in communion with nature as had previous ages. No longer actually killing or harvesting their own food and living in close proximity to other people, who were not related necessarily by blood, created a whole host of relational problems that were previously unknown. Within the mythic structure of the human community, the gods took on personalities, which meant they had to get along with one another as civilized people also needed to do. Like humans who resided in relatively fixed locations, the gods began to demonstrate the best and worst of human characteristics, and religion began to take on aspects of a control mechanism to deal with human behavior, with the addition of ethical/moral demands. The gods resided in particular locations and were involved in a complex interaction with humans and with one another.

**Tribal/Totemic Deity**—*Patriarchs – David. God continues to display human characteristics.*

Beginning with Abraham, the Patriarchs led their tribe through a variety of adventures under the auspices of YHWH. Interestingly, when YHWH first contacted Abram, the first instruction was to leave the urban environment and go out into the wilderness (return

to nature). Again we see a cultural shift related to evidence of a new experience of God. Retrospectively, we assume that the God who revealed himself to Abraham is the same God who came to be known later in the bible. Except for the enigmatic Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18) YHWH seems to be primarily known by only the people of Abraham's tribe. This God took care of them and led them, ultimately to Egypt, where they eventually became slaves.

We know little about the Patriarch's concept of YHWH, other than their special relationship with this powerful deity. However, we can see that YHWH was not the only god. For instance, using scripture, we can see that originally God was considered to be the "Great King over all other Gods." Psalm 95 suggests that fidelity to YHWH was a choice, however service to other, lesser Gods was possible for the foolish.

*Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD;  
cry out to the rock of our salvation.  
Let us greet him with a song of praise,  
joyfully sing out our psalms.  
For the LORD is the great God,  
the great king over all gods,  
Whose hand holds the depths of the earth;  
who owns the tops of the mountains  
The sea and dry land belong to God,  
who made them, formed them by hand*

Psalm 95:1-5

In this context, God is demonstrated to be superior because of power over nature and events, not necessarily the only god around. From a modern perspective, this rather exclusive relationship may seem a bit chauvinistic on God's part, but that was the world-view at that time. The Jews were happy to be the beneficiaries of this exclusive relationship: "Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine."

Exodus 19:5

Moses, under the guidance of YHWH, led the Hebrews out of Egypt into the desert, where the tablets of the covenant (totem) were given to the people. God not only watched over the Hebrews, but actually dwelled with them in the Ark of the Covenant.

*When King David was settled in his palace, and the LORD had given him rest from his enemies on every side, he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God dwells in a tent!" Nathan answered the king, "Go, do whatever you have in mind, for the LORD is with you." But that night the LORD spoke to Nathan and said: "Go, tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: Should you build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day on which I led the Israelites out of Egypt to the present, but I have been going about in a tent under cloth. In all my wanderings everywhere among the*

*Israelites, did I ever utter a word to any one of the judges whom I charged to tend my people Israel, to ask: Why have you not built me a house of cedar?*

*2 Samuel 7:1-7*

Obviously, the idea was that God dwelt with his chosen ones, both literally and figuratively. From our perspective today, we would not take the sense of the text literally, but that was the view of people in former ages. We can see from this, that their view of God is largely “geo-centric,” and God is a fairly localized deity.

### **Anthro-Cultic Deity—Solomon—Exile**

The concept of God dwelling in a specific location was transferred to the Temple in Jerusalem. Because of this in-dwelling of God in the Temple, Jerusalem was the center of the world. With the shift from a nomadic tribe to an urban community, there are some evident changes in the view of YHWH. Perhaps because of the need for revenue, additional anthropic qualities of God were exhibited in the need for sacrifice and ritual. Propitiation became an important aspect of the cult. Perhaps the reason the prophets were so vocal is that during this period, it would be difficult to differentiate the God of the Jews from those of the surrounding cultures, at least in terms of outward worship.

### **Trans-Cultic Deity—Exile—Return**

When the Babylonians destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, there were some problems for the exiles regarding God. They were still in covenant with God, but unable to offer sacrifices and holocausts any longer. Out of their existential situation, God manifested some changes.

With the prophet Micah, we can see the transition from a sacrificial system of propitiation to an ethical moral system that involved real change within individuals. Fidelity to the covenant was demonstrated by the way one acted and believed, not just cultic ritual.

*With what shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow before God most high?  
Shall I come before him with holocausts,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with myriad streams of oil?  
Shall I give my first-born for my crime,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
You have been told, O man, what is good,  
and what the LORD requires of you:  
Only to do right and to love goodness,  
and to walk humbly with your God*

*Micah 6:6-8*

This “Rend your hearts and not your garments” mentality began to take hold as the synagogue system began to develop, without the need for sacrifice. This begins a sort of two-tiered religious consciousness that continued until 70 AD.

