





# Stairway to Nowhere



# Stairway to Nowhere

Yakov Rabinovich



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## General Preface

The contents of this volume were written over a quarter century, in a still undiscouraged effort to restore intellectual glamor and credibility to Jewish religion and culture. *Loose Leaf Scripture* was published by my own micro-press *Verlag Golem* for the 1980's zine scene. It was then the sole voice for a Jewish coolness when intellectual fashion was signaled by Situationism and Heretical Islam, and hip Jews defined themselves by Jew-jokes and Israel bashing.

*Faces of God* was mistakenly published by the Jungian *Spring Publications* in the 1990's. With this I brought a true history-of-religions perspective to early Judaism. The study of the faith was at that time dominated by bold piety and timid scholarship. *The Unholy Bible*, ambivalently published, in the last days of the twentieth century, by the leftist-theory press *Autonomea*, presented classical Hebrew poetry in an American poetic idiom that Allen Ginsberg taught me to speak.

The early twenty-first century *Bible Land Blues* was (aptly) never published anywhere, particularly not in Israel where it was written, and where it was written for. Finally, *The Judaism-X Manifesto* was published in aught-five, very modernly, only on the Internet.

Even though it may today appear one-sided, I do not believe my life-long love-affair with the Jewish people can yet be fairly evaluated. I have worked for the transfiguration of a people, and so I reject the conception of a success that is measured in sales and silly interviews. I wrote what I offer here, not because I was sure I could achieve it or because I expected to be paid, but because the plan was noble. And such ventures, if they succeed, do so only over time.



# Loose-Leaf Scripture



## Loose-Leaf Scripture

### A midrashic history of the world from the creation to Moses

“Tell me the Human story again!”  
“Oh, alright,” said God and all the great poets, “then will  
you go to sleep?”  
“Yes,” I lied.

There were many worlds created and scrapped before ours, until God recognized that no planet would satisfy him that didn't offer humanity a means of repentance. First he made Erez, which is dark and empty; then, Adamah, which at least has a sky and its own phantasmal stars and constellations, though it's populated by creatures half-human, half ghost, who are always sad, have not even heard of joy, and till a ground which bears no fruit.

Then there's Arka, inhabited by two-headed giants. As they eat and drink the twin heads argue and accuse each other of taking more than a fair share. In Ge live evil scientists. If an inhabitant of our world visits them they load him with gifts but then lead him to Neshiah, where he forgets his name and home. Neshiah is inhabited by noseless dwarves. They breathe through two holes set like an electric outlet in the center of their faces. Once anything happens they forget about it completely, having no memory. Zia is a world of good looking men with lots of money, but it has no water. Hence vegetation is scarce and arboriculture meets with indifferent success. Should a spring be discovered, they run to it and sometimes succeed in slipping through it into our own Earth, where they satisfy a keen craving for the food eaten by humans. Otherwise, they are men of steadfast faith — more so than any other class of humanoid. Our earth is called Tebel.

Kabbalists refer to these unsuccessful attempts at cosmogony as the *klippoth*, the shells or fragments — and many there are breathing the same air with us who in fact inhabit these ill-realized domains.

Even this world wouldn't have lasted if God had ruled it — as he'd planned — with the absolute equity of physics. For, if it had been a universe of mere matter and unflinching rationality, a world of pure justice, it would have produced nothing nicer than rock crystals, or, at best, insects who worshipped evil angels.

Therefore, God introduced something completely irrational.

“Who's your friend?” hooted the angels.

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“I call her Mercy,” explained the Holy One. “If creation is left up to you exalted spirits I’ll be running an ant farm.”

Now Mercy, whom we usually refer to as Spirit, is in love with Matter — indeed, she only manifests through it. Matter is a slow, bull-browed clay-faced monster who is rather in awe of his brilliant younger sister, and, much as he loves her, he’s terrified by her advances, which take place on every plane.

Each Nisan, at the Spring Equinox, the Seraphim approach the realm of Elemental Spirits and tease them until they become too teary and dispirited to harm people. In Tammuz, at the Summerr Solstice, Behemoth, at the height of his strength, roars, and every cruel and powerful animal is abashed —

right up to the lions, outstretched in sunlight, weightlessly coiling and uncoiling their heavy tails in the air as they enjoy the awesome boredom of being giant carnivores — every one of these noble creatures becomes timid, or at least less ferocious. In Tishri, at the Autumn Equinox, the huge bird Ziz flaps its featherful wings and caws,

— whereupon all birds of prey take up nonchalant poses on branches, clinging to the bark with big-taloned knucklesome feet, pretending not to be greedy. Finally, in Tebet, when the ocean is rough, Leviathan, the whale of the world, spouts, and the sharks

slowly cruising along with leisured fillips of their back fins, just exuding brutal coolness, become uneasy and lose their appetites, which ensures the survival

of all the smaller fish that zoom along with wobbling glide and quick-swishing fins, those little bright ones colored like a child’s drawing, the timid whiskered lobsters, like armored hands skittering along on bony thin fingertips, and the Octopus — gentlest of God’s creatures! — that jelly-boned scrotum-faced beastie, and every other underwater-soaring slow-gape mouthbreathing flexile-finned evidence of God’s unmeasurable generosity, selah!

But of course the greatest work of God’s Mercy is the survival of his people Israel; at Mercy’s prompting the angels Michael and Gabriel were appointed guardians of Isreal, to fight for her against the angels of other nations.

When God created the world, he did so with a word. The twenty-four letters of the alphabet, engraved in fire on his crown, flew down to form it. All twenty-four were essential as the word which created was the entire Torah pronounced as a single polysyllable. It took six days to say.

On the first day God, the Holy Life Force, looked down on Tohu-Bohu, the boiling expanse of Chaos. The light of his face shone upon it

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— this was, incidentally, the famous “light sown for the righteous”, by which one can gaze to the ends of the earth, the intrinsic brilliance of things. When we are first born we see by this light and it’s such an eyeful it produces the fissures in our skulls —

the light shone down, and God saw his own reflection in the depths or “ground” of Chaos. The image swam up into existence and became Leviathan. It broke through the splashing surface of Tohu-Bohu at the exact spot where the Temple would stand, and dove immediately back into the chaotic depths. This caused such a storm that Chaos would then have overflowed the pot, had it been in a pot.

To calm it, He who is the Breath of the Universe blew on Tohu-Bohu as a child might blow on hot soup. A film formed on the surface and this became the Idea of the World.

On the second day God separated Tohu-Bohu into a starry chaos above and a roaring water chaos below, on which the Idea of the World rested like a lily-pad on a troubled pool. But it is God’s nature to unify, not to separate, so this distinction is something of a formality. Sea and sky remain Tohu-Bohu, freely flow into one another during storms, and any candid person will tell you that the world itself is, more than not, Tohu-Bohu.

Until day three the world was no more than a flat concept, an idea fluttering through Chaos. Then God ordered the waters to withdraw from around it and green earth appeared — which coincided with Paradise. Formerly, all Earth was Paradise, and until the coming of the Europeans, most of North America was still Paradise.

Nowadays Paradise is more frequently recognisable by the character of its inhabitants than by such visible features as pools of wine or roasted oxen strolling by with carving knives stuck in their sides.

When Adam was expelled from Eden he was permitted to take with him certain spices, among which are clove, cinnamon and ginger. This consideration, along with several similar, makes it difficult to determine just where Paradise ends and Earth begins. At many points they may accurately be said to coincide.

In Paradise dwells the Messiah, who, when discouraged, lies down with his head in Elijah’s lap. Elijah strokes his hair and reminds him that the end of time will be here soon enough.

Having heard so much about Paradise, you may be curious about Hell. Humans create Hell, because they become so boring and stupid they have to make themselves or others unhappy in order to take any interest in existence. Realizing that their time is short, they set up Hell on Earth, awarding themselves high administrative positions.

Satan also exists. He is, like all demons, an elemental spirit, an aspect of Matter the Prince of Darkness, Heat, Ignorance and Inertia. When

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God was planning to create the world in light, it was Matter, himself whirling through chaos, who suggested it all begin in darkness.

In the last days Matter will declare himself God's equal and claim to have masterminded the Creation, boasting: "Though God made Heaven and Light, I made Darkness and the boiling Pit, above which sky and earth sit trembling like a lid." In modern terms, Matter will persuade people that the creation of the universe was a purely physical phenomenon, proceeding from scientific principles.

Eventually even matter will be enlightened, and the world-drama end like a comedy, with heroes and villains shaking hands and everyone getting married.

On day four (to resume) God screwed in the Sun and Moon and turned on the lights. On day five he placed Leviathan in the sea and filled the air with Ziz, a bird so enormous that once, when it carelessly threw away one of its eggs, which was rotten, the fluid from it flooded sixty cities. Also God made the birds and the bugs.

As a foreshadowing of the 613 mitzvot (248 positive, 365 negative), God created 613 kinds of bugs, 248 of which are nice, 365 of which are pests. Now just as the birds devour noxious insects, the winged angels busy themselves with zapping the harmful commandments.

The relationship between bugs and mitzvot is important. By it God tries to teach us that religious laws regarding sexual behaviour are usually no better than, and indeed little different from, fleas or lice.

On the sixth day God made the Human from the soil of the earth's four continents — white ice from frozen Europe, black land from sun-smote Africa, yellow sand from the orient East and red clay from the sunset lands of the Americas. Also a spoonful of colorless dust from the site where the Temple would someday stand. The Human children would be of many colors to complement the varied beauties of the earth.

The correspondences between Human and world are accordingly both inherent and infinite. Each hair is the equivalent of a tree, each tear a spring, each drop of blood an ocean, the brain a cloud, the bones rocks, the buttocks a valley, &c. While this was clearly to prove a fortunate resource for poets in all ages to come, it also means that in a very real way every cry of Human pain sends a shudder through the entire universe.

The laws governing Human thought, the meta-syntax which underlies every language, are thus an abbreviation of the laws that govern reality. The Human was designed to be a complete world in miniature and the Cosmos a writing large of the word "Human".

But the Human also represents a No-Man's-Land, an uneasy truce between ape and angel. An experiment. On the one hand Humans speak, walk upright, see and copulate like the angels; on the other they die like animals.



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The Human spirit was actually created on the first day — it is the same Breath of God, the Universal Wind, that hovered over the waters of Chaos. This explains how all peoples come to have some memory of the creation even though no person was then present.

The Human spirit possesses five powers, each of which can transport us instantly to heaven. Especially touch. The enemies of the Human race try to annul the use of these by selling us clothing destitute of wool and warmth, and flavorless “diet” foods compounded of deadly chemicals, cooked in the electricity from nuclear reactors and packed in non-reusable containers. These things, not the harmless pig or the delectable lobster, are un-kosher.

Adam HaRishon, the original human, was neither male nor female, but of a sex more wonderful and rare. HaRishon was a living dictionary of physical superlatives, a giant who, even sitting, looked down on the clouds. His massive neck supported two heads — and HaRishon’s spiritual qualities were commensurate with his physical charm. It, or perhaps more properly they, was a true prophet: with its every utterance it revealed the will of God.

God breathed soul — Ruak — into HaRishon’s body, through the nostrils, which remain the most exquisite and least easily deceived of the sense organs.

Satan, who before Adam, had been the toast of the angels, disliked the human’s self-sufficient perfection. He said, rather pointedly in God’s hearing:

“All it does is sit there. I’m sure *it’s* happy, but *I’m* bored!”

No one likes to be thought a bore. God booted Satan out of heaven, saying:

“You like finding fault with humanity? Good! Do it for eternity!”

Nonetheless, God realised that the Devil had a point, so he put HaRishon into a deep sleep and split it in two. He called them Man and Woman, for, God explained,

“From *Hu*-man were they taken. Let them live as equals in delightful conflict!”

God healed the marks of division and watched from behind a tree to see what would happen.

“Now this”, said God, “ought to be *good*.” And indeed at first it *was* good. The humans played together contentedly.

It should be noted that, as it is God’s nature to unite more than to differentiate, the “division” which involved humans with the world was and is perhaps more apparent than real. Women are more manly and men more womanly than either will now admit. This raises the eternally interesting question of homosexuality, which, like the nipples on men, is a trace of the original androgeny. Homosexuals are souls that have “strayed

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towards perfection” — which accounts for their spiritual and artistic aptitudes, as well as a certain degree of prissiness.

All was harmony in Eden until, while Adam was gathering fruit, the demon Samael appeared with his infant son. Would the woman look after it while he ran an errand to one of the failed earths? No problem.

As soon as Samael disappeared, Adam returned, much annoyed to find his place taken by the purple-skinned horned demon child.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Woman, “anyhow, Samael said he’d be right back.”

Adam’s vexation increased when the little boy started howling.

“Can’t you keep it quiet? He demanded of Woman. “Shut up, shut up!” bellowed Adam right into the small monster’s ear. It only redoubled its cries. In a fury, Adam struck the child and killed it.

But even in death it caterwauled. Frenzied Adam hacked it to fragments, only multiplying the problem. Now it seemed that many voices were shrieking shrill in ghastly harmony. To end this plague Adam boiled the bits and he and Woman ate them.

They were just napkin-dabbing the gravy from their lips when Samael returned. As they opened their mouths to deny everything, from inside them both issued an echoey sepulchral croak saying:

“All is well father! I have penetrated into the human heart, never to leave it.!”

Thereafter the situation between man and woman degenerated. Arguments arose over the littlest things. How dare Adam treat her like that! Let him keep in mind that they were equals!

Pointing to his penis, Adam claimed to have 51%, a controlling interest, in the entire stock of humanity. At this Woman laughed.

Beside himself, as a “show of force,” Adam invented the plough and gouged the garden into a furrowed field. Work entered the world. paradise turned into a farm and so was lost. To explain the Fall, Adam circulated the story that woman had caused it by stealing from his orchard. This was the first slander and the beginning of history.

The human came to life at dawn on the sixth day. Man and woman, Adam and his wife, exiled themselves from the garden at noon, the hour of decision. Then as now they could easily have found their way back had they not been exhausted by work and arguing.

There is an alternative tradition which states that the expulsion resulted from eating the fruit of the tree of knowlege, for even in their childlike state man and woman realized that wisdom was better than thoughtless immortality. God is said to have taken secret pleasure in their disobedience.

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The first woman, now exiled from the Garden due to her husband's obstinate bad temper, would have remained patient even under this dispensation had not Adam added the final insult of insisting that they make love with her on her back. When he tried to force her, the woman, whose name was Lilith, pronouncing the magic name of God, rose into the air and flew off. Afterwards Adam was more than content when God made docile Eve from his rib, remarking that he was already "sick of Lilith and her hairy legs".

Lilith went on to become a powerful demoness who straddles sleeping men to steal their sperm. Her male children she exposes in the desert, but the females she carefully nurtures to become tribades, jaspers and muff-snuffling bulldaggers, from whom are descended all proud and independent women.

The indistinctness of their first twilight added confusion to the gloom of Eve and Adam after the Fall. Passing angels could be heard to comment that the Human hadn't lasted so much as a single day in Paradise. However, that evening became the first Erev Shabbat.

As Adam watched his first sunset he thought the world was ending, returning to Tohu-Bohu because of his sin — the invention of work. But as the moon and stars appeared, Eve and he were overjoyed at the mere continued existence of the world. Forgetting about their jobs, they adored God — which meant they had recovered Paradise.

Once the following evening came, Adam decided that there was nothing miraculous about it — he'd seen it before — this was just the "course of nature". He went back to his tasks. God invited him to stay in bliss, but, with a deprecating little chuckle, he said sorry, he had *work* to do. Sighing wearily God let him go, but entrusted to the woman the sabbath candles, making her priestess of Shabbat's mysteries, protectress of paradise in the world of man.

One day, while Adam sat on the bank of the river that flows through paradise, resting in the heat of the day, the angel Raziel appeared to him, saying:

"I have received charge to teach thee pure words and deep understanding, to make thee wise through the contents of the sacred book in my hand, to know what will happen to thee until the day of thy death. And all thy descendants, and all the later generations, if they will but read this book in purity, with a devout heart and a humble mind, and obey its precepts, will foreknow what things shall happen — all will be manifest to them."

Anyone who's had a little teaching experience can imagine how successful this approach was. With profuse thanks Adam accepted the volume while the angel shot like a spark back up to heaven. Whereupon

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Adam set it down and forgot about it. Much damaged by weather and neglect, this is that famous book from which one can learn all the things that can be known and the mysteries that can't. Also it reveals how to call on the angels, to make them appear and answer questions. But not all can use this book — only such as are wise and God-fearing and resort to it in holiness. It is from this book that the present narrative has been transcribed.

It was a harsh world, this one Adam built with such relentless effort. At the age of 930 sickness seized him. He summoned all his descendants. They were appalled, never having seen this degree of pain and suffering. They thought he must be overcome by longing for the fruits of Paradise. Eve ran to the gates of Eden to beg God for some of the oil of life flowing from the tree of his mercy. After much lamentation on her part, the archangel Michael appeared to tell her the petition could not be granted. Adam would die in a few days, and following him all his descendants would be subject to death. Only at the time of the Resurrection, and then only for the pious, would the oil of life be dispensed, together with all the bliss and delight of paradise.

Adam, informed of his fate, wept and repented:

“Fool that I was to invent work! The more I own, the less I enjoy; the more I have, the more I'm had. I've made myself fat for the hungry grave.

“Because of me and my need for new workers, childbirth has become forced labour. In the hour of birth I hear Eve cry: Lord, Lord, save me this time and I'll never fuck again!

“— Yet my desire will not let her rest, I make her a victim of her own fertility.”

Abel was a glad to hear that his father was dead. It meant he'd inherit the cultivated ground and fat pastured animals.

One day he and his brother Cain offered sacrifices to God. Cain heaped his turf-altar with field-gathered flowers and barley-cakes, while Abel's altar filled the sky with the greasy smoke of animal fat. Cain protested that Abel's sacrifice would overwhelm the smell of his own. Abel said that this was only right as the good — to whom God naturally gives more things — will be heard by God, while the prayers of the wicked will be ignored. This simpering piety from a rich man's lips — the first hypocrisy — astonished Cain. He looked to the sky for composure, but saw Abel's factories filling the air with yellow smoke and chemical stench, while Abel kept insisting that he was the good man, whereas Cain was “a bum”.

Decent Cain brained his brother. As this was the first injury, Cain was surprised by the result. After all, he'd never seen a man killed. Cain and his progeny had to flee the wealthy descendants of Abel, a condition that

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prevails to this day. Cain protested to God — why must he be called a criminal for his simple worship and hatred of lies? God said:

“Why did you let Abel become so powerful?”

To which Cain replied:

“Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Though admitting the justice of Cain’s plaint, God was unwilling to interfere in Human history in ways that would deprive it of reality — for a condition of independent existence is that things be very sporting and uncertain. He did however give the race of Cain a mark — a clear defiant eye that can stare back indignant at God’s own face, and which no son of Abel can meet. It is a pledge of eventual justice, an indication that the underlying world-order is just, an unambiguous sign for people who reflect.

The sons of Abel bought up the earth, which they called real-estate, and with infinite labor made her bear regular crops of fruit in every way inferior to those which grew wild and were to be had for free. Artificial light duped plants into continuous unhappy growth, further crazed and made monstrous by unnatural amounts of chemical forced nutrition. This process reached the point where even the noisy stinking chicken-yards instituted by old Abel had given way to hydroponic hatcheries where pulsing hunks of pallid breastmeat, horrible, without body or bone, grew in petri dishes, row on row.

Before Abel’s career was cut short, he performed countless godless deeds, as, building cities with walls to force his estranged family to remain with him, and robberies of all sorts, to which end he invented weights and measures.

Enoch, a descendant of Cain, was a great teacher of God’s ways. He edified the entire world, but with the passage of time he longed more and more to retire from human company and cultivate his relationship with God. He began appearing among men just once a week, then once monthly, and finally once a year.

By virtue of his exquisite *davening* he was invited to visit heaven.

One night, as he slept, a great sadness came over his heart, and he wept. Beside his bed appeared two men, very tall, their eyes and wings and hands bright as snow and white as gold. Singing his name, they carried him through heaven after heaven.

Curiosity made Enoch pause at the soundless heaven of the Grigori, giant creatures with wrinkled faces and tight lips, who never sleep — insomniac angels who don’t believe in God. Enoch was so exasperated that he shouted at them to get on with their task of praising the allpowerful, whatever they thought of it. The Grigori, cowed by the rebuke, sounded their trumpets and sang God’s praises with such homesick sweetness that Enoch, sobbing, begged them to stop.

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Then Gabriel carried him off like a leaf in the wind and sent him spinning up to the throne of God, where he was annointed with holy oil and made like one of God's glorious. Thereupon he was given a book of all the secret things that Raziel had tried to impart to Adam, to memorize, then sent back to earth for thirty days to teach these things to humankind. But first the angel of snow had to chill and darken his face so that people could endure the sight of it.

His teaching completed, Enoch ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot, where he became as huge as the world, received thirty-six wings and three hundred sixty five thousand eyes, each one as brilliant as the sun. His name was changed to Metatron. As God pronounced it Enoch's flesh became flame in which you could see his veins flicker like branched lightning at each ignition of his pyrotechnic heart. His bones were blazing logs, his eyes glimmering coals, his hair wildfire, on all sides he was surrounded by sparks and torches hurtling in storm and whirlwind, hurricane and thunder.

Noah was Enoch's great grandson. When he was born his whole body glowed, his long hair was white as washed wool, and his eyes, on opening, lit up the entire house. His first words were:

"Praise to the Lord of Righteousness!"

He was born after a nine day pregnancy, and the moment he emerged he showed his considerate nature by running to find a knife to help his mother cut his navel-string.

Scurrying around the floor of the apartment, he encountered, under the bed, the chief of the demons. A combat ensued.

Suddenly the cock crowed. The demon made off crying out:

"Go tell your mother if it hadn't been for dawn I'd have killed you!"

To which Noah answered:

"Go tell *your* mother if it hadn't been for this navel-string I'd have killed *you*!"

In this period it was already a wicked world. God lavished on sinners all the dainties that await the just in the world to come, though they didn't realize it, purely to show them what they were forfeiting.

The book of Raziel was given to Noah, and he studied it day and night. After a while the angels, who were Noah's regular visitors, envious of his growing wisdom, tried cunningly to destroy him by calling him a god and bowing down before him.

This shows that the angels are complex beings, and perhaps, had they inhabited the earth, the evil impulse would have overpowered them too and made them even worse than people.

Indeed, certain angels were sent to earth to teach mankind justice and truth, but on assuming human form became subject to human



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weaknesses. Seduced by men and women, they found themselves wingless, stranded on earth, unable to resume their spiritual shape — until Jacob’s ladder enabled them to climb back up. These “fallen ones”, the *niphlim*, introduced mischievous sophistications and unfortunate arts.

In the book of Raziel Noah found an account of himself constructing the ark, which he followed with great precision. So it was that after prophesying unheeded for one hundred and twenty years to atheists, he got in with the animals and locked the door behind him.

The flood rushed darkly down; everyone in the ark was shaken like lentils in a boiling pot. All the animals brayed in terror.

Finally the waters subsided. The dove found an olive tree atop the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, for the Holy Land, being the top of this round earth, was the first to be uncovered as immense drops of water, each as big as the moon, dripped from the other side of the planet and fell away into space.

Carrying a sprig of olive in her beak, the wandering exiled dove came back to Noah, like a student returning to visit his old teacher, bringing a green branch from a future world.

The worst man in the corrupt generations which followed was the billionaire Nimrod. The great success which attended all his undertakings produced a sinister effect: men no longer trusted in God, but rather in their own abilities and science — an attitude to which Nimrod attempted to convert the entire world.

His godlessness climaxed in the building of the tower of Babel, an immense apartment complex to house lawyers, physicists, engineers, and other highly paid enemies of the human race. It became so high that it took a full year to reach the top. If a worker fell the builders didn’t care, but if a brick should slip they wept since it would take months to bring another up.

Since the entire effort of Nimrod’s generation was focused on the attainment of this luxurious housing, they had no time for studying foreign languages — or even their own. As a result, they became, by inevitable degrees, incapable of communicating their admittedly considerable technical knowledge, or even of making their wishes known. Construction halted, never to resume, as they had all become idiot savants — brains crammed with info they lacked the wit to express. This is the fate of all who abandon culture as useless and pursue only those servile sciences which teach how to compel matter — the very crudest kind of magic.

Many are the deed of Abraham, and they are perhaps even more important than those of the creation, for these only brought into being the world,

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whereas Abraham created the Jews. He, with Isaac and Jacob, is one of the great prototypes and exemplars of the Jewish people, teaching by example what stance to adopt in facing the cosmos — our ultimate orientation. And this in his character of iconoclast. Abraham's famous obedience to God, "looking neither to the right nor the left," entails his rebellion against all else.

Abraham looks nothing like your rabbi. He can be glimpsed in Heine's verses, in a student passing out radical leaflets, in Harpo Marx or an old-time anarchist bowling for bureaucrats — he's the one whose black ball sports a sizzling fuse.

There are other classic Jews: Moses, Devorah, your yiddishe momma and the Maharal, but these are — as genealogy would suggest — mere consequences of Abraham, and inevitable ones at that. Abraham alone is the sole, the only source of us all.

Now everyone knows that Abraham's father sold idols — but what are idols? "Graven images, wood and stone, the work of men's hands", comes the ready response. By this definition idol worship is a thing of the past, a bit of quaint lore, a joke, or at most an embarrassing memory. In any event, Abraham's father is out of a job. Who would pay good money for someone else's embarrassing memories?

But Abraham may not have had to grow up in grinding poverty, the curse of fanciful vocations, for an idol need not be a sort of cosmic dolly. An idol is anything in which one mistakenly places trust. Abraham's father might well have been a bookseller.

The job market being what it was, Abraham was glad enough to work for his dad. A quick mind, he read everything, as young people read, with uncritical zest, gluttons at the table of literature, grabbing from every plate, never knowing when they've had enough.

One night Abraham, turning back a page of the endless text, looked up at the clock like a swimmer gasping for air. Lines of Greek were printed full tilt across his page, spraying accent marks. Sick with learning, he asked:

What is the end of study, where is the limit of thought?

The whole ancient world gabbles and croaks from the  
back of my brain.

I am Sheol. I am full of dead poets.

It had gotten to be too much, and at the same time not enough. The bookstore seemed an unlife, a petty haggling retail trade in other people's thoughts. All his learning there amounted to a ersatz religion of good taste, a rag-heap thievery from the junkyards of all cultures to deck out his personal idol, "Civilization." But, were idols and religions inevitable, perhaps necessary? If so, was not God also — necessary? Obsessed with this train of



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thought, he for the first time began to *reflect*. He pursued the self-analysis with a sane man's reluctance and a madman's absolute logic. He wondered:

This intellectual being, can't it end?  
Can't I close my eyes and see test-patterns,  
know that for once my brain has ceased transmitting?

To let my mouth hang open — no words emerging —  
but static, rock and roll lyrics, commercials —  
to be like others!

My thought exhausts me. Its voltage jerks  
my tongue into articulate sound.  
I speak. I cannot refrain from speech.

I cannot stop. Can light be wearied  
travelling through space?  
Can the infinite curves and spirals

of sacred Geometry,  
those unending arcs, do they anywhere relax?

Now Abraham had often heard his father praising the wares, how this book would recreate the modern world, that one was redefining physics, as though these volumes had real power, and by reading them, especially the most silly, up-to-date and perplexed, one could truly improve one's life. One night he heard his father say "This book is setting the world on fire!" With the giddy calm of a man who's found his answer, Abraham waited for his father to step out. Then he put a match to the shop.

Abraham saw all the books in the world giving off all the light they contained, shining like a single book written in black fire on white fire. This was the torah of flame, the first torah which the Holy One showed Moses — sometimes called the secret torah or the torah of Elijah.

As Abraham watched the upward flow of the letters, (and this is why Hebrew letters look as they do, flowing upwards and thickening and thinning again into points and crownlets — they remember that once they were fire), as Abraham stared his father returned.

"Abraham! I'm ruined! How did this happen?"

"I guess that book that was setting the world on fire didn't spare our shop either."

"At a time like this you're making jokes? This is sick behaviour, Abie!"

But Abraham answered:

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Keep your reality, I never liked it. I've been spoiled for  
your stingy limits,  
the world that converges on a shop window and only  
opens for business.  
Roofless, I am richer by a sky.

His father squealing in the distance, Abraham walked away through the suburban nightstreets, under lit windows glowing the mist and bareknuckled trees black and exact against the streetlamps. He thought only of the torah which is fire, the wisdom beyond the power of print to hold.

Walking, he became weightless. The heavy, turning earth slid back underfoot, he trod the air — as far as the frontiers of physics and astronomy. But he found no insights there, only information. He complained:

With telescope the greedy eye  
sucks in the distant nebulae,  
but can it see, as I do now, what comes of all of this?

Could a jet overtake a word spoke in anger,  
could a microscope ever scan my belief,  
do atomic defenses make anyone safe,  
can all the pharmacopia remedy a grief?

But the very fact our eyes  
which must see suffering  
can make a hot droplet contain all compassion  
— that's a sign from heaven for people who think.

It was suggested, with a certain logic, that Abraham should try looking for his Torah among the orthodox Jews. But Abraham rejected the notion:

Among those hoary-headed apes, those irritable  
household gods,  
served by kerchief-headed wives with brats in both their  
arms,  
living in warehouses full of books, the walls all hung with  
portraits of bygone beards?

Their way of life is a way of avoiding life.  
They're like the last monk left in a cave on Mount Athos  
for whom the world's become a narrow circle,  
the narrow circle — a hole  
into which he sticks his finger  
so none

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leaks  
in.

I know all about their rotten torah with the little black letters crawling over  
the vellum like flies,  
there's nothing so unlike the torah of fire.

But one night Abraham gave in and went to the synagogue. It was Friday  
night — they were welcoming Shabbat, the goddess of evenings. As they  
sang *boee kalah* he heard the Torah leap in the ark.

Abraham was there Saturday morning when they released her, the  
prisoner of the ark. They laid her on the desk, spread her wide to read her  
secrets out. Then Abraham discovered why it was so important to bind  
her with velevet and muzzle her with crowns.

When they unrolled and disclosed her all the letters rushed up from the  
page, they rose in a swarm like glittering insects, every one was beautiful, and  
the most beautiful of all was the *shin* with four prongs, which much  
resembles a dragonfly.

Then the hurtling characters became a mist, and even that  
evaporated, turning into pure sound as the reader began. In his seat,  
Abraham flipped open his Hebrew Bible. It was blank. The letters were  
gone.

For the Torah, basis and blueprint of the world, is fickle, difficult to  
interpret, impossible to pin down and fix. The torah is so fine and light as to  
*easily fly about.*

Abraham issued three-ring (as in circus) binders to the faithful for the  
ingathering of the escaped, the loose-leaf scripture, believed to be hiding  
in the most disparate places, from works of mysticism to erotic books  
innocent of grammar, in subway graffiti and children's songs — he  
provided the following guidelines to aid in recognition:

No one has ever writ the word of God,  
no alphabet could indicate, no page  
could hold, no eye could bear to read the word.  
It is the least known and most precious wine  
in all the world — untasted by the ear —

only known to the unconscious,  
too apparent to be heard,  
it's too urgent to be noise  
and too chaotic to be words,

it is soft as a hard-on  
and it's harder than a heart,  
it is decent without clothing

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and more beautiful than art,

it is heavier than sorrow  
and it's lighter than a tear,  
it is closer than tomorrow  
and as far away as here.

No one else saw what Abraham saw, and her revealed it only to his son, the dreamy meditative Isaac, who told it to his son Jacob, who wrestled with God.

When Abraham was sent to sacrifice his son, before he raised the knife, he remembered how it was when God first ordered him to leave Ur and enter the Canaanite desert.

He had been so alone he had no companion but his shadow, and so lonely that he talked to it.

If he met people, what good did it do him? Even those who understood him couldn't believe in him and his God. Sarah loved *him*, not his ideas.

So self-absorbed was Abraham that it was only by chance he discovered his wife Sarah was beautiful — although compared to her all other women were apes. As they waded through a stream he saw what he thought was the reflection of the moon in the waters. Looking up, he saw it was Sarah. That night Isaac was conceived.

And when Sarah gave birth, God remembered all the barren women in the world — they had sons as well. And the blind saw, the lame ran, the dumb spoke and the mad became calm.

At Isaac's *bris* Sarah had enough milk in her breasts to suckle the babies of all the guests. From these are descended the righteous Gentiles and converts to Judaism.

Now Abraham was about to kill his son, and he knew that this would make him not merely the *only*, but also the *last* Jew.

He brandished the blade in a slow-motion steel-glittering arc, and said:

"If ever a man was more faithful than any human could be, I am that man!"

Something grabbed his upraised arm, and from behind him a voice:

"If ever a god was more faithful than any human could be, I am that god."

A ram was found to substitute on the consecrated stones. That beast had been a long time ready. God made it in the twilight of sabbath eve in the first week of creation. As its origin, so were its ends extraordinary. Its sinews

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were made into the strings of the harp on which David composed the psalms; one of its horns was blown at the end of the revelation on Sinai, the other will proclaim the end of the exile.

As the scape-goat appeared, another of the three Jewish archetypes walked into existence. The *Had Gadya*, Isaac, the *Agnus Dei*.

Righteousness before God leads inescapably to suffering at the hands of the world. Abraham's stark piety would have no other end than the "sacrifice" of Isaac. From Abraham on, our fate, to become a nation of eternal victims, bearded like the sacrificial goat, was a foregone conclusion. Wherever books and brains and humanity are attacked, the Jews are the first to suffer. Because we are the pointing finger and recording gaze of God. No other people ever won such favor or paid for it so dear. At this point in the story Abraham becomes a moment of Isaac, and the terrible implications of the covenant begin to appear.

We are a *joyful* people — but sad, very sad.

Since he so looms in the future, Isaac's connection with his own time is brief and tenuous. When the servant was sent to find him a wife the earth spun under his feet so that a journey of days was accomplished in hours. Again, when Rebecca went to draw for him, the water in the well rose of its own accord and overflowed into her pail. Isaac's events hurtled by, barely grazing the surface of history, leaving few and faint traces.

This easy progression of successful events was only brought short when Rebecca, as she rode towards Isaac, at the moment when she saw him for the first time, fell from her camel in shock as the Holy Spirit made her aware that she was destined to mother the godless Esau.

Her pregnancy was torment: in her womb struggled two nations for whom the whole world wouldn't be wide enough: Jacob, ancestor of Solomon, builder of the Temple, and Esau, from whose line would come Vespasian, its destroyer. These two, Israel and Rome, are the two nations destined to be hated by the whole world. Esau, because he rules it, and Jacob, because he disdains to.

With Jacob the Jewish soul becomes complete — which is why God is always addressed as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and never associated with any further person. For the stiff-necked faith of Abraham and the patient endurance of Isaac would have proved, if not an unendurable, a fatal inheritance, had they not called forth from the womb of being the essential and inevitable cunning of Jacob, whose whole essence, and indeed the survival of the Jewish people, is summed in the Yiddish saying: *a Yid gefindt sich eyne etzge* — a Jew finds a way.

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How much can anyone know, seeing that it is the glory of God to conceal a thing? Our tightest logic is pure paradox, holiness glows through even our mistakes.

One day God offered Isaac, as a gift, his heart's desire.

"Jah", said Isaac, "let me see your glory".

After such hesitations and insistings as are customary in these cases, Isaac began seeing the world with exceptional clarity. His gaze plunged forward to the ends of the earth. He began to be aware of the advantage hidden in even the greatest evil, and the secret motivations that can make our goodness dubious. He read in the lines of people's foreheads their previous lives and most embarrassing secrets. From a newspaper article he grasped the prehistory and eventual destiny of a nation. It was like breathing pure oxygen — euphoric! But he burned off his body's weight in a few hours of adrenaline. Before noon, that is, before all the shadows had shortened out of sight and rendered everything evident, his eyes had lit up and gone out like flashbulbs. Isaac had become a blind old man.

