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AND
YAHWEH

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HAROLD BLOOM



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Thou thou art Worshipd by the Names Divine
Of Jesus & Jehovalt, thou art still
The Son of Morn in weary Nights decline
The lost Travellers Dream under the Hill

—WILLIAM BLAKE, "The Gates of Paradise"



JESUS AND YAHWEH



INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK centers upon three figures: a more-or-less historical person, Yeshua of Nazareth; a theological God, Jesus Christ; and a human, all-too-human God, Yahweh. That opening sentence cannot avoid sounding polemical, and yet I hope only to clarify (if I can) and not to give offense.

Almost everything that can be known about Yeshua emanates from the New Testament, and from allied or heretical writings. All these are tendentious: their designs upon us, as readers or auditors, are palpable and conversionary. If I call Yeshua "more-or-less historical," I mean only that nearly everything truly important about him reaches me from texts I cannot trust. Quests for "the historical Jesus" invariably fail, even those by the most responsible searchers. Questers, however careful, find themselves, and not the elusive and evasive Yeshua, enigma-of-enigmas. Every Christian believer I know, here or abroad, has her or his own Jesus. St. Paul admitted that he himself had

become all things to all men: that may be the single authentic affinity the great Apostle had with his savior.

Though the historical Yeshua, however many yearn for him, never will be available to them, Jesus Christ is a theological God presented by rival traditions: Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, normative Protestantisms—Lutheranism, Calvinism, and their variants—and sects old and new, many of them American originals. Most of these myriad Christendoms would reject instantly my conclusion that Jesus Christ and his putative father, Yahweh, do not seem to be two persons of one substance, but of very different substances indeed. Yahweh, from Philo of Alexandria to the present, has been allegorized endlessly, but he is sublimely stubborn, and cannot be divested of his human, all-too-human traits of personality and of character. Since he appears to have chosen exile or eclipse, here and now, or perhaps is guilty of desertion, one sees why theological Gods have displaced him. Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Virgin Mother Mary have become the pragmatic Trinity. Yahweh either dwindles into a remote God the Father, or blends into the identity of Jesus Christ. I am merely descriptive, and hope to disengage from irony, here as elsewhere in this book.

My culture is Jewish, but I am not part of normative Judaism; I decidedly do not trust in the Covenant. Those who do, or those others who accept the submission that is Islam, affirm that God is One, and that Jesus is not God, though Islam regards him as a prophetic forerunner of Allah's final messenger, Muhammad. The monotheism of Jews and of Muslims is strict and permanent.

But what precisely is the value of monotheism? Goethe, a great

ironist, observed, "As students of nature we are pantheists, as poets polytheists, as moral beings monotheists." Even Freud, not a theist at all, could not divest himself of the notion that monotheism had been a moral advance upon polytheism. Freud, an atheist, remained pugnaciously Jewish; but again, why does his book translated as *Moses and Monotheism* so readily assume that a "progress in spirituality" is the proper judgment upon the movement away from polytheism? Why is "the idea of a more august God" more congenial to psychoanalysis than the labyrinthine gods of Egypt or the fierce gods of the Canaanites?

The answer appears to be *internalization*, both of authority and of fatherhood, in the Yahweh of Moses. Philip Rieff first saw this, in the late 1950s on to the mid-1960s, before the Cultural Revolution gave us the wilder Freud of Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown. Now, in the early twenty-first century, a return to Rieff vindicates his insights, which were anticipated by the prophet Jeremiah, whose vision of the Covenant was that Yahweh would write the Law upon our inward parts.

When Yeshua was transformed into a theological God, first by the New Testament's Christology, and then less tentatively by Hellenistic philosophy, I cannot be clear as to what degree he was malformed, because Paul had little interest in the personality of Yeshua, and the Synoptic Gospels, the three Gospels except for John, are so frequently baffled by him. But the Yahweh of the primal text, already transmogrified by the Redactor's frequent reliance upon the Priestly Author and the Deuteronomist, all but vanishes among the great normative rabbis of the second century of the Common Era: Akiba, Ishmael, Tarphon, and their followers.