**Trans-Creational Deity**—*post-exilic Scriptural version of Genesis*

When the Jews returned from exile, they began the slow process of trying to return to the former ways, under the guidance of the priests, who were the guardians of the cult. However, there were some profound changes that occurred during the Babylonian Exile. Through contact with the Babylonians, the Israelites were exposed to other religious traditions and deities. When they returned from exile, there was a need to demonstrate the superiority of YHWH and eclipse the other religions, some of which had creation stories. The creation stories of Genesis come from the P tradition, which gathered and edited the material after the Babylonian Exile. By then we see that God is not just more powerful than other gods, but is actually the creator of the heavens and earth, as demonstrated in the book of Genesis. From this period of time begins the development of a much more elaborate and systematic cosmology, as well as theology and a messianic eschaton (end of time).

**Trans-Temporal Deity**—*Sadducees et al at time of Jesus*

Early Judaism does not exhibit any particular sense of an after-life, unlike the Egyptians and Greeks and others. Their temporal orientation ended at *Sheol* (the grave). However, there came to be an undercurrent that considered the possibility of an after life with God in heaven. According to the Gospel accounts, in the post-exilic Judaism (perhaps after their exposure to Zoroastrianism), some Jews developed the idea of an afterlife. This was a major extension beyond the previous paradigm of *Sheol*.<sup>2</sup> Within this viewpoint, God was beyond time; Lord of eternity who lived in a spatial/temporal reality known as heaven, surrounded and served by various and sundry creatures. Within this paradigm, earthly souls could be allowed to dwell. This provides the context for Jesus’ interaction with the Sadducees (Matt. 22:23-32). Obviously, the idea of a **Trans-Temporal Deity** was what was inherited by the early church. The cosmology was elaborated upon further to incorporate elements of judgment with a reward and punishment scenario.

**Trans-Cultural Deity**—*Early Church—The whole notion of “chosen people” was expanded, which made God king of the whole world and of time.*

The early Christian Church existed as a subset of Judaism. From the Acts of the Apostles we witness a profound transformation in God. From the time of Abraham to the time of Jesus, the Jews had been the “Chosen People of God.” However, the early Christians could see that God was not limited to loving only one cultural group, but could love the entire world. This oft quoted passage is a profound testimony to this dramatic shift:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*

So we can trace the expansion of the notion “People of God” and the transition of God as a trans-cultural deity (God of all nations, not just Israel) via the Acts of the Apostles as the locus shifts from Jerusalem to Rome.

**Trinitarian Deity**—*God no longer viewed as single entity, but Trinity.*

The other major change that occurred in early Christianity was the development of God as a Trinity. This was a profound change from the previous monotheistic paradigm of the past. Just at what point in history this change became apparent is not entirely clear and in response to what is not entirely certain. This shift was evident in the writings of Paul and the gospels so that by the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, this paradigm for God was affirmed. The mechanics of the Trinitarian belief system were problematic for all manner of people, and finally became the basis of the split between the Eastern Church and Western Churches in 1000 AD<sup>3</sup>. For some, the seemingly schizophrenic nature of God was just too much, and fomented a number of movements which were branded heretical.

**Trans-Dimensional Deity**—*Where did heaven go?*

From the time of the Babylonian Exile to the Renaissance, heaven was conceived to be a place upwards, hell downwards. When Galileo lifted the telescope to his eyes and could not see heaven, this idea of God sitting on a throne up in the clouds was in trouble. The whole idea of heaven as a spatial/temporal reality had to be revisited. Since that time, these “places” are purported to exist within something like another dimension of reality. What’s interesting is how much easier it is to invent other dimensions than it is to give up on a powerful poetic image. To forsake heaven and hell is to compel us to revisit once again our whole notion of God. The question is not about whether there is a God or not, it’s about us: do we have room in our hearts and paradigms to accept the reality of God as God. Science has revealed the possibility of infinitely many “universes.” For an infinite God, this presents no problem, but for finite minds, we may have some real growing up to do.

