

Preface

In his book *Cosmopolitanism*, K. A. Appiah¹ shared a parable in which ultimate reality here on Earth is represented as a mirror. The mirror is accessible to us sentient and mortal humans, but it has fallen and is broken into pieces. The shards lie about, to be discovered by different groups and individuals at different times. We each have a shard or two, but we do not have enough to see the whole picture. We all tend to think that our shard is fairly representative of the whole. Because we are relatively simple beings, we must hope that the universe is sufficiently simple for us to fully grasp, even though we have the capacity to understand that it may be complex beyond our comprehension.

This parable can be aptly applied to the realm of theology and biblical studies. Any number of approaches can be employed in the academic investigation of the Hebrew Bible: a historical/archaeological approach; an ethnological study of the origins of Israel; a literary explication of dialogic techniques, puns, mythopoeic iconography, and connectedness of texts; a heuristic exploration of one's own spiritual journey; or a theological reflection. No matter which approach one chooses, there will be divisions and shards and references to anatomical parts of elephants investigated by blind sages.² Archaeologists cannot agree on whether the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and Job) were historical characters (most would say not), whether Israel really came out of bondage in Egypt (most would dismiss the notion), whether David was a tenth century Israelite king (some say David never

1. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 8.

2. John Godfrey Saxe's poem about the blind men and the elephant can be reviewed at http://www.noogenesis.com/pineapple/blind_men_elephant.html or in Linton's *Poetry of America*, 1878.

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existed), or who destroyed the ancient city of Megiddo. The task of the biblical scholar is not to convince but to present cogent arguments based on acceptable critical methodology without being blinded by personal presuppositions.

Neutrality and objectivity are important assets in scholastic research, but when dealing with vast amounts of literature that cover thousands of years of *Heilgeschichte* (holy history of redemption and salvation), objectivity is difficult to achieve. One's *a priori* assumptions about the validity of supernatural claims almost inevitably shape one's hermeneutical methodology. The theologian/historian cannot escape his/her assumptions, but should at least be aware of them and make his/her readers aware of them.

The biblical tradition includes narratives in which a supreme, creator deity interacts with humans in history, imposing law codes, giving revelations, and providing miraculous interventions. This deity co-exists in a transcendent dimension with a number of other good and evil immortal and immaterial beings. If God, gods, spirits, or other such entities *do* exist, and if all analyses proceed from the perspective that such things do not exist in our universe, then our hearing of the text will be skewed. On the other hand, if trans-dimensional reality is truly non-existent and life ends abruptly at death, then believers are naïve. The biblical narrator who claims to have encountered an angel or deity is simply self-deceived or is a myth-maker, so we must discern his/her agenda, both the evident as well as the subtle or hidden goals in inventing such tales.

In my view, deconstructing the evident agenda of specific texts and discerning the historical context of a passage is certainly a legitimate function of critical thinking. On the other hand, closing one's mind to all but one interpretation of reality may not be the most productive way to understand the biblical text. Although heuristic theology will not be a part of the present study, I should say up front that mine is not a naturalistic reading of biblical history. I have personally experienced some of the kinds of spiritual events described in the Davidic narrative, such as miracles and prophecy. Nor am I alone in what I have experienced. I dwell in a community of experiencers. Many of us have seen visions, had prophetic dreams, received promises from God that came to pass against all expectation, been healed of chronic diseases or addiction, been protected from harm, or been prophesied over. When I was forty-

two years old, I myself saw my second son in a dream shortly before he was conceived and welcomed him into the family, so Israelite traditions about ‘houses’ and establishment of family are very important to me. If there is a God who is in any way similar to that of the Hebrew Bible, it should not be surprising that that deity would continue to engage humankind in similar, but progressive ways. If there is such a God, then the Hebrew Bible is not just a book of history, poetry, and epic narrative about a particular people, but a book of mysteries that reaches into all eras, ages, genders, ethnic groups, and educational levels, and which is so complex that it can not be understood at merely one level of inquiry. I write this as a word of caution, a private reminder to the scholarly community that we may in fact live in a very complex and mysterious universe. Even my charismatic, twenty-first century, Judeo-Christian perspective may be too simplistic.

Liturgically, many churches today worship with the clapping, lifting of hands, singing, sitting, standing, and shouting described in the Psalms. I was first introduced to the idea of “Davidic worship” in the 1970s by a sermon preached in a church associated with the Latter Rain Revival. We called such liturgy The Tabernacle of David, after the passage in Amos 9:11–12:

On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, says the LORD who does this.³

The above life experiences helped to form my pre-understandings that the God of the Hebrew Bible is still existent and interactive with society and individuals, that he still responds positively to heartfelt worship, and that I will one day dwell in his Kingdom in a resurrected body. My experiences have sparked a long term interest in the life of the second Israelite monarch, King David, and in the philosophy and the literature associated with his spiritual court. I feel that I and others have lived the Psalms. We have felt the discouragement and anguish that they expressed and found the same solutions, triumph, and comfort.

3. All Bible references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

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Having said that, however, my task now is to step away from my own beliefs and examine the biblical evidence regarding the afterlife. My approach in this book is not heuristic and will not be to attempt to prove that there is a God or that my Christian experiences are valid, but to point out that, since almost everyone in the ancient world believed in a God, gods, demons, angels, the power of rituals, and various superstitions, the psalms writers believed in a creator deity who was actively invested in their community. Their worldview deserves respect, not only from the perspective of ancient history, but from our own vantage point. Their message is totally current and applicable to today. As this book goes to print, powerful names are in the headlines. Blame for massive economic collapse is blazing across all the media. Ordinary people and large organizations have been ruined by entrepreneurs who became immeasurably rich by performing in ways which they allegedly knew would be devastating to the economy. The author of Psalm 49 has a special message for them. You can't take it with you. The worms will eat your flesh while the Lord of Death marches your soul away to your eternal fate.

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