He saw how everything connected, how act led inescapably to act. He saw that we must at every moment choose good or evil — and that to choose one is to choose both. So he went to bed, resolved to lie aloof from action and decision until he could die.

In came Jacob to deceive him, saying "I am Esau!"

"The voice is Jacob's voice," faltered Isaac, but the hands are the hands of Esau . . ." Now Isaac, who could see everything, knew perfectly well it was Jacob, yet he also knew to what extent Jacob was defined by Esau, to what degree they were indivisible. One could not be understood without the other. In a sense, they were inseparable. In a word, they were twins. So he gave his blessing to Jacob and to whatever would happen.

Then in came Esau saying "Arise father, sit and eat of my venison!" Isaac was more frightened than he had been when his father was about to sacrifice him, for he now felt how the walls got hot on account of the hell Esau always brings with him, and he saw, through the flooring, the flaming pit just under Esau's feet.

When Esau heard that Jacob had given his father flesh, he screamed horribly and said: "His lentils cost me my birthright, what must he have taken in return for meat!"

To compensate him for his loss of the patriarchal blessing, Isaac blessed Esau with this world and all material power, even over Jacob.

Wherever there is cruelty, and the just cry out in pain, the voice is the voice of Jacob, and the hands are the hands of Esau.

One day, while fleeing, as was his wont, from his brother Esau, Jacob chanced to be overtaken by night in a certain place. He made himself a pillow

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of stones — the same stones on which his father Isaac had lain bound as a sacrifice.

As he slept, he saw a ladder stretching above him up to heaven, down which came the angels of all the nations to gaze on him — amazed by his face, for its likeness was also engraved on the divine throne.

Here Jacob awoke with a start — there was a muffled throbbing under his ear. He sat up, frightened. His stone pillow had become a man's chest.

The other grabbed Jacob's hand and pressed it to him so Jacob had to *feel* the heart-thumps. They seemed to be drubbing out the words:

*I am, I am, I am.*

Jacob remembered who it is that calls himself "I am". His hand on the stranger's chest, Jacob was terrified. He said:

"How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God and this is the gate of heaven."

And the angel wrestled with Jacob until the breaking of the day.

They hurtled whirlingly together, in slow motion now, wings beat against arms with muffled thump,

they grappled in adagio time, chest bumped imperceptibly against resonant chest,

they were lying together, legs interlocked and fingers interlaced,  
the angel pressed against Jacob solid and breathing under his touch,  
body swelled against body and face grew warm against face.

The angel said:

I look into your eyes, they widen.

Your heart enlarges in the sweetness of being.

I touch your hand, the veins stand throbbing out along  
your arm

and you enter more deeply into realness,  
for all your love is love of me —  
this is what makes you real.

I can hear *your* heart beat,  
it also says "I am, I am,"  
for the word is very near you,

in your mouth and in your heart:  
it is not hidden from you,  
neither is it further off

than arm's reach. I am as close to you

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as your jugular vein. I kiss your neck —  
you feel it deeply as a wound.

I kill, I make live, I liberate:  
I am the God of Abraham.

The son of Jacob's old age, Joseph, was a dainty bookish youth who stayed in the shade reading while his brothers tended the flocks. He earned their dislike by his habit of tattling, his carefully styled hair, painted eyes and mincing step. He wasn't gay either — just horrid.

Jacob loved the boy — his girlish good looks were strikingly like those of Joseph's mother Rachel, and Jacob had but to look at him to feel consoled for the death of his wife.

The anger and envy of Joseph's bretheren climaxed in the well known incidents, of which one, the staining of the coat with kid's blood, is interesting as an echo of Isaac's sacrifice. Later, when he had been elevated to power and came to recount his life to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt marvelled at his misfortunes — whereupon Joseph blandly observed "The Lord is in the habit of choosing a favorite member of our family as a sacrifice to himself."

Joseph's hysterical daintiness, which proved a virtue with Potiphar's wife, well suited him to wealth and luxury. In a sense he was the first Jew to discover he could "pass", and his love of the good life was the beginning of our slavery.

Unlike the Patriarchs, who insisted on burial in Palestine, Joseph had himself interred in Egypt — in a coffin so well hidden that Moses had to delay the exodus three days and nights to find it. For forty years in the desert Israel carried two shrines, one the ark of the covenant, the other the casket holding the bones of Joseph, furious, but finally unable to complain.

The Plagues of Egypt: Smog, Oil-slicks, Pesticides, Government, Nuclear waste, Anxiety, Work, Conformity, Television and Gloom. But God hardened Pharaoh's heart to such density that . . .

"What do you mean *plagues*? I *pay* my magicians and scientists to produce these — they aren't miracles, nor does Moses make them."

But not only Pharaoh's trapped narrow in a dull skull's bone walls. For all that they print a pyramid on the back of every buck, how many are hip there's still a Bank of *Mizraim*? This is Egypt, nor are we out of it. Brick-built cities still witness *our* slavery.

But, y'know, exodus. *Exodus*.

"So long, Gypos!"

"Keep your reality — I *never* liked it."

"We're taking our dolly and dishes and going *home*."



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Actually, it was the Egyptians' dishes they were taking. And the silverware. In fact, they looted the place.

So they're schlepping this booty through the middle of the sea, as though through a crystal cave. It's a bit like a trip to the aquarium. And we're not the only ones gawking. The fish are all a-hover with swift-milling gills, incredulous to watch these Jews moving into the neighborhood. And this is why fish have eyes eternally wide-open non-plussed round, why their mouths can only gape and gape anew — they've never recovered from the puzzlement, but eternally ponder the question:

“Who are these Jews that God does such wonders for them? Can God have truly chosen him this one people only?”

To which question there is this one answer only:

“As surely as you live, it is so.”

One twilight, while the Israelites were encamped in the desert, sweet melancholy came over the people, nostalgia for the good past, the old ways. The most learned and venerable sage of those that came up from Egypt consoled the people with these words:

“We live by bits and pieces. You can tell, because whenever someone totally enjoys himself he says: This is the life! And so it is. The rest of his existence wasn't. Rather, it was bent, cracked or mixed with inattention and debris. But it happens that one finds a week, an hour, a moment that is full and perfect — and that is “the life” — a fragment of the true life, which suffices to teach its taste.

“In the true life which was once, there was only one story, that contained all stories. People demanded to hear it always again — like children, they didn't want a different, or (as though such a thing were possible!) A better story, but the same story over and over. That is why we Jews read through the whole torah every year. To remember that there was once a true life, and a true story.

“But even the torah of this world is broken, and as much as we patch it with commentaries, you can still see the seams. But we keep on reading torah, because it holds so many parts of the true story, and we keep on telling tales, until we find all the missing pieces.”

When he heard this Moses felt life sweeten and slow in his veins, a schmaltzy-sleepy bliss closed his eyes, and he dreamt of the good old never-was, the dreamtime of our great-grandfathers in Mythuania. He let his head rest on the sagging breast of Mother Tradition.

But Jah got hold of him by the hair and dangled him a sizzling while in blue volts of prophecy. Then Moses dropped — into a battle-stance, smoke curling from his nostrils, sparks crackling in his beard as he turned on the sweet sad sage.

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“You cunning old ape! After 2,000 years of mumbling and fussing with that patchwork quilt of a Torah, not only haven’t you gone forward — you haven’t even gone backwards! All you managed was to build a fence around your failure of awareness. Your sole concession to the twentieth century was when you electrified it!

“Your Pharasaic jive was one smooth ride while the Levites were doing their Temple-step strut, but by now that stuff is deader than the sixties, and, trust me on this, what’s dead is *extremely* dead.

“This time everyone stands on Sinai,  
that aloft and liminal region  
no longer earth and not quite sky  
rushing up rocky from the desert  
like matter raised in song.

“It’s time to go nomad! We can’t afford the weight of what won’t work! Wine! Illegally sacrificed goats barbecued on a fire of reform siddurs! Drums, dope, a savage Yiddishkeit, our synagogue’s wherever we meet to feast!

“Throw away the baggage till there’s nothing left but Jah!

“This much of the old torah was true — creation only comes our of *Tobu-wa-Bobu*.

“That means everything’s overthrown, and no-one knows what’ll find new use or a chance to last. Meantime, smash it all! torah, *tefillah*, *shabbos* — only the holiest notions

“merit squander in this sacred waste.

“Go, crack the sky’s blue egg-shell, let it fall  
with shatter-chime in shards of amethyst  
to litter earth with heaven — that might win  
your lips the right to whisper what it is  
to live so vivid as who lives for Jah.”

# **The Unholy Bible**

**Hebrew Literature from the Time of David  
to the Beginnings of Greek Influence**

**(1,000-300 B.C.)**



## Preface

In this volume you hold virtually the entire literary record of kingdom-period Israel, an erotic, pagan, aristocratic, impious and elegant world, closer in spirit to Homer than to Hosea. This incredible record of vivid life was too central to the national identity to be jettisoned by the compilers of the Bible, so it was reinterpreted, muffled, even muzzled. Yet this literature, allowed to deliver its message directly, can tell us a great deal about the early Hebrew religious culture that produced it, the prophetic voices that were raised against it, and the rabbinic religion that replaced it.

In a sense this is the “missing link” for our understanding of the biblical world: we have been long taught to view the Jews as a nation of priests, prophet-led and pure, and have forgotten that they were a real people, *the Hebrews*, a bronze-age middle-eastern kingdom as riotous and exotic as the court of Agamemnon.



# King Solomon's Book of Love Songs

Commonly called the "Song of Songs" or "Song of Solomon"





## King Solomon's Book of Love Songs

The verses in this book of the Bible are a collection of traditional, popular wedding and love songs — beyond that near certainty we enter the realm of conjecture. Modern scholars tend to think it contains datable material from the time of Solomon's accession (around 960 B.C.) — the “royal wedding poem,” 3:6-11 — to the period of Persian influence in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. — the Persian word for garden, *pardes*, 4:13.

Setting aside, for the sake of conservatism, the high likelihood that some of the material was old even in Solomon's time, the book may cautiously be said to range from the tenth to the fifth centuries, which means that much of it antedates Homer by two or three hundred years, while a good portion was written by the contemporaries of Sappho and Anacreon, who write with a similar playful, erotic delicacy. The latest compositions were penned while Aristophanes still breathed.

It does not seem to me unreasonable to suppose that Solomon was responsible for the assembly of the book in its entirety. The use of the word *pardes* is as strong as the late-date evidence gets, which is not very. It is more than plausible that Solomon, who accomplished a program of cultural consolidation comparable to those of Augustus or Charlemagne, would have ordered the anthology made. The idea has behind it the momentum of tradition, the book's title, careful structure and graceful shifts and recapitulations of theme, all of which, by my reading, point to a single, brilliant compiler.

But, whether we allow ourselves to invest the songs with historic range or royal glamour — or both — our understanding is not affected. Nothing in the text emerges with added clarity for being fixed to a certain date.

Completely secular and sensuous, the book required vigorous, defensive, mystical interpretation before its Jewish scriptural status was decisively confirmed at the Council of Jamnia in 90 A.D. The Christians, adopting the Bible, adapted the talmudic reading of the songs as a love-dialogue between God and his chosen people, and the book radiated its influence, on two cultures, for the next 1800 years, through a mist of allegoric confusion. Two traditional Jewish readings will show variously the strength and weakness of the approach. The knocking of the lover in 5: 2 (King James Version), “I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled . . .” The lover is held to be God calling to the soul even in sleep, pounding, insisting it wake and hear, and the knocking is the heartbeat itself — for the mere fact of existence, tokened by the rhythm of one's blood, summons like a drumbeat to remembrance of God.

One would gladly jettison higher criticism for a complete allegory of this order, but the poem itself rejects it, driving a pious explicator to heights of unfortunate ingenuity, as when, confronted by the breasts in 4: 5, he primly interprets them as Moses and Aaron.

It is worth reviewing the major later interpretations, since good modern translations, of which the best is the *New English Bible*, exhibit traces of both. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was the scholarly fashion to read our book as a play about Solomon, a shepherd girl and her rustic lover. In the early twentieth the suggestion was made that the book contained cult-hymns from canaanite spring festivals, describing the love of the fertility gods Baal and Asherah. These interpretations proved as poor a fit as the traditional.

The breakthrough to a historical reading came in 1893 when J. G. Wetzstein, the Prussian Consul in Damascus, called attention to the nuptial rites of Syrian peasants, who have the couple, crowned, sit on a throne during the wedding feast, while guests sing them songs of praise, addressing them as “king” and “queen.” Syria was only the case in point. Such customs are universal and ancient in the Nile to Oxus region.

This immediately clarified the frequent use of the word “king,” and further researches along these lines identified in the formulaic phrases the standard features of oral composition. The book’s style was no longer unique and bewildering, and it became possible, for the first time in 2,000 years, to read it as it had been sung.

The best critical edition incorporating modern findings is Robert Gordis’ *The Song of Songs*. On this I have relied. It should be noted that all english translations suffer the influence of the King James Version’s priggish dignity. Even Gordis’, which is clear and accurate, fails to convey the simple, elegant pleasure and wit of this gallant verse.

One might half regret the historical perspective that made this translation possible. The glamour of the mystical reading is lost. Yet I think something better is gained. Restored is a humanly beautiful book which can again delight lovers, consoling their pain, inciting to new refinements of flirtation, according passion and erotic play their dignity. Going back to Rashi’s or Origen’s reading, one’s appreciation of their work is enhanced rather than undermined, for it now becomes possible to fully savor the creativity and holy insight that discerned the patterns of the sacred in the secular. For the traditional reading is not merely a hallucination arising from the text, but, at its best, a vision of the mysteries implicit in physical love.

(1:1)

## KING SOLOMON'S BOOK OF LOVE SONGS

(1:2-4)

(Bride): I want to feel his mouth on mine, to drink love at his lips. The taste makes all wine weak, all liquor thin.

(Companions, addressing the Groom): Your scent is spicy rich attar, your trademark — a whiff of rich cologne. Lovesick girls breathe deep as you pass, look after you and sigh.

(Bride): Take me, draw me after you, hurry, my king, bring me to your bedroom.

(Companions, addressing the Groom): We dance, we laugh, we have to admit — the bride's words make it clear — your love does more than wine. All the girls were right to fall for you.

(1:5-6)

You city women, aristocratically pale, I'm beautiful even though the sun has tanned me black —

True, a Bedouin's goat-hair tent is dark as me — but so are the curtains that hang in Solomon's palace!

Don't stare at me because I'm red where the sun shot me a hot glance —

I'm burnt because my brothers flared up at me, set me out here in the sun to watch over the vineyard — where no one ever comes —

They were angry that I wasn't careful about guarding my own orchard,

anxious lest I let the boys walk in and have a taste.

(1:7-8)

Can't you tell me where you pasture your sheep, where you take them to rest in the day's heat, can't you tell me when I'm so in love with you?

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Why should I have to wander by the flocks of your friends, looking for you?

The shepherds tell me: If you can't find your friend  
— a beautiful woman like you — why don't you follow the tracks of the flocks  
and graze your kids where we pitch *our* tents?

### (1:9-11)

Like a lordly horse, elaborate in sparkling harness, who draws a pharaoh's dazzling chariot — such is your beauty, my love,  
with wide earrings of plaited gold against your cheeks, a string of coral beads around your neck.

I'll get you golden bracelets inlaid with silver studs.

### (1:12-14)

My king lay in bed beside me,  
my perfume renewed as my skin grew warm,  
my lover was like a sachet of myrrh between my breasts  
all night long,  
like a cluster of white henna blossoms, my love, the kind that grow  
by the noble vineyards of En Gedi.

### (1:15-17)

(He): But you're beautiful! with your eyes as gentle and shy as doves —

(She): No *you're* beautiful, so sweet to me! Our bed is the new soft grass —

(He): The cedar boughs are a roof overhead, around us — a wall of pines.

### (2:1-3)

(She): I'm just a common wild-flower, a lily among the rocks along the valley-slope.

(He): A lily shining among rough brambles, compared to other girls.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

(She): And you stand out among the boys, an apple-tree amid a forest,  
I joy to sit in its shade and pleasure my palate with its fruit.

(2:4-5)

He brought me to the wine-shop. His face was flushed, eyes shining  
love —  
Bring us cakes and apples! Food! I'm fading away!  
(Is it only hunger makes me feel so weak?)

(2:6-7)

I rest my head on his shoulder, his arm holds me to him.  
In the name of the deer and gazelles that wander through this field, by  
all the timid creatures shy as love,  
let no strollers come upon us, let none disturb us here  
till Love awaken sated from its pleasure daze.

(2:8-13)

I hear my lover, here he comes,  
bounding down the mountainside, leaping along its rises and hillocks,  
barely touching the ground,  
like a gazelle or a young deer, more flying than afoot,  
— he's standing by our wall,  
peering in at the window, trying to peep through the blinds,  
(he thinks I didn't hear him!) he waits, then reveals himself with a  
whisper:

"Come out, my sweet, my lovely one, no need to stay indoors,  
the winter's heavy rains are done, the clouds have glided on,  
the land is suddenly covered in flowers, the season of song is here,  
little figs start to ripen on the tree, vine-blossoms spice the breeze.  
Come on, my dear, my beautiful, let's go!

(2:14-15)

(He): "Is my little dove hiding in her high rock-crevice cliff-nest?  
Let me see your face, just hear your voice!"

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

(She): "Away! There's nothing left for you to pick in my vineyard,  
the vineflowers, spicing the breeze, already drew in foxes,  
young foxes have already eaten up my grapes."

### (2:16-17)

My lover is mine, and I am his.  
I am a meadow of lilies where he grazes  
all night, till cool first morning breeze when shadows run from the  
sun.

Turn again before you leave, let me look at you again,  
tall and graceful like a young deer,  
a gazelle on the mountains where spices grow.

### (3:1-5)

I lie in bed, dreaming of the man I love.  
Even in sleep I search for him. I cannot find him, even in a dream.  
I seem to get up, to look for him through the city, along the streets,  
past dark shops,  
my soul flies on, seeking him I love,  
seeking, never finding.  
Then the night-watchmen, patrolling the shadowed town, find me.  
"Have you seen him, the one my soul loves?"  
I float on. Suddenly he's there.  
I hold him. I'll never let him go  
till I bring him, hand in mine, to my mother's house,  
into her own room, like a member of the family.  
Quiet, quiet, Jerusalem. Women, keep the city peaceful tonight,  
in the name of the deer and gazelles, by all the timid creatures shy as  
love,  
let no sound disturb, let nothing stir me  
till I awaken, sated, from my dream of love.

### (3:6-11)

Smoky clouds on the horizon — the dust of a caravan riding up from  
the desert?

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

It's the litter of Solomon, approaching slow, amid clouds of rising incense, of myrrh, frankincense, all the merchant's fragrant powders.

Sixty warriors surround him, Israel's heros, sword-girded, masters of battle.

These men and blades should be enough to ensure a night's quiet privacy!

King Solomon had his litter made from Lebanon cedar,  
the platform's plated with gold, the back and fittings silver,  
the inside's upholstered in purple cloth, lovingly brodered and tasseled

by the virgins of Jerusalem, lined with their longing.

See, girls of Zion, come look!

Solomon in the crown his mother placed on his curls  
on his day of wedding and heart's joy.

### (4:1-7)

You're beautiful, my love. Your eyes look out, dove-gentle, through your veil,

your hair fleeces down, thick and rich as a whole flock of goats streaming down Mt. Gilead,

your teeth shine like a herd of sheep when they come up from the river, white and washed for the shearing,

each one healthy and strong, like sheep that bear twins and never miscarry.

Your lips are red like new-dyed scarlet yarn, your mouth is gracefully fashioned, your words finely framed,

your cheeks beneath their veil blush, like the gem-red in the white of a cut pomegranate,

your neck, adorned with a necklace of coins, is strong and smooth like the tower David built on a height, hung round with a thousand painted shields, necklaced with the shields of heros,

your breasts are elegant as twin gazelles grazing among the lilies

all night, till cool first morning breeze when shadows run from the sun.

I want to explore your myrrh-scented hills, your frankincense slopes.

You're beautiful entirely, my love, a world of beauty, perfect, without flaw.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

(4:8)

You've come to me from Lebanon, my bride,  
travelled down the northern mountains — Amana, Senir, Hermon,  
from the heights where lions and panthers have their dens.

(4:9)

With a glance, my sister, my bride,  
you've hypnotised me with a glance,  
with a sparkle of your necklace.

(4:10-11)

Your love, my sister, is better than wine, it's made me drunk in  
daylight, my bride,  
your perfume's richer than all the incense,  
your words are honey — golden, sweet and slow; the taste of your lips  
is delicious — milk and honey are under your tongue,  
the sweep of your dress fans the air with spice,  
like a breeze from Lebanon.

(4:12-5:1)

(Groom): Your garden is locked, my sister, my bride, your well is  
closed, your fountain sealed to me —  
and it's a paradise of branching pomegranate, with sweet, precious  
fruit,  
with henna and spikenard, nard and saffron,  
aromatic reed, cinnamon, and all the trees with scented resin,  
myrrh and aloe, all the noble spices.

(Bride): My garden fountain's no closed well, its quick water rushes  
down to you like a spring in the hills of Lebanon.

North wind, wake! South wind, rise! Blow through my garden, carry  
down its perfume  
to my love, so he'll come to my garden and taste its rarest fruit.

(Groom): I enter my garden, my sister, my bride, I pluck my myrrh  
and spice,  
I eat my honey from the comb, drink wine rich as milk.



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

(Guests): Eat, my friends, drink and be drunk with love.

(5:2-6:2)

While I slept, my heart woke to the sound of my lover  
knocking at the door of a dream.

“Open to me, my sister, my friend, my dove, my perfect one, let me in  
— my hair is wet from cold evening mist,  
dew’s dripping from my curls.”

“I’m in bed — I already got out of my clothes — do I have to put  
them all on again?

I just took my bath” (I continued dozily, “I don’t want to get my feet  
dirty.”

My lover began fiddling with the lock, now he took his finger from  
the hole,

my heart thudded sudden, my belly tensed and trembled,

I rose to open for him, my hands still slick and scented with myrrh  
from the bath oil,

I passed my dripping fingers along the doorbolt,

I opened for him — he was already gone.

Not even the echo of his footsteps. My soul flew after him.

Seeking, never finding. Calling without an answer.

Night watchmen, patrolling the shadowed town, found me  
running around in my nightgown — they thought I was a whore.

They shoved me. They hurt me.

The sentries who pace the city’s walls, they tore off my veil as I ran  
from them.

Promise me, women of Jerusalem,

if you see my lover — tell him —

tell him I’m sick from loving him so much.

“Pretty woman, what’s your lover more than another?

Is he really worth our searching for him too?”

There’s no one looks like him — red cheeks, a face aristocratically  
pale,

his curls are dark and wild, thick like palm branches, black like a  
raven,

his eyes are bright and clear and quick,

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

the whites are white as a dove in the snow,  
the pupils sparkle blue like a pool of icy water,  
his cheeks are soft with down, like the lawn in a spice garden sweet  
with blossoming herbs,  
his breath is wind through the lilies, like a breeze through balsam  
trees,  
his arms are columns of gold, his fingernails are gems,  
his belly's carven ivory, his black chest-hair glints blue like lapis lazuli,  
each leg is a marble pillar set in a base of gold.  
His glance is noble like the hills of Lebanon, he stands like a cedar,  
— his kiss is delicious.

When you see my lover you'll know it, Jerusalem women.

"Beautiful woman, where's your friend gone?  
which way did he head? We're eager to help you find him."

He's gone where you can't follow, down to his garden, his bed of  
spices,  
to graze in the garden I keep for him, to pluck my wildflowers.

### (6:4-10)

You're dazzling as Tirzah, the northern kingdom's capitol,  
and no less splendid than Jerusalem, chief city of the southern realm.  
Like these great towered towns you're beautiful — wonderful —  
frightening.

Look away, your gaze makes me brave and insane,  
your hair fleeces down, thick and rich, like a whole goat-flock  
streaming down Mount Gilead,  
your teeth shine like a herd of sheep when they come up from the  
river, white and washed for the shearing,  
each one healthy and strong, like sheep that bear twins and never  
miscarry.

Solomon has sixty queens, eighty concubines, too many pretty  
serving girls to count.

I've only one dove, one perfect one, her mother's only daughter and  
special favorite,

but one whose looks make all the girls call her lucky, even the queens  
and concubines praise her:

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

Did the sun just rise? Who just came in,  
dawn-glad, sun-lovely and moon-bright, amazing, radiant, frighteningly  
beautiful?

(6:11)

I went down to my garden, wandered under the nut trees along the  
stream's green banks,  
looking to see if the vine was in flower, the pomegranate in bloom . . .

*(line 6:12 is lost)*

(7:1-6)

Whirl around so we can see you, woman of Shulem; dance, dance  
again, we haven't seen enough!

Noble girl, we watch the pace and prance of your sandaled feet,  
and your legs, fine formed as if a master goldsmith carved their  
curves.

Your navel's like a small fine shallow cup,  
it doesn't need wine to excite a drunken warmth.

Your belly's smooth and white as a mound of flour, sweet as lilies,  
your breasts are elegant as twin gazelles,  
your neck is stately and strong, a tower of ivory.

Your eyes are like the pools at Heshbon by the gate of Bath Rabbim  
— glad, bright and clear to the depths.

Your nose is straight and proud as the tower of Lebanon that looks  
out over Damascus,

your head is majestic as Mount Carmel, your hair heavy, thick as royal  
purple cloth,

indeed, a king has already been caught in your curls.

(7:7-9)

There's nothing so good, so delightful as Love.

Be a tall palm tree, your breasts a cluster of dates  
— I'll climb to the top, hold on by the upper branches.

Your breasts are my grapes, ripe and heavy,  
your breath like the smell of apples,  
your kiss like wine: it stuns me drunk

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

and leaves me dreaming — talking of you in my sleep.

(7:11-14)

I've got a lover and he's eager for me.

Let's go to the country and sleep out in a vineyard,  
wake up among the henna blossoms that grow by the grapes.  
We'll see if the vines have flowered, if their buds are open yet,  
whether the pomegranates are in bloom.

That's where I want to make love to you.

Already by our door the aphrodisiac mandrake  
gives out its subtle, irritating perfume;  
outside the house the herbs have sprouted,  
both last year's and those planted early this spring  
— it's more than time we went out to the country.

If I've been coy, hidden my love from you,  
it's because I've been saving it all for now.

(8:1)

I wish you *were* my brother, that we'd sucked the same breast,  
then no one could scold me if I kissed you out in the open . . . .

*(lines 8:2-5 are lost)*

(8:7-8)

Set me on your life like a seal,  
making and marking you mine  
with all your heart and all the force in your arms.  
I have to utterly own,  
because Love is strong like Death;  
Jealousy — harsh as the Grave.  
Love's fire sears like a branding iron,  
burns in deeper than fever;  
it splinters your life like a lightning bolt

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

thrown by the hand of God.

This flame you couldn't put out with a flood,  
rivers couldn't wash it cold.

If a man even considered  
trying to buy Love  
with the wealth of his entire family  
— people would just walk away from him in total disgust.

### (8:8-10)

(Suitors): We know a little girl, too young to have breasts yet  
— what shall we do about our little friend when she's old enough to  
be courted?

If she resists, like a city wall, we'll attempt her with jewelry, silver  
siege-works;

if she's a closed gate, we'll storm her with carven cedar ladders, carry  
presents over her ramparts.

(Girl): I am a wall — to keep *you* out,  
and I do have breasts — like towers,  
stately, and beyond your reach.  
But when I find the one I want to please  
it is I who will besiege and conquer.

### (8:11-12)

Solomon has a vineyard in Baal Hamon  
worth a thousand in silver yearly,  
so big it costs 200 shekels just to hire the vine-tenders.

Well, I have a little vineyard too,  
whenever she's with me I'm too rich to envy  
any worker's wage or king's wide estate.

### (8:13-14)

You sit in the garden, talk with your friends, the young men.  
Do they have to sit so close? You aren't whispering.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

If only I could overhear you saying:  
“I wish my love, tall and graceful as a young deer,  
a gazelle on the mountains where spices grow,  
I wish my shy love would come running past here where I wait and  
watch for him.”

# Selections from *The Book of Praises*

Otherwise Known as *The Book of Psalms*





## The Book of Praises

The standard title of this book, *Psalms*, is from the Septuagint's Greek *Psalmoi*, meaning literally "harp-string twangs." Charming as this is, my allegiance is to the Hebrew text. There the title, *Tehillim*, means "praises." The praises in question are a hymnal assembled from collections spanning centuries. Some may actually have been written by David (around 1000 B.C.) and many are clearly post-exilic (after 587 B.C.). Whatever their earlier employments, they were all used in the liturgy of the second Temple (520 B.C. — 70 A.D.), at some point during which period the book's form was fixed. We know this date can't be later than 200 B.C. because that's when it was translated for the Septuagint, in a form that differs in no material way from the Hebrew original. *Psalms* is then an anthology of anthologies spanning something like 800 years (1,000 to 200 B.C.).

I have not translated many of the psalms. It is not their complexity but their simplicity that defeated me. These were above all *songs*, and as such would have failed had they been complex in their construction or baroque in their sense.

The richest poetry is not generally singable, nor do the best songs always merit as poems. The combination of features that make at once good songs *and* good poems is very rare. The songs in Shakespeare are sometimes perfect examples of this marriage of simplicity with rich content. The psalms that answer this description are here translated, but they are not many.

Another type that yielded to the translator's pen were those rooted in Canaanite mythology. Here the original was literary, and so presented no great difficulties to the literary translator.

What it was possible to translate will, I hope, make up in quality what it lacks in bulk, and give the reader an intelligible echo of the Jerusalem Temple cult, with its white-robed bearded Levites chanting over the gorgeous noise of drums, harps and flutes, while incense smoke towered cloudily up and slaughtered oxen crumpled bloodily at the altar's base before a congregation of veiled women with gold bracelets clanking on their proud ankles and men with earrings and swords, the whole marble-bright gold-glaring *hallelucination* of ancient near-eastern religion, where opulence was a style of piety and excess a mode of transcendence. These poems are no simpering hymns, but court music to be played in the palace of God.



# The Book of Praises

## 19, 1-7

*This psalm shows the influence of polytheistic Canaanite literature the Hebrews encountered (and absorbed) in the promised land. This is especially clear from the use of the Canaanite names El (the creator and father of the gods) and Shamash (the sun-god).*

The sky announces the Glory of El, the heavens' urgent blue shouts  
"He made me!"

Each day breaks — into praises the next will repeat,  
each night is a vision of how the night after will darkly enlarge  
upon El, builder of earth and sky.

Day and night transmit all this  
without speech, without words, without sound.  
By darkness, then light, they articulate time in a harmony of  
alternating reigns,  
and their heavenly message reaches out to earth's furthest verge.

At the border between night and day El set up a tent for Shamash  
who comes from it each morning, with Dawn in his arms,  
like a groom striding out from under the wedding canopy holding his  
new bride.

He's eager and glad as a powerful runner when the race is about to  
begin.

His course is as long as from east to west  
and there's nothing in between his heat doesn't reach.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

### 23

*I have been paganly literal in my rendering of the word for death, "Mot," because it is the Canaanite name for the god of death, and as such would have been recognized by the contemporary reader — just as we would appreciate the mythological resonance of "Hades."*

With Jah to shepherd me, I won't go hungry, I have all things I need,  
he brings me to fresh thick-grassed pastures,  
there he has me rest in shade through the day's hot hours,  
he brings me where I drink from cool gentle-running streams,  
he refreshes my soul, he leads me along the flat clear path of justice —  
which is his own and his glory.

Even if I walk down shadow-valley, Mot's realm, I'll not be scared  
nor need to be —

because you're with me.

It reassures me just to see the top of your staff up ahead beyond the  
flock,

when I'm tired, the thought of you lifts me, as a shepherd carries a  
lamb.

You anoint my head with fragrances,

For me you pour wine — not a little, but till the glass runs over.

My life is a too-full cup,

gladness overflows at my eyes in tears.

Now I know that good things, goodness and love will run to keep up  
with me every day of my life,

and I will live in Jah's house throughout my life's long day.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

104

Jah, you are most great,  
dressed in splendor and majesty,  
your clothing is the light.

You built the heavens to be your house,  
your palace is the sky.

The clouds are your horse  
whose wings are the wind.

The breezes are your messengers,  
lightning bolts — your servants.

You made the earth a firm and forever unshakable place.  
You pulled the floodwaters over it like a blanket —  
covering mountaintops — and at your shout  
they rushed back down, running from your thunder.  
As the waters drew off, hills rearose,  
valleys sank, all went back to the place you first gave it.  
You made the shores a border  
the waters can't repass to recover the earth.

You set springs in the mountains to feed into streams  
then rivers torrenting through gorges  
to where they give drink to the beasts of the plain,  
quenching the thirst of the wild ass,  
watering riverbank trees —  
home to birds who sing among the leaves.

You lean out of heaven's high window  
and pour rain on the green mountaintops.  
You feed the entire world,  
make grass for cattle to crop and crops for men to tend,  
you have earth sprout grain for bread  
that restores a man's strength, and the vine  
that gladdens hearts, makes faces glow.  
You nourish the cedars of Lebanon,  
which you planted to be the trees of God:  
their branches host all birds —  
the stork makes his house in the highest.  
You formed the crag-paths — easy roads for the goat,

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

and rocky hillsides where the rabbit makes his castle.

You shaped the moon to mark months,  
and the sun who never forgets what time it is,  
you bring down dark — it's night.  
Forest animals come slinking out.  
The lion roars for bloody meat,  
calling for God to send him a kill.  
Sun rises — they're all gathered back,  
creeping to their lairs.  
Man goes out to his work,  
busy with it till evening comes.

How great are your creations, Jah!  
How wisely you made them,  
everywhere the earth shows your work.  
Here and huge is the sea, holding the land in its blue and limitless  
hands,  
cupping infinities of fish, from microscopic to big as the ships  
that to and fro across it,  
and Leviathan, whom you gave the whole ocean to play in.

All these creatures look only to you to feed them every day.  
You give — they gather their dinner.  
Your hand is open — they gorge on good things.  
You hide your face — they feel death-fear,  
you take back their breath — they die, they're dirt.  
You breathe in life, the land's refreshed,  
recreated with newborn things.

God is glorious forever! May he delight in his creations!  
If he just looks at earth it quakes,  
if he touches the mountains they volcano out smoke.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

137

By the rivers of Babylon, it was there we were allowed to rest; when we'd reached the shores of the Tigris and Euphrates, then we found time for tears.

The harps we'd brought with us — what was left from the Temple's wreck — these we leaned against the riverside trees,  
we sat on the bank and wept for what had been Zion.

Then our Babylonian captors demanded music,  
commanded us to act glad, saying:  
"Sing us one of your Jew songs!"  
With what cheer could we sing the songs of Jah,  
kidnapped to this new shore?

Jerusalem! If I ever forget you may I have a stroke!  
May my right arm be paralysed, my tongue forget how to speak —  
if Jerusalem isn't still more to me than any pleasure,  
and no pleasure true or real that I can't share with her.

Remember, Adonai, what Edom did, how they helped Babylon's armies,  
don't forget Jerusalem's last day, when they shouted: "Plough it  
under,  
tear out Jerusalem's rocks by the roots!"

And Babylon, God remembers you,  
Babylon about to fall.  
Lucky! whoever gets to do to you what you did to us,  
who'll seize *your* children and smash them against rocks.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

126

When God returned us to our land from Babylon  
we stopped at every step, looked back, and thought it was a dream.  
Then it was our turn to laugh.  
The gentiles said: "Their God really *does* exist,  
look what he's done for them."