**Trans-Phenomenal Deity** (*Not anthropic—not geo-centric—non-local*). (*Personality Breakdown*)

After Galileo, God has to be God over a whole lot of territory as well as perhaps other universes and possibly other intelligent life forms. They may not look like us, but if we’re in the image and likeness of God, what does that mean? Is God a chauvinist as the Israelites conceived “him” to be? Or, does “God so loved creation that he sent his only Son” have a whole other dimension of meaning? Can our poetry and our imagination accept a God who isn’t like us, who isn’t geo-centric, who loves infinitely many worlds and races as much as us? Or, do we have to go through the whole process again every time a new life form or civilization is discovered? I’m suggesting that we conceive and embrace a God who is beyond categories of thought—who is beyond limits and boundaries of any sort—who can be experienced in wisdom and beauty and mystery. This “true” God, this “real” God lives and reigns and loves us passionately, infinitely, eternally; we are special, chosen, unique, but loved no more or no less than the rest of creation.

This is our challenge. Where do we find and how do we fit into this new paradigm?

## REALITY AND REVELATION

Some 16 or so billion years ago, our universe began with an awesome event of unimaginable intensity, which has fondly been called “The Big Bang.” Inherent within that event was born all the possibilities of our universe, which we see manifested today. The universe unfolded according to the *Logos* or “Plan” mentioned above. My take on it is that “reality” is God’s revelation to us. Everything that needed to be revealed was at that instant revealed or began the processes of revelation that would be unfolded later. In the liturgy, the Opening Prayer for the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter states: “*Father, for you, time is the unfolding of truth that already is.*” The immensity, the intensity and the depth of God’s love was shown in the very act of creation/revelation.

My understanding is that there was nothing more to reveal about God—creation was the self-evident manifestation of the Creator. Inherent within human beings is the knowledge of this God; human evolution has been about coming to know the fullness, the beauty, the wisdom and the mystery of God. There are moments in human history when certain individuals glimpsed in some manner the true nature of reality, and their knowledge and experience of that reality is what we have come to know as “revelation.” The interesting thing to me is that, seemingly, these revelations are more about the nature of being human than they are about the unfathomable nature of God.

As evidence, I offer the book *The Structure of Biblical Myth, the Ontogenesis of the Psyche* by Heinz Westerman. In this book, the author analyzes in an extraordinary way how the bible stories illuminate the journey of the psyche toward empowerment and liberation.

*Biblical stories are mythological though they may be related to historical events. Stories which do have origins in historical facts may, nonetheless, be seen as inner and/or outer realities, and therefore are not limited to interpretation as “history.” Biblical stories reveal not only the working of the human mind, but they are also vehicles of communication, and speak to individuals because of their phylogenetic truth. They are a living dialectic of our inner history, providing us with the satisfaction of our essential need to experience “consciously” a meaning for our own lives.*

This thesis is also echoed in the wonderful book *Ego & Archetype* by Edwin F. Edinger. In a clear and powerful way these authors take events from the Old and New Testaments and show their relationship to modern psychological understanding of human development and offer insight and hope for all of us.

Unfortunately, books that one hasn’t read aren’t really proof of anything. However, they are an indication of ways that one can approach a reconciliation that’s needed within the torn fabric of our civilization. My hope is that everyone could be exposed to such powerful ideas.

Perhaps the task is not to necessarily “re-envision” God, but perhaps to re-envision ourselves so that we don’t need to infuse God with so many human qualities. If we could

approach the stories of the bible, not as dogmatic principles that had to be slavishly followed, but as a dynamic road map of the human psyche, perhaps there would be no need to maintain the foolish dichotomies that separate humans from one another. If we were successful at this task, perhaps we could begin to see God in one another. So the task calls for a deep journey inward.

So where does one come up with such a dynamic road map, you may ask? I offer for your consideration my discussion on the Ontogenic ThemeScape. This paradigm is a synthesis that provides information about the themes and dynamics which underlie so much of the bible and other wisdom literature. It is about the profound experience of being human and perhaps allows us to awaken our awareness of the divinity within each person.

### **NOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> **logos** ~~λογος~~ from 3004; *a word* (as embodying an idea), *a statement, a speech*:—  
account(7), account\*(1), accounting(2), accounts(2), answer(1),  
appearance(1), complaint(1), exhortation\*(1), have to do(1),  
instruction(1), length\*(1), matter(4), matters(1), message(10), news(3),  
preaching(1), question(2), reason(2), reasonable(1), remark(1), report(1),  
said(1), say(1), saying(4), sayings(1), speaker(1), speech(10),  
statement(18), story(1), talk(1), teaching(2), thing(2), things(1),  
utterance(2), what he says(1), what\*(1), word(179), words(61).

<sup>2</sup> To this day, some forms of Judaism makes no provision for an after-life

<sup>3</sup> **Filioque Clause:** In the Nicene Creed recited in the west, we say about the Holy Spirit, “Who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*...” The original creed from the ecumenical council did not include the last part: “and the Son”. This became a source of bitter conflict between the east and west, finally resulting in the great schism.