All religion, for Freud, reduces to a longing for the father, an Oedipal ambivalence that makes *The Future of an Illusion* Freud's weakest book, secretly dependent upon its misreading of Hamlet, whose actual affinities are with Montaigne and not with Christ. Freud's identification with Moses helps make *Moses and Monotheism* into one of the strongest of his more fantastic writings, where Yahweh, the warrior God, is civilized by Jewish remorse for the Jews' slaying of Moses, an event Freud imagines. That civilizing, with all its cultural discomforts, is what Freud means by "monotheism," and is an astonishing interpretation on his part. This "monotheism" actually is a repression that establishes a benign civilization, while polytheism is seen as a return to a Hobbesian state of nature, rendering life into something nasty, brutish, and short. Freud's weird transpositions work because they return us to the Yahweh of the J Writer of the Bible—the original writer of what is strongest in what we now call Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers—who bestows the Blessing of "more life, on into a time without boundaries."

Freud was obsessed with Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses, which he interpreted as showing the prophet in the act of preserving the Tablets of the Law, not of being about to cast them down in his fury of disillusion with the people's worship of the Golden Calf. Mosaic self-control is fused with Freudian sublimation of instinctual desires. Yahweh is hardly a sublimation. Is Jesus? In Mark, no, but in Matthew, as I will explain, yes. Yet it may be that the Freudian analysis of human nature is irrelevant in regard to both Yahweh and Jesus Christ, whether they are two Gods or one.

Why in particular does it matter whether or not Christianity represents a return to polytheism, as the rabbis and Muhammad in their

different ways have insisted? Despite the brilliance of Christian theology, culminating in Thomas Aquinas, the Trinity is a sublimely problematic structure, not only in separating the concept of person from that of substance, but also in its positing the Holy Spirit as a crucial third with the Father and the Son, upon very little New Testament evidence. But then, I cannot recall a single passage in the Synoptic Gospels that unequivocally identifies Jesus as God: such status comes to him only in John, and clearly emerges from that Gospel's battles with those it angrily called "the Jews." Yet even in John, the status is there without the name. Yahweh and Jesus are linked for John but not fully fused.

Most Christians, in the United States as elsewhere, are not theologians, and tend to literalize doctrinal metaphors. This is hardly to be deplored, and I suspect this was true of the earliest Christians also, except that they were almost pre-theological. What is increasingly clear to me is that the emergence of Jesus-as-God pragmatically created what was to develop into Christian theology. Another way of putting this is to say that, from the start, Jesus Christ was not Yeshua but a theological rather than a human God. The mysteries of the Incarnation, and the Resurrection, have little to do with the man, Yeshua of Nazareth, and surprisingly little to do even with Paul and John, as compared with the theologians who voyaged in their wake.

YAHWEH WAS AND IS the uncanniest personification of God ever ventured by humankind, and yet early in his career he began as the warrior monarch of the people we call Israel. Whether we encounter Yahweh early or late, we confront an exuberant personality

and a character so complex that unraveling it is impossible. I speak only of the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible, and not of the God of that totally revised work, the Christian Bible, with its Old Testament and fulfilling New Testament. Historicism, be it older or newer, seems incapable of confronting the total incompatibility of Yahweh and Jesus Christ.

Jack Miles, Yahweh's Boswell, in his *God: A Biography*, depicts a Yahweh who begins in a kind of self-ignorance fused with total power and a high degree of narcissism. After various divine debacles, Miles decides, Yahweh loses interest, even in himself. Miles rightly reminds us that Yahweh, in II Samuel, promises David that Solomon will find a second father in the Lord, an adoption that sets the pattern for Jesus' asserting his sonship to God. The historical Jesus evidently insisted both upon his own authority to speak for Yahweh, and upon his own intimate relationship with his *abba* (father), and I see little difference there from some of his precursors among the charismatic prophets of Israel. The authentic difference came about with the development of the theological God, Jesus Christ, where the chain of tradition indeed is broken. Yahweh, aside from all questions of power, diverges from the gods of Canaan primarily by transcending both sexuality and death. More bluntly, Yahweh cannot be regarded as dying. Kabbalah has a vision of the erotic life of God but severely enforces the normative tradition of divine immortality. I find nothing in theological Christianity to be more difficult for me to apprehend than the conception of Jesus Christ as a dying and reviving God. The Incarnation-Atonement-Resurrection complex shatters both the Tanakh—an acronym for the three parts that make up the Hebrew Bible: the Torah (Five Books of Moses), Prophets, and Writings—and the Jewish

oral tradition. I can understand Yahweh as being in eclipse, desertion, self-exile, but Yahweh's suicide is indeed beyond Hebraism.