We cried: "Jah, bring us back from exile  
to the land that thirsts for our return as the desert waits for rain."

He answered: "Who sows the seeds, watering the unborn plants with  
tears,  
will roar with joy, harvesting the fullgrown grain.  
Though now he staggers out to the fields, full seed-sack on his back,  
groaning over every furrow,  
he surely will return, holding triumph-high his sheaves, rejoicing in  
the very weight of them."



*How?*

**Cries of the Prophet Jeremiah Over the City of God  
Fallen to the Armies of Babylon in the Year 587 B.C.**



## How?

The title *How?* is a literal translation of the first word in the text. In Hebrew, as in Arabic, books take their titles from their first significant word.

Traditionally *How?* is ascribed to the Prophet Jeremiah. This is most unlikely, due to the highly, almost affectedly, literary style, and the positive attitude toward the royal house. It is, nonetheless, by my reading, the work of a single author. Though the book is full of philosophic inconsistencies and shifts of position, an overriding logic prevails: it is the portrait of a soul, completed by its own contradictions.

Further, the book functions as a whole. It begins with a historically panoramic, almost aerial view of ravaged Judah, focusing in on the figure of grieving Jerusalem. Chapter two cuts to the calamity itself, the siege and fall of the city as seen first hand, recounted in grim unsparing detail. In chapter three the author speaks in the first person, and as we see through his eyes we enter into his soul where coexist the extremes of faith and despair that explode into the book's most terrific insights:

Don't good and evil both come into being because of  
towering Jah?

This glimpse of the amoral vastness of God, who cannot be suspected of being anything so limited as "good" or "evil," is immediately clouded over by the iconography of the sky-god and his justice — the one idolatry the Hebrew genius always allows itself. But the realization, once made, cannot be retreated from — as Job will show.

Chapters four and five move slowly back through the aftermath, into the occupation. These are soft, solemn and dirge-like, moving through sorrow to longing, a movement which ends in an address to God that is the plea and song of a lover.



## *How?*

### I

How can I comprehend? The overcrowded city now full of emptiness,  
totally alone,

on the ground like a widow sitting *shiva*.

She was more like a nation than a city, greater than other countries, a  
master to her provinces. Today she became a slave.

She cries and cries in the night, tears drip from her chin.

Of all who said they loved her, no-one's there to comfort her.

All her friends just left her, became her enemies.

Judah's gone into exile after so much struggle and pain.

Even while she held her land, a nation among nations, she was never  
secure, never let lower her guard —

and all her enemies moved against her when she was trapped between  
the foreign powers as in a narrowing pass.

Zion's roads are deserted tracks, bare paths no one travels gladly,  
all her gates hang open as if stunned,

the priest's every breath comes out as a sigh,

the Temple virgins feel it like a sickness in their guts. Grief beats on  
Zion.

Her haters are in control now; her enemies take it easy,

since Jah himself makes her suffer for how rotten she was,

her enemies watch their prisoners — her children — led away.

The lady Zion doesn't feel so beautiful now, she's lost that high  
commanding glamour of hers;

her princes, arrogantly graceful as stags, they're like starving deer who  
can't find any pasture,

without enough strength to run from the hunter.

Jerusalem understands what pain is now. That point is driven home  
as she's driven from her home.

She remembers all her precious things — they'd always been hers, by  
right —

as the enemy's hand clamps onto her shoulder. And she has no help.

The attacker knows it and laughs to see her fall.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

Jerusalem did evil — that's why she became a thing to shrink from,  
loathsome as a menstruous rag;

whoever respected her despises her now. They know she's a slut.  
They've *seen* her cunt.

She drops to her knees with a groan and hits the ground with her  
palms.

Her skirts are caked and stained. She never gave a damn what would  
happen,

till the moment she fell like no one else had ever — and there was no  
one to help her.

(She says): "Look, Jah, see how my pain makes the enemy proud."

The one who comes against her grabs and handles all her fine things,  
the things she loved.

She watched the *goyim* walk into her Temple's inmost sanctuary —  
you ruled no gentile should ever go in there, even to pray!

The entire people search for bread even as they mourn,  
they give their jewels for enough food to almost keep them alive.

Jerusalem says: "Look Jah, consider. I know I'm worthless, I should  
be thrown away.

"All you people passing by: go every road, look, reflect;  
has anyone ever been cut down with wound or sickness like mine  
which God sent down upon me in white-hot annihilating rage.

"He fired his lightning from the high vast gap of heaven, sent it  
jagging and flashing into my bones.

He buried landmines for my feet, I was hurled away. It was horribly  
amazing.

I'm sick with terrible menstrual cramps all day long.

"They watch my every step for a chance to administer a kick;  
God clamped a yoke around my neck, my strength is caving in.

Leader of leaders and God of gods, he handed me over to those I  
can't stand up to.

"God my master has made a heap of my strong men and warriors —  
all of them.

He declared a harvest festival in the midst of me, he gave a party in my  
dishonor, to bash my firstborn males like grapes.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

I was Adonai's beautiful Judah — he stamped me out as in a winepress.

“My eye overflows,  
there is no help for this.  
My sons are in a stupor, the enemy won!”

Zion holds out her hands — for nothing.  
Jah passed sentence on Jacob, enemies were around to hear it.  
Jerusalem falls at their feet and grasps their knees — they shove her away in disgust.

(She says): “God is just! I did wrong, I rebelled against Jah.  
Listen, all peoples, see how he hurt me,  
sending my daughters and sons into exile.

“I shouted to my lovers for help — they betrayed me;  
my priests and elders died in the city,  
feebly foraging food.

“Look Jah, I'm becoming a corpse, hot lava oozes brutal through my bowels,  
my mind is altered within me. I know! I did wrong! I rebelled against Jah!  
Outdoors it is the sword, at home the survivors sit silent as the dead.

“I cannot speak. I exhale sickly cooings, mournful noises. There is no help.  
Enemies heard of my disaster — they're overjoyed you did it  
— but you bring the day you warn of, they'll all become like me.

“Bring together, consider all their crimes, break *them* in pieces  
and crush their remnants just like you did to me for my offenses,  
making me pay with groans and cries and a sick heart's halting beats.”

## II

How could Adonai cover himself in black anger clouds  
darkening day to Zion, closing the heavens against her prayers and cries?

How could he thunder down the skyish towers of his beautiful city,  
Israel's glory. How could the Temple itself, his footstool, the entry point

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of his presence in the world, mean nothing to him anymore? How could he kick these down and stamp them flat on his day of wrath?

Adonai swallowed up the homes of Jacob's people.

Exploding, he tore down the fortresses of beautiful Judah, made rooftop touch ground,  
he made the kingdom a junkyard, the princes derelicts.

In smoking vehemence combust, he cut off all of Israel's strength as one might saw the horns off a bull,  
tied Israel's hands behind his back and left him for the enemy,  
cremated Jacob with a lightning bolt, left a smoking crater around the remains.

Our enemy, he bent his bow against us; murderous, he held it steady,  
took grim deliberate aim  
and shot down all our warriors, young beautiful men,  
his flickering ire outburst upon the tent of fine Zion in vomiting fire,

a ruthless Adonai unbuilt Israel,  
a hard God shattered the castles, broke the strongholds open,  
made all Judah groan.

He tore up the Temple's enclosure like a garden, rooted out the places of sacred observance.

Jah made Sabbath and Holidays fade away from Zion,  
the names of priest and king had no more meaning here.

Adonai knocked over his altar and dragged down his temple,  
opened to enemies the palace walls,  
there was shouting in the house of God — it sounded like a festival being held.

Jah decided to havoc the walls of shining Zion,  
with surveyor's tools he took careful measure and set about to un-make.

The ramparts paled, the stones whitened like a sepulchre — a wailing wall —

The bars cracked and flew as the city gates fell slowly heavily flat and thud to ground;  
kings and princes away in foreign lands, none led,  
if we still had a future, not even the prophets could see it.



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

The elders of Zion sit silent on the ground,  
they've wrapped themselves in coarse cloth as mourners, they pour  
dirt on their heads.

Jerusalem's women double over with woe, their hair trails in the dust.

My eyes are swollen from tears, my stomach aches with grief,  
I'm retching up my liver at the hurt of this people I love,  
for the children, babies, fainting in the city street.

They ask their mothers for bread, for drink,  
— like wounded men they pass out right in the street,  
their breathing ceases in their own mothers' laps.

What can I compare this to, how begin to understand what's happened  
to you, my bright Jerusalem?

Dear Zion, can any word of mine encompass, to calm, your grief?  
Can a man lift the sea in his cupped hands or heal a shattered stone?

Your prophets saw what you wanted them to see;  
none told you truth about yourself to turn back the order for your  
exile.

They daubed your faults with whitewash, made insipid allowances for  
everything, till you became a rotten wall held together by layers of paint.

Now everyone who passes claps their hands,  
shakes their head and whistles at fine Jerusalem.  
“So *this* is the city they called ‘Earth’s Joy’ and ‘Beauty Utterly Achieved’?”

Your enemies laugh over you, they show you their back teeth,  
they hiss and gibber to get your attention, then say: “We *buried* you!  
This is the day we *waited* for — we really lived to see it!”

As God planned, so did God enact, what he said he has made happen,  
just as long before he swore, he smashed and didn't pity,  
he used you to gladden your enemies — he backs up all their brag.

Call to God with all your mind, sweet grieving Zion,  
pour out your entire mind under God's gaze in a flood,  
lift your hands to him, reach out and beg for your children's lives.

Look Adonai, see who you did this to,  
should starving women eat their young, the babes they nursed?  
Should prophet and priest be murdered in the Temple of God?

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The boys and elders lie on the ground, in the street,  
young women, young men — both felt the sword.  
You were angry and you killed, cold butcher God.

You summoned the enemies awaiting this chance, invited them as if  
to a feast,  
no one escaped, no one fled Adonai's day of wrath.  
Our children were only raised to be destroyed.

### III

I am the man who watched while angry God raised his pastoral staff  
against us and threw it like a spear —  
the Lord my shepherd lead me, sent me off — into night and  
nowhere.  
He turned against me too, that long destroying day.

My bones were showing under wasted muscle, thinning skin — he  
broke them.

I have nothing left. I can go nowhere else. All around me,  
impossibility, a wall.

Am I dead and is this nothingness, the God-apart no-place dark?

God walled me in, made heavy my chain. I won't be leaving here.  
My shouts and cries of prayer, shut out, echo senseless back.  
Buildings' rubble and wall-collapse fill every impassible path.

Like a bear, God waited silent for me; a lion, he slunk from behind,  
misled me, then tore into me, suddenly gutted and gored,  
he set me up like a target — bent bow, sighted down the arrow —

he speared my kidneys with his quiver's whole payload.  
The peoples of the world laughed and told each other Jew-jokes.  
God knew how to glut my gut with nausea and stuff my face with  
pain.

He stamped on my back as I lay in the dirt, ground my mouth in the  
gravel.

Safety, Peace, Happiness? Were those words I'd ever used?  
I felt myself ending; I'd lost my hope in God.

Memory sours the tongue in my mouth, I flinch to think how we fled,

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

remembering how we were hurt, the soul inside me shrinks down low.

But there's one thing I keep dragging back to mind, that gives me strength to wait:

God's mercy and love do *not* run out, they *cannot* come to an end,  
each morning proves they've been renewed, and like the earth they're sure,  
and *nothing* can take my God from me! and therefore I have hope.

For God *is* good to the soul that trusts, the soul that asks of him,  
it's right to wait patient, silently, for help and rescue from Jah,  
it's best to get humble and neck-bent accept this yoke while you're still young —

then when it presses heaviest you'll sit unprotesting, alone,  
you'll prostrate yourself face-flat before God, then — damn right you have reason to hope!

You'll offer your chin to the fist and accept as God-sent all contempt.

God won't reject forever his own.

If he hits, he will pity — because he loves.

He takes no joy in hurting and humbling human beings.

To kick the face of all on earth who are already in chains,  
to subvert a man's case with courtroom distortions goes clash against the nature of most-high Jah,  
when human rights are wronged God looks most undelighted on.

And whose order was it that brought into being all that is *as it is*?  
Who was it made the world with a word, who was it “spoke and it was?”

Don't good and evil both come into being because of towering Jah?  
How dare a human find fault with the cosmos, complain he's punished too much?

Let him think what he is, what he's done, what deserved — in spite of which he *lives*.

Let's examine the path we chose and explore whether we can follow it back to God.

Reach out in utmost offering of self, arms held out to God in the sky,  
stretch out in supplication, hold out your hearts in your hands.

*Yes!* we did wrong, we disobeyed you — and you, you didn't forgive.

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You cast your anger over us like a net, hunted us down, red untender  
God,  
you sealed yourself off in your clouds and wouldn't listen to prayers,  
you threw us out among the nations like garbage.

Our enemies make faces at us, grown giddy with sated hate,  
as I watch, a thrill of terror goes through me to the balls, it's like  
looking down from a cliff — only here the fear's as real as the corpses and  
rubble —

I'll stand and cry over my sweet people till the tears eat a hole in the  
ground,

my hot eyes overflow, they'll never close or cool  
till God, hidden in his heaven, again looks down to us.  
Even if I could stand to, tears won't let me see more.

I'd done nothing. They trapped me like an animal, a bird.  
I could almost hear the dirt down-clatter across my coffin's lid.  
I sank towards world of the Dead, Sheol; its heavy black waters  
flowed over my head.

Out of my grave I call your name, Adonai!  
Listen Jah, you hear me! Rescue and help!  
Be present to me when I cry to you, tell me not to be scared,

take my side and save my life;  
just judge, see how I'm harmed,  
watch their malicious deliberate cruelty.

Smell the stink of their scheming against me, Jah,  
all day long they hatch up slanders to blame something new on the  
Jew,  
my sufferings are their morning song, by night their lullaby.

Pay them back what they've earned, O God, full wage for finished  
work,  
*let* their crazed brains bake with irrational hate to surely earn your curse,  
hunt them down to nothing, annul them from under the sky.

## IV

Is it possible gold can tarnish, or silver lose its worth?  
Precious stones left lying in the street?

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Yet Zion's golden children are thrown away like paper.

The desert jackal will offer her teat and give the cub suck,  
but my people's women have lost even that brute and common  
tenderness;  
they're like the desert ostrich  
that lays and leaves its eggs on the ground to be crushed under every  
foot.

Thirst glues the forgotten babe's tongue to its palate.  
The children ask for bread — none have it to give.

The ones who fed on gourmet morsels are out on the street in a daze,  
brought up in silk, they sleep in garbage heaps.

Jerusalem must have done worse than Sodom to deserve this —  
that city fell in an instant, none knew the hand that struck.

Our young nobles with milky uncalled skin, glaringly beautiful as  
snow, with a fine ruddy blush upon them as of polished coral,  
pearl-pale from the luxuried indoor life, made of some finer stuff  
than mortal, graceful as figures carved on a gem —

blackened out of recognition with filth, they're shadows, nameless  
and non,  
hunger's made dry sticks of their limbs, their shrunk leathery skin  
wrinkles in at each exhale.

Luckier, those gored with the sword than those gutted by hunger the  
whole siege long,  
at least they died with their bellies full, faced death in their strength.

With their own hands, mothers cook their children for meat,  
feed upon it, waiting for the city to crack.

The outer wall burst like a dam — hot rubble and glowing smoke —  
the wrath of Jah in burning surf ploughed fire into Zion.  
At first no country or government on earth believed a foreign army  
could march  
through the gates of the city of God.

Because of your lies, you prophets! your crimes, you priests!

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who said nothing while just men's blood was shed right out in the street.

You totter along the roads, your own blood caked on your robes.  
What you once couldn't bear to hear of, today you wear.

In your torn grungy clothes people take you for lepers. "Unclean!" they shout, "Don't touch! Get away!"

You run from place to place, country to country. No nation takes you in, none let you stay.

You Levites, God and his Temple were your inheritance, your territory and portion among the tribes.

Once God set you apart for his own — now he can't stand the sight of you.

And you're no reverend men to the conqueror either. Your years and dignities get no respect from them.

All night we strained our gaze at the blackness, for help that would come from Egypt,

leaning from the watchtowers, seeing shapes in shadows, hearing hope in every sound.

Now the Babylonian garrisons cut down anyone found in our streets.  
This is what came of all our brave patience, this is what it earned.

The king and his guard escaped the city by night. Babylon vaulted after them like an eagle sky diving from topmost cloud,  
hunted them down the mountains, trapped them in Jericho's plain.

Zedekiah, God's anointed king, taken. An earthquake had done no more.

While he stood for us we'd have sheltered in his shadow and lived.

Dance, laugh, Edom, descendants of cheated Esau, who've lain in wait for us forever in the desert far south, who joined Babylon marching up against Jerusalem.

The cup we drink will yet come round to you; you too will stagger as we do now, like us you're "gonna get wrecked."

Zion, your punishment's come and done, this is indeed the exile long foretold.

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But Edom! God's still adding up your crimes, none hidden, none forgot.

### V

O God, do not forget us, see how low we're beaten down.  
Haven't we fallen far enough by now?

The land you gave, taken away, strangers settled in our homes.

Widow-guardless, orphan-weak, we have no safety more.

We sip water for a price, the last possessions go for a little wood and warmth.

The yoke is on our necks. We're worked like animals.

Our parents had no trust in Jah, they allied with Assyria,  
pacted with Egypt, lived well on the blood of those to be —

of us, who pay the cost of their contempt for God, who bear the day  
they thought would never come.

Babylon's slaves master us, their petty officials king it where we live.

A piece of bread can cost your life. You only live because some  
soldier's sword-arm's tired.

Our limbs have blackened, shriveled in the oven of hunger.

They rape our women, trap and grapple our daughters.

They hang our princes and leaders. The aged are honored with a kick.

The young men turn the mill, tied to it like mules, else they stumble  
under loads of wood and stone.

No more, the old men at the city gate, arguing politics, rendering  
opinions. No more, the boys running through with their games and  
songs.

No more, the gladdened heart. The dance becomes a sullen trudge of  
mourners, dull, reluctant, looking down.

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God's light and leading taken like a crown from our heads — Oy! that we ever disobeyed Jah!

For this our heart is weak and sick, *this* darkens day to us: the God-apartness and the big alone.

You, Jah! Will you go on battering us forever down? Will every generation cringe beneath?

Were we never yours, that you can cut and cast us eternally away?

Let us be close again, Adonai, we wait for you alone! Let us live, as once, for you, our God who makes us live at all.

We can bear your fury — not to feel you far.



**Job**



# Job

*The Book of Job* is generally placed in the post-exilic period, somewhere in the fourth to third centuries B.C. Many arguments have been made for this on stylistic grounds. More convincing inferences may be drawn from the book's content. In the period when Israel had lost its land for two generations, and its autonomy forever, the confident, patriotic god- concept of the kingdom period was no longer tenable: in the ruins of royal ambitions, luridly and implausibly aglow with the eschatologic fantasies of the later prophets, we see the most appropriate setting for the skeptical wisdom literature of *Job* and *Ecclesiastes*. To us of the twentieth century, who saw the wreck of so many hopes, systems and syntheses, these grimly disabused writings may offer the most congenial and immediate voice of all.

There is no part of *Job* that has not been rejected as spurious by someone. I adopt a very conservative reading in rejecting only the speeches of Elihu.

The action takes place in a foreign country, somewhere in the East — the establishment of distance makes it possible for Job to make comments that would have been too outrageous in the mouth of a Jew.

I would read the prologue as existential absurdity — suffering *doesn't* make any sense, and the bet with Satan takes wry cognizance of this fact.

The action itself is relatively straightforward. Job is, and remains, blameless — we have the prologue and epilogue, his own statements, and God's acknowledgement to corroborate this. His friends insist that God is perfectly just, that if Job is punished he must have done something wrong. Job's position is that he himself is perfectly just, and that God is behaving immorally by punishing him. God's reply is that he is neither moral nor immoral, but rather *amoral*.

The most interesting thing about the book is that everyone is to some degree right. The friends are wrong in their assessment of Job, but their descriptions of the world as ruled by a reliably retributive justice are, in the main, correct. Not to any extent that will satisfy those who suffer unjustly, but the fact that we continue to accept existence is proof that most people feel the world's sufficiently fair. It would be difficult to find a successful person who didn't agree in large part with the friends.

Job's position is fascinatingly untenable. He embodies the contradictions of the Hebrew sky-god concept. This may come as a minor surprise to the reader who is accustomed to thinking of the Hebrew concept of God as, quite simply, God. Nonetheless the sky-god, who is the creator, makes a brief visit to the earth to give humanity its laws, is

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famous for his goodness and mercy, is, with exactly these characteristics, a universally attested religious pattern, from Haitian *Damballah* through Canaanite *El*.

There is, in the concept of the sky-god, a built in engineering flaw. On the one hand the sky-god's implications of totality, enormously reinforced by his status as supreme deity, make him responsible for *all* that occurs — and so Job correctly blames God for his suffering. On the other hand, the sky-god is characteristically the establisher of the norms of existence — the origin of all fairness and justice. Thus Job is similarly justified in appealing to God for justice — even against God.

The Hebrews were almost unique in not devaluing the sky-god concept in the face of the very contradictions Job encounters. Job's heroic action is not, as is generally supposed, his patience, (of which he gives little evidence), but his extraordinary *loyalty* to a conception of God as both all-powerful and entirely fair, despite the fact that his conception does not match reality. He complains of God, but never meaningfully questions or rejects him — Job remains God's loyal opposition.

God himself is typologically a very curious phenomenon: Job addresses him in typical sky-god language, invoking his omniscience, justice and totality, often with explicitly sky imagery such as clouds and sunlight. The theophany is startlingly different. This God is neither, like Canaanite El, a sky-god, nor is he become, despite certain attributes (the hurricane he speaks out of, his boast of how he subdued the original chaos), Baal the storm god — the typical replacement of the sky-god for the disillusioned Hebrew. The concept we have here is rather like what one calls the “master of the animals,” an order of deity who is associated with paleolithic hunter-gatherer society, and who guarantees the well-being and fecundity of animal life, and has no especial concern with humans. This is a god neither of the sky nor of the land, but of the superabundance of life, the cosmic generosity. The entire content of God's reply to Job is to describe the deity as the source of all animal life. Man has no special mention here.

Is God's answer satisfactory? In a moral sense, and from the human point of view, no. But Job's God doesn't appear as a bitter witticism, like a Euripides *deus ex machina*, aiming to show you how hopeless and awful it is to exist. There *is* an important amelioration of God's gigantic flippancy: his acknowledgement that Job was, in human terms, right. From this emerges a rather heroic and humanist image of man, whom even God must acknowledge, as the source of meaning and morality in the face of God's own chaotic and amoral opulence. This view of life is very much like Nietzsche's, or even Pindar's.

If this disappoints our sense of fairness, it should not our sense of truth. The epilogue does not betray this — rather it presents a facile conclusion to satisfy those who can't grasp the harsher satisfactions the

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text offers. But there are cues, like the syrupy names given Job's daughters and God's rebuke to the friends, that the epilogue is meant tongue-in-cheek. In a sense the prologue and epilogue are, with their fairytale character, the only non-tragic way of bringing together the divine and human points of view. And it must be borne in mind that Job is structurally a comedy: one may justly see in it the lumbering dinosauric prototype of Jewish humor.



# Job

## 1

There was once a man named Job who lived far away in the East, a blameless, upright man who stood in reverent awe of God and refused to do wrong. He had seven sons and three daughters ; his holdings came to 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 teams of oxen and 500 she-asses; his was an enormous estate, in fact the largest in the East.

When the holidays came around his sons took turns hosting the feast, each inviting all the others over to share the pleasures of the day. Whenever one of these feasts approached, Job sent for his children, blessed them, and ritually purified them of any sins they might have incurred, offering for each an atonement sacrifice (though in fact his children were as blameless as he), taking this extra precaution because, he reasoned, “they might have committed a sin unawares or offended God by an ill-considered thought.” Job never failed to take these careful measures.

One day when the gods were assembled before their creator — among them the Accuser — God turned to the Slandorous Seraph and asked:

“What have you been up to?”

“Oh, wandering around the earth, travelling the planet.”

“Did you happen to notice my servant Job? I’ll bet you’ve nothing to say against that unexampled man — blameless, upright, ever in reverent awe of God, refusing to do wrong.”

“Don’t you make sure it pays to act like that? Isn’t your protection around him like a fortified wall? Around him, his family, all he has? You see to it that whatever he does succeeds; his livestock breeds till it overflows the plains! But if you used your power *against* his possessions, so much as touched his stuff — see if he wouldn’t curse you to your face.”

Jah said to the Accuser:

“I’ll put all he has in your power, but him you leave alone, don’t even —”

The Accuser was already gone.

It was a holiday. Job’s daughters and sons were feasting and drinking at the home of the eldest.

A man ran up to Job.

“Your oxen were plowing, with the asses grazing nearby, and a band of nomads attacked, murdered the herdsmen, stole the animals. I’m the only one who got away — ”

While he was still speaking another man ran up:

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“A thunderbolt burned up all your flocks and shepherds. I’m the only one who got away — ”

While he was still speaking another man ran up:

“Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the home of your eldest and a gale came in over the desert and blew the house down on top of them and they’re all dead. I’m the only one who got away.”

Job arose and performed the formal rites of mourning: tore his garments, shaved his head and beard, fell to the ground stretched out in flat submission to the will of God. He said:

“When I came out of my mother’s womb I was naked and I had nothing.

Naked, having nothing, I’ll be buried, returned to the womb of my mother earth.

Nothing a man has is really his — Jah lends, takes back again. Jah is holy and glorious forever.”

In all, Job’s conduct was flawless.

## 2

The next day, when the gods were assembled before their master, the Accuser made a point of being there too.

God turned to the Slandorous Seraph and said:

“What have you been up to?”

“Wandering the earth, travelling the planet.”

“Did you happen to notice my servant Job — that unexampled man — blameless, upright, ever in reverent awe of God, refusing to do wrong, who holds on hard to his blameless ways even though at your enticement I ruined his life for no reason at all?”

“So he accepts the loss — he figures its his ransom, and as such cheap enough. They paid, he’s safe. But if it’s *his* hide takes the beating from the hand of God — then see if he doesn’t curse you to your face.”

Jah said:

“His body’s in your power — just don’t kill him.”

The Accuser hit Job with a horrible skin disease from the soles of his feet to the top of his scalp so that all Job could do was sit on the ground scratching himself with a potsherd.



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

His wife said:

“Are you still holding on hard to your blameless ways? Curse God! If he kills you he’ll be doing you a favor.”

Job answered:

“You speak like a fool and a woman. Should we accept the will of God only when he does what we want?”

Job’s reply was morally flawless.

When Job’s three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar heard of all the sufferings that had befallen Job, they gathered from their respective countries and went together to visit him, to sympathize and comfort him.

From a distance they didn’t even recognize him. When they realized who it was they groaned and wept, rubbed dirt in their hair, tore their clothing and were spectacularly aggrieved. They sat on the ground beside him for seven days and nights, in silence, respecting his agony.

### 3

Finally Job opened his mouth, to curse his birthday:

The day I was born, when they said “It’s a boy!” — may that day with its night cease to exist.

In that day’s place be a black unlit space, may God never peer down from heaven to look for it with the sun’s searchlight.

May that day drown in its own night! Let Death inherit the date and mark it for his own with heavy low cloud, drizzle, mist and eclipse, every chilling thing that deadens day,

and may its night be starless thick and dull, moonless to show it’s been disowned by the lunar calendar too —

may there be no begetting on that night so sadly black it scares numb the thought of bed-pleasure and the joys that darkness otherwise invites,

may the witches who know how to summon up sleeping Leviathan, put out the sun and draw down the moon, may they nail the day with a curse

so the morning star never shines through shadows to announce it. It’ll stay one day-long predawn dark, a pointless wait for a dawn that never raises rose eyelid over sun’s gold eye.

Because on that day the womb ejected me, exposed me to pain and grief,

because I didn’t die right then, breathing my first and last.

Why was I ever accepted by a mother’s arms, why was I given a breast to suck?

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I'd be lying quiet now, safe and dead, untroubled and asleep,  
along with the kings and ministers of history whose palaces and  
actions are just rumors and ruins now,  
with the rich men and princes who stockpiled gold and filled their  
homes with silver;  
luckier still to be a buried abortion, a stillborn that never opened eye  
— not even to have been!

There the evil finally leave off their malicious industry, there all the  
exhausted can at last relax,  
there even a slave is allowed to sleep late — he'll hear no master's  
shout.

Big-shots, nobodies, all there, all the same, none serve and no one's  
boss.

Why is light given to those who've seen enough, breath to those who  
hate life?

who pray for death and it doesn't come, who search out ways to the  
grave like it was buried treasure,

who are so relieved when they can finally die they perish squealing in  
helpless bliss.

Why does God keep giving more existence to a man when he's lost to  
life, when his path has disappeared, faded out from underfoot and God's  
blockaded any way back to happiness?

My mouth has forgotten how to eat — for so long the only thing in  
it's been the groans that pour through me like water.

All I feared, was scared might happen, I was right to dread, it's here.

I used to stay awake taking anxious pains, exhausted myself with  
precautions,

and now it's the terror of what's already happened that doesn't let me  
rest.

### 4

Eliphaz relied:

I'm going to try and tell you something. I hope you're up to hearing it  
— but no one can listen to this kind of talk and answer nothing back.

Lots of times I've heard you lecture slumping defeated people, set  
them straight and toughen them up,

a foot-dragging head-down man came marching back from your  
reprimand.

— but when you're the one that's hit you can't accept it — when it  
touches you, you panic,

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because you trusted too much in your piety, figured nothing bad could happen to a man pure as you.

Have you ever heard of an innocent man's having been destroyed? When was a righteous people ever wiped out?

So far as I know, that's what happens to the wicked — they have to harvest as bad as they planted and planned.

God obliterates them with a blast of anger.

Those lions that preyed on the people roar, outraged and helpless — God's kicked in their teeth,

they can't make any more killings, they starve and their cubs are scattered.

Listen to this insight that came upon me quiet as a whisper from behind —

in the hour when all sink deepest into sleep I was still half-thinking half-dreaming —

Fear jolted my bones.

Cold wind blew across my face, my every hair bristled.

Something stood there, I couldn't make it out,  
a shape facing me. Silence, then a voice:

Can a man be right and God wrong? A human be more perfect than the one who made him?

God can't even put full trust in the angels: celestial spirits err!

Then what about a being that inhabits a frame of clay, who's nothing but dust,

one could crush him like a moth,

created and crumbled during one day's light, gone forever before he's even noticed,

vanished as fast as a tent collapses when the main peg's pulled —

How wise can a human be, how much can he have learned in the instant he was given to live?

### 5

Go on, complain, present your appeal — to whom? what god will side with you against God?

Being indignant won't help you here — you know the proverb: "His own anger is what gets a fool killed."

I've seen just such an overconfident arrogant fool, rooted firm in wealth and success, lose it all in an instant,

his kids had no one to turn to — they were cheated in business, defrauded in the courts,

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

and all the greedy people who'd stared hungry at his fields have now stripped them to the stubble, sniffed out all he'd stored and gulped it gone.

Trouble like that doesn't sprout from the ground for no reason like a weed.

Man's born to earn and deserve his misery — it's his nature — he heads for harm sure as sparks fly up when you stir the fire.

Even so, I'd still try to find a way back to God, I'd make my prayer to him,

he does more great amazing things than man will ever explore, miracles more than one could count,

he gives the earth its morning dew and the fields their share of rain.

He takes poor men at sorrow's low point and rescues, sets them high;

he makes schemers' plans fail so nothing they set their hands to works,

trips them up with their own cleverness, sends them spinning out of control.

They never know they're lost; in noon's light they're still in the dark — blind men tapping for the path.

Meanwhile God leads victims out of range of the wicked man's lawyers and swords,

so the weak have hope and the evil have to just shut up.

Look, you're lucky when God punishes you — he's teaching you, don't turn away,

if he slices into you he'll bandage the wound, the hands that hurt will heal you.

Nine times out of ten God rescues, and in that tenth case you won't even be at risk,

he'll feed you through famine, save from the sword in wartime,

no liar's tongue will dare begrudge your luck or attack you sitting secure,

you'll laugh at the threat of hunger, marauders, wild animals,

the very fields will be your allies, their rocks will shift position to avoid your plough, no pest will nibble your grain,

you'll know all's well in your tents, never find a thing missing when you overview your holdings.

You'll plant a family growing up countless and quick as the wheat in your field.

You'll approach your grave still strong but ready for death, like a crop that stands tallest at harvest time.

So far as we could find out, this is the way things are — now you listen up and learn it.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

### 6

Job answered:

If only scales could calculate my rage, tabulate the weight of my pain —

but it's heavier now than the sodden sand of every beach on earth —  
when I try to heave it into speech all I can do is gag.

God pinned me with his poisoned arrows — their venom spreads  
through my soul like a stain, panic lays me flat.

No jackass brays when he's got good grass to chomp, no bull bellows  
with his face in the manger —

but I can't dummy up and suck down your no-salt mush of platitudes  
insipid as eggwhite slime,

the mind refuses even to taste such sickly milktoast drivel.

If only someone granted me what I ask for, if only God gave me what  
I'm hoping for —

if only he'd be good enough to crush me, let loose and kill me with a  
quick fist,

that would console me despite all that's happened, I'd laugh as I  
spasmed out of being. Just don't mercifully spare my life any longer!

I'll nevermore dispute the decree of God if he answers me  
in a fast death sentence.

What power do you imagine is mine that I'd have strength to go on  
hoping? And what's waiting for me in the end that I should further strain  
my soul waiting to see it?

Is mine the endurance of rock? Is my flesh made out of bronze?

What hope could I have wisely helped myself with that hasn't been  
beaten out of me?

A dying man expects kindness from his friends, not to have his piety  
criticized,

but my friends cheat me — like a river you see overflowing its banks,  
rushing down from the mountains dark and cold from melting snow, but  
as soon as it's summer that ice-water's gone, translated into mist and  
mud, then just a few trickles twisting down the riverbed and disappeared  
into the desert,

caravans and nomads trusted to find it, searched for its fresh and  
cold, and they look like fools, having come so far to feel stupid.

That's how you let me down just now — and out of cowardice! You  
didn't need to fear.

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Did I ask to borrow your money? Did I say: “I’ve been kidnapped — ransom me!” or “I’ve been captured by bandits — lead a troop to the rescue!”

You didn’t need to prove my losses were just — I’m not asking you to defray them.

But if you *can* explain to me where I was wrong — I’m silent, go on and tell!

You just and moral men, so sure, such stern pronouncers of judgement — you’ve come to your smug indignant decision, and what does it prove?

Your speechifying’s an argument — and the words of a man in despair are just wind?

Unbending men, so exactly just you’d auction off an orphan or sell a friend to collect an overdue debt,

do me a favor and look me in the eye, tell me to my face I’m a liar.

If you didn’t need so bad to be the ones in the right you’d see I’m not in the wrong.

Don’t you think I’d know the taste of a lie on my tongue, admit it and spit it away?

### 7

Isn’t life on earth like a military term of service, one long day’s labor for little pay?

You wait for night and labor’s end like a panting sweating slave, like a hired man watching the clock till he can go home with his wage.

But the time I’ve been given to serve is worse — my months a cheating measure of moons: night, which offers all their inheritance of rest, only doles and draws out my woe.

I lie down already wishing it was day, night extends me an unending portion of exhausted tossing till dawn.

Dirt-caked rags cover my skin — itself a cracked and oozing piece of hide.

My days flicker past faster than a weaver’s shuttle. They brought no hope. They’ll not be back.

Did you forget my life’s a moment, a breath? — if I don’t see happiness with these eyes I’m never going to.

Nor will you see me again in some aftertime — if you turn away now, by the time you look back I’ll be gone.

Man dissolves like a cloud, fades traceless into Sheol,

he never finds his way back home, the places he was known forget he ever was.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

And I won't be quiet — you sure weren't — I hurt and I'm going to talk, let my pain think out loud.

Do I roar ocean-loud? Spout blasphemy like a whale's blow hole? that you stand there like a lighthouse to warn others away?

All I wanted was to bed down and forget, the covers pulled over my head,

but you come here and terrorize me with your nightmare visions and gods in the dark.

All I want now is extinction — to cease being me and just not be.

I wouldn't even want to live forever! And seeing my whole life's three heart-beats long — so short I scarcely even exist — can't you leave me alone?

Jah, what is man — you make such a fuss over him — why pay him any attention?

You test him every instant, find new faults in him each day —

how long are you going to stare at me? Won't you let up for a second, let me swallow my spit in peace?

Even if I *had* sinned, how does that affect you, always watching mankind like a cop? Why'd you set me up to be your target and nothing but a burden to myself?

Why won't you forgive, lift the weight of blame?

Now I sit in the dirt. Soon I'll be under it, and not even you will find me again.

### 8

Bildad answered:

How long are you going to gust and squall this kind of haughty talk?

Does God judge wrong or decide for a lie?

Obviously your kids sinned and God saw to it their crimes caught up with them;

obviously, if you ask mercy and show yourself eager for God

and if you're really pure and upright, he'll jump to help you this minute and restore you what your righteousness earned, all you had will look little to the much you'll get.

Don't believe me? Examine what the ancients taught, you may accept our forefathers' findings —

For, what can we know? We were born this morning, what could we have learned in a life as long as our shadow and faster in the passing?

Let the old wisdom teach you, listen to it make its points.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

Can papyrus plants rise except when there's swamp, or reeds grow where there's no water?

No, their shoots, even untouched, unplucked, are the first grass to dry and die if they can't soak their roots.

And that's the way things succeed for those who forget about God — just when success has them hoping big things it's all destroyed.

Their plans hang from a frailer thread than a spider would trust her weight on.

They've floored their house with rotten wood, the roof creaks ominous overhead.

They're like a plant that shows fresh and green in early spring, sending out shoots to the ground around it,

but its tendrils only wind around rock, gropingly grow over stones, meet no moist dirt —

when the heavy suns come it's gone, dried up, blown off, not a root remains.

That's the quick joy of the Godless life — an hour's thriving, and another grows where he was.

But God doesn't abandon the innocent or put power in wicked men's hands.

He'll have you laughing out loud again — and right in your enemies' faces.

Then they'll be the ones humiliated, homeless and alone.

## 9

Job answered:

I agree, God only punishes the wicked —

since his definition of wicked has nothing to do with actual guilt.

If you're innocent and try to defend yourself, he doesn't listen to one word in a thousand,

no matter how smart or strong you are, you get no benefit from strictly stating the clearest case —

no fact stands obstacle to the whim and will of God.

If a mountain's in his way, in a second it's someplace else, and as if there always, not a grass-blade out of place.

His snort of impatience could send the earth skittering out of orbit, at his "No" the sun doesn't rise and the frightened stars hide under night.

He's the one who pitched the sky's blue tent, he tramps across the ocean on the backs of tidal waves,



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

he arranged the constellations, from the Great Bear and Orion in the north, down through the Pleiades and all the southern stars.

He makes more wonders than you could count even if you were wise enough to recognize them all.

He could be here now and I not know it, pass enormously on unremarked.

No one can keep him from seizing whatsoever — who could demand an explanation from *him*?

He never revokes what he's wrought in wrath. Chaos is still cringing from when he beat her into the shapes of the created.

Can you really think I'm going to answer him back, even try to communicate?

Supposing I don't upbraid him with my innocence, just beg him to judge me with mercy—

if I cry out to God and he answers, I don't trust it'll be because he really listened and was touched.

His reply will be to flick me off the ground with a hurricane and smash me back to earth, without cause, and for sure without a word.

Before I could take a breath after my first words he'd give me pain enough to shut me up.

If it's a question of power, he'll answer any man, but for justice — what court do we summon him to?

So I'm in the right — he can torture confessions from me, make me rename purity sin.

But I am blameless here — I don't care if I die for saying it — it's true. So kill me! I spit on my life.

I say: it's all one — guilty, innocent, God executes both alike.

God laughs when sinless people are shot down on an instant's whim.

Earth belongs to the strong and evil. God blinds all judges, there's no appeal. If this isn't God's work, whose is it?

My time on earth runs, gone and brought no good,  
faster than a light ship before a heavy wind, than an eagle zooming  
earthwards after prey.

I tell myself "Stop pondering the pain. Look up again, relearn how to smile."

But I can't. Dread soaked into my bones. I don't trust God will ever acquit or forgive.

To him I remain a man condemned. Why struggle for a change that can't come?

If I washed in water from whitest snow, scrubbed my hands with raw lye,

in his eyes I'd still be fresh-dredged from the pigsty, so filthy my own clothes try to slip off out of loathing.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

How expect he'd relent? he's not a man so you could reason and respond, you can't go with him before an impartial judge,  
no one could lay a hand on both our shoulders and mediate between us, make him put down the whip so he can't make me cower and squeak.  
If that could be, I'd speak out unafraid — but that's not how it stands.

### 10

I'm disgusted I still live. I'm going to abandon all thoughtful caution, let the pain talk.

I say to God: don't just condemn me! tell me what your charges against me are.

Do you like to bully and beat? do you enjoy throwing away a being you constructed and pouring sunshine on whatever the wicked want?

You made the human eye — can you look through it, see things from a human point of view?

When it comes to seeking out my faults and hunting for my sins you're as urgent as if you'd only a man's span, the brief chance of the creature that counts its life in years, — despite the fact you know I'm not guilty! You take your unfair aim in full knowledge I can't escape it.

Your hands formed, assembled me — now you swallow me up into nothing?

Remember! I'm just a thing you made from clay, one you'll return to dirt.

Didn't you spurt me into existence like milk from a teat? make me take shape like curds, harden like cheese,

didn't you congeal me into soft fetal bones woven over in thinnest muscle, wrapped in translucent flesh?

You showed me such kindness — you showed me life! Your infinite attentions protected my breaths

— and all the time you were treasuring up *this* fate for me? Yes, you, the architect of all that occurs.

You just waited for me to sin — and destroyed me for it. If I'm innocent, so what? I'm too sated with humiliating pain to so much as raise my head.

If I stood up you'd pounce on me like a lion and teach me better than to pray at you — you'll hurl my words right back,

redouble your judgements against me, irritate your own anger, send in fresh troops.

Why did you ever bring me out of the womb? I could have just died in its darkness.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

I'd have been as if I'd never been, carried straight from the belly to the grave.

Won't I leave off being in a little anyway? Can't you ease up for that brief time, let my last days brighten?

before I go the path I won't travel back, Death's black land, shadow valley,

where there's only light enough to see how dark it is, Mot the death-god's non-realm, where dawn is a gloom seeping black from the horizon, the reversed and chaos kingdom where night is day.

### 11

Zophar answered:

Should sheer mass of words outweigh any answer? Will we be jabbered into agreeing he's right?

You ramble on and we sit dumb; mock us, we don't dare talk back and put you in your place.

You call out to God, "I know full well I'm innocent — what's more, you know it too!"

Is no one willing to take God's side and match words with you?

to impart to you the mysterious wisdom that no one-sided argument is true,

and here the other side is: however God punishes man, it's less than he deserves.

Have you really fathomed the mind of God? you know his limitations?

Those limits are the limitless heights of sky — how do you deal with that? They're more unsearchably deep than Sheol — how far can you peer towards the bottom of that blackness?

They're broader than earth, wider than sea.

He lets pass or recaptures or gathers together whatever he pleases — who's to stop him?

— and why should they try? he knows who's guilty — don't you think he recognizes sin when he sees it?

Though Man's an empty-headed kind of creature, he should try to wise up and wake up — even though he's born to be jackass stubborn.

Now if you'd get control of your own mind, calm down and stretch out suppliant arms to God,

throw away whatever sin you're holding on to, don't protect it like your house guest,

then you could look up to God with clear-eyed blameless face, stand fearless, firm as a man cast in iron,

you'd forget your pain like last year's rain,

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

your life would brighten clear as afternoon, fresh as morning light,  
you'd recover your trust because there *would* be hope, the closest look  
around would show you all secure, you'd go again easy to sleep.

People would look at you with their old respect, the eyes of your  
enemies avoid your glance,  
they'd have no cover or excuse for their malice — their ill-wishes for  
you would die with a gasp.

### 12

Job answered:

Well now the entire assembly has passed its unanimous judgement,  
the concentrated wisdom of the whole people — when you three die  
wisdom leaves the race of men.

But I've got a brain too, and no worse than yours. Who couldn't  
come up with this level of insight, these false and easy explanations of my  
case?

I'm a laughing stock to my friends — as far as you can see I'm still  
asking God long after he's given his answer. The fact that I'm innocent  
and upright is nothing but a subject for jeers.

Misfortune always seems earned, deserving a sneer, in the minds of  
people sitting secure, safe beside catastrophe.

And everything's tranquil in the homes of real criminals, all's easy for  
those who provoke God, they still hold whatever he's given them.

Don't listen to me — ask the animals — they'll teach you, the birds in  
the sky — they'll tell,

the very plants in the ground know the story, the ocean's fish will  
speak it and leave nothing out,

not one among these but knows anything that happens is an act of  
God's deliberate will, in his hand the life of every creature, and the breath  
of all who wear human flesh — but they have no illusions about that  
hand's being *fair*.

Isn't the ear supposed to test words like the tongue tastes food?

Isn't age supposed to have experience, don't many days lived make  
for wisdom? Then why don't you understand?

Well, God has all knowledge, all strength, and he knows full well what  
he does,

he tears down with no intention of rebuilding, traps a man and never  
lets him go,

he shuts off the springs, lets rivers run dry, or sends them in torrents  
to wash away the land,

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

he's the giver of power and insight, and he makes one man mislead so another man errs,

he makes wise councilors be led off barefoot captives, degrades ministers of state into slaves,

he takes away a king's judgment and self-restraint so he ruins the realm for a tight skirt,

God has even priests auctioned off as chattel, wipes out their inherited dignities,

he twists the words of trusted advisors, takes away prudent elders' common sense,

he drowns princes in shame, opens holes in a warrior's armor,

he pulls secrets out of their darkness, makes clear day black and baffling as death,

he raises high a people then annihilates them, scatters them among nations then leads them back,

he confuses their leaders, makes them wander at random, knowing no road,

they grope their way as if in the dark, reel and stagger like drunks.

### 13

My eyes have seen, my ears have heard, I've understood this thing.

I'm no less able than you to figure it out.

Even so, I still want to try words with the Almighty, to bring my case before El,

— but you, you lie to me about God's nature — and not even comforting lies!

If only you'd just shut up — then you could at least *look* wise.

I'm only asking you to listen to my defense, try and grasp the basis of my plea.

How can you be so dishonest with God, lying to him about him to his face?

Do you think you you'll flatter your way out when God is sitting in judgement?

Do you think false fawning and fat praises will work when he explores your heart? Do you think you'll cheat God like he was a man and then go laugh it off?

Have you no fear of his majesty? Can't you feel the terror of God?

Before him your wise sayings won't stand up any better than scribblings in the dust when the storm wind drives, all your defenses — sand-castles.

Hold back your indignant answers, let me speak, come upon me for it what may.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

Why should I bite my lip and say nothing, hug myself to clamp back the words?

Let him kill me — I hope for no better — I stand right in front of him reading out my unstained record,

and he'll *have* to rescue me, because no sinner *can* stand before him — *therefore* he must become witness to my innocence.

Listen carefully, carefully, let your ears take in my statement:

I've set my case in order, double-checked it, I know I'll be shown right.

Who can prove otherwise? Speak now, I'll shut up and quietly die.

God, I offer myself naked, unflinching, to your decision — but on these two conditions:

don't strike me down with your fist as I speak or shake me with your terrors.

You ask the questions, I'll answer; or I'll tell while you listen to me.

Let me know what and how many are my crimes, sins and faults.

Why do you hide your presence from me as if I were your enemy?

Why crush a papery wind-driven leaf? Why root out and destroy me whom am no more than dry stubble?

Have you sourly recorded and learned by rote all the stupid things I did as a boy?

You caught me! I'm human, I stand convicted of being a fallible creature of flesh —

disease-rotted flesh at that, worn to holes like a moth-eaten coat.

### 14

We humans, children of Woman, have only a narrow measure of life and that brim-filled with fears,

we bloom and wither fast as a flower, we last like shadows running from the sun.

On *this* you turn your all-searching eye? *I'm* worth summoning before you in judgement?

Who could expect perfect purity in a creature shaped from dirt? No one!

Haven't you already unchangeably engraved my sum of days, numbered every month, set life before me like a task — only so far then finish?

then lighten your hand pressing heavy upon me, let your servant take what pleasure he can in his given work.

There's hope for a cut-down tree, it may yet send up new leaf and shoot,

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

though its ancient roots are dry as rock in the sod and its trunk sticks  
up dead from the dirt,

at the mere scent of water it musters a sprout, blossoms up sudden as  
a sapling would,

but a man once dead is felled for good — when his body dies, what's  
left?

for him, poor plant, the sea might as well be dry, and every river  
parched to a runnel of dust — this tree no water restores.

A man's laid out, he will not rise. There'll cease to be a sky before he  
starts up and wakes from the grave-deep sleep.

If only you buried me in Sheol like treasure, planning to dig up and  
recover me, if only you just hid me there till your wrath were past —

then, at a set time, remembered me again.

If a dead man lived again — then I'd wait hopeful through my whole  
term of service for the time I'd be relieved,

when you'd feel a longing for this creature you built, when you'd call  
my name — and I'd answer!

But now you count against me my every step, don't even wait for me  
to sin.

You've rolled up tight the scroll that records my faults, sealed it with a  
smear of slander and stamped that like clay with the signet of untruth.

Even the mountains finally wear down level with the plain, their great  
rock masses shift and subside,

ceaseless water wears out stone, rains gnaw away the earth,

and human hope, more enduring than these, that too you finally  
destroy.

Batter forever at a man, he turns away; age reshapes, sorrow  
lengthens his face, he gives up.

His children get success — it doesn't register. They go hungry, he  
doesn't recognize them, can't care,

nothing's left of him but a pulse and pain and a great vague memory  
of grief.

## 15

Eliphaz answered:

Does an intelligent man respond to words senseless as the roaring of  
the wind? If he opens his mouth to speak all he gets is a lungful of the hot  
air blowing in his face.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

Why engage an argument going nowhere? You can't fill an empty premise with sense.

But your statements demand response — because they undermine reverent dread of God, shear away religious devotion,

because your tongue persuades to your style of sin, your lips teach a reasoned, clever wickedness.

It's not me but your own words that condemn you, your own mouth provides evidence and answer.

Are you the firstborn of Mankind, the primordial person, older than earth, formed before the hills?

Did you hear God's secret plans for the creation? Did you take such a share of the original wisdom as diminished the remaining stock?

What do you know that we don't? What do you understand that we can't?

We're white-haired elder men, greater in days than your father!

Is all God's compassion too little for you, do you call his gentleness neglect?

Your mind is working backwards, you dream with open eyes when you set your inspiration against God and breathe out this kind of talk.

You ask: "What is Man that he's expected to be flawless, how can the child of Woman be perfectly just?"

You're right about that — God can't even trust the angels, the clear skies don't look pure enough to him.

Of course Man goes wrong, becomes corrupt — he absorbs error naturally, with no plan to — necessarily, just as he drinks water.

I'm talking now, so you listen to me. I know you don't care for my visions, but I saw this too and I'm going to describe it,

the same as the ancient sages related, an unhidden wisdom since the time of *their* ancestors,

of the earliest men to be born in this land, before they even knew other peoples existed.

That first folk saw that the wicked man writhes in anxiety every day, through the whole sum of years set aside for his goodly portion.

He hears his worst fear in every sound, and when he finally calms down, that's when his destroyer comes.

And when the shadow falls on him he knows he can't outrun the one who casts it — they're waiting for him, swords out and well sharpened.

When he's on the run and hungry, who's going to give him bread? He knows at any instant his day could go death-black.

He shivers, knowing he's trapped. Terror stands before him like an armored king about to lead the attack.



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

And this is the man who dared oppose God, who bragged like a soldier, the hero who didn't fear all-powerful Jah,

who set himself against God, lowered head and bull-charged, trusting his thick shield against every missile.

Conqueror-calm, he looked out through the slitty eyes in his fat face, sat solid and confident, his blubber hanging heavy over his crotch,

secure in his citadels — about to be destroyed, his houses — about to burn, every structure ready to become rubble.

Judge how rich he is, how long his wealth will last, how far his holdings overspread earth —

he can't escape his doom any more than he could outrun nightfall, death eats his offspring with him, they go like green leaves ash-whitening on a tree in flames, he and his family name end with his breath.

Let no man trust and get giddy over cheating schemes — what he receives in the end will rob him worst.

Before his measure of life plays out, before the tree of his being greens full foliage,

God tears him away like you'd pluck an unripe grape or rip off an olive tree's early blossom.

A sinner's family ends with him, sterile, gone with its name; fire inherits the tents of bribe-takers.

His life's work is a false pregnancy, labor and pains that bring to light their own lie, a belly bloated with air, a wombful of nothing.

## 16

Job answered:

I've heard so much like this I know it by rote. Your counselings are as bad as the suffering itself.

Will you go on restless, endless as the wind? What is it excites you to keep answering back?

If you were in my place, I wouldn't have trouble preaching either, but I'd fascinate you with soothing words, nod my head, sympathetic, agreeing,

and utter such as shores up courage, the wish to comfort would govern my tongue.

Speaking puts no pause to my pain — if I'm silent and resigned, nothing changes, either wearies me now.

God, you've horrified all my friends,

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

you've shrivelled me into a scary portent, a symbol of your wrath. My skinny limbs witness against me — I look as bad as if I deserved this.

God-rage has torn me. He hates me so much he grinds his teeth.

My enemy, his eyes beam evilly at me.

People come and gape at me, they're all ganged up against me. Outraged, they smack my face;

God abandoned me to the power of the cruel, the evil own me now.

I was all calm and cozy when God snapped me in pieces, grabbed me by the neck, smashed me against the wall, then propped me up as a target.

His army stands around me in a circle, skewering my heart with their spears. I kneel in bloody mud.

God tackles me like an armored warrior, his impact redly rends, widens wounds into one.

I wrap rags around my battered hide, lie with my face in the dirt.

I cry so much my cheeks fiercely tingle, when I shut my eyes I see a black foretaste of death.

And there's no stain on my innocent hands! Blameless, I continue to pray to him.

Earth, don't drink, don't hide my blood; sky, don't absorb but forever re-echo my cry!

I shout my protest through the heavens, make him on high my witness.

While my friends mock, my eyes trickle with longing for God.

If only I could argue with God as with a man, as a human talks to his fellow,

— but already my life's short enough to count in hours, I'm on the unreturning path.

### 17

My breath would have drained away, my light been snuffed, I'd be looking up from the grave-pit

if my friends didn't taunt me forward into life, if they didn't quarrel my attention back to this existence.

God, give some surety you'll fairly handle my case! Ah, who's to shake my hand on such a promise?

Not these whose minds you've hidden from insight, you can't set *them* as judges over this.

These conscienceless flatterers have so far forgot what truth is that even their children will be morally blind.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

You set me before all peoples as an object lesson. Edified, they spit in my face.

My eyes glaze over from frustration and rage. I feel like I'm vanishing into my own shadow, staggering back into blackness.

All righteous people are shocked by my case, the innocent say, startled, "Oh what a big sinner!

Good thing *I'm* on the path of the pure!" Everyone feels encouraged and justified.

Why don't you all just leave? I'm not going to applaud your discernment.

My time is gone, my plans cut off, I comprehend no more.

I can't see the difference between day and night — to me it's all night now.

If I have any hope or home now it's Sheol — to pull its shadow over me like a blanket and sleep.

Death is my family, the grave is my father, the maggot my mother and sister.

Where have you gone, my hopes? to what remote land was your flight, what traveller saw you passing?

I drag my legs down the steps to Sheol and pray that that's the end.

## 18

Bildad answered:

How long must we go on mending a net of argument he just keeps tearing through? Let's reflect and then pronounce.

Why should we be left staring, big-eyed and wordless as cows?

He's insane — he's ripping apart his soul.

Job, do you really think you're proof that the rock which supports all being's been pulled out from under, that God's deserted the earth?

The light of the wicked will be put out, his flame can't flicker bright for long,

his tent goes dark, his candle blown.

His wealth only hobbles him now, he stumbles over his own bad plans

and right into the net spread for his steps, he's put his foot in the trap, the noose pulls tight around his ankle, and that strong rope will hold.

It was hidden, that snare, in the ground he walked; not visible, yet right in the middle of his road,

and now he flinches for fear all around, scrambling in panic.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

Now all his having's become hunger and want, disaster waits ready for his fall.

Disease, the firstborn son of Death, eats his skin by bits, then grabs whole limbs.

Dragged out of his house and safety, he's sent packing to Death, the king of terrors.

Death moves into his empty tent, tills his fields, sowing brimstone to make them forever sterile.

That man's roots dry dead in the dirt, his leafage crisps and withers above.

His very memory passes from the land. No one in the towns has even heard of his family.

He's thrown out of light into darkness, evicted from existence.

He has no children left, no kin among the people, no survivors where he lived.

The young are stunned by the judgement passed upon him; the old, who've seen so much, shiver seeing this.

These then are the wealthy dwellings of the wicked, the choice place and estate of those who don't recognize God.

### 19

Job answered:

How long will you go on saddening my soul, hurting me with words?

Ten times now you've tried to humiliate me — doesn't any shame restrain you from gouging a man who's down?

Suppose I really have gone wrong — the madness and mistake are mine — not yours.

If you're resolved to set yourselves up superior, upbraiding, disgracing me in high moral tone —

then don't forget you're blaming God too — if I sinned it was unawares, tricked into it, trapped by God — he made me stray, he threw the invisible net I struggle under.

I cry: "Help!" but get no answer, howl for justice that doesn't come.

He walls me in with ignorance — if I don't know what I did, how can I leave the sin? He's laid such darkness on my path I can't see where I am.

He stripped people's respect from me, honor's been taken from my head easy as knocking off a hat.

Whichever way I turn, he pummels and I run. He tore out my hope like a sapling.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

His anger flames in my face. He thinks I'm his enemy.

His attacks come at me all at once, an army; they trench in, heap siegeworks, encamp around my tent.

My brothers watch from a distance, my friends just look away.

Neighbors, acquaintances — I don't see them any more. Men who were my guests don't remember my name,

my slave-girls treat me like a foreigner, an unknown from far away.

I call for my slaves — none come, not even if I beg.

My wife is disgusted I'm still alive; you can imagine what a pleaser I am to my kids —

even the young ones despise me — if I so much as raise my head they shout "Shut him up!"

Men I talked, shared plans with, loathe me. Friends I loved and love — *they've* changed.

My bones stick out, they tent my skin. I've escaped with nothing but the teeth in my head.

Have mercy, pity me, you, my friends — I've been touched by the hand of God.

Why do you persecute me like as he does, clawing for my mind, not content with my flesh?

If only my words were written down, inscribed in the pages of a book, writ with iron pen, cut into sheets of lead, hewn forever into stone!

I'd know I had a living witness, lasting past, standing up for me on earth,

so when this body wrecks and rots I could, with my words, still stare back accusingly at God —

if only I could confront him myself, with my own and actual eyes!

my gut is sick with wishing this.

But you, my friends, keep saying: "Come on, we almost have him. We really know his problem to its root."

Be afraid, be death-scared, what you're doing's a death-deserving crime, and you may learn there really *is* a judge.

## 20

Zophar answered:

The thought that might be so holds me back and flusters me.

I hear the rebuke — it almost shames me — but my understanding tells me: "No. Go ahead!"

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

Don't you know, Job, that since forever, since Man was first put on earth,

the joy of the wicked's always almost over, a sinner's glad for an instant?

Though rank and position make him think he's a god looking down through the clouds,

he's obliterated like shit on the ground, gone so fast no one knows where,

flown like a dream — who can find him? like the phantom world of sleep that flutters off when you wake.

The eye saw him — but no more. His home never glimpses him again.

His sons, ashamed of his wealth, scatter it to charity.

He was still strong as a younger man — that strength is buried with him.

Evil was sweet as candy to him, he cherished it under his tongue, he sucked on it slow to make it last, gently tongued it up against his palate,

but that sweet suck turned in his belly, it's rattlesnake venom inside him.

He swallowed down wealth — now he'll vomit it up. God pummels his stomach till he pukes.

He suckled viper venom — the poison spreads from his center.

He thought he'd float forever on tides of wealth, skimming the cream off a wave of luxury;

he sweated for it — now he has to give it back untasted, he never gets to crow from the top of his gold-heap.

He crushed the poor and left them lying; built no home, only robbed one;

no matter how fat, his belly never felt full, and his greed left nothing over,

he ate it all, put nothing by; then it was all good for now: now it's all back then for good.

With far more than enough he still itched for more, felt poverty always just behind him, about to tap his shoulder.

Just when he was lolling gorged, God's anger sprayed him with flame, seared him at his table: a blackened man at a dish full of cinders.

He fled at the sight of God's iron-tipped arrows, but the bow of brass shot them right through him.

He draws one out of his belly, sees the point pull glinting from his ruptured gut — and comprehends terror.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

His treasure-house becomes his tomb. He fries in a fire no human could have lit — spitted on a lightning bolt. And it goes no better with those left in his tent.

The sky sheds light on his crimes, earth covers none of them.

All his goods spew out from his house, broadcast in judging God's anger-day.

That's the wicked man's God-given heritage, his promised portion from El.

### 21

Job answered:

Listen, listen to my words, and take comfort in this coming repayment of your patience:

endure it that I speak, and afterwards —  
you'll get to ridicule my thoughts.

Why shouldn't I be frustrated? it's not a man but God I'm asking for fairness.

Turn, look at me, be stunned! Gape, put your hands to your mouth!

As often as I remember what's happened I shake, terror encompasses me like my own body.

Why is it that the wicked, unlike me, live, and though they age remain strong, noble, rich and happy?

They see their children, then their grandchildren, safe, living with them.

God never strikes their peaceful, fearless homes.

Their pregnant cattle never miscarry, their cows deliver frequent and easy,

their families extend quick as their herds, their children frisk and gambol strong as calves,

they make joy-noise with drum and flute and harp,

their days slip by in happiness — when they die, it's an instant's terror, no more,

they tell God: "Go somewhere else, don't be bothering us! We don't want to know about your rules.

Who's the Almighty that we should serve him? What do we stand to gain from going to him?"

Their own and godless efforts made them happy — but me, I chose a different plan!

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

Now how can you say the wicked's lamp will be put out, that their misery's on the way?

that an angry God will assign them pain?

that they're about to be scattered like straw in the wind, chaff snatched by the storm?

You'll counter: "God's saving up his punishment to visit on their children, they'll all yet pay in full and know what it's for. The wicked live on — to see a greater disaster, they'll drink the full cup of almighty wrath. What pleasure can they finally have in their holdings when all their months are numbered?"

Do you realize you're teaching God, the judge on high, the way he *ought* to act?

One man dies, still strong, uninjured, the calm end of a quiet life,  
muscles firm, forehead smooth, blood rich from feeding well;  
another dies, embittered to the soul, he never tasted the good things  
of this world.

There's no fairness in their different portions, it's no justice that they lie in the same earth, equally worm-food in the end.

Oh, I understand the way you think — your rationalizations rend me, they're oppression to all who suffer.

You ask: "Where now's the house of the wealthy and wicked?"

Why don't you ask passers-by at random, maybe you'll believe what every one of them knows, their plain talk's an oracle even you can interpret.

Are the evil spared for some day of judgement? led insensibly to where fury will explode over them?

Who's going to tell those wretched sinners to their face where they're heading? Who's going to make them pay for what they've done?

When they finally *are* led to the cemetery, it's in pomp and solemn cortège, an honor-watch is posted at the graveside.

Sweet lies the sod on the evil dead — since everyone marches in the funeral procession, led by numberless notable men.

What nothing you comfort me with! Your answers are shown up for cheating lies.

Eliphaz answered:

Do you think when a man is prudent he's doing God a favor?



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

Do you think God waits eager for you to be just? That God owes you something, that he makes an unfair profit if your doings are pure?

Or do you think he's prosecuting you on account of your incredible reverence?

Aren't you actually enormously wicked and limitlessly sinful?

Don't you exploit your own brothers, extort the shirt off a naked man?

You wouldn't offer water to one fainting from thirst, you'd refuse a starving man bread.

You're powerful — the earth is yours — the people bow down before you!

You turn away widows empty-handed, you break an orphan's arms!

That's why you're afraid of everything now, the cause of your terror out of nowhere,

of this dark confusion you can't see through, the death-dread flooding you under.

Isn't God above, like the sky, dominating all? See the stars in their height and infer how supreme is He!

But you say: "Does El even know what happens here below? He can't see down through his own clouds to judge,

sequestered in the upper sky's gauzy fog-banks, he doesn't watch us but only strolls around the circuit of that uppermost blue."

Will you keep forever to that old same road walked by every evil man before you?

Do you want, like them, an early death, that you build your house-foundations on rushing waters? like those who tell God: "Get away from us!" Well, what do you think the Almighty's going to do to them?

God fills their homes with wealth? I want no share of it on their terms:

let the just man just watch — he'll be glad at what he sees. The innocent will laugh at *them* in the end.

All their wealth will vanish, translated into flames.

Accept and yield to God and it'll be well with you. You've everything to gain if you do these things:

recieve his teachings, try to understand his words.

Kick your sins right out of your house, come back to God, he'll build you up again.

Shake off all regret for the gold you lost just like you'd brush off dust, throw away your remembered gems like pebbles into a stream.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

Make the Almighty your treasure, hold God as your overstuffed wallet,  
because when you look up to God and find in him your delight,  
and pray to him — he'll hear you! next you'll be offering sacrifices of thanks,  
whatever you plan will come to pass, you'll be walking in the light.  
When men knock you down you'll call it a promotion, so clear you'll know God saves the humbled heart-broke man.  
If you're innocent, he'll rescue; you're saved insofar as you're pure.

### 23

Job answered:

Still new bitter considerings eat into my brain. I'm so weak from long groaning pain my hand feels too heavy to raise.

If only I knew where to find him! I'd come to him where he lives,  
I'd set my case before him — my mind is full of what I'd say.

Oh to make my statements and have him answer, to find out how he'd reply!

Would he shut me up by a show of force? But no, he'd listen to me.

Were there a chance an upright man could argue his case with him —  
I'd make him acquit me forever.

I walk forward searching for God, go back, he isn't there either.

I see his actions all around me, but him I can't grasp — he causes and disappears.

But he knows my life's whole road. Every test he put me to, I emerged pure as gold from the furnace,

I marched hard in his footsteps, eyes always on his path and never turned aside.

I didn't disregard a one of his commandments, treasured in my heart every word of his law —

but he's independent of all, complete, aloof. No one can turn him, whatever he wishes he ineluctably does.

He executes his decrees in full. What he's begun to do to me he'll keep on doing, only much more,

*that's* why I dread him, this is the reflection that puts me in terror of God,  
this makes my trapped heart thud:

that he *hasn't yet* killed me — what a darkening then awaits me before he brings on night!

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

24

Why doesn't the Almighty set aside a time of judgement, why don't those who strive to know him ever see his reckoning-day?

Men move the boundary stones, grabbing others' land, keep for themselves the herds pastured there as well,  
they lead off the orphan's sole inheritance — a mule, take a widow's one ox as interest on a debt.

The poor wander out in the wasteland, looking for a place to hide their dispossessed selves.

Look, the wild asses in the desert are free to feed on what's there, to pursue their grassy affairs,  
cropping all the fodder earth and generous nature offer them and their young each day,  
they stray and graze at the plowed lands of men, they browse the leaves of the rich man's vineyard,  
but the human poor sleep naked, not even a blanket against the cold,  
houseless, crouched in hill-caves, hugging the rock for cover, soaked by every rain.

The wicked rich tax and exact, enslave as payment the baby at the breast,  
while the poor walk without even a shirt, the starving shoulder the rich man's bushels,  
the hungry harvest him his olives, the thirsty press his wine.  
From the cities rise the groans of the poor like cries of the wounded on a battlefield,  
and God doesn't see how insane this all is.

These things are done defiantly, in daylight, men ignore God's ways as though he'd never shown them,  
they wake up in the morning ready to kill, all day long they slaughter the wretched and poor.

In daylight they do this — at least the petty thief has enough shame to do his work by night,  
even the adulterer, impatient, waits for twilight, taking care he's unseen, ashamed to show his face and have it known.

Burglars break in under darkness — in daylight they're indoors asleep. They don't even see, much less outface, day,  
in daylight they'd be killed, dawn would be their doomsday, if they don't fear God at least they do Death.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

Oh God, you who move invisible and quick as the wind across the sea,

will you never move against the rich, curse their heriting the earth, their lifelong leisured stroll through its vineyards?

May Sheol eat them for their sins as the sun in a drought would devour snow.

Feed them to grave worms! Be they forgot even by their own mothers, crack their evil power like a sapling!

May the herds in their pastures be barren and do their widows no good,

though they employ private armies let them wake at midnight in terror for their lives,

when all's secure and calm let them fear the whispers of those they pay to protect them,

let these leaders of men disappear suddenly, let them sink with all they've amassed

easy as snapping dead a stalk of grain.

If this isn't how things should be — and are not — tell me I'm a liar. But you can't deny a word.

### 25

Bildad answered:

God rules, God is frightening, he who calms the storming sky.

Is there any number to his powers? Who doesn't his light reach?

How can a man seem just before God? The child of Woman, how could he be pure?

Even the moon shows stains, its brightness no cause for boasting, starlight itself doesn't seem perfectly clean to him.

How then a Human, that worm of sixty winters? Man, that maggot on its way to the grave?

### 26

Job answered:

What strength have you offered the exhausted? What rescue have you brought to a man too weakened to lift his own arms?

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

How have you advised the man who's at a loss? What great sustaining insight have you given?

Have you thought at all about the person you hurl words at? Do you perceive how harsh a spirit breathes through your speeches?

The dead souls writhe and struggle to hide in Sheol's blackwater undersea world —

but the pit is naked under God's gaze, the abyss can hide nothing of what it's swallowed.

God sends the winds coursing wide and free through bare and hollow sky, suspends the earth in mid-nothing, resting on emptiness,

he binds up floods in his clouds, those vapory gates are enough to hold them back, they don't split under all that water's weight,

he extends the levitating white prairies of cloud on which his throne sits sure,

he decreed the horizons and the dome of sky, regulating all its rainfall for as far a light and darkness reach,

North, South, East and West, the four frightened pillars of heaven, quake at his amazing thunder-shout,

terrified sea stampedes beneath; Rahab, the defiant, the violent, Rahab, chaos-dragon of the waves, who surf-roars angry wordless noise — God gigantically whacks her and then by his insight tames her waters into orderly tides.

This done, God sighs — and the sky gentles bright and sweetly clear, while Rahab, that great water-snake, smit and fearing the fist, slides her apprehensive coils into hiding on ocean floor

— all this doesn't touch on the fringe of God's robe — it's just what whispery rumor of his being reaches us —

the full bomb-blast of his power, who can understand that language?

### 27

As God lives — he who's cheated me of justice and soured the soul inside me —

as long as the spirit lives in me, and the live wind that is his breath keeps pumping through my lungs,

damned if I'll teach my tongue to lie or let my lips shape the deceits that would please you,

like Hell I'll wrongly call you right — till I die I'll not deny my own life's honest truth,

I'll hug my righteousness to me tighter, not even in thought will I slander my well-lived days.

Accuse me, attack me — go ahead — if anyone's wicked it's you!

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

What good will you liars get to outweigh your loss of any hope when God drags you up and examines your life?

Will God listen to your screams when suffering closes over you?

Will God be all your delight even then? Will you ask him to save you — from Him?

I'll teach you what God has in store for you, what you'll soon enough know,

all of you have seen it clear and true — never thinking it applied to you —

this is what the wicked man gets from God, the inheritance the violent grab from El:

if their children grow it's for sword-slaughter; their grandchildren won't see bread enough to fill their bellies ever,

Death eats their survivors, the widows don't even cry.

If gold coins rain on them numberless as dust-motes, if their rich robes heap like snow-drifts,

it's the just who'll actually wear those wardrobes, the innocent who'll spend the silver.

Their homes are no surer than a moth's cocoon, frail as the lean-to a field-watcher builds for a sun-shade.

They can fall asleep on a hill of gold — they'll wake up in an empty room,

fear pulls them into its undertow, steals over them like a hurricane's sudden darkness.

Like a storm from the east, dread lifts and spins them; tornado'd into the sky,

they scramble and grab in the hurling mid-air that has no pity for their terror,

the storm thunderclaps its cloudy hands in glee and all the winds whistle their derision.

## 28

Man knows where to look for silver, the place to dig for gold,  
he knows the smelting mysteries that make iron and bronze emerge from dirt,

he learns all things to their limit, pushing back the borders of whatever darkness hides, only death is his boundary, the sole shadow he can't shine a light into,

he cuts canals, splits up rivers — where once water, now roads and traffic flow;

he makes earth bristle grain for his bread.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

Easy as stirring a fire to expose the glowing coals he turns up earth to show

the underground where sapphires lie common as rocks, the dirt that glitters gold ore.

Through mountains not even the eagle has seen, no vulture's eye has scanned,

not even the lions, those archetypes of pride who rove all rocky heights, not even they strode over such haughty hills —

there Man cuts roads through cliffs of solid flint, tears out by the roots any mountain in his way,

he turns rivers out of their deep rocky channels, exposing whatever treasure they covered:

their waters cut off to a weepy trickle, their secrets gleam out in daylight.

But Wisdom — where can Man find that? Where does Insight make its home?

No one even knows what it looks like — nothing else resembles it in the land of living men.

The ocean says: "I don't have it, it isn't hiding in my depths."

You couldn't buy Wisdom with a royal treasury, you can't weigh out its value in silver,

not with pure gold from Ophir, not with rare onyx or sapphire,

not with gold that's carefully worked, bowls, jars and plates in twenty-four carat.

Coral? Crystal? don't even think about it. A tear drop of Wisdom's worth more than bushels of pearls,

you can't buy it with Ethiopian topaz, pure gold bars weigh nothing in the scales against Insight.

Where does Wisdom come from? What place is Insight's home?

It's hidden from all that live, no bird's ever spied it from the sky.

Death and the Pit say: "We have heard certain rumors — "

God knows the roads that Wisdom travels, he's familiar with her home;

when he looked out to the limits of all underneath the sky

and established how much the weightless winds would weigh, the ends of the endless sea,

when he legislated the amount of rainfall, and resolved which way thunder would roll and lightning writhe,

when he looked to all this he saw Wisdom and made her his measure, set her up as a standard, explored her limits and her use,

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

and told Man: “As far as you’re concerned,  
to be in awe of God — that’s wisdom, and insight consists of refusing  
to do wrong.”

### 29

If only I could live again as once, when God watched over my days,  
and led me through my nights, his light shining down on me, a lamp,  
when my life was in its harvest time, and God sat in my tent like a  
friend;

God was with me, and all around me — my children.  
It seemed the streams ran milk for me, my olive trees gushed oil;  
when I went to join the council of elders at the city gate, I was given  
the wide seat of honor,  
when they saw me, children hid, and rich men stood up to greet me,  
princes broke off their conversation and put their finger to their lips,  
merchants stopped their squabbles and stood like mutes,  
every ear listened to me, and afterwards every tongue said  
“Good!” Every eye looked approval,  
because if a poor man or an orphan without defender cried out, I  
rescued them,  
slaves called down blessings on my head, I made widows laugh again,  
I put on righteousness like a garment, and justice clothed itself in me:  
fairness made me look noble, not my turban or my robe.

I was eyes to the blind, legs for the cripple,  
a father to the needy — taking on the cases of people I didn’t even  
know.

I broke the teeth of wealthy sharks, made sure their prey escaped,  
I thought I’d live as many years as there are grains of sand, like the  
Phoenix in its cassia and frankincense nest that only dies giving birth to  
itself,

I thought my roots would keep on drinking deep from underground  
streams and the morning dew ever refresh my fields,  
my power would always renew itself, the bow in my hand stay supple  
as living wood.

People waited trembling for my advice, and listened, silent and intent  
to understand,

after I spoke they wanted no other opinion, but just to let my words  
sink in.

They’d stand silent, imploring my counsel, anxious as a farmer in  
drought staring open-mouthed at the sky.



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

If I smiled at them, they couldn't believe it, their faces brightened,  
taking light from mine.

I helped them choose their route, a leader; I comforted the grieving  
like a king giving courage to his troops.

### 30

But now, they laugh at me, men lesser than me in age,  
men whose fathers I wouldn't have trusted as much as the dogs that  
watch my flocks,

men without the stamina for any respectable work,  
beggars and outcasts, grown useless in hunger and poverty, driven  
out of every settlement, who hide in the desert and the waste,

who feed on whatever roots and berries they can pluck from the  
scrub,

thieving nomads, chased from the towns with curses and shouts,  
who sleep in dry riverbeds, in holes, in the fissures of rocks,  
who live under bushes, who bray among the nettles like wild asses,  
men without religion, men without family, men afraid — and rightly  
— to show themselves in any city.

Now I'm the hero of their taunting songs, their proverb is "worse off  
than Job,"

they despise me — even they avoid me — except to spit in my face,  
no bond of respect bridles them back, they look me in the eye and  
hiss;

the mob comes up against me, they trip me with a kick, dig a pit for  
me to fall in,

they shove me from the road, add force to my fall — they need no  
help, it's easy enough.

They troop in at me as though through a breach in a city's wall; they  
writhe on the ground, laughing at the wreck I am.

Terror rolls over me, chases me down the road like a wind, all hope of  
rescue blown away like a cloud,

now my soul pours out with every groan, days of pain have seized me,  
the hurt bores through my bones, restlessly gnaws me at night,

God's awful power is on me like a garment, its collar throttles my  
neck,

he throws me into the mud — I lie there little better than the dirt  
beneath me.

God! I cry out for your help — you don't answer; you only notice  
when I try to stand up,

then you're present — as my enemy — I feel the hate in your hands.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

You hurl me onto the wind, make me ride the bucking gusts — my  
brain melts from panic,  
because I know you'll finally kill me like you do all that lives.

No one I saved from their own disaster holds out a hand to pull me  
from the rubble  
though I wept when I heard of their hard times, my heart went heavy  
for every wretch.

I hoped for the best and recieved the worst, waited for day and only  
more night came,  
and when day did come, it only brought my bowels more spasm and  
ache.

I shuffled along, bent over with grief, with no sun overhead; I stood  
up before the people, cried for help:

"I have no friend, no kin among you all — my only brothers are the  
jackals, my comrades are the ostrich's abandoned nestlings,  
my skin is blackened from hunger, my bones burnt dry and white  
from thirst,  
my harp plays dirges, out of tune and harsh, my flute sobs and keens."

### 31

When I was married, I swore an oath on my eyes — and kept it — I  
never even noticed another woman,

and what reward did God on high send down, what wage from  
towering Jah?

Wasn't it the wreck due a sinner, the ruin a criminal deserves?

Didn't he see all my goings? He counted my every step!

Did I walk the path of lies, did my legs carry me at a run towards  
deceit?

Let God weigh me in any fair scales, he'll see my purity.

If I turned from the right road, if I so much as looked and lusted, if  
my hands are stained by anything I touched,

I'll eat whatever I planted, roots and all!

If I was tempted by another woman, if I hid by her door waiting for  
the husband to leave,

may my wife grind grain as another's slave, may strangers take my  
place between her legs.

If I did such a crime, it requires the harshest judgement!

Adultery's a fire that eats a man's house down to its foundations, his  
fields down to their roots — if I committed it, let everything blaze!

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

If I wouldn't listen to my manservant or maidservant when they made complaint against me,

what could I hope for when God confronts me, how answer when he probes my heart?

Didn't he who made me make my slaves too? he gave us both shape in a woman's womb.

If I refused a poor man's request, if I made a widow cry,

if I ate my morsel all by myself and the orphan never shared it,

if I didn't rather raise him as if I were his father, and help him along as though we'd both one mother,

if I saw my worker without a shirt and didn't clothe his naked need,

if his shivering butt didn't bless me when the wool from my lambs covered him warm,

if I shook my fist and shouted at the little man because I knew I had power in court,

may my right arm break off at the shoulder and my forearm snap at the elbow!

But I feared God's punishment — at the thought of his power, I'd no strength for harm.

If I put my trust in gold, if I said to my coins: "I'm safe with you!"

If I rejoiced because I had wealth and exulted at owning so much,

if, when I saw the sun rise in brightness or the moon move in beauty,

I secretly raised my hands in prayer and greeted them as gods,

— that would have been a crime to condemn me, it would show I'd forgotten God above.

If I was glad at the misfortune of a man who hated me, if I brayed with joy when bad befell him,

if I ever let my mouth so sin as to whisper the hope that he were dead;

if I didn't feed my servants so well they wished someone were hungry so the food wouldn't be wasted,

if my home wasn't open to the whole highway, if a traveller ever had to sleep out of doors,

if I ever sinned and hid it, buried it in my mind as people will and didn't confess it outright

through fear of what the crowd would think, scared of losing my status among the clans — if I kept it quiet and private;

if I did any of these things I wouldn't now hope for a hearing — but I never did! I take oath, affix my signature: now let the Almighty answer what I've said! My case couldn't be more clear and well-ordered if I'd written it out on a scroll

and held it up over my head for everyone to see.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

I walk up to God, confident as a king, crowned with my just cause,  
ready to recount and account for every step I took.

If ever the land cried out because of me, if ever a tear fell in the  
furrows of its fields because of what I did,  
if I got rich from it without paying well my workers, if I made my  
servants groan,  
let it bring forth brambles, not wheat, for me, and in place of barley,  
weeds.

The speeches of Job were completed.

### 38

And God answered Job from the midst of a hurricane:

Who's this polluting the intellectual air with uninformed opinion?  
Stand up like a man, buckle on your sword-belt: I'll ask, you answer to  
me!

Where were *you* when I laid the Earth's foundations? Tell! if you know  
so much;

who took its measurements, surveyed its space — at least you must  
know *that*?

When the world's foundation stones were sunk in the void, what did  
they finally rest *on*? What holds them up in mid nothing? Who slid into place  
the keystone upholding the whole impossible arch

on that first of all mornings when the stars sang together and all the  
gods shouted with joy?

Who sealed off the ocean of Chaos, slammed a gate against it, put  
limits on its liquid infinity gushing from the womb of non-being?

who tamed the roaring blackness of ancient Chaos, reduced it to mere  
oceans, then wrapped those newborn seas in swaddling clothes of  
darkness, mist and cloud?

who cut them off abrupt at the edge of land, whose law walls them off  
with a shore,

who ruled their proud swollen waters could only raise their foaming  
heads so high, no further?

Did *you* one day ordain that morning would exist and teach Dawn where  
to rise,

how her beams would seize the earth to its edges, scaring off crooks,  
making muggers hide from light?

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

clearing that crew from the newlit planet like you'd shake crumbs  
from a blanket,

making this world stand out sharp, distinct, like an image fresh-stamped  
in clay, in clear contour and high relief, shining and clothed with color,

denying the evil any pleasure in her light — which catches them in the  
arrogant act and breaks their upraised arm?

Have you visited the springs that feed the sea from beneath, walked  
the weedy forests of the ocean floor?

Have you seen the gates of Sheol open? Even peered through its  
keyhole at Mot and the race of shades?

Do you understand how wide the world actually is? Tell me, if you've  
grasped it all!

What road leads to the home of Light, and Darkness — where's *its*  
house?

Trace these back to their native lands — lead on! you of course know  
the way,

you *must* know — you're so ancient, so great in days, born before either  
of these!

Have you been to the treasury where snow is stored, where I stockpile  
hailstones — at least you've seen *that*?

the icy armory where I save my skyish weapons for winter's bitter,  
war's chilling, day?

Why isn't light lessened, made fainter as it travels, scattering Eastern  
brilliance to the edges of the West?

Who pours the upper sky's flood down as rainfall, spraying it evenly  
over all between horizons? How do thunder and lightning know which  
way to roll and jag?

Who sends rain, now to the desert, where there's no man to even see  
it,

now quenching heat-cracked dusty fields to make them bristle  
fiercely green?

Does the rain have a father? Who gives birth to dew drops?

Whose womb creates ice? Who's the mother of all frost?

How is it water freezes, disguising itself as translucent rock? The  
ocean itself cramps into white and solid plains!

Did you weave the Pleiades together, can you unfasten the stars of  
Orion's belt?

Do you make the zodiac roll forward with the seasons? Can you  
console the Great Bear for never being able to touch her own cub?

Do you know the laws of the heavens? Did you impose their  
influence on earth?

Can you raise your voice till it echoes through the clouds and they  
answer you in rainfall?

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

Do the lightning bolts wait for your orders, crackle out “Yes, Master!” and flash off where you send them?

Who placed wisdom behind the eyes, trapped insight in the skull’s bone walls?

Whose intelligence marshals the armies of the clouds, at whose orders do they open fire — pouring out their weight in rain,

making dirt melt into autumn mud when summer suns have baked it hard as clay in a kiln.

Do you hunt up kills for the lion? fill their bellies with torn red flesh when they’ve waited hungry hours crouched in their mountainside caves, in patient unfed ambush?

Who sees to it the raven finds food, when her children chirp to God that they’re starving, and flutter in circles, giddy with hunger?

### 39

Did you decide the right season for mountain goats to give birth? do you midwife the pregnant deer when they crouch to squeeze out their babies, wombs widening pang by pang?

Their children grow and strengthen fast as the grass they feed on, they run off, forgetting they ever had a parent.

Who made the wild ass free from the first, never to know the bridle — to create him was to liberate him —

his home is every open field, every outstretch of desert’s his address, he whinnies a jeer at the crowded towns; he’ll never obey a mule-driver’s shout,

he finds his pasture even on mountaintops, there’s no plant he can’t eagerly eat.

Does the buffalo wish he could be your slave? will he eat from a manger and sleep in a stall?

will you hitch him to your plough and have him pull furrows down your field?

will you trust him because he’s so strong, count on his power to get your work done?

can you count on him to bring in your harvest and thresh the sheaves of grain?

The ostrich, when she’s happy, paddles her stubby wings — the stork’s no less a bird with feathers to flash —

but only the ostrich lays and leaves her eggs lying out on the ground, trusting the dust to keep them warm,

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

she's no idea that every passing step, every beast of the field could crush them.

If she even recalled her children you could say she was cruel — but the laying of her eggs is less than a memory — if she noticed them now, she'd wonder what they were:

God shared no wisdom with her, but gave her a gap for a brain —  
she flutters her useless wings and thinks she's flying, honks scornfully down at rider and steed.

Are you the one who made the horse strong? did you weave the quivering muscles of his tremendous neck?

did you teach him how to jump like a grasshopper? to snort scarily with his glorious big nostrils?

He scoops out a valley with impatient pawing hoof, whinnies his joy, gallops with all his power to meet the war-chariots;

if he knew what fear was, he'd laugh at it — he'll never swerve back from a sword.

While arrows clank in the quiver on his saddle, spears hiss flickering by and javelins snap,

he drinks up distance, hurtling heavy over the quaking battered earth under hoof; when he hears the shofar-blast, he thinks it's another horse and neighs back glad answer; he snuffs eagerly at the battle-smell, ears up for the shouting of war-horns and roaring of commands.

Did you instruct the hawk how to soar and circle with outspread wings?

Did you command the eagle fly at a prouder pitch, build a more eminent nest,

live on utmost cliff, fall asleep nodding over chasm, make its watchtowering house on the fang-point apex of crag?

— from there it scans the plain for food through telescope eyes;  
wherever there's flesh to tear, the eagle's already diving after it, to bring her beaky babies back fat hunks of bloody meat.

## 40

And Jah said to Job:

Does my aggrieved colleague have any objection to raise? Does God's prosecutor have anything to add?

Job answered:

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

I'm humbled to nothing — what can I say? I clamp my hands over my gaping astounded mouth.

Bad enough I spoke even once; I'm not about to try it twice.

Then Jah went on from the midst of his hurricane:

Stand up like a man, buckle on your armor, I'll ask, you answer *me*.

Are you really going to tell me my justice adds up to nothing? will you prove I'm to blame and you're right?

are you about to shake your sky-churning fist and utter thunder?

Go on, veil yourself in exalted splendor, robe yourself in glory and pride,

scatter the bomb-bursts of your wrath, catch every arrogant man and knock him to his knees,

detect all the proud and make them crawl, beat down the wicked where they stand,

make the earth swallow them all, cover their faces with dirt,

go on, do it all, you powerful being! I just can't wait to see it!

Now look at Behemoth, like you, my creation — he chews grass like an ox,

what power's in the beef of his massy rump, woven with the sinews of his belly!

His penis is tough and supple as a cedar, his boiler-plate scrotum hugs a pair of cannon-balls,

his bones are pipes of bronze locked into cast-iron flesh,

he is God's masterpiece — only his creator would dare to battle him.

He could just as well chomp the grass on the hills where every other grazing beast is glad to be,

but he'd rather look up at the lotus, his tonnage sunk in reedy swamp, in the shade of lotus-shrubs, hidden by willows all around.

If the river suddenly flooded, he wouldn't be startled or even shift position — not if the entire Jordan gushed straight into his face.

Do you think you can walk up under Behemoth's eyes and pierce his nose for a ring like a bull's?

Can you drag up Leviathan with a fishing rod, snag his lower jaw and yank him gaping out?

bore through his mouth with a fish-hook and string him like a bead by the face?

Will he flatter you, croaking for mercy as he flops on the dock?

Will he sign a contract with you to become your slave forever?



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

Will you give him to your daughters to play with like a song-bird  
leashed by the leg?

Will you haggle over his price as you sell him by hunks to the retailers?

Can you prick his hide with a spear, make his neckless head bristle  
harpoons?

Go on — step closer — just touch him — I bet your thoughts have  
turned from war —

### 41

you won't be planning your victory celebration when the sight of him  
sends you running for cover.

The cruellest mercenary wouldn't risk catching his eye — who could  
stand up to and stare back at him?

I made everything under heaven — what do I owe to anyone — who  
even existed before me?

So why should I silently listen to your self-obsessed if powerful  
expressions, your graceful though irrelevant turns of phrase?

Has anyone ever gutted Leviathan, parted the curtains of his flesh?  
Who ever dared draw near his horizon-wide lips?

Who's knocked on the gates of his face, seen them open on the terror  
of his teeth?

His sealed, tight-fitted scales glitter magnificent as a river of shields,  
one so close to the other not a breath could leak between them,  
they stick together like brothers, hold fast and never give up.

His sneeze is a white blast of heat, his eyes are two dawns side by side,  
live coals shoot from his mouth as embers leap from a fire — when  
he smiles the escaping flames lick his lips,

smoke geysers out of his nostrils like steam from a boiling kettle,  
his breath would kindle coals, his mouth is a gaping cremation.

His backbone is the summation of strength, he radiates anguish and  
fear;

the layers of his flesh are pressed so dense that nothing could budge  
his bulk,

his heart is hard as fossil, solid as a lower millstone;

when he surfaces, heroes hug each other in terror, their boat shatters  
and they splash in panic.

Sword, javelin, slingstone, mail — nothing stands up to him.

He treats iron like straw, brass like rotten wood,

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

no arrow makes him dive for cover, a hurled rock does no more than  
a handful of grass,

to him a club is a nutshell, he thinks it's funny when you shake your  
spear.

He can stretch out on glass-jagged rocks, comfortable as a flat-bottomed  
barge drawn up on a muddy bank.

He makes the whole ocean boil around him like a pot of stew on the  
fire,

his creaming wake so foams the sea it all goes white like a human's  
hair,

there's nothing on earth even like him, not nearly another so fearless a  
creature,

this being looks down on all proudest things, king over the kings of  
beasts.

### 42

And Job replied to God:

I know you can do everything — your intentions are immediate  
acts —

“Who,” you ask, “by his lack of understanding darkens the  
deliberation?”

I spoke as I did because I didn't understand — never guessed how  
astounding, how baffling you are —

You say: “Listen to my words: I'll ask the questions, then you reply  
and enlighten me!”

All I knew about you was nothing more than rumor — now that I've  
seen with my own eyes —

I melt into a puddle of penitence, wishing I could just seep unnoticed  
into the dirt.

Now Jah had finished talking to Job and, turning to Eliphaz, he said: “My  
anger roars up against you and your two friends because you didn't speak  
correctly concerning me as did my servant Job. Now take seven bulls and  
seven rams, and sacrifice them for an atonement while my servant Job prays  
for you as intercessor: and as a favor to him I won't punish you for your  
stupid, inaccurate ideas about me.”

So Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar did as God told them, and God  
spared them as a favor to Job.

And God reversed again the fortunes of Job while he was praying on  
behalf of his friends, and gave him back double all he'd had before. All

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

Job's brothers and sisters and former friends came to Job's house, brought food and ate with him, nodded, sympathized, comforted him for all the evil God had sent down on him, and everyone gave him a coin and a golden ring.

And God blessed Job's end more than he had his beginning, and Job had 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1,000 yoke of oxen, and 1,000 she-asses; he had three daughters whom he named Crystal, Chantilly and Amber: they were the most beautiful girls in the entire country. Not that they needed to be, with the huge dowries Job was able to give them.

Job lived for another 140 years, saw his children's children's children, and finally died, an old man content with the length of his life.



# Solomon's Testimony



## Solomon's Testimony

This is in some ways the most difficult book to translate in the Hebrew Bible. Though the text is generally in an excellent state of preservation, the language is so elliptical that some lines are now quite unintelligible. This stylistic problem is exacerbated by the fact that we are now (third century B.C.) at the very border between Classical and Mishnaic Hebrew and the different worlds they represent. The content of the *Testimony* is abstract and philosophical, but the vocabulary remains concrete and poetical — a rich store of abstract nouns such as we find in later Hebrew are not yet available. Often, only the context tells us what abstract sense the concrete term is carrying. My method has been to preserve the poetic language insofar as possible, but place glossingly beside it the abstract sense. For example; *bevel* (wind) may indicate anything from actual wind to concepts such as futility, uselessness, impassivity, endlessness or activity.

The famous opening line “vanity of vanities, all is vanity” actually reads “wind of wind, it’s all wind.” Since the following lines cite a devastating list of instances of activity, human and natural, being without lasting effect, I translate “wind of wind” with “nothing lasts any longer than words shouted into the wind.” Thus, by a paraphrase, I bring out the full content of the line without (I hope) forfeiting its poetic charm.

A much subtler problem is the author’s use of religious terms in a very non-religious way, for example, he may use “righteous” to indicate “lucky.” Here the sense is left deliberately, and a little wickedly double: the author makes the limits of language a smoke-screen for his skeptical ideas. Unfortunately this delphic style cannot be matched in a translation that aims for clarity — much that I have had to translate as raw cynicism is expressed in the text by the verbal equivalent of a mysterious grin.

I have put into somewhat higher relief the book’s clear implication that it was written by Solomon, sufficiently evident by the reference to predecessors on the throne, building projects, &c. This attribution was of course only to give the book prestige and authority — such apocryphal ascriptions were the rule rather than the exception for this period.

The customary title given the book, *Ecclesiastes*, is merely the Greek translation of the Hebrew title *Qobeleth*, and means “one who speaks before an assembly,” a term with religious, legal and political overtones. The English word “testimony” conveys precisely the sense required.

The actual author was evidently a wealthy man who had (by the tenor of his most-iterated complaints) been deprived of some of his income. He also shows a minute acquaintance with the down side of court life, which suggests he was “passed over” for some deserved preferment. His overall tone is Epicurean, and it is entirely reasonable to assume that there

was some direct influence. Epicurus himself lived from 342-271 B.C. and Israel was under Greek rule from Alexander's conquest in 332 (taking it from Persia) to the age of Roman rule (with Pompey's conquest in 63 B.C.). Greek rule differed from Persian in that, while the Persians were content to receive the taxes and leave it at that, the Greeks made a real attempt to incorporate the subject lands into the world of Hellenic culture and politics — which meant that Greek was the language of all official business and became at least as well known in Israel as English is today. Accordingly, the author of this third century B.C. *Testimony* was born into a hundred year old acquaintance with Greek culture, of which Epicureanism would have been one of the most powerful intellectual currents. Some of our author's statements on the indifference of God, the calm disposition advocated as a philosophical ideal, and the bland acceptance of death, are in content and formulation entirely Epicurean. This has of course been strenuously denied by the Jews, who have no interest in acknowledging the huge debt of late-classical and rabbinic Hebrew thought to Greek culture, and by the Christians, who are even more eager to maintain the imagined "purity" of the Hebrew tradition from which they claim descent. Accordingly, this is the first translation ever to present honestly the Epicurean passages of this book.

I do not, however, wish to suggest that the author is nothing but an Epicure. Though he was unquestionably influenced by Epicurus' doctrine, his position probably represents that of the Sadducees, whose pointed hostility to the doctrine of life after death and the Pharisaic predilection for meticulous and wordy observance would have found much that was congenial in Epicurus' doctrines. When we remember that the Sadducees — the wealthy, priestly party — were also the Hellenizing "modernizers" from whom the Pharisees distanced themselves, the reading of the book as Epicurean-Sadducean becomes quite defensible.

The connection of the book with the Sadducees is a new one — the "official" pietized versions and interpretations of the text passed along from generation to generation have prevented this clear identification.

The laundering of the text has had one further effect which must be noted: since the actual content was never understood, the text was divided into chapters somewhat randomly. Accordingly, the chapter numbers are indicated within, not before, the sections.



## The Testimony of Solomon, Son of David, King in Jerusalem.

(1) It's all pointless, declared the king, nothing lasts any longer than words shouted into the wind.

What do men get for all their hard labor in the few days they're given to live under the sun? What's left to show for it all?

The generations come and go, leaving not so much as a footprint behind them on the earth  
which lasts impassively forever.

The sun rises, the sun goes down, then rushes underground back to the place it started and rises blithely there again as though it never had before;

the wind blows south, then veers back north, circling, circling, around and back again forever;

all rivers flow always to the sea, which never gets any fuller, but they keep on pouring oceanwards, just like they always have;

it's demoralizing even to contemplate all this unrelenting but meaningless activity — it's exhausting even to try and describe it —

and even if one could, it would do no good — the eye will never be satiated with seeing, however much the ears have heard they're still hungry to hear more:

we're forever eager to find out something further, something new, even though there's nothing that will be or be done that isn't the same thing all over again — there's nothing really new under the sun.

Whenever someone says: "Look, *this* at least is new!"

you can be sure it's only something so old that everyone's forgotten the last time it happened.

No one remembers the first human beings, nor will there be any better recollection of this present generation among those who live in the times that are to come.

I, Solomon, who testify, was the last to rule from Jerusalem over a united Israel;

I set my mind to explore and dispassionately examine every activity that takes place under the heavens:

all in all, it's a sorry business that God gave man to slave over.

I reviewed every possible mortal employment the sun so briefly shines upon — and discovered that not one has more, or better, or longer effect than writing on sand or shouting words into the wind.

There's more wrong in this world than human work can fix, too much even to set down in a list.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

So I said to myself: "I've accumulated more power and wisdom than any king who ruled before me in Jerusalem, my mind has far explored along the paths of wisdom and experience;

let me now, for the sake of comparison, try insane self-indulgence and hunt unthinkingly for pleasures, to see if that's equally useless and deluded,

since I've found that wisdom just makes you more irritable, and understanding why things happen just makes you sadder.

(2) So I resolved to pop the joyful cork and start the party

— this proved equally empty —

wine made me howl with laughter over nothing, ecstatically happy for no reason at all

— this did not however change anything.

So I tried a more moderate indulgence in wine, and continued my grim driven grasping after whatever secrets the pleasures might contain — perhaps they'd reveal the best way for man to spend his few years of life here on earth.

I undertook massive building projects, erected palaces, planted vineyards,

made gardens and parks, planting them with every species of fruit tree,

I had dug fishponds — actually, lakes, — big enough to water my new-planted forests, now transplanted to their shores where none had ever been before,

I had slaves and slave-girls, some bought, some born to those already on my estates; I had more cattle and sheep than all my predecessors at Jerusalem together;

I stockpiled gold and silver: my private holdings exceeded those of provinces, of kingdoms;

I had male and female singers, and, that greatest of pleasures known to Adam's sons — wives and mistresses.

I became greater and richer than any king before me in Jerusalem — my wisdom was useful for this at least.

I never denied myself any enjoyment — and indeed, these bursts of pleasure in the midst of all my acquiring were the only pay-off for what was actually hard work.

Then I stood back, viewed all my efforts and what they'd constructed;

I might just as well have slaved to build castles in the air for all the lasting worth my work had — nothing that's built in days can last more than a petty measure of suns.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

Then I looked back on my exploration of wisdom and my soundings in senseless pleasure, with an eye to deciding which, on balance, was better,

trying to see things from the perspective of my successors in the far future calmly reviewing what was done by those before them —

and I saw there is more advantage in prudence and wisdom than there is in the insane hunt for fun, just as there's more advantage in having a light than there is in stumbling around in the dark;

the wise man at least has his eyes in his head, the fool might as well be blind.

But I also noted that neither escapes death, a like end comes to them both, and I thought:

"I'm going to die, the same as any moron, so what good is there in having been so wise? It didn't provide a way out of death, which will dissipate my accumulated wisdom like smoke into the wind.

"The wise aren't remembered forever, in fact little longer than fools.

"In the unending outstretch of days to come everything is finally forgotten — the wise and the fool, equally dead, are just as unremembered as if neither had lived."

So I hated life, because it looked to me a bad business, the whole deal, this moment, this flicker of existence in sunlight —

since all our efforts are finally meaningless as breeze, which, whether it pass by whispering or roaring, leaves no lasting track and signifies nothing.

And I was even more disgusted with all I'd built up in my short term here on earth, under the sun, since I'd only end up leaving it to the man who comes after me —

a man who could be stupid or brilliant — I'll never know — and he'll have control over all my laborious works which I planned so intelligently all my life's short day — efforts as meaningless finally as the wind stirring the sand.

Thus disgusted, I turned away, and gave up even thinking about all the great works I'd done in my mortal sum of suns, since a man who's worked carefully, intelligently and successfully has to give it all to someone who made no effort for it:

that's not only meaningless as breeze, it's terribly wrong.

What then does a man get for his work and anxious plannings all his brief number of suns?

To have his days made sad and irritable from overwork, and worries that keep him awake at night

— a life that comes and goes insignificant as wind.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

Does a righteous life then consist of eating and drinking and trying to enjoy yourself despite your life's workload?

Those *do* seem to be the terms on which God handed us this existence; and certainly, pleasure comes from God, regardless of whether Man decides to enjoy or refrain.

I don't see how we can avoid the conclusion that the good man, the man with whom God is pleased, is the one whom God gave enough wisdom and experience to enjoy himself,

and the sinner, if this is at all a meaningful term, must be the one God punishes by having him labor to amass and gather all sorts of possessions, which he ends up leaving to another —

to another whose effortless acquisition of the stuff shows *he's* the one who's righteous and rightly rewarded.

Well, if that's the way things are, then working hard to heap up holdings is as useful as trying to herd the clouds.

(3) In this world of things so short lived and fast shifting that time is reckoned by suns, there's no intention or activity that doesn't soon find its necessity and appropriate moment.

Suddenly it's the right time to give birth or to die, to plant or tear out by the roots, to murder or heal, kick down or build up, cry or laugh, grieve or dance, save or squander, make love or refrain, seek out or get rid of, guard or neglect, tear up or sew together, keep quiet or speak, love or hate, make war or peace —

Since life is such a frantic succession of changes, such a storm of altering circumstances, how can any work a man undertakes help him for long?

And I pondered the various sorts of work God gave Adam's heirs to slave over:

God made every kind of activity as a beautiful match to a certain need and circumstance,

and he gave man an intelligence great enough to contemplate the whole world,

without however giving him the kind of insight that would enable him to uncover the underlying causes and ultimate ends of the events God causes to occur. Consequently, man never knows for sure what will happen next,

and the best he can expect from any work is to have some pleasure in doing it and to earn a living by it.

Indeed, any pleasure from food or drink or general contentment a man can extort from his life-sentence of hard labor — that's a gift from God, in fact the only one he gives.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

And I understood that God will forever continue to run the world exactly as he does now; no change can possibly be effected in the pattern of existence for better or for worse; we can do no more than look on in amazement;

that which was once is no different from the yet more distant past, and what will be will repeat what once was —

God is apparently chasing himself in circles.

I also noted these features of mortal existence:

in place of fair decision there was injustice, and in place of equity, evil.

At first I thought: “Eventually God will *have* to judge between the righteous and the guilty; like everything else in turn, justice will find its necessity and appropriate moment.”

But I was finally forced to conclude that if any divine decision *is* to be deduced from the lack of justice in the world, it’s only the decision to demonstrate that men’s contendings in no way differ from the amoral survival fights of animals.

And in fact, the same end comes to man and beast, they die alike:

man is no better than beast, the same breath pumps through human and animal lungs, and when they breathe their last both their souls dissipate into the wind, and both their bodies go under the same earth.

All living things are made out of dirt, to dirt they return. No one really *knows* that the human soul rises skywards while that of an animal just seeps into the ground.

I conclude then that there is nothing better for a human than to try and take pleasure in what he does — because that much surely *is* given him,

and there’s no way of knowing what — if anything — happens after death.

(4) When I turned my attention to all the oppression that takes place here on earth throughout life’s brief sun-measured stretch of days:

I saw the tears of the victim, and how everyone just ignored them; and as for the oppressors, they had power, but no one had any warm feelings for them either.

And I envied those who’d died long ago, at least more than I did those still living

— but luckier than either are those who haven’t yet been born, who’ve never had to see what a rotten business it is, this mortal existence under a short succession of suns.

Pondering all the hard work that men do and the profits they make from their labor, I saw that it was all motivated by competitive envy — which is meaningless as breeze.

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But on the other hand, the lazy fool just lies on his back and snores his way to starvation.

All in all, it's better to own little and enjoy it, to have one scant handful of contentment, than to sweat and stagger under a double armload of work and possessions and never have pleasure from them.

Another human condition I saw which made no sense at all was a man all alone, without even a brother, ceaselessly slaving away, never rich in his own eyes no matter how wealthy he was, never asking himself for whom he was spurning delights and living laborious days — that's crazy, and it's sad.

Two together are better off than one alone: their shared expenses are easier to meet,

and if one falls, the other can help him up — but if you fall alone, who'll hold out a hand to you?

Two sleeping together keep each other warm; it's a shivery business sleeping alone.

If someone attacks you, you and your friend could stand up to him easily, and three cords braided together make a rope that won't soon snap.

A boy who's poor but smart is better than a king who's old and foolish and has forgotten how to listen to advice — because that poor boy may yet make it as far as from the jail to the throne of the country he was born in, while the old foolish king may yet lose all he was born to.

[*lines 4: 15-16 unintelligible.*]

(5) Don't be in a hurry to utter vows before God or even think them. God is the Lord of Heaven, and you're a little creature scurrying on earth. Have a sense of your scale in the scheme of things and let your words be few.

Just as a dream rushes forward filled with unrelated matters, the voice of a fool in prayer is full of empty promises and silly wishes.

When you *do* vow an offering to God, don't put off its fulfillment. God doesn't like to be toyed with by fools: if you vow it, do it, and soon! It's better to have made no vow at all than to fail to fulfill it once made.

Don't let your unthinking tongue bring punishment down on your whole body, don't have to explain to the recording angel it's all a mistake.

Why should God come to hate the sound of your voice and ruin your business as punishment because your jabber was empty and senseless as the words of a man talking in his sleep?

Show God some respect.

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Don't be stunned when you see the poor crushed, justice stolen and judicial decision for sale in the land: society is a pyramid of oppression, every high-placed predator has another over him. Whatever the land produces has to be split up among them all — and so it comes about that there's not a weed in a vacant lot the government doesn't tax.

The man who loves money will never have enough to be contented, nor can the man who loves property ever be satisfied by more. Acquisition by itself is finally senseless.

The more you have, the more hired people you have eating it up, until you as owner have to spend all your time managing things, and have no advantage over your employees,

except the empty one of being able to look it all over and think "mine."

Sleep is sweet for a working man no matter how small his supper was, while the rich man with his full belly lies awake worrying.

There is a sickeningly evil thing I've seen here on earth: you have a man who denied himself, suffered privations to save up a lot of money, then he loses the whole hoard in a bad business deal,

and he ends up leaving his child empty-handed, and he himself dies naked and poor as a newborn babe, not a penny left in his fist for all the work he did.

This is disgustingly unjust! He leaves life the same as he entered it, with nothing to show for all his pointless labor, the dinners he ate in the dark to save a candle, his suffering, frustration and rage.

So then, this is what I found to be good and appropriate for a human to do in life — to eat and drink and try to enjoy whatever work he does here on earth for the short sum of suns God's allotted him.

The man to whom God gives wealth and property, and the power to use and enjoy what he has and take pleasure in his work — that's the man whom God has blessed.

God gives Man happiness to counterbalance the fact that his life is short and he knows it.

(6) There's an evil I've see here on earth — and a common one it is — you have a man whom God has given wealth, property and honor — there's nothing he could wish for that he doesn't have — and yet God doesn't let him enjoy what he's got — some stranger comes and takes it all.

It's insane that this can happen — and it's sickeningly unfair.

If a man has a hundred sons, and lives a hundred years, but he doesn't get his portion of mortal enjoyment, if he ends up so poor and alone there's no one to even bury his bones — I'd say an abortion made out better than he did,

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for it approached existence gently as a breath and returned whence it came quiet as night, it never left the shadows of nameless non-being; it never saw the sun or the kind of life that sunlight shows us

— that aborted almost is happier than a man who lives twice a thousand joyless years:

after death comes nothing for either, there's no afterworld compensation of a bitter life here.

(7) There's no perfume smells better than a good reputation.

The day of death is better than the day someone's born, and it's better to go to a funeral than to a party — because it makes you remember that you, like everyone else, are going to die.

Tears are better than laughter, and sad looks are a sign you're starting to understand things.

The wise man's mind is always half-grieving, the fool's is amused at everything.

It's better to listen to a wise man scold you than to tap your feet to the songs of fools — the laughter of the fool is a meaningless noise, like the crackling of thorns thrown on hot coals.

[7: 7 *unintelligible.*]

What's important is not how a thing starts, but how it ends.

A patient mind is better than one that's proud and quick to take offense: being always in a huff is the mark of a fool.

Don't say "Things were better in the old days.." — That's a failure of pessimism — things never *were* good.

[7: 11-12 *unintelligible.*]

Consider this world which God has made: who can set right all that God made wrong in it?

But this at least you *can* do: when things go well, enjoy. When things go badly, remember

God makes both success and misfortune, forever alternating,  
no man has any idea what's coming next — things may improve in turn.

In the course of my pointless life I've seen everything; just men most unjustly killed, evil men living evilly ever after.

Don't be too righteous or too wise — why get yourself destroyed?



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Don't be too evil or unduly stupid — why should you die before your time?

Hold on to both these rules, careful not to grip just one and let the other drop,

but always be God-fearing, by which I mean, be circumspect — and everything should be fine.

A wise man is more powerful through his own prudence than the ten most important men in the city —

but remember, there's not a man in the world who's perfectly righteous, that is, who always makes the right choice with never an error.

Don't listen to everything people say — you might overhear your servant cursing you — and that's not worth your attention. You know that plenty of times you've said tart things about others you felt more than you meant.

Careful reflection also showed me the following to be true:

I resolved to become wise — but that proved beyond me.

Existence is too wide for a man to take it all in, so deep you'll never get to the bottom of it;

but in my attempts to explore the whole human condition, from wisdom and prudence, through wickedness and rashness down to madness and stupidity, I did however make this discovery:

that Death itself causes less suffering than Woman.

She's a trap — she uses love as a bait, and when she locks her arms around you, you can almost hear the cage-door clanging shut.

The man God has blessed is the one who escapes her, the man God wants to punish is the one she snares and enslaves.

This is my sworn testimony: I reckoned up all my experiences and this is the sum result:

I found maybe one decent man in a thousand, but not a single good woman yet, even though I've never stopped looking, and wish with my whole soul to find one.

But bear in mind this slightly counterbalancing consideration: so far as I can make out, God made all human beings basically upright, but they thereafter have, of themselves, proved unfortunately ingenious.

(8) What is the mark of a wise man, of one who understands why things occur?

Intelligence makes you smile, it lights up the face, gentles the expression and makes the eyes shine.

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My advice to the courtier: obey the king, stay true to the oath you swore before God at the coronation.

When you attend him in court: don't panic and run out when he loses his temper, nor should you stand up to him when he's wrong;

he'll do whatever he wants anyway, its not like you can escape or change him.

The king's command is insuperable — who can say to him “What do you think *you're* doing?”

Obey orders and you'll stay out of trouble; play his game by his rules, use tact, remember etiquette, and you'll do very wisely.

Tact and timing will save almost any situation, but remember, the human condition has this great defect:

not only is it impossible to know what will happen next, even if you have a fair idea, there's no telling how soon.

No man can command the wind to stop, no man beats death, no man can take a break in the middle of a battle, and no evil man's evil will save him in the end.

I also made this observation in my study of all that takes place under the sun: it often falls out that one man has power over another and abuses it cruelly.

I've seen just such evil persons solemnly interred in holy ground and the funeral procession return sadly to the city — clearly the mourners were quite ready to forget all these men had done. Which is insane.

If there's no prompt or even eventual redress for the evil men do, then of course people feel encouraged to do wrong. They sin, they commit a hundred crimes — they know everyone will put up with it.

[8: 12b-13 a *pious interpolation*.]

A further earthly condition that makes no sense:

there are honest men who suffer what criminals deserve, and crooks who get the rewards honesty earned.

Seeing how much on earth makes how little sense, I place the highest valuation on pleasure;

there's nothing better for a mortal than to eat, drink and be glad. He should always have some joy to offset the drudgery God gave him for a life under so small a sum of suns.

Having set my mind to the acquisition of wisdom and the examination of all earthly activities,

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I concluded that even if a man were to keep poring over it all,  
sleepless, day and night, life-long,

he could still never come to understand all the things God causes to  
occur beneath the sky.

No matter how hard you search, the meaning of life will elude you,  
and if some wise man says he's found it, then you can be *quite* sure he  
hasn't.

(9) Reflecting intently on the pleased or angry reception God gives to the  
actions of even the wise and the just, I can only conclude God does whatever  
whim dictates — man can't predict how he'll react and any response is  
possible.

And in the end, Death gets everyone, the just man and the evil man,  
the good man who observes the laws of ritual purity and the man who  
cares nothing about defilement, the one who sacrifices to God and the  
one who doesn't, Death comes to the virtuous just as to the sinner, the  
one who uses God's name just for emphasis same as the one who  
respects it —

of all the injustices under the sun, this one is the worst — that one  
same end comes equally to everyone:

this consideration fills mens minds with evil and madness while they  
live: why shouldn't they do as they please right now? They're all  
condemned to death no matter what.

But still, there's always hope for a man, as long as he's alive —

bad as things may be, remember: a live dog is still better off than a  
dead lion.

True, the living know they will die — but the dead don't know  
*anything*.

The dead can't accept your gifts or hear your praise,  
their loves, their hates, and their jealousies were over long ago.  
They have nevermore any effect on the doings of the world.

Get along then, sit yourself gladly to table, eat up, drink your cheerful  
wine,

for these pleasures are signs of God's favor as sure as anyone gets.

Dress up every day in silk, don't spare the rare perfume,

enjoy life with the woman you love all the days of your meaningless  
existence,

for this is your portion, your wage for the long day's labor of life.

Everything you undertake — do it with all your might. This is your  
only chance to do it at all —

there's no doing or reasoning or learning or knowing in Sheol where  
you're going.

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The fastest man doesn't always win the race or the strongest man the battle,  
often enough the revered scholar starves and even the shrewd man can't make a living,  
when times get hard enough, not even a con-man can strike up a friendship. Chance and luck rule all.  
Poor baffled mankind can never tell the right moment when it comes,

so circumstances catch us like fish in the cruel net,  
like birds in the trap — suddenly snared wherever bad luck jumps us.

Sunlight showed me this discovery too, and I think it no small one:  
There was once a small, sparse-inhabited city, and a great king came and surrounded it, building huge siege-towers.

There lived in that city a man poor but wise, who had a plan that would have saved them. But no one would listen to him because he didn't *look* important.

And I realized: Wisdom may be stronger than an army, but when it wears a patched coat no one comes to listen,  
even though its words are easier on the ear than the shouted commands of the idiot-in-chief.

Insight is better than weapons, but one fool's enough to wreck a well-laid plan,

(10) just as one dead fly in the perfume is enough to make the whole bottle ferment and stink,

and a single mistake can destroy a long earned reputation and people's belief in your wisdom.

A wise man's mind is his savior — that a fool thinks at all destroys him;

even when he's just walking down the street, the fool's every movement declares what he is.

If the ruler loses his temper with you, stand your ground, don't leave the room —

when he's done shouting, answer gentle and calm — this approach can win forgiveness for even big sins.

Another earthly evil I've noticed — which must be just an oversight on the part of our esteemed rulers —

for they wouldn't have knowingly given fools high office while men of name and property were humiliatingly ignored —

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and yet, I have seen slaves on horseback while princes followed on foot.

If you dig a pit for a booby-trap, you may be the one who falls into it.

If you move the stones that mark the property lines, you may get bitten by the snake that lives under them.

Dangerous work is called dangerous for a reason — every stone-quarrier and woodcutter can show you scars.

If you don't sharpen a dulled axe, you'll have to work harder: it makes more sense to use your brain — and your whetstone.

There's no point in knowing the art of snake-charming if the serpent bites you before you can use it.

A wise man's words win friends, a fool's mouth is so dangerous to himself it would be an act of charity to gag him:

he starts by uttering nonsense, talks his way into bad trouble — and he still has *lots* more to say.

A man never fully grasps what's happening right now — so he needs someone to read him the future?

Fools work hard at working too hard — it takes effort to always avoid the clear, well-beaten path.

I'm sorry for the country whose king is a boy and whose court begins feasting in the morning,

and I envy the country whose king acts like a nobleman should, whose courtiers come to table at the appropriate time, to satisfy their well-earned hunger, not to get drunk.

It's neglect, not bad wood, that makes the roof sag and leak.

Food, it's true, was made for feasting, and wine to make life glad — yes,

and money was made for a man to earn, without it you won't drink *or* eat.

Don't curse the king even in your thoughts, don't bad-mouth the powerful in your own bed under the covers —

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the stool-pigeon builds its nest where you'd least expect it, and can broadcast private thoughts like a popular song.

(11) It's worth the risk of shipping your merchandise overseas for the profit it'll eventually get,  
but entrust your goods to seven or eight different vessels — here on earth one never knows where disaster is going to occur.

When the clouds gather and blacken, they're about to empty their rain onto earth;  
no matter which direction a tree falls, where it falls is where it lies:  
there is an ineluctable logic to the way things happen — don't expect reality to change its rules for you.

If you're forever watching the weather for the most favorable time, you'll never get around to planting — much less reaping.  
You can't see what the wind is bringing any more than you can see what kind of baby's taking shape in a woman's pregnant belly,  
nor can you second-guess what God has in store for the world.  
Sow your seed in the morning, and don't stop work till it's too dark to see:  
you can't tell which seed will sprout, which won't — maybe all of them will grow up strong.

Light is immediately sweet and directly a pleasure — how good it is to look at the sunlit world —  
always try to be happy, for as many years as you live —  
it may help if you keep in mind how many years you won't live — the endless nothingness to come.

To be young is a victory. Hooray for the head without white hairs!  
Whatever you wish for or like the look of — try and win it right now —  
remember, by the laws of this world all delights are condemned to die — and soon.  
Avoid anger and sorrow just as seriously as you'd take precautions not to get sick.

What could be worth the time lost to tears now, in your youth, which goes by fast as wind and leaves as little trace?

(12) Remember your creator, now, in your youth, before old painful age comes and you can't enjoy a thing anymore,

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before the sun, moon and stars look dull to your eyes grown dark  
from a lifetime's tears,  
and the heavy clouds never leave your sky,  
before those sentries of your house, your arms, tremble with age, and  
those brawny servants, your legs, are stooped under the weight of years,  
and your teeth, the women who grind your grain, are too few to do  
the work, and lights are going out in the window of your eyes,  
and your ears, those doors open on the marketplace, are shut,  
muffling it all to a distant din,  
and you can't hear the birds any more though your own voice  
becomes a shrill chirp,  
and you look up with dread at a hill ahead, and a short walk has its  
dangers,  
and your head whitens like an almond tree in blossom, and your cock  
won't stand up to crow, and the nuts that hang from your branch are stale  
and good for nothing,  
and you're about to change your address for the final time, and the  
undertaker walks past your house every day;  
while the golden lamp of life still burns, hanging from its silver chain  
— before that chain snaps and the lamp is smashed —  
while the bucket still draws you up waters of life from the well of  
existence,  
before your clay melts back into the earth it was shaped from,  
and your breath returns to God who lent it,  
— remember your creator, now, in your youth, and what he has in  
store for you, and realize that everything is breeze-meaningless,  
fast-passing, traceless, air-empty.  
This is my sworn testimony.

I who write these lines was not only a sage but a teacher;  
I collected wise sayings, tested them all, and set down the best —  
those which went to the heart of the matter, which told the honest  
truth.

The sayings of the wise are like spurs.

[12: 11b-c *unintelligible*]

One final piece of advice, my child:  
writing books is an endless task — you'll never say it all,  
and studying books will exhaust you long before you know enough.

[12: 13-14 *a pious interpolation.*]





# Faces of God



# Preface

This book owes an enormous debt to Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* for insight into Moses, to Theodor Gaster's *Thespis* for the ritual meaning of the Canaanite epic, and to Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* for the understanding of religious archetypes.

The conclusions presented here disagree completely with those of respectable scholars, who claim that such things are unprovable. I don't think "unprovable" is quite the word, but scholars nowadays are understandably shy about using the term "damnable." Which shows how much ground they've lost.



# Chapter One

## Yahweh

### Freud's Theory

When I began my study of Egyptian I sat in a class where the professor offered up a slide-show overview of Nile-side art and architecture. Coming to the Amarna period, he projected the least flattering of the naked Akhenaten statues. As we studied the pot-bellied, flabby-breasted, round-shouldered liver-lipped figure, the professor asked:

“There! Think *he* wrote the Bible?”

The heat of the reaction is typical, and in itself an indication that the subject I am approaching is so sore a point that no responsible scholar afford to ignore it. Something is terribly wrong here.

What the unhappy professor was alluding to was Freud's theory, presented in *Moses and Montheism*. Freud identified the thought of the geeky-looking fourteenth century B.C. pharaoh as the source of Moses' religious conception.

Even though certain highly esteemed Egyptologists, such as James Breasted, have held Akhenaten to be “the world's first monotheist,” and recently Cyril Aldred has concurred in rather less emphatic language, Freud's theory has found no supporters. Despite the precise agreement of time, place and *content*, they would rather believe that Mosaic monotheism fell out of the sky onto a convenient mountaintop than that it was the outcome of 1500 years of Egyptian metaphysical speculation, during which the sun made ever-increasing progress in the direction of being a supreme deity.

What requires explanation is not Freud's clear and plausible theory, but the resistance to it, which has now celebrated a centennial of triumph over reality. The answer lies in a misguided reverence for the Bible. People who spend years mastering the languages necessary to study the Bible tend to do so out of piety, and so those with the skills to consider the Bible critically lack the will to do so.

The Jews, the centerpiece of whose national mythology is the break with Egypt, have no ambition to be redefined as Egyptian heretics. Nor can the Christians be enthusiastic about becoming, instead of the elect of Israel, Egyptians twice removed. But the Jews and the Christians are mistaken as to their best interests here. Supposing we were to set aside the priority even an unglamorous truth must have over the most appealing fable. Even without this, a demonstrable connection to Egypt, that is, to

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the world's oldest and most august religious tradition, is not so poor an exchange for the Bible's thunder and wonder account.

### Time and Place

The dating of the Exodus bears Freud out. Akhenaten's reign is 1366-1348 B.C. The first mention of Israel in history is 1218 B.C., on a stele erected by the nineteenth-dynasty Pharaoh Merneptah in the fifth year of his reign, which lists Israel among the peoples defeated on a campaign into Syria. Interestingly, Israel is the only one listed there with the determinative for "people" rather than "land" after their name, suggesting their immigrant and unsettled status. This is the only absolutely secure date we have for the Exodus: it must have occurred before 1218.

The account we have in the Biblical book *Exodus*, written some 200 years after the event, places it at the time the cities of Ramses and Pithom were being built, around 1300 B.C. This would be about fifty years after Akhenaten, but that doesn't rule him out. The Book of Exodus is what we would now call a historical novel, and facts are bent in it to make a better story. It would be natural to want to connect the servitude of the Hebrews in Egypt to the most spectacular of the period's building projects.

Thus the dates we have for the Exodus, definitely before 1218 B.C., and probably not too far from 1300 B.C., leave the end of Akhenaten's reign, in 1348 B.C., as a date with no real implausibility. Akhenaten made a radical reform of Egyptian religion, which was followed by a polytheist counter-revolution. Akhenaten's followers accordingly would have had to flee. Among these, according to Freud, were the Hebrews.

We know that Akhenaten employed immigrants from Canaan to staff his bureaucracy. This is attested by his diplomatic correspondence, the "Amarna Letters," which abound in Canaanitisms. (A good parallel for this "outsourcing" comes from the Roman Emperor Augustus, who ran his new empire with a bureaucracy staffed by freedmen. Because they owed everything to Augustus, their loyalty could be relied on.) Among the labor available from neighboring Canaan were the *Hapiru*, a class of nomadic traders from whose name the word *Hebrew* is derived. This is in harmony with the Biblical account, which has Hebrews from Canaan in high favor with the pharaoh from the time of Joseph.

How did we get from the flight of the last pharaoh's bureaucrats to the Cecil B. DeMille spectacular? Well, the same relation of fact to legend, and the same time span to develop the myth from the facts, is to be observed in the epics of all peoples. Thus an insignificant and unsuccessful rear guard action in the Pyrenees became the Song of Roland, the greatest poem of the Charlemagne Cycle, within 300 years. Thus a raiding party to Troy became

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the *Iliad*, the Bible of the Greeks, again within about 300 years. A hasty retreat from Egypt by Canaanite jacks-of-all-trades who carried away nothing with them but a great *idea* became the epic of the Hebrews, roughly 300 years after the less than glamorous facts.

### Evidence from the Biblical Account

First there is the name “Moses.” *Mes* is a common Egyptian name-suffix, and means “born of.” For example, the name *Ra-Mes* (which we know as Ramses) means “begotten by Ra.” The Hebrew transcription of *Mes* was *Moshe*, which took on a final “s” when it was transliterated into Greek, hence our “Moses.” To see Egyptian identity in this name is no more extraordinary than seeing Celtic identity in a man known to history as “Mac.”

Moses, a kind of nationality nickname, is the *only* personal appellation we are given for the central figure in the Hebrew Bible. Is Moses’ lack of any Hebrew name explained by his having been raised as an Egyptian prince? Freud suggested it accorded better with Moses actually being an Egyptian, whose full name would have been hard for the Hebrews to pronounce.

And Moses isn’t the only one with an Egyptian name. One could add Phinehas, *Pa-nehesi*, “the Nubian”; Merari, *Mery-Ra*, “beloved of Ra,” and Aaron, *A’a-ren*, “Great is the (god’s) Name.” Equally notable is the fact that the Egyptian names occur primarily in the priestly tribe, Levi, which suggests that Moses and the “theologians” of ancient Israel were Egyptians. To this we may add the mention of Moses’ stutter, an unlikely thing in a charismatic leader. But if we assume (with Freud) that his speech impediment was actually a foreign accent, again the facts match.

Freud observed that in many national hero stories the man is of royal birth but humbly raised, as in the cases of Sargon, Romulus and Hercules. The fact that the Moses story *reverses* the typical legendary agenda needs explaining, and again the hypothesis that Moses really was an Egyptian noble whom Hebrew legend was at pains to naturalize among the subject people explains things neatly. In fact, every truly problematic central feature of the Moses epic accords with Freud’s theory.

### Was Akhenaten a True Monotheist?

Egyptian theology had a long-standing tradition of henotheism, seeing the many gods as subordinate to this or that particular deity. This was especially the case with Amun in the New Kingdom period (roughly 2-1,000 B.C.), where the expanding empire and contact with foreign gods led to a certain universalism.

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These facts are ordinarily cited, rather disingenously, to diminish Akhenaten's achievement.

But unlike his predecessors, Akhenaten denied to other gods even so much as a subordinate and tributary existence. The iconography of the one god was so abstracted as to be imageless. Akhenaten identified God with the sun-disk, the *aten*, but represented it as a simple circle, eschewing the traditional imagery (such as a solar disk on the head of a falcon). The bare ring, where so much else would have been expected, was, in its aggressive omissions, comparable to our null sign, the circle with the line through it. In the same spirit, Akhenaten excised from all monuments he could reach the names of other gods, and even the word "god" where it existed in the plural!

It has also been objected that Akhenaten maintained the role of god-king, of Pharaoh. Although his subjects were enjoined to pray to him as representative of the Aten, this is just a standard and hoary royal formula. There is no prohibition of addressing the deity directly, and in fact that is often required, as in the the case of prayer for the king's wellbeing! Such divinity as Akhenaten claimed for himself may be adequately explained in practical terms. For Akhenaten to have put his monotheist principles into practice to the extent of dropping his official personal godhood would have been to effectively resign as pharaoh. And his official depiction, unflatteringly realistic rather than idealized like that of all his predecessors, supports the assertion that his royal godhood was no more than a matter of policy.

The Aten cult was not confined to courtiers, as has frequently been asserted; why else establish many Aten cult centers in Egypt, Nubia and Syria, in effect, every corner of the world the Egyptians had access to? Akhenaten's description, in his famous hymn, of the Aten's concern and care extending to every foreign land, is an explicit declaration of universalism, and a complete break with Egyptian tradition. In fine, Akhenaten was a thoroughgoing, indeed a missionary monotheist

### **The Religion of the Living**

Let us see now how much Akhenaten's religion has in common with Judaism. Akhenaten's lack of interest in the world of the dead, so similar to the Hebrew attitude, is particularly revelatory. In Egypt, that land where the streets were paved with ouija boards, the dead were believed to exert momentous influence on all the affairs of the living. Yet in the tombs of Akhenaten's courtiers at Amarna, our prime source for the Atenist writings, there is no mention of Osiris or the continued life of the dead. Instead we find hymns to the Aten. Mummification, though still practiced by



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Akhenaten's court, had been reduced to an empty convention of burial, and no longer formed the chrysalis of an afterlife.

It is in the context of this break with the world of the dead that Amarna art must be understood. The Egyptians considered material existence to be a cyclic recapitulation of the "real" mythic events. The pharaohs were portraitized as ideal likenesses of the first pharaoh, and on death they rejoined the "real" by "becoming Osiris." Even plants and animals were depicted in stiff archetypal forms, as eternal concepts. There was one way to draw the eternal essence of a reed or a rabbit, and any variation missed the point.

But if the absolute reality isn't located in the beyond, if everything that materially exists isn't just a third generation Xerox of the ideal type, it's worth preserving. *Life as it actually is becomes valued as the unique, the rare, the exception.* This results in the sometimes grotesque naturalism of Amarna art, particularly in the depiction of Akhenaten himself. And this extreme of realism is a clear break even with such naturalizing tendencies as Egyptian art was coming to manifest.

Suddenly, in the Amarna friezes, natural space and time are represented. The disorderly momentary forms of things are painted, while contemporary and colloquial language replaces archaism in inscriptions. The royal family is depicted for the first time informally, gnawing bones at dinner, kissing, or playing with the children. Akhenaten's wife, Nefertiti, and their daughters are shown in scenes of public devotion, giving real women a prominence and holiness never before known.

The same attitude is to be seen in the "unflattering" depictions in the Bible, such as we find of Moses' lisp and Davids peccadillos. Historical truth is more important than idealization, for therein is momentarily shown the active hand of the the Creator God. The Hebrews would carry this naturalism much further than Akhenaten by prohibiting the making of physical images: Akhenaten only went so far as to make images that were, in the context of Egypt's artistic tradition, no images at all!

True monotheism rejects all falsifications of reality, including the subtle falsification that is artistic "realism." Only reality is real. Even a photograph is so far from doing justice to reality that it amounts to an intellectual cheat — in religious terms, idolatry. One sees this same aesthetic taken even further in Taoism, where a grotesquely shaped rock, because it's chaotic formless form suggests the harmonious irregularity of reality, is more prized than a realistic statue.

Another confirmation of the Hebrew continuity with Akenaten's theory is found in the Hebrew modification of circumcision. We know the Egyptians practiced it, for in Africa, among the Semites, and in fact world wide, circumcision is the initiation rite *par excellence*.

Initiation means initiation to the mysteries of the group's religious life, for only with such knowledge can one have contact with the gods, and so

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become fully human. Moses' reform was to push initiation back from its normative position as a puberty rite to eight days after birth. Since he, like his master Akhenaten, viewed human life as the unique, the rare, the exception, it made sense to enlarge the definition of this embattled mode of being, *to ritually extend the range of human life*. We note a similar high valuation of life in a very innovative legal principle of Torah: *life is never to forfeit for crimes against property*. This is in marked contrast to the stipulations of the ancient Near East's other law codes.

The burning bush of *Exodus* chapter three is an echo of Amarna's principles. Like Akhenaten, the author of *Exodus* saw in transient things, even in a wind-shaken plant, a manifestation of the holy. The bush in *Exodus* "burns and is not consumed." Out of this flaming plant God speaks and declares that he is reality itself: *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* says God. "I am that which is — and that which is, is I." Out of a green plant, a standard symbol of that which is perishable, comes the message that all existence comes from God. For Moses, as for Akhenaten, the holy blazes forth from the momentary.

Something similar can be observed in the structure of Hebrew sacred time. For the entire ancient Near East, the cycle of the agricultural year was the pattern of existence. For Akhenaten, the *day* became the paradigm. Though the pharaohs celebrated the yearly renewal of the world each autumn, Akhenaten undermined this custom by celebrating the jubilee and renewal of his reign, the year of years, daily, instead of at the usual thirty year intervals. The Hebrew unit of sacred time is also the day: God's creation of the world takes place in a series of days, and both in the psalms and later liturgy God is frequently described as "he who renews *every day* the creation."

### The Two Plus Eight Commandments

One of the long-standing problems in understanding Judaism has been the relation of the monotheism to the morality. The difficulty is clearly visible in the ten commandments of *Exodus* chapter twenty. What is the relation of the first two, which state God's exclusive deity and forbid images, and the succeeding eight, which give a seemingly unrelated list of moral laws?

Freud explained the development of Judaism's uniquely evolved and demanding morality through Akhenaten's rejection of images. He asserted that the renunciation of the image provided the pattern for the renunciation of instinctual urges (*Treibverzicht*). Here I part company with Freud. I am not persuaded that the former leads to the latter: I think it merely complements it.

The sources of the Jewish preoccupation with morality may be sought with better success in Egyptian culture at large. Many things that

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we consider uniquely Jewish, such as the preoccupation with washing and ritual purity, the prohibition of pork, and circumcision, are actually normal parts of Egyptian culture (see Herodotus for the classic social history account of Egypt's customs). Wisdom literature, that is, collections of proverbial wisdom, were from the first a mainstay of Egyptian literature, and the wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible show direct Egyptian influence, to the point of direct incorporation of material (for example, *Proverbs* 22:17-24:22 is taken directly from the Egyptian *Instruction of Amen-em-Opet*). The knowledge of this moral teaching was a central part of the education of an Egyptian official, and is paralleled by the training of the Pharisee elite in law and morality.

Just because Akhenaten left no record of his *moral* teaching doesn't mean that Jewish morality owes nothing to Akhenaten. A moral emphasis was, for an Egyptian, a given. And for an Egyptian like Akhenaten, who was exclusively interested in God's presence in *this* world, life's moral dimension would have seemed even more urgent.

But there is more. Atenism, being a true montheism, naturally led to a universalism and humanism: the universal fatherhood of God has as an intellectual consequence the universal brotherhood of man. This would have coincided neatly with the cosmopolitanism basic to the oral law of the Hebrews. The Hebrews were *nomads*, and thus were forced to take a universal view of human rights, one valid in all countries, not just a particular one that grew out of local tradition.

### Hymn to the Aten

The best proof of the above assertions comes from Akhenaten's own scripture, the famous *Hymn to the Aten*. Date and location place it as something Moses could not have missed.

It is an unequivocal statement of the singleness of God. It rejects the idea of any otherworld existence after death (remember, this hymn is engraved on the tomb walls of Akhenaten's courtiers: if there was hope for an afterlife, this is where it would be expressed). It has the realism and universalism that are the trademarks of Hebrew thought.

Appear, be beautiful at the edge of the sky, living Aten,  
creator of life!

Risen on the horizon, you fill the earth with your  
goodness,

kindly-bright, immense, shining, high up over every land.

Your rays encompass the earth, reaching to the verge of all  
you have made.

Ra is only one of your names, you whose light touches all  
things.

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Though you are distant, your rays reach the earth and you are seen by all.

When you set on the western horizon, the land is in darkness, it looks like everything died,

everyone's asleep in their bedrooms, covered up, each eye's closed,

all their things could be stolen from under them without their knowing it.

Every lion emerges from its den, all the snakes are out biting.

Darkness, the land is silent, the one who made all rests below the horizon.

The land is brightened as you rise, orb of daylight,  
when you rout the darkness, broadcasting your rays,  
gladdening the land.

Awakened people are on their feet — only because you've raised them —

they're bathed and dressed, their arms are lifted in adoration of your glory.

The whole country goes to work.

All the herds are happily pasturing, trees and plants are greening,

all the flocks frisking and running.

Birds fly up from their nests, wings spread in adoration of your living energy,

soaring up or fluttering down — they live because you rose for them,

and ships travel up and down the Nile as soon as your light shows the way,

fish leap in the river at the sight of you, your rays light up the depths of the sea.

You who create the foetus in the womb, who make the sperm in man, who keep alive the child in the belly of its mother,

who comfort him in that dark place so he doesn't cry, who soothe him within the womb as a nurse would;

on the day he's born, when he emerges to breathe air, you open wide his mouth and fill his lungs,

you who have given breath to animate your creatures.

The chick in the egg, alive beneath the thin stoneware of the shell, you give him what he needs to breathe and live within it.

You have brought him to completion there so he can break himself out of the shell.

He bursts forth, announcing his independent perfection by walking on his own legs the moment he's born.

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How infinite are your actions! No one can view them all,  
or even see one completely, o sole God — there is no other  
besides you.

You made the world as you wished it — you and you alone

—

humans, cattle, flocks, all on earth that travel on legs  
and all that, being bird, go aloft upon their wings.

You give every man his place — be it Syria, Ethiopia or  
Egypt — where he'll find food to sustain him all his life;  
each people with its own language and character, and a  
different skin color, since you made each country distinct.

You placed the Nile underground so you could make it  
emerge for your beloved Egypt, to give life to the people you  
made your own,

you who own them totally, who exhaust yourself helping  
them, O lord of the earth, who rises for them as the sun,

the orb of day adored by all. You make live all foreign  
lands as well, by giving them clouds — a kind of Nile in the sky  
that pours waters onto their hills and overflows their fields  
with rivers, with whole oceans of rain!

How excellent are your plans, lord of eternity! You made a  
Nile in the sky for the foreigners in their countries  
and all the animals that wander the world, but for Egypt  
— a Nile that rises from underground.

You rise and your rays warm the fields, you hold the world  
to the warm breast of your light — it lives and flourishes.

You made the seasons: winter to cool your creations,  
summer so they'll feel you near.

Your singleness is clear as you emerge from among all  
creation's forms in your role of the living sun, glorious,  
shining, far off yet near,

you made the sky in which you rise, from which you scan  
the countless things

you made from your own substance and self: cities, towns,  
fields, roads, rivers.

There's not an eye that doesn't see you right in front of it:  
you're the orb of daylight high over the earth  
who travels so it can all keep existing .

You are in my mind. There is none who knows you except  
for your son Akhenaten, "God's chosen who sees all beauty as  
the beauty of God;"

may you give him knowledge of your ways, of your power,  
of the world which exists through your activity and exactly  
as you intended.

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When you rise things live: when you set they die. You are duration itself. What lives, lives because of you.

### Moses

Akhenaten left us the above clear statement of his beliefs in multiple copies. The version of atenism that Moses transmitted is not so richly documented. Therefore it is particularly important to clean away every extraneous speck, every mere accretion, from the few sure grains of data that remain.

To begin, we must bear in mind that the one God of Moses was not the same as the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” The deity associated with the patriarchs was actually derived from three separate sky gods, honored by three individual clans of the pastoral nomads who migrated into Canaan before, during and after the time of Moses, that is from 1400-900 B.C. That these relatively crude traditions were later absorbed by the Mosaic god-concept is a commonplace of Biblical scholarship and needs no documentation here. Further, the fact that the Torah records no very advanced god-concept for the patriarchs is acknowledged, and richly redressed, by midrashic literature (for example, the well-known tale of Abraham and the idols).

Along with the clan gods, the Canaanite sky god El absorbed the content of the Aten. The Bible dates this improvement of the El concept to Moses, for it is only with Moses that the name *Yahweh* and the atenist agenda is introduced. The theory that El and the gods of Abraham Isaac and Jacob owe their more sophisticated content to influence from Egypt is even more plausible in that it is not a unique case. Allah, a local sky-god of Arabian paganism, linguistically and typologically cognate with El, became a cosmic lord only after he incorporated more sophisticated Jewish and Christian God-concepts. Mohammed recapitulated the history of Moses in identical terms, and with identical success.

Setting aside El and the gods of the patriarchs, we turn to the best textual record we have for Moses’ idea: the name *Yahweh* itself — most plausibly interpreted as an archaic form of the verb *haya*, “to be.” Thus God’s self-definition in *Exodus* 3: 14, King James’d as “I am that I am,” might be more appropriately rendered “I am all that exists” or “all that exists is Me” or even “I am Being.” We should note that at this time Hebrew possessed no abstract nouns that could have served this purpose, and that if the intention of the author had been to suggest a concept like “being” this would have been the logical way to coin the term.