I can object to myself that the frequently outrageous Yahweh also baffles my understanding, and that Jesus Christ is nearly as much an imaginative triumph as Yahweh is, though in a very different mode. I alternate endlessly between agnosticism and a mystical gnosis, but my Orthodox Judaic childhood lingers in me as an awe of Yahweh. No other representation of God that I have read approaches the paradoxical Yahweh of the J Writer. Perhaps I should omit "of God" from that sentence, since even Shakespeare did not invent a character whose personality is so rich in contraries. Mark's Jesus, Hamlet, Don Quixote are among the principal competitors, and so is the Homeric Odysseus transmuted into the Ulysses whose story of quest and drowning reduces Dante the Pilgrim to silence. Dennis R. MacDonald, in his *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (2000), argues that Mark's literary culture was more Greek than Jewish, which I find persuasive in so far as the earliest Gospel's eclecticism is thus emphasized, but a touch dubious, since Mark's God remains Yahweh. Matthew is rightly known as "the Jewish Gospel"; the Gospel of Mark is something else, though it may well have been composed just after the Temple was destroyed, and in the midst of the Roman slaughter of the Jews. Hamlet has something of the bewildering mood swings of Mark's Jesus and of Yahweh. If Don Quixote can be regarded as the protagonist of the Spanish scripture, then his enigmas also can compete with those of the Marcan Jesus and of Hamlet.

We cannot know how much of Yahweh's character and personality was invented by the J Writer, just as Mark's Jesus to some degree seems to be an original, though doubtless informed by oral tradition

just as J's Yahweh was. I wonder if the author of Mark is not responsible for giving us a Jesus addicted to dark sayings. In a "cannot know" context, where what we regard as Pauline faith replaces knowledge, Mark's brilliance exploits our limits of understanding. His Jesus asserts authority, which sometimes masks wistfulness in regard to the will of Yahweh, the loving but inscrutable *abbā*. Only Mark's Jesus goes through an all-night agony because his death is near. Whether, as MacDonald thinks, the suffering of Jesus emulates that of Hector at the end of the *Iliad* cannot be resolved. Jesus dies after uttering an Aramaic paraphrase of Psalm 22, an outcry of his ancestor David, a pathos distant from the Homeric variety. Doubtless the *real* Jesus existed, but he never will be found, nor need he be. *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Drama* intends no quest. My sole purpose is to suggest that Jesus, Jesus Christ, and Yahweh are three totally incompatible personages, and to explain just how and why this is so. Of the three beings (to call them that), Yahweh troubles me the most and essentially usurps this book. His misrepresentations are endless, including by much of rabbinical tradition, and by suppressed scholarship—Christian, Judaic, and secular. He remains the West's major literary, spiritual, and ideological character, whether he is called by names as various as Kabbalah's Ein-Sof ("without end") or the Qur'an's Allah. A capricious God, this stern imp, he reminds me of an aphorism of the dark Heraclitus: "Time is a child playing draughts. The lordship is to the child."

Where shall we find the meaning of Yahweh, or of Jesus Christ, or of Yeshua of Nazareth? We cannot and will not find it, and "meaning" possibly is the wrong category to seek. Yahweh declares his unknowability, Jesus Christ is totally smothered beneath the massive superstructure of historical theology, and of Yeshua all we rightly can say is

that he is a concave mirror, where what we see are all the distortions each of us has become. The Hebrew God, like Plato's, is a mad moralist, while Jesus Christ is a theological labyrinth, and Yeshua seems as forlorn and solitary as anyone we may know. Like Walt Whitman at the close of *Song of Myself*, Yeshua stops somewhere waiting for us.

PRELUDE: EIGHT OPENING REFLECTIONS

1. The New Covenant (Testament) is throughout marked by belatedness in regard to the Tanakh. But the partial exceptions are the *logia*, or sayings, and parables of Jesus. Their enigmatics (to coin that) are sometimes unprecedented. Hamlet, Kierkegaard, Kafka are ironists in the wake of Jesus. All Western irony is a repetition of Jesus' enigmas/ riddles, in amalgam with the ironies of Socrates.

2. Shakespearean "self-overbearing" has one source in Chaucer, but perhaps the primary Shakespearean precursor is William Tyndale's Jesus in the Geneva Bible. Internalization in Shakespeare gets beyond Jesus', though Jesus inaugurated the ever-growing inner self, developed by St. Augustine, and which Shakespeare perfected in Hamlet, after reinventing it in Falstaff.

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