This god who defines himself simply as “being,” this ultimate in non-mythological, imageless religious conception, corresponds perfectly to what we find in the “Song of Moses” (*Exodus* 15) whose poetic form

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and archaic language are some guarantee of antiquity. There God is described simply as *what happened*.

I sing a praise to Yahweh who rules and overlords,  
he threw the horse into the sea, rider and all.

Jah is my courage, my war-song. My god is victory.  
This is my god. I dress him in beautiful words.  
The great god of my father — I call him “highest.”

The warrior god — his name is Yahweh.

He shot Pharaoh’s chariots and armies under the water.  
The finest charioteers were sunk in the Gulf of Suez.

The roaring water chaos of abysmal sea hid them, they fell  
like weights into lowermost depth.

Your right hand, Yahweh, is gloriously violent,  
breaking into pieces anyone who hates me.

Haughty as a giant, quick to anger, you’ll throw down  
whoever rises against you,  
whoever you’re enraged with will burst into flame,  
then they’re gone — a handful of ashes — there’s a crater  
where they were.

Your nostrils widened furious, you blew apart the waters,  
heaping up ocean on either side.  
The fluid stood firm like walls,  
the mid-sea wave-chaos parted and froze.  
The enemy said: “I’ll chase them down and catch them,  
I’ll split up what was theirs, take all I want,  
I’ll swing out my sword and my hand will make me their  
heir.”

Your breath became a wind so the sea covered them,  
they plunged lead-heavy under high water.

What other god is like you, Yahweh,  
holy, blindingly bright,  
Your praises alone are frightening,  
you do things no one understands.

You stretched out your right hand — they vanished — it  
was as if, in an extension of your gesture, the earth had split  
open and eaten them.



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Throughout the ancient Nile-to-Oxus region the battle of the storm god with the ocean dragon (for example, the cosmos-creating conflicts of Baal with Leviathan or Marduk with Tiamat) is the most central and indispensable myth, and is presented with epic elaboration. Yet here the sea is far from being a cosmic opponent. Rather, it is characterless and passive, little more than scenery.

The sea-taming motif *is* frequently and casually used in the Bible as a poetic metaphor for Yahweh's aid to Israel against foreign powers, and his establishment of the world's order. Yet this myth is not employed to illustrate the parting of the Red Sea, which might seem its inevitable object. (The one exception, two verses long, *Isaiah*: 51: 9-10, is just that, an exception.)

Not only is the chaos dragon lacking, but Yahweh is not here described as a storm or a sky god: the words for thunder and lightning are scrupulously avoided. And the images for Yahweh's actions are, though striking, inconsistent — fire ("whoever you're enraged with will burst into flame, then they're gone — a handful of ashes"), water ("the fluid stood firm like walls, the mid-sea wave-chaos parted and froze"), earth, ("it was as if, in an extension of your gesture the earth had split open and eaten them") and wind ("your breath became a wind so the sea covered them"). We have here an *eruption* in every element, not a personification. This is a god to be described not in a series of images but of explosions. This is "all that is" presented in its chaotic simultaneity. Existence itself is the archetype.

The thrill of Moses' concept is principally its frightful and intoxicating asceticism. To assert that reality, with all its chaos and contradiction, is the face of God, and to reject all the baggage of paganism, its myths, the haggling of its transactions, the kitsch of its artistic profusion, is liberating. Monothiesm is the most twentieth-century *modern* of religious viewpoints. All clean lines and brightly lit, if at times gallery-bare.

Only by appreciating the *conceptual violence* of Moses' idea can we understand the Prophets' passionate attachment to it, their God-intoxication, their contempt for less strenuous notions of deity.

### Elijah

Moses lived sometime around the middle of the thirteenth century B.C. It is not to be expected that the later prophets would reflect his thought with any great clarity because they are so much later. The great prophets, Amos, Isaiah and the rest, wrote between the eighth and sixth centuries B.C. The entire phenomenon of prophecy ceased by the time of the Maccabees (second century B.C.).



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The great prophets are the inheritors and renewers of the Mosaic tradition, as is shown by their hostility to paganism, their concern for righteousness, and their complete disinterest in the afterlife. Still, it would be difficult to find in them anything like the Zen immediacy of Akhenaten or Moses.

For the period between Moses and the great prophets, we have the record of the Judges in the book named for them. But though characters like Gideon and Deborah seem to burn with the presence and power of Yahweh, their recorded utterances are more stirring than illuminating.

There is however one final astonishing and articulate explosion of the Mosaic spirit to be found: in *The First Book of Kings*. This is in the account of how the ninth-century B.C. prophet Elijah fought against the paganization of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. (In the late tenth century B.C. the country had divided into two related but independent realms.)

I believe the Elijah material shows real continuity with Moses' conception. This seems to have been Elijah's opinion as well, for he too went to Mt. Sinai to renew his powers at the low ebb of his career, when he was brought to the point of praying for his own death:

"Enough," he cried, "Now, Yahweh, take my life . . . I am moved by zeal for Yahweh, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to the sword. I alone am left. (*First Kings* 19)

Seeking God on Moses' mountain, he encountered a theophany which strikingly parallels the description in the Song at the Sea:

. . . and look, Yahweh passed by,  
there was an enormous and powerful wind,  
breaking mountains and shattering cliffs before it,  
but the wind was not Yahweh.  
After the wind; thunder,  
but the thunder was not Yahweh.  
After the thunder; lightning,  
but the lightning was not Yahweh.  
After the lightning came a subtle silent voice. (*First Kings* 19)

Elijah's rather naturalistic scene, a storm, is transcended by the repeated assertion that *this* wasn't Yahweh. Comparing Moses' experience with Elijah's, we see the continuity of the Yahweh concept, and the evolution of its expression from mythic language (in Moses' thirteenth-century B.C. poem) to something more like philosophy (in Elijah's ninth-century B.C. narrative). Previously abstraction had been achieved by presenting simultaneous and contradictory images (Yahweh is lightning *and* earthquake *and* flood *and* wind). Here the thought is explicitly distanced from the image (the wind *isn't* Yahweh, nor is the

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thunder of the lightning). The Yahweh of Elijah, who is not this and not that, who cannot be limited by images, is a concept and addresses the intellect directly. The “subtle silent voice” (*qol d’mamah daqqah*) is a thought, a pure imageless insight into the utter *incomparability* of God.

## Chapter Two

### El

All through the Middle Bronze Age, from 2,000 to 1500 B.c., Arameans had been migrating through the fertile crescent. One portion of this group settled in Canaan, another went down to Egypt, and it was a portion of this latter group that went up to Canaan under Moses.

Once in Canaan, Moses' people adopted a dialect of Canaanite, which we call Hebrew. This was easy, for Aramaic and Canaanite were as close as Spanish and Italian. But Moses' people also adopted much of the religion and mythology of the Canaanites, as the prophets ceaselessly complain. The Canaanite influence became knowable in detail only in the early twentieth century, when the library of the Canaanite city of Ugarit was discovered. This included a large body of epic mythological poetry from which the Bible borrowed ideas, images, whole passages text, and gods — including the sky god El.

The Biblical El, who is master of time (in the Hebrew as in the Ugaritic phrase “father of years”), is very far from being a crude co-opting of the Canaanite deity. That does occasionally take place, as in:

The heavens declare the glory of El,  
the sky proclaims his handiwork.  
Day utters El's praises to the following day,  
night speaks out El's praises to the following night. Each  
succeeding day and night are creations that should inspire one  
to praise El.  
There is no utterance, there are no words said,  
day and night speak this praise of El soundlessly.  
Their order, the alternation of day and night, extends  
across the whole earth,  
their message of El's praise to the edges of the world.  
He placed in the heavens a tent for Shamash the sun god,  
who is like a groom coming forth from the chamber,  
like a hero, eager to run his race.  
He rises at one end of heaven,  
and his circuit reaches the other;  
nothing escapes his heat. (*Psalms* 19)

But this is an early psalm and a notable exception. Hebrew scripture always tries to sift out from a Canaanite myth not the most striking and literary image, but the one best suited to symbolize certain moral and philosophical

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notions. To put it more simply, Hebrew culture seems to draw on Canaanite (and other Near Eastern mythologies) as a source of *ideograms*.

The unique prominence of the sky god motif in Hebrew mythology is apparent on the most casual perusal of the texts. The Canaanite sky god El was taken on as synonymous with the God of Moses, an identification accepted as early as our records go, *and never challenged even by the prophets*. This is entirely understandable: implicit in the sky are concepts such as loftiness, power, transcendence, radiance, omniscience and totality. The sky sees all, and, as Eliade explains, "... for primitive man ... comprehension and awareness are, and remain, epiphanies of power, of sacred force. The one who sees and knows all can *do* and *is* everything." The sky god's mere awareness of things brings them into being, thus he is effortlessly and implicitly the creator. On these terms the sky-god is an entirely accurate, if rather florid, translation into symbol of the monotheist idea.

The Hebrew descriptions of El exhibit all the standard features of the sky god as described by Eliade. To summarize Eliade's description, the sky god is a type found everywhere and universally conceived as creator of the universe, rain-giving guarantor of the earth's fertility, infinitely wise and prescient, and founder of the group's laws and rituals during his brief visit to the earth. The pertinence of this description to the God of the Hebrews is writ so large across the Bible that "he who runs may read."

The sky god is also, typically, a *marginal* figure.

In the sources which are geographically the most relevant to our inquiry we find El the Canaanite and Anu the Mesopotamian sky god to be deities so bounded in importance that their descriptions are few and brief. What is stated of them concentrates on their uselessness. We see this most dramatically in the Ugaritic texts, where El is threatened with physical violence by his daughter Anat. (All quotations from Canaanite epic in this book are taken from Coogan's delightfully readable *Stories from Ancient Canaan*.)

And the Virgin Anat replied:

"My father, El the Bull, will answer me,  
he'll answer me . . . or else  
I'll push him to the ground like a lamb,  
I'll make his gray hair run with blood,  
his gray beard with gore,  
unless he gives Baal a house like the other gods'  
and courts like Asherah's sons."

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— a threat followed by El's prompt and enthusiastic acquiescence. Clearly a god who can be so managed is far from being on the top of the divine hierarchy.

Throughout the Ugaritic poems the adjectives applied to El are "merciful" and "compassionate," which mean not only that he does only good but that he does not punish; that is, he is ineffectual and can safely be ignored. This is not only an inference from the fragmentary Ugaritic epics, but the generally attested case: the sky-god is honored worldwide with *precisely these* pacific and equivocal titles of "merciful and compassionate." What is striking in the case of the Hebrew El is that these qualities become active — prestigious rather than pathetic.

Universally, the sky god has the formal status as father and king of gods and men. He is regarded as the founder of laws and norms, the source of justice, and is at the same time, because of the sky's implications of totality and omnipotence, the author of all that occurs. Hence the world's injustice seems to accuse the sky god of impotence, of having become a *deus otiosus*. This may well suffice to explain the marginalization of the sky god.

This very question is posed in regard to El in *The Book of Job*, where one of Job's friends upbraids:

... What can El know?  
Can he govern through the dense cloud?  
The clouds screen him so he cannot see (down to earth)  
as he moves about the circuit of heaven. (*Job* 22)

But despite the devaluation of the sky god which is here seriously contemplated — and powerfully expressed — it was not a position seriously taken up. *Job* was written about a century after the exile to Babylon, and it reflects the dissatisfactions of its time. But a hundred years later we find a new and dramatic exaltation of El, as in these three late psalms (from probably the fourth to third centuries B.C.) which give an overview of the positive sky-god attributes in their fullest development.

Here the sky god is a type of superior and paternal goodwill:

For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.  
(*Psalms* 103)

Elsewhere in the late Psalter the sky god symbolizes fairness and evenhandedness:

Who is like Yahweh, our God,  
who, enthroned on high,

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sees what is below,  
in heaven and on earth.  
He raises the poor from the dust,  
lifts up the needy from the refuse heap . . . (*Psalms* 113)

Finally the sky, which is above and has an overview of all also represents transcendence and omniscience:

If I take wing with the dawn  
to come to rest on the western horizon,  
even there your hand will be guiding me,  
your right hand will be holding me fast.  
If I say, “Surely darkness will conceal me,  
night will provide me with cover,”  
darkness is not dark for you:  
night is light as day,  
darkness and light are the same (for you). (*Psalms* 139)

A consequence of the sky god’s aggrandizement was the development of the most natural and immediate symbol of his influence – *the day*.

The Hebrew conception of sacred time is strikingly different from that operant in Egypt, Canaan and Iraq. For these nations it was the agricultural yearly cycle which provided the structure of being, while for the Hebrews, with their emphasis on the sky god (rather than the deities of weather and agriculture), it was not the year but the day. That the day is the most essential structural unit of creation is evident from chapter one of *Genesis* (dating from the third century B.C.) where the day is the basic measure of divine activity.

Indeed, it appears as though the Hebrews originally conceived of the creation as something that took place in a single day. That is the version preserved in the earlier (1000 B.C.) account given in chapter two of *Genesis*:

This is the origin of sky and earth, how they were created *in the day that God made them*. There weren’t yet any plants or grass in earth’s fields because God had not caused it to rain upon the earth and there didn’t exist any humans to till the ground. Then a mist rose up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground.

The creation takes place “in the day,” and the mist that rises from the ground to water the barren earth is the first morning mist — that initial morning brought everything into being just as all succeeding mornings bring the world into view.

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In both accounts of the creation, the early one (written in Solomon's time) and the later one (some seven hundred years later), the day is the original radiating forth of the sky god's power. By implication, morning is the original condition of things, and every dawn constitutes a symbolic recovery of the first day of creation — in a sense, every day is new year's day, the momentous recommencement of the cycle, with all life's time-sick energies restored. This is the concept which we find in the very center of the Hebrew soul's most anguished cry for renewal — *The Book of Lamentations*:

The kindness of Yahweh has not ended,  
his mercies are not spent.  
*They are renewed every morning —*  
ample is your grace! (*Lamentations* 3)

The day is described not only as theophany (visible manifestation of God) but as kratophany (revelation of God's power): it is the image of rescue from one's enemies, either achieved:

This is the day that Yahweh has made —  
let us exult and rejoice on it! (*Psalms* 118)

or anticipated:

I am more eager for Yahweh  
than watchmen for the morning. (*Psalms* 130)

The day-as-kratophany is what makes God the master of time, the "God of History," and so, in utmost extension of this attribute, Lord of the *Day* of Judgement.

In *Isaiah* 2: 2 the abrogation of the previous world order is called the "end of days." This is the end or ordinary time, of mere days, which God's previous creative acts in time brought about. And this "end of days" introduces a new dispensation, a new *day*, which is envisioned as a pure show of force.

Yahweh, whose army is the night sky's luminaries,  
is bringing his *day* against —

all the high and heaven-affronting things of the natural, artificial and moral landscape, mountains, towers and human pride (*Isaiah* 2). The power which flattens these prominences is a kind of light; a heavy radiance that people hide in caves to escape. The leveling of the terrain is not attributed to God's stamping foot, his shaping hands or his terrifying thunder — which melts mountains in the psalms — the only description of what is meant by this day is in terms of its height and splendor and its terror. We are presented then

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with the sky god's classic attributes of luminosity, loftiness, totality and awesomeness, meticulously maintained. The day symbolism is not merely the garment, but the basis of Isaiah's vision. *Gloria dei, gloria Dei.*

This is a key to understanding, and indeed to identifying the first Isaiah's writings. In the light of his vision of the day, human pride and loftiness, which *affront the heavens* are the essence of sin. Only the sky god is exalted. To ignore his demand for the observance of the moral laws (which the sky god archetypally establishes) is to *deny his light*, or, as Isaiah says in the fifth chapter of his book, "they make darkness light and light darkness." In short, the daytime sky is the face of God.

We find the day concept still at center stage even at the weary and disillusioned low ebb of archaic Hebrew religiosity, in *Ecclesiastes* (third century B.C.), where the whole repetitive, pointless and ineffectual round of human activities presided over by a touchy and unhelpful God is described with relentless repetition as what happens "under the sun." The day is used here more as a symbol of the ephemeral than the sacral character of existence, an acid refrain intoned at the expense of the most venerable Hebrew conception of sacred time.

Something very new is at play here. We are now entering the period of Greek, that is to say, *gnostic*, influence and the *mythology of reason*. In this period a highly developed light symbolism has taken hold of the Hebrew religious imagination. I analyze this in some detail in my book *Buried Angels*, in chapter four section two. For the present it must suffice to note that here the day finally lost its sacral meaning, and is used as part of an overall devaluation of material existence. Thus the period following Alexander's conquest presents us with lines like:

For in your sight a thousand years  
are like yesterday that has passed,  
like a watch in the night. (*Psalms* 90)

But having noted this late and somewhat disquieting development, I will not dwell on it. My goal in this chapter was give the reader an appreciation of how El was transformed by the genius of the Hebrews into an emblem of the one God's loftiness, power, transcendence, omniscience and totality.



## Chapter Three

# Baal

### Storm God and Chaos Dragon

A battle with the dragon of the waters is a universal myth, describing the mastery of nature for agriculture. The flood-monster is “dismembered,” that is, canals and dikes are built to protect fields from flooding by rain-swollen rivers. The regularity of irrigation guarantees the success of the harvest, and so the dragon is slain or tamed. There are many other themes at play in these cosmogonic poems, but this seems to be the primary one.

The best quick substantiation of this theory comes from examining the form the myth takes in differing levels of culture. Here is a tale from the Micmac Indians of the far North East of America, recorded by Charles Leland (best known nowadays for his book *Aradia*, which became a holy book for modern witches in the 1960's). Leland heard the legend from a very talented Micmac birch-bark artist named Tomah Joseph, who was also a hunting guide to Teddy Roosevelt.

The Micmac were a pre-agricultural, hunter-gatherer society. In their version of the dragon myth, a bullfrog has dammed up and drunk all the water and the country is dying of thirst. The world-shaper culture-bringer divinity, Glooskap, defeats the creature thus:

And having come to the monster, Glooskap said, “Give me to drink, the best you have, you muddy little fellow!” But Chief Bullfrog replied with scorn, “Go get your own water!” Then Glooskap thrust a spear into his belly, and out gushed a mighty river, all the water the land would have received in the weeks when Chief Bullfrog had been drinking it all down. Glooskap, rising high as a giant pine, caught up Chief Bullfrog in his hand, squeezed him with a mighty grip, and crumpled his back. And look, Chief BullFrog became nothing but a bullfrog!. So Glooskap hurled him contemptuously back into the stream, to live in the currents that once more flowed

Ever since that time the bullfrog's back has crumpled wrinkles in the lower part, showing the prints of Glooskap's awful squeeze.

In the Ugaritic Baal epic, Yam (Ocean) makes a bid for cosmic dominance, and Baal counters his attempt thus:

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The club danced in Baal's hands,  
like a vulture from his fingers.  
It struck Prince Sea on the shoulder,  
Judge River between the arms.  
Sea was strong; he did not sink;  
his joints did not shake;  
his frame did not collapse.  
Kothar (the blacksmith of the Canaanite gods) brought  
down two clubs,  
and he pronounced their names:  
"As for you, your name is Chaser;  
Chaser, chase Sea,  
chase Sea from his throne,  
River from the seat of his dominion.  
Dance in Baal's hands,  
like a vulture from his fingers.  
Strike Prince Sea on the skull,  
Judge River between the eyes.  
Sea will stumble,  
he will fall to the ground."  
And the club danced in Baal's hands,  
like a vulture from his fingers.  
It struck Prince Sea on the skull,  
Judge River between the eyes.  
Sea stumbled;  
he fell to the ground;  
his joints shook;  
his frame collapsed.  
Baal captured and drank Sea;  
he finished off Judge River.  
Astarte shouted Baal's name:  
"Hail, Baal the Conqueror!  
Hail, Rider on the Clouds!  
For Prince Sea is our captive,  
Judge River is our captive."

A more normative account of the struggle for world rule is this violent parallel from Mesopotamia, wherein Marduk slays the chaotic sea serpent Tiamat, and builds the universe from her corpse. (I give N. K. Sandars' translation from *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia*, the most readable version I know):

Then they met: Marduk, that cleverest of gods, and Tiamat  
grappled alone in single fight.  
The lord shot his net to entangle Tiamat, and the pursuing  
tumid wind, Imhullu, came from behind and beat in her face.  
When the mouth gaped open to suck him down he drove

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Imhullu in, so that the mouth would not shut but wind raged through her belly; her carcass blown up, tumescent, she gaped — And now he shot the arrow that split the belly, that pierced the gut and cut the womb.

Now that the Lord had conquered Tiamat he ended her life, he flung her down and straddled the carcass; the leader was killed, Tiamat was dead, her rout was shattered, her band dispersed.

(There follows a description of how Marduk vanquished the gods who had been Tiamat's allies.)

He turned to where Tiamat lay bound, he straddled the legs and smashed her skull (for the mace was merciless), he severed the arteries and the blood streamed down the north wind to the unknown ends of the world.

When the gods saw all this they laughed out loud and they sent him presents. They sent him thankful tributes.

The lord rested; he gazed at the huge body, pondering how to use it, what to create from the dead carcass. He split it apart like a cockle-shell; with the upper half he constructed the arc of sky, he pulled down the bar and set a watch on the waters, so they should never escape.

This gives us a complete spectrum of attitudes towards irrigation and land mastery — from the playful Indian tale to the sadistic Mesopotamian version; the theme is more grandiose and its content more cruel in proportion as the level of agriculture is extensive and laborious. The Canaanite tale, probably because theirs was primarily a trading society, occupies a middle position. I have cited this pattern at considerable length because it is one that is quite extensively drawn on and fatefully developed by the Hebrew authors who, like their Canaanite predecessors, preserve the chaos dragon alive as an integral and powerful (if subordinate) part of the orderly cosmos.

There are many allusions in the Bible to the victory over the chaos dragon, all clearly modeled on Canaanite material. The most explicit are these:

Ascribe to Yahweh, O divine beings, ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength.

Ascribe to Yahweh the glory of his name;

bow down to Yahweh, majestic in holiness.

The voice of Yahweh is over the waters of the ocean,

the God of glory thunders, Yahweh, over the might waters.

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The voice of Yahweh is thunder, is power; the voice of  
Yahweh is majesty;

the voice of Yahweh breaks cedars; Yahweh shatters the  
cedars of Lebanon.

He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Syria like a young wild  
ox.

The voice of Yahweh is lightning, kindles flames of fire,  
the voice of Yahweh convulses the wilderness of Kadesh,  
the voice of Yahweh causes hinds to calve

and strips forests bare

while in his temple all say "Glory!"

Yahweh sat enthroned on the Flood,

Yahweh sits enthroned, king forever. (*Psalms* 29)

The prototype of this Yahweh, who discharges thunder and lightning from  
his mouth, and whose storming ends with his enthronement on a evidently  
subjugated flood (Ocean), is clearly Baal. Another example of the myth in  
Hebrew adaptation is:

In my distress I called on Yahweh,

cried out to my god, in his temple he heard my voice,

my cry to him reached his ears.

Then the earth rocked and quaked;

the foundations of the mountains shook, rocked by his  
indignation;

smoke went up from his nostrils,

from his mouth came devouring fire, live coals blazed  
forth from him.

He bent down the sky: the rain-clouds were low and heavy  
in the heavens,

he came down, thick cloud beneath his feet.

He mounted a cherub and flew, gliding on the wings of  
the wind.

He made darkness his screen,

dark thunderheads, dense clouds of the sky were his  
pavilion around him.

Out of the brilliance before him

hail and fiery coals and lightning pierced his clouds.

Then Yahweh thundered from heaven,

the most high gave forth his voice — hail and fiery coals.

He let fly his shafts and scattered them, he discharged  
lightning and routed them.

The ocean bed was exposed,

the foundations of the world were laid bare

by your mighty roaring, Yahweh,

at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. (*Psalms* 18)

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The image of the world suggested by the ocean covering the earth's foundations is a little more complicated than what would naturally occur to the modern reader. Georg Fohrer, in his book *The History of Israelite Religion* gives a description that is so clear it is worth quoting here in full:

In the ancient Near East the world was thought of as a self-contained structure; in Israel, it was first conceived of as bipartite (heaven-earth) and later, under Mesopotamian influence, as tripartite (heaven-earth-abyss). Heaven was a gigantic bell-shaped dome inverted over the earth; above it were the waters of heaven and the heavenly palace of the deity, below it the stars and constellations moved about. The earth was thought to be a flat surface with four corners, though some believed, on account of the way the horizon appears to our eyes, that earth was a round disc. Either way, the earth rested on posts or pillars. The latter were fixed in the waters of the abyss under the earth; this water fed the springs and watercourses of the earth, whence they flowed back down to the abyss. Within or beneath the abyss lay the realm of the dead, which was usually thought of as belonging to the third portion of the world.

To return to the psalm: Yahweh who so scares the waters that they run off, leaving bare the supporting pillars of the earth-disk, is a Yahweh based on Baal who routs Yam, the sea-dragon.

This incorporation of Baal material, from the time of the judges (thirteenth to tenth centuries B.C.) is fairly superficial: no more theologically meaningful than Milton's borrowings from Graeco-Roman myth to gussy up his Christian epic. Somewhat greater significance is to be accorded the later (kingdom period) development of Baal-Yahweh as a political and military emblem. In this context, foreign powers were routinely equated with the waves of the chaos-dragon. For example:

Ah, the roar of many peoples that roar as roars the sea,  
the rage of nations that rage as rage the mighty waters —  
nations raging like massive waters!  
But he shouts at them, and they flee far away,  
driven like chaff before winds in the hills,  
and like tumbleweed before a gale. (*Isaiah* 17)

Similarly, when the seventy-fourth psalm describes the destruction of the Temple in 587 B.C., it asks God to smite the Babylonians as once he did Leviathan:

. . . it was you who drove back the sea with your might,  
who smashed the heads of the sea monsters;

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it was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan,  
who left him as food for the denizens of the desert.

Further examples of this political use of the dragon-battle motif will be given later in this chapter, for they are importantly subordinated to a larger schema. For the moment I shall confine myself to the merely literary uses of the symbolism — those which were really only a decoration for the Yahweh concept. Of this sort is the allusion to the smiting of Rahab (literally “arrogance,” an epithet for the sea-dragon Yam,) in the creation account in *The Book of Job* :

He set the horizon in place at the edges of the world-disk  
encircling sea

that extends as far in every direction as light and darkness  
can reach.

The pillars of heaven tremble, astonished at his thunder.

By his power he stilled the sea, by his skill he struck down  
Rahab,

by his wind the heavens were calmed; his hand pierced  
that writhing Serpent.

These are but glimpses of his rule, the mere whisper that  
we perceive of him. Who can absorb the thunder of his mighty  
deeds? (*Job* 26)

— but this is no more than to say “all this he shaped from Chaos.” It’s a colorful literary reference, like Leviathan in *Job* chapters forty and forty-one, a Leviathan who is (as in Psalm 104) merely a big beast, an instance of God’s unbridled creativity, with nothing to suggest Yahweh’s opponent.

Our last example of the motif is from *Genesis* chapter one:

. . . the earth being unformed and void , with darkness over  
the face of the waters, and a wind from God swept over the  
water . . .

This is the final significant appearance of the Pattern in Scripture. The spirit, *ruak*, literally “breath” or “wind” of God hovering over the waters (in Hebrew *tehom*, a word cognate with the Babylonian Tiamat), is the latest attenuated descendant of the ocean-subduing storm god.

### Tsedeq and the Sacred King

Baal never came close to competing with Yahweh in the literary hymns we’ve just looked at. Things were different though in rituals of kingship. In the ancient Near East, the king’s central role was as representative or incarnation

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of the male agricultural deity. The parade example of this analogy between royal and cosmic rule is the Babylonian new year's festival where the king personifies the land-fertilizing storm god Marduk. The text recited on this occasion includes:

Powerful master of the Igigi gods, exalted among the great  
gods,  
Lord of the world, king of the gods, divine Marduk, who  
establishes the plan,  
Important, elevated, exalted, superior,  
Who holds kingship, grasps lordship,  
Bright light, god Marduk,  
Who measures the waters of the sea, cultivates the fields,  
Who dwells in the temple Eudul; lord of Babylon, exalted  
Marduk,  
Who decrees the fates of all the gods,  
Who turns over the pure scepter to the king who reveres  
him.

The king is here explicitly equated with Marduk, and so master of both the political and agricultural cosmos. Like Baal, he controls sea and masters the land: as the hymn says, he “measures the waters of the sea, cultivates the fields.” The role of the Egyptian kings as vice-regents for Osiris, the world's most fully realized example of an agricultural deity, is too well known to need more than a mention.

In the Hebrew coronation hymns we see a rather precise parallel. These were recited to explicitly equate the king's rule, renewed for another year cycle, with the original cosmic coronation of Baal — with the change of name to Yahweh.

Yahweh is king! Let the earth exult, the many islands rejoice!  
Dense clouds are around him,  
Justice(*tsedeq*) and Fairness are the foundations of his throne.  
Fire goes forth before him, burning up his enemies on every  
side.  
His lightnings light up the world: the earth is convulsed at the  
sight.  
Mountains melted like wax at the presence of Yahweh,  
at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth.  
The heavens declare his ordering of the world in  
justice(*tsedeq*),  
and all the people see his glory. (*Psalms* 97)

Yahweh reigneth, he is clothed with majesty;  
the Lord is clothed with strength  
which he has fastened on like a belt,

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and so the world also is established that it cannot be shaken.

Your throne is established from of old, from eternity you have existed.

The ocean sounds, O Yahweh,  
the ocean sounds its thunder, the ocean sounds its pounding.

Above the thunder of the mighty waves,  
more majestic than the breakers of the sea,  
is Yahweh, majestic on high. (*Psalms* 93)

We are here very clearly dealing with the motifs of the storm god and the rebellious chaos-ocean, but the images of lightning and flood are all but fused into a single explosion.

As the Baal-Leviathan myth dissolves into a single combusive act which is Yahweh, one feature of it arises with greater clarity. This feature is the result of the battle: on one level this is simply establishment of the orderly cycles of the agricultural world, but these become the type and pattern of political and social harmony, the image of justice.

A number of words are used for this moral and cosmic Order: *emet*, *hesed*, *mishpat* and especially *tsedeq*. Ringgren, in his book *Israelite Religion*, excellently observes that *tsedeq*, usually translated as “righteousness,”

... is neither exclusively nor even primarily a juristic concept. On the basis of Arabic, the original meaning of the root is something like “be right, stable, substantial.” ... the nuances can be derived from the definition “conformity to a norm.”

As Ringgren goes on to show, in a military context *tsedeq* can mean “victory which re-asserts the world’s just order.” Sociologically, it means conformity with the norms of society. On the cosmic scale it is used of rainfall sent “at the proper (*tsedeq*) time” (as it is expressed in the eighty-fifth psalm.) It is accordingly very similar to the Babylonian *mesaram* and the Egyptian *Ma’at*, the characteristic virtues of Marduk and Osiris respectively.

To do justice to the richness of the word *tsedeq*, I would have to translate it as “balance and good order of the moral and ecological world.” To be practical, I will simply translate the word in the way that most simply fits the context, giving the Hebrew word after, in parentheses.

The idea of the king as the embodiment and guarantor of *tsedeq* seems to have been already operant in the Canaan of Abraham’s time (about the eighteenth century B.C.). After Abraham returns from defeating Chedorlaomer and the kings, he is blessed by king Mechizedek of Salem (an archaic name for Jerusalem). The name Melchizedek, in Hebrew *Melkij-Tsedeq*, means “my king is *tsedeq*.” That is, the king for whom king



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Melchizedek is vice-regent, the king of the gods, is conceived of as the truest possessor of the quality of *tsedeq*.

Later, Joshua (thirteenth century B.C.) is opposed (*Joshua* 10) by a king of Jerusalem named *Adoni-Tsedeq* (my lord is *tsedeq*.) Clearly, identification with the god of *tsedeq* was basic to the Canaanite conception of kingship.

A late and very explicit coronation psalm makes it quite clear that the royal-priestly *tsedeq* king, no less than the capitol Jerusalem, was appropriated from the Canaanites. One Hebrew coronation hymn goes:

The Lord God said to my lord the king:  
“Sit at my right hand  
while I make your enemies your footstool...

The Lord has sworn and will keep his word:  
“You are a priest forever, after the manner of  
Melchizedek.” (*Psalms* 110)

Paul will continue the tradition by identifying Jesus with Melchizedek in *Hebrews* 5.

More light on the meaning of *tsedeq* — as the underlying condition of existence — comes forward in these two psalms from the kingdom period:

His help is very near those who fear him –  
he will make his radiance be the sunlight of our land.  
His generosity and his fairness will be inseparable.  
God’s justice (*tsedeq*) will be to effect general wellbeing:  
what’s right and what’s profitable will be things so closely  
allied they kiss.  
The land will bring forth in one movement grain and equity,  
the skies will shine down light on a world filled with justice  
(*tsedeq*).  
Yahweh bestows all good things,  
and our land shall yield her produce. (*Psalms* 85)

Here is a clear description of as the king maintaining *tsedeq* in the land all year long:

O Yahweh, endow the king with thy justice,  
and the king’s son with your righteousness (*tsedeq*),  
that he may judge your people with righteousness (*tsedeq*),  
your poor justly.  
The mountains shall produce bounty for the people,  
and the hills as well,

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because the world-order is being maintained by justice  
(*tsedeq*).

He shall judge the poor of the people,  
he shall deliver the children of the needy,  
and shall break in pieces the oppressor.  
They shall be in awe of him as long as the sun shines,  
and show him reverence while the moon lasts,  
for generation after generation.

He shall be like the rain that comes down upon the mown  
field:

the showers that water the earth,  
so that in his days the righteous may flourish,  
and wellbeing abound till the moon is no more. (*Psalm 72*)

The psalm goes on to develop the idea most impressively, yet this excerpt suffices for my purpose, and indeed is the cornerstone of my case. The Hebrew king, like the kings of Egypt or Babylon, guaranteed the land's increase like an incarnate agricultural god.

So then, the use of the Baal-Leviathan myth as metaphor for Yahweh was part of a larger adoption of Canaanite ideas, particularly as regards sacred kingship. We can now perhaps better understand the prophet Samuel's reluctance to anoint the first Hebrew king so the Israelites could "be like other nations," and the fact that none of the great prophets had particularly warm feelings for *any* of the royal houses. We can also begin to understand how very deep the roots of the concept of the *Messiah* (literally, "annointed king") actually go — and how truly pagan the idea actually is.

The first stirrings of the mythology of the messiah are to be seen in the eleventh chapter of Isaiah, where the messiah king wears justice (*tsedeq*) like a sword-belt, and doesn't merely guarantee fertility but restores the world to its original paradisaical condition. From this to Christ the king the trajectory is brief and direct.

### The Conquest of Death

The sacred king was only a part of the mythological inheritance from Canaan. The Baal myth, *in its entirety*, appears in Isaiah, and nearly all the prophets following him, presented with detail, power and conviction far surpassing the version we find in the actual Canaanite literature from Ugarit. This myth describes the fate of Baal in the summer months. These are, in the Middle East, a brutal and deadening outstretch of time, where motion seems madness under the white weight of sunlight. In the Ugaritic account Baal, who presided over the rainy winter months, is now slain by the god of death and drought, Mot. In the Canaanite epic Mot says:

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“I approached Baal the Conqueror,  
I put him in my mouth like a lamb,  
He was crushed like a kid in my jaws.”

This declaration that the forces of life have been defeated is immediately followed by the description:

Sun, the gods’ torch burned,  
the heavens shimmered under the sway of El’s son, Death.

Immediately thereafter we learn the consequences of this are that “the furrows in the fields have dried.”

An identical blanching of the land under the sky’s heavy heat is described in Isaiah:

Behold,  
Yahweh will strip the earth bare  
and lay it waste  
and make it the opposite of what it was  
and scatter its inhabitants.  
Layman and priest shall fare alike,  
slave and master,  
handmaid and mistress,  
buyer and seller,  
lender and borrower,  
creditor and debtor.  
The earth shall be bare, bare;  
it shall be plundered, plundered;  
indeed it is Yahweh who spoke this word and this shall  
surely come to pass.

The earth is withered, sear;  
the world languishes, it is sear;  
the most exalted people of the earth languish  
for the earth was defiled  
under its inhabitants;  
because they transgressed teachings,  
violated laws,  
broke the ancient covenant.  
That is why a curse consumes the earth  
and its inhabitants pay the penalty;  
that is why earth’s dwellers have burned  
and but few men are left. (*Isaiah 24*)

The earth stripped bare, languishing and sear, consumed by a curse, with few survivors and those *burned*—this is a very clear, if highly colored, depiction of a punishing summer.

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Isaiah then enumerates all that is lacking, all that fails, in a summer extended into drought. The new wine and oil of the autumn harvest is not produced. Summer endures illimitably in an endless August.

The new wine fails,  
the vine languishes  
and all the merry-hearted sigh.  
Stilled is the clamor of revelers,  
stilled the merriment of lyres.  
They shall not drink their wine with song,  
liquor tastes bitter to the drinker, it's too hot to drink, even  
if there *were* anything to drink.  
Towns are broken, empty;  
every house is shut, none enter.  
There is a crying for wine in the streets,  
the sun has set on all joy.  
The gladness of the earth is banished.  
Desolation is left in the town  
and the gate is battered to ruins.  
For thus shall it be among the peoples  
in the midst of the earth:  
as when the olive tree is beaten to make the olives fall from  
the branches,  
like gleanings when the vintage is done, as bare as that.  
(*Isaiah* 24)

The prophet Habbakuk used the same Baal apocalypse as a paradigm; he wrote around the turn of the seventh to the sixth century B.C., and so his work comes about a hundred years after Isaiah's. Habbakuk's summer of drought goes:

I heard and my bowels quaked,  
my lips quivered at the sound;  
rot entered into my bones,  
I trembled where I stood.  
Yet I wait calmly for the day of distress,  
for a people to come to attack us.  
Though the fig tree does not bud  
and no yield is on the vine,  
though the olive crop has failed  
and the fields produce no grain,  
though sheep have vanished from the fold  
and no cattle are in the pen. (*Habbakuk* 3)

Very much later — around 400 B.C. — Joel carries on the same tradition, and is much more explicit in his invocation of Canaanite myth. Here the terrible summer is connected with mourning rites in the temple — which he

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compares to a woman mourning for her husband (the word for husband is *baal*!) I give the passage in full:

Lament — like a maiden girt with sack cloth  
for the husband (*baal*) of her youth!  
Offering and libation have ceased  
from the House of the Lord;  
the priests must mourn  
who minister to the Lord.  
The countryside is ravaged  
the new wine is dried up,  
the new oil has failed.  
Farmers are dismayed  
and vine-dressers wail  
over wheat and barley;  
for the crops of the field are lost.  
The vine has dried up,  
the fig-tree withers,  
pomegranate, palm and apple —  
all the trees of the field are sear  
and joy has dried up  
among men . . . .

The seeds have shriveled  
under their clods.  
The granaries are desolate,  
barns are in ruins,  
for the new grain has failed.  
How the beasts groan!  
The herds of cattle are bewildered  
because they have no pasture,  
and the flocks of sheep are dazed.

To you, Yahweh, I call,  
for fire, this scorching heat, has consumed  
the pastures in the wilderness,  
and flaming heat has devoured  
all the trees of the countryside.  
The very beasts of the field  
cry out to you;  
for the water-courses are dried up  
and fire has consumed  
the pastures of the wilderness. (*Joel* 1)

The Ugaritic epic gives us a fairly complete account of the following events:  
Baal is resurrected:

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In a dream of El, the Kind, the Compassionate  
in a vision of the Creator of All,  
the heavens rained down oil,  
the wadis ran with honey.  
El the Kind, the Compassionate, was glad;  
he put his feet on a stool,  
he opened his mouth and laughed;  
he raised his voice and shouted:  
“Now I can sit back and relax;  
my heart inside me can relax;  
for Baal the conqueror lives,  
the Prince, the Lord of the Earth has revived.”

El sends a message to the sun, asking the whereabouts of Baal, whom he has seen in a dream returned to life. El says:

“Sun, the furrows in the fields have dried,  
the furrows in El’s fields have dried;  
Baal has neglected the furrows of his plowland.  
Where is Baal the Conqueror, where is the Prince, the Lord  
of the Earth?”  
And Sun, the gods’ torch, replied:  
“Pour sparkling wine from its container,  
bring a garland for your relative;  
and I will look for Baal the Conqueror.

There follows a gap of some thirty-five lines, which would include a description of Baal’s return. The next passage describes Baal’s conquest of death and the chaos dragon.

Isaiah’s apocalyptic summer is similarly ended by the return of a god who is greeted as the one who guarantees the agricultural cycle (and the moral economy which is an expansion of this idea), that is, who guarantees *tsedeq*. We are shown a joyous crowd who

lift up their voices, exult in the majesty of the Lord (*Isaiah*  
24)

then greet him with the phrase:

“Glory to the one who establishes righteousness (*tsedeq*) ”  
(*Isaiah* 24)

Isaiah has a national resurrection follow, like Baal’s, the return of the rain:

Oh, let your dead revive!  
Let corpses arise,

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awake and shout for joy,  
you who dwell in the dust!  
for your dew is like the dew on fresh growth,  
you make the land of ghosts give birth. (*Isaiah* 26)

A passage in the very disordered writings of Hosea (late eighth century B.C., contemporary with Isaiah) also follows the Canaanite myth on this point. Hosea's victorious autumn includes a resurrection which is again used to represent the political "return to life" of the nation:

Come, let us turn back to Yahweh;  
he tore, and he will heal us;  
he struck, and he will bandage us.  
In two days he will return us to life,  
on the third day he will resurrect us and we shall be  
alive before him.  
Let us seek to know Yahweh:  
he will manifest as surely as will the dawn  
he will come to us like rain, like autumn rain  
that waters the earth. (*Hosea*. 6)

Judging from these passages, the resurrection of the dead — an article of faith for the Pharisees and a central doctrine for the Christians — is then, insofar as it is rooted in the prophetic writings, an extension of this phase of Baal's epic career. Similarly, the Egyptian Osiris was originally a myth applied only to Pharaoh, but gradually democratized to include the nobles, then the entire people. The Christian hope of resurrection is based in the exemplary life of an Ancient Near Eastern god-king in a more pagan way than is generally supposed.

But to return to the myth. Isaiah's resurrection is also accompanied by the thunderstorms of late September. The punishing summer has yielded to the autumn rains — rains so vehement they seem almost to wash away the land.

. . . for the sluices are opened on high, it rains  
and the earth's foundations tremble at the thunders.  
The earth is breaking, breaking;  
the earth is crumbling, crumbling;  
the earth is tottering, tottering. (*Isaiah* 24)

Habakkuk also has God return as a storm:

. . . his majesty covers the skies,  
his splendor fills the earth:  
it is a brilliant light  
which gives off rays on every side —

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and his glory shows as lightning.  
Pestilence marches before him  
and plague comes forth at his heels.  
When he stands, he makes the earth shake;  
when he glances, he makes nations tremble.  
The age-old mountains are shattered,  
the primeval hills sink low, shaken down by thunder . . .

. . . you make the earth burst into streams,  
the mountains rock at the sight of you.  
A torrent of rain comes down... (*Habakkuk* 3)

Joel follows his summer with a very similar storm. Though Joel's storm is made a metaphor for a foreign invasion, the figurative language follows Isaiah in all details: the clouds,

Blow a horn in Zion,  
sound an alarm on my holy mount!  
Let all the dwellers on earth tremble  
for the day of Yahweh has come,  
it is close!  
a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of densest cloud:  
the hills are almost black, overspread  
by a vast enormous horde. (*Joel* 2)

lightning,

Their vanguard is lightning that devours,  
their rear guard's a furious lightning bolt. (*Joel* 2)

and thunder,

Before them the earth trembles,  
the sky quakes;  
sun and moon are darkened  
and stars withdraw their brightness  
and Yahweh utters thunder  
at the head of his army. (*Joel* 2)

Isaiah continues the mythological itinerary. After a few lines of rather generalized praise for God, we are favored with this astounding description:

The Lord of Hosts will make on this mountain  
for all the peoples  
a banquet of rich viands,  
a banquet of choice wines —



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of rich viands seasoned with marrow,  
of choice wines well refined.  
And he will destroy on this mount the shroud  
that is drawn over the faces of all the peoples  
and the covering that is spread  
over all the nations:  
he will destroy Death forever.  
My Lord God will wipe the tears away  
from all faces  
and will put an end to the reproach of his people  
over all the earth —  
the Lord has spoken it. (*Isaiah 25*)

The feast is merely an apocalyptic enlargement of the Middle East's ordinary autumn harvest festivities. It is worth noting that Baal's resurrection in the Ugaritic epic had

And Sun, the gods' torch, replied:  
"Pour sparkling wine from its container,  
bring a garland for your relative...

which seems to anticipate Isaiah's "banquet of choice wines."

Habbakuk gives a more menacing sense to the wine feast, but wine feast it certainly is:

Ah, you who make others drink to intoxication  
as you pour out your wrath,  
in order to gaze upon their nakedness!  
You shall be sated with shame  
rather than glory:  
Drink in your turn and stagger!  
The cup in the right hand of Yahweh  
shall come around to you... (*Habbakuk 2*)

Joel concurs in immediately following the storm with an orgy of plenty: Joel has Yahweh "leave a blessing" — an agricultural one assimilated to a political harvest of peace:

In response to his people  
Yahweh declared:  
"I will grant you the new grain,  
the new wine and the new oil,  
and you will have them in abundance.  
Nevermore will I let you be  
a mockery among the nations." (*Joel 2*)

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Joel shows the invader will be driven away, just as the autumn storms will pass, leaving in their wake the characteristic blessings of the restored agricultural order:

“Fear not, O soil, rejoice and be glad,  
for the Lord has wrought great deeds;  
fear not, O beast of the field,  
for the pastures in the wilderness  
are clothed with grass.  
The trees have borne their fruit;  
fig tree and vine  
have yielded their wealth.  
O children of Zion, be glad,  
rejoice in Yahweh your God,  
for he has given you the early rain in accord with righteousness  
(*tsedeq*),  
now he makes the rain fall as formerly —  
the autumn rain and the spring rain —  
and threshing floors are piled with grain,  
and vats shall overflow with new wine and oil. (*Joel 2*)

Now that we have placed Joel’s account alongside for comparison, we can see that Isaiah’s apocalyptic feast is just a poetic version of the harvest-home festivities celebrated in Israel each autumn. But Isaiah’s death of Death (“he will destroy Death forever”) is more than an image of summer’s end. In the Baal mythos, when Baal returns from the dead he battles Death and Chaos to restore the agricultural world order. The Ugaritic epic goes:

Baal seized Asherah’s sons;  
he struck Rabbim, the dragon of the sea, on the shoulder;  
he struck the waves with his club;  
he pushed fallow Death to the ground.  
Baal returned to his royal chair,  
to his dais, the seat of his dominion.

Habbakuk makes the slaying of Death a metaphor for the defeat of the Babylonian invaders:

How much less then shall the defiant go unpunished,  
the treacherous, arrogant man  
who has made his maw as wide as Sheol,  
who is as insatiable as Death,  
who has harvested all the nations  
and gathered in all the peoples! (*Habbakuk 2*)

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Clearly Habakkuk, like Isaiah, is giving us the next event in the Canaanite myth. Isaiah is even more explicit. His version of the Canaanite Baal's battle with Death and the ocean-dragon is so precise as to include that latter deity:

In that day the Lord will punish,  
with his great, cruel, mighty sword,  
Leviathan the quick and coiling serpent,  
and he will slay the dragon of the sea. (*Isaiah* 27)

Similarly, Habbakuk follows the death of Death with a dragon-battle, actually using the names from the Ugaritic epic, *Yam* (sea) and *Neharim* (rivers):

Are you wroth, Yahweh, with Neharim?  
Is your anger against Neharim,  
your rage against Yam –  
that you are driving your steeds,  
your victorious chariot?  
All bared and ready is your bow,  
sworn are the rods of your word.  
You make the earth burst into streams,  
the mountains rock at the sight of you.  
A torrent of rain comes down,  
loud roars the deep,  
the sky returns the echo.  
Sun and moon stand still on high  
as your arrows fly in brightness,  
your flashing spear in brilliance.  
You tread the earth in rage,  
you trample nations in fury. (*Habbakuk* 3)

The seventh-century prophet Nahum, whose works are too disordered to permit insight into his overall conception does, however, quite unambiguously equate contemporary events (the fall of Assyria to Babylon) with the Dragon battle:

Yahweh is slow to anger and of great forbearance,  
but Yahweh does not remit all punishment.  
He travels in whirlwind and storm  
and clouds are the dust of his feet.  
He rebukes the sea and dries it up,  
and he makes all rivers fail. (*Nahum* 1)

In the light of the foregoing mythic itinerary followed by Isaiah, Habbakuk and Joel, we can hazard a fair guess at what a better preserved Book of Nahum would contain.

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\* \* \* \* \*

While El was easily assimilated to monotheism, Baal brought along an elaborate mythology that proved harder to integrate. It is not suprising that no scholar, religious or secular, has so far dared to examine it in detail, as I have here. But the scholarly shyness was quite unnecessary. The many details of the pagan tale of Baal were employed by the Bible's authors as emblems of God's active justice.

## Chapter Four

# The Center

The symbolism of the center is perhaps the richest and most elaborate religious symbolism there is. This complexity is very logical: the center is the place where everything comes together, connects and interpenetrates. The center will have most or all of the following features:

It is described as *the geographic center of world*, signaled by the presence of the most august mountain, the world-tree, the fountain which feeds all rivers, and the like.

It is *the point of origin*, the original home of the first ancestor, the first land to rise from the waters of primordial chaos — in short, the original and oldest place. (This concept will eventually expand to include the idea of the place where the first time can be *renewed*.)

The *primal paradisaal condition* still obtains there: it is a place where death may not come, where the gods still communicate with man face-to-face, where work is unnecessary.

It is the place of the *world axis*, that is, the point where heaven, earth and underearth meet, where travel from one level of existence to another is possible.

The classic center in Hebrew mythology is Eden:

The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed.

And from the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

A river issues from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and becomes four branches.

The name of the first is Pishon, the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where the gold is.

The gold of that land is good; bdellium is there, and lapis lazuli.

The name of the second river is Gihon, the one that winds through the whole land of Ethiopia.

The name of the third river is Tigris: the one that flows east of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. (*Genesis* 2)

We shall now systematically examine the symbolism in play.

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*Geography:* The place of the garden is the center of the world, for the rivers that define the four directions radiate out from that which rises in Eden. Eden itself is, as the text states, “in the east,” that is, east of the writer, who is in Israel. Thus Eden is probably in Babylonia — now Southern Iraq. From this standpoint Ethiopian Gihon, (possibly the Nile) is surely West; Tigris “east of Assyria” is East; the Euphrates which empties into the Persian Gulf is South; and the remaining Pishon (perhaps the Oxus) in Havilah, must be North.

*Origin:* Eden is the home of the original ancestors (Adam and Eve) who established all human customs (such as language — Adam names the animals).

*Paradise:* though it may seem superfluous to point out that Eden is edenic, I will note the paradisaic implications of its very name, *Eden*, that is, “delight.” Here the world’s original blissful dispensation obtains, food is had without work, animals have no fear of man and do not attack him, death is unknown.

*World-Axis:* this is the Tree of Life, which is placed in the center of the garden which is itself the world-center. This tree has the power to confer immortality. No surprise to us, who understand that this tree is planted and steeped in center symbolism. Its true world-axis character, however, is apparent only when we consider that in its vicinity God deals with Man face-to-face; it is a place where communication between the divine and human realms is possible.

In fact, every important feature of the center symbolism is present in the description of Eden. We will now show that all of these features are repeated in the other Hebrew world-centers, Zion and Sinai.

### Geography

Sinai is not explicitly described as the geographic center of the world — for the simple reason that at the time the texts of the Bible received their final formulation, Jerusalem (also called Zion for the mountain on which the Temple stood) had taken over that role.

But even without the honor of being called the world’s navel, Sinai possesses a world-tree that is perhaps the world’s most famous axis of communication with the spirit world: this is the burning bush in the third chapter of *Exodus*. Further Sinai has a miraculous spring, which rises when Moses strikes the rock in *Exodus* chapter seven. But despite these and even more spectacular features of center symbolism which we see when the Torah is given on Sinai, it is not this mountain but Jerusalem that is for the Hebrew the ultimate center.

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Even Eden's center status, given in geographic terms, was harmonized with Jerusalem's centrality by naming the spring nearest (and south of) the Jerusalem temple "Gihon" — thus assimilating the two descriptions.

The political and religious primacy of the Jerusalem temple accounts for the preponderance of center descriptions that focus on Mt. Zion and its temple.

First Isaiah (around 750-680 B.C., author of *Isaiah* chapters 1-39), describes a Zion which is the highest point of the earth:

... The Mount of the Lord's House  
shall stand firm above the mountains  
and tower above the hills. (*Isaiah* 2)

The next line adds metaphorical rivers — the inflow of people from all the surrounding nations. The importance of this detail to Isaiah is shown by the fact he coins a new verb from the noun "river" (*nabar*) to express it:

All the nations  
shall rush like rivers (*nabarn*) towards it. (*Isaiah* 2)

Now we may fairly consider these figurative streams, like the rivers of Eden, as features which define the focus of the four directions — for *all* the nations rush towards it as to a center.

The third section of *The Book of Psalms*, certainly post-Exilic and probably to be dated around the fifth century B.C. (300 years after Isaiah), gives us a Zion from which the rivers that define the directions continue to radiate.

Singers and dancers alike will say:  
"All God's springs are in you,  
you are the source of all waters." (*Psalms* 87)

This spring was also essential to Hebrew coronation rites. We have this account of Solomon's:

They had Solomon ride on King David's mule and they led him to the spring named Gihon. The priest Zadok took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon. They sounded the horn and all the people shouted "Long live King Solomon!" All the people then marched up behind him, playing on flutes and making merry till the earth was split open by the uproar. (*1 Kings* 1)

This helps make sense of an otherwise obscure last line in the great coronation psalm:

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He drinks from the stream on his way,  
therefore he holds his head high. (*Psalms* 110)

I will here make a little digression about the geography involved. Mt. Zion is not, properly speaking, the hill now so named on the southwest corner of Jerusalem's "Old City." The original Mt. Zion was the Ophel ("the hump"), the southern spur of Mt. Moriah. Mt. Moriah was the site of the temple, and is now dominated by the Dome of the Rock,

The Ophel, downhill from Mt. Moriah and the temple, possesses on its eastern slope the spring Gihon. This spring was neither within the ancient Canaanite city of Jerusalem, nor in the expanded city of Solomon and his successors. Only at the turn of the seventh century B.C. was its water diverted into the city, by Hezekiah, who cut a tunnel for it through 1,700 feet of bedrock. The new outlet, within the walls of the City of David, is the pool called Siloam, far south of the Ophel and of course downhill from it.

This tallies with the description of Solomon's coronation – for the people march *up* behind him – presumably from the spring to the top of the Ophel, and then further up Mt. Moriah to the Temple.

Some later and quite interesting examples of the spring motif are found in Zechariah, who wrote in the second century B.C.:

In that day fresh water shall flow from Jerusalem, part of it  
to the Eastern Sea, and part to the Western Sea, throughout the  
summer and winter. (*Zechariah* 14)

Joel, in the sixth century B.C., has:

And in that day  
the mountains shall drip with wine,  
the hills shall flow with milk,  
and all the watercourses of Judah shall flow with water;  
a spring shall issue from the House of the Lord  
and shall water the Wadi of the Acacias. (*Joel* 4)

But for maniacal detail and surrealistic power, nothing can surpass the sixth-century B.C. prophet Ezekiel's vision of the Temple as source of all waters. In chapter forty-seven he describes water pouring out from under the altar to form a river that flows south, great enough to water the desert and make the Dead Sea alive and sweet. (I will not quote it since the description is as dull as the idea is striking).



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## Origin and Renewal

His city is founded on the holy mountain.  
Yahweh loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings  
of Jacob.  
Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.  
I mention Egypt and Babylon to an acquaintance of mine;  
Philistia, Tyre, Ethiopia. He replies: "I know of someone who  
was born there."  
But of Zion it shall be said: "Every man was born there —  
may Yahweh preserve it!"  
Yahweh will inscribe in the register of peoples  
that each was born there. (*Psalm 87*)

When the psalmist claims that Jerusalem is the true home of all humans, he is not only making a beautiful assertion of human equality, but he is deliberately equating Jerusalem with Eden, the original home to which every man's genealogy may be traced.

But the psalmist is not simply stating that Jerusalem *is* Eden. Rather, he claims that Jerusalem has *renewed* the magic of Eden and the origin.

Regaining the Edenic condition, becoming *new*, is also central to the enthronement psalms, sung at the annual new-year's renewal of the reign (for being a Canaanite-style king meant entering into the whole cyclic itinerary of Near Eastern agricultural sacral kingship). Here we find a clear description of Mt. Zion as the place of rebirth:

Yahweh said to my lord the king,  
"Sit at my right hand  
while I make your enemies your footstool."  
Yahweh will stretch forth from Zion your mighty scepter.  
Hold sway over your enemies!  
Your people come forward willingly on the day your warlike  
power is revealed,  
you are reborn  
like a new day  
you shine like a thing new-born,  
like the dew at dawn,

Yahweh has sworn and will not change his mind,  
"You are a priest forever in the manner of Melchizedek  
the ancient priest-king of Jerusalem  
when it was still a Canaanite city. (*Psalm 110*)

The same concept is in play here:

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“But I have installed my king  
on Zion, my holy mountain!”  
Let me tell of the decree:  
Yahweh said to me:  
“You are my son,  
I have fathered you this day. (*Psalms* 2)

The idea of rebirth is explicit in this adoption of the king as God’s son and earthly vice-regent. In the same spirit, Isaiah’s Mt. Zion is a place where time is abrogated, reversed, renewed: what Isaiah in his second chapter calls “the end of days”. This entails a retreat from the technological level where war was possible:

Thus he will judge among the nations  
and arbitrate for the many peoples,  
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks:  
Nation shall not take up  
sword against nation;  
they shall never again know war. (*Isaiah* 2)

The renewal implicit in the center symbolism of Isaiah’s Zion is vastly magnified by the fact that this “end of days” is itself a new *day*, and so a renewal of creation using the original tool of Genesis. The frightful brightness that flattens the planet beneath it in the second chapter of *Isaiah* is a louder, longer echo of the first day’s “let there be light.” (This passage will be discussed in detail below under “Paradise.”)

The concept of renewal finds different and even more striking formulation in Isaiah’s famous “peaceable kingdom” passage. Isaiah compares the regained paradisaical condition to a flood:

In all of my sacred mount  
nothing evil or vile shall be done,  
for the land shall be filled with knowledge of God  
as waters cover the sea. (*Isaiah* 11)

Here I must make another digression; into water symbolism. Water represents undifferentiated potentialities, as in the chaos-flood from which the world arises in a preponderance of mythologies including the Jewish. It is also an emblem of the state of death and dissolution to which things return, dissolving their contingent forms. An example of this is the waters of Sheol, the Hebrew world of the dead.

The contradictory valuations of water, as both origin and end of life, are resolved by the notion of water as the basis of renewal, destroying the old

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and bringing forth the new. Thus Noah's flood effaced the old and withdrew to reveal a new world, which emerged at a center mountain, Ararat. Isaiah's flood of God-knowledge, from which the renewed "holy mountain" arises, is a precise parallel.

In the third chapter of *Joel* we find an image which supplements and clarifies this:

After that,  
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
your sons and daughter shall prophecy,  
your old men shall dream dreams  
and your young men shall see visions.  
I will even pour out my spirit  
upon male and female slaves in those days.

I will set portents in the sky and on earth,  
blood and fire and columns of smoke;  
the sun shall turn into darkness  
and the moon into blood  
before the great and terrible day of Yahweh comes.  
But everyone who invokes the name of Yahweh shall  
escape  
for there shall be a remnant on Mt. Zion and in Jerusalem,  
as Yahweh promised. Anyone whom Yahweh calls will be  
among the survivors. (*Joel* 3)

We needn't go into the historical details of Joel's allegory. For us it suffices to note that the *flood* of spiritual knowledge leads to the redemption and political renewal of the people on the mountain at the center of the world.

There would come one last refinement in the Hebrew conception of renewal. Rabbinic Judaism, defining itself in terms of the Law, made Sinai, not Zion, the supreme center, and the giving of the Torah was valued as the "real" creation of the world: the establishment of its *moral* structure.

An interesting corroboration of these statements is the most persistent formula in Jewish piety, the omnipresent phrase which begins every blessing and seals any religious action: "Holy art thou Adonai, king of the universe, who sanctified us with your laws . . ." This is an attempt to relive illimitably the moment of Sinai's transfiguration, to suffuse all of later life with the power of the time of the origin.

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### Paradise

Isaiah made the Mt. Zion of the future a Paradise. It would be characterized by the abolition of war and full establishment of the “peaceable kingdom,” a restoration of the coexistence with animals known in Eden.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
the leopard lie down with the kid;  
the calf and the beast of prey shall feed together  
with a little boy to herd them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together  
and the lion, like the ox, eat straw.  
A babe shall play  
over a viper’s hole  
and an infant safely pass his hand  
over an adder’s den.  
In all of my sacred mount  
nothing evil or vile shall be done,  
for the land shall be covered with knowledge of God  
as water covers the sea. (*Isaiah* 11)

But even in comparison with this magnificent passage, or the Genesis account of Eden – which makes up in prestige what it lacks in literary elaboration – the development of Sinai as a paradisiac region is impressive. The accounts of Sinai describe a *strong time*, like that which existed before history had strained the fabric of existence — in fact, a Paradise. Just as in Eden, food is obtained without effort: quail and manna fall from the sky and need only be gathered. (*Exodus* 16)

That the Israelites near Sinai have attained a condition superior to that of mortals is evident from the fact they eat the food of spirits:

So he commanded the skies above,  
he opened the doors of heaven  
and rained manna upon them for food,  
giving them heavenly grain.  
Man ate the bread of powerful spirits,  
God sent them provision in plenty. (*Psalms* 78)

Adam and Eve were naked in Paradise, and this nudity shows symbolically that they were outside the power of profane time, which makes things “wax old like a garment” (*Psalms* 102.) Though the Israelites at Sinai do not go naked, they achieve the unaging condition that ritual nudity implies, insofar as after forty years their clothing is still new:

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Remember the long way that the Lord your God has made you to travel . . . The clothes upon you did not wear out, nor did your feet swell these forty years. (*Deuteronomy* 8)

and

I led you through the wilderness forty years; the clothes on your back did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet . . . (*Deuteronomy* 29)

A further feature of Paradise is to be noted: it is *flat*. This shows symbolically that for those who have attained the condition of spirits, there are no more impediments to motion. Valleys and heights are the same to one who “flies” — he skims across them glib as a fingertip over a map.

This leveling of the three dimensions appears at the Lord’s approach in Isaiah:

A voice rings out:  
clear in the desert a road for the Lord!  
Level in the wilderness a highway for our God!  
Let every valley be raised,  
every hill and mount be made low.  
Let the rugged ground become level  
and the ridges become a plain.  
The presence of the Lord shall appear  
and all flesh, as one, shall behold —  
the Lord himself has declared it. (*Isaiah* 40)

This passage is quoted by John the Baptist in announcing Christ’s approach (*Mark* 1; *Matthew* 3). It will be more familiar to the reader in the King James formulation “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.”

The New Testament, though steeped in earlier Biblical tradition, brings an original genius to the symbolism. Jesus displays his power, his attainment of the condition of spirits, not by flattening hills but by walking on water. The disciples, despite Jesus’ chiding, seem to have understood (on the archetypal level) exactly what this meant, for they cried out in fear, “It is a ghost!” (*Matthew* 14; *Mark* 7) The disciples realized that Jesus, ghostlike, had transcended the three dimensions of mortal existence.

To return to the Hebrew motif: Isaiah’s contemporary from the eighth century B.C., Micah has:

For lo! Yahweh is coming down from his dwelling place  
he will come down and stride upon the heights of the  
earth.

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The mountains shall melt under him, and the valleys fill in  
and rise;

the mountains shall melt like wax before fire, like water  
cascading down a slope. (*Micah* 1)

This is an instance of the motif which is particularly useful for the light it casts on the frequent image of the mountains melting at God's approach in *Psalms* (for example, psalm ninety-seven).

The leveling image is still current in the seventh to sixth centuries B.C., in the writings of Habbakuk, who gives a powerful account of God approaching Israel from Sinai which includes:

When he stands, he makes the earth shake;  
when he glances, he makes nations tremble.

The age-old mountains are shattered,  
the primeval hills sink low.

His are the eternal paths. (*Habbakuk* 3)

With our present insight into the leveling motif, we can also understand why the parting of the Red sea was not equated with Baal's conquest of Yam. A seemingly inevitable association does not occur because an entirely different symbolism is in play. Instead of the storm god and chaos dragon motif, we have here the symbolism of *the journey to the center*,

I have already noted that the Sinai trek involves an abundance of food (manna) and the unaging condition (clothing does not wear out) that we can recognize as signs that we are approaching a paradise. I think we can understand the parting of the Red Sea as part of the flattening of landscape which marks the center. Walking "through" the Red Sea is, in content, entirely comparable to Jesus walking "on" the waves — an instance of the transcendence of space. But the transition from profane space to the center is not without its danger, as the Egyptians discover!

On one level, the motif of the hazardous passage to the center shows that as one approaches the world of the spirits, one may lose one's ability to return to one's mortal state — one may "die." A classical example of the symbol is the Symplegades — the clashing rocks through which Jason's ship must pass on his journey to the tree at the center of the world, on which hangs the golden fleece.

The idea of the dangerous passage recurs after the Red Sea is crossed and in a way that shows its meaning even more clearly. If the Israelites touch Sinai during God's manifestation, they will "surely die." Even to *hear* the voice of God may prove fatal, so the congregation prefers to learn God's will second-hand, from Moses. Sinai itself is a scene of perilous eruptions from the spirit world, as is announced by the thunder, lightning, shofar-blasts and earthquake. There is a danger that Yahweh may simply *blast* the Israelites out of profane existence.

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## World-Tree

Because the center is a place where all the worlds — the world of the dead, that of men, and that of spirits — align, it is also the place where they communicate with one another. The most universal symbol of this communication is the tree, usually referred to in this context as the world-tree. This tree is present when God first speaks to Moses on Mt. Horeb as the “burning bush.”

We find the world-tree again on Isaiah’s holy mountain, Zion, but *personified* as the Messiah. The Messiah is described in arboreal language as the conduit through which the spirit of God comes to earth:

But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse  
a twig shall sprout from his stock.  
The spirit of Yahweh shall alight upon him,  
a spirit of wisdom and might,  
a spirit of counsel and valor,  
a spirit of the knowledge and reverence for Yahweh,  
his sensing shall be by the reverence for Yahweh:  
he shall not judge by what his eyes behold,  
nor decide by what his ears perceive.  
Thus shall he judge the poor with equity  
and decide with justice for the lowly of the land.  
He shall strike down the ruthless by the authority of his  
word  
and slay the wicked with the breath of his lips.  
Justice shall be the girdle of his loins  
and faithfulness the belt around his waist (*Isaiah* 11)

The iteration of tree terms (stump, twig, sprout, stock and rod) is so consistent and thorough that we may fairly see in this figure of the messiah an embodiment of the world-tree. Zechariah, writing in early post-exilic times, 3-400 years later than First Isaiah, attests the enduring power of the Messiah and World-Tree equation: he refers to the Messiah simply as “my servant, the Branch” (*Zechariah* 3).

It is probable that a better preserved body of Canaanite literature would have given us many close parallels to the motifs that appear in Eden and Sinai. But even though I had to rely more heavily on a comparative approach, I think I have succeeded in making intelligible a number of important features of the very complex Biblical center symbols. And though it is gratifying to be able to point to hard evidence that the Biblical material draws on particular myths, my purpose is fully accomplished if I have shown that the Bible expresses itself mythologically, in meaningful symbols.

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Taking stock of our overall progress, we may note that to El, image of God's totality, and Baal, who represents God's justice, we may now add the center symbols, the paradises and sacred mountains of the near east. These images cannot easily be connected to a specific Canaanite literary reference, and they do not need to be. These images, perhaps best known to us from the garden of the Hesperides and Mount Olympus, are universal. What will interest us is their use in Hebrew prophecy as emblems of God's *omnipresence*. For the archetypal center is *everywhere*, and it is no sooner faced than found.



## Chapter Four

# Asherah and Anat

### Asherah

Asherah was the Canaanite Venus, and more than Venus. The Greco-Roman deities come to us in desacralized, literary form. Asherah remained a real fertility goddess, an earth goddess, deity of the entire life-cycle from birth to death to rebirth, for animals as well as humans, not just a pretty allegory of romantic love.

A certain amount of confusion arises when we try to talk about Asherah, because there are a number of similar and sometimes interchangeable names for deities from this part of the Ancient Near East:

*Asherah* (plural, *Asheroth*) is the Hebrew name for a Canaanite fertility goddess (known to us in the Ugaritic texts as *Athirat*). The name Asherah is also used in the Bible to mean an *image* of Asherah.

*Ashtoreth* (plural, *Ashtaroth*) is the Hebrew name for another Canaanite fertility goddess (known to us in the Ugaritic texts as *Athtart*). The Bible makes no distinction between her and Asherah.

*Astarte* is the Greek form of the name Athtart.

*Ishtar* is a Mesopotamian fertility goddess equivalent to Athtart; the Mesopotamian goddess equivalent to Asherah however is *Ashratum*.

Most popular authors use these names rather interchangeably. The best concise treatments of this complex topic are the articles “Asherah” and “Ashtoreth” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, which provides the best, most current overviews available of nearly every Biblical topic.

Asherah, like all earth and fertility goddesses worldwide, could be represented as a tree. The Egyptian fertility goddess *Hathor*, who was identified with the sycamore tree, is a good parallel. We have just seen the use of the tree as a symbol of the center, and this seems to be the primary signification of trees. The center associations of renewal and abundance naturally lead to the expansion of the tree symbolism to include the fertility goddess.

Though the sparsely surviving Ugaritic texts don't give us much information about Asherah, the Bible is rather more forthcoming. The word *Asherah* was often used to mean a representation or object identified with Asherah. According to the Mishnah, the earliest commentary we have on the Bible, these objects were either groves or individual trees or, if no tree was present, simply a sacred pole set up to represent the goddess.

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As the ceaseless denunciations by the prophets make clear, the worship of the Canaanite goddess Asherah provided strong competition for the worship of Yahweh. She was venerated in the Northern Kingdom for as long as there was a Northern Kingdom (until 722 B.C.) and beyond — the image of Asherah that Jeroboam (who established the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 926 B.C.) set up, was still there for Josiah of Judah (who reigned from 639-609 B.C.) to burn three hundred years later.

In the southern realm, Judah, Asherah was introduced into the Temple by the wife of Rehoboam (Solomon's son) and periodically removed or restored by successive kings. Calculating from the Bible's obsessive tally of idolatrous versus pious kings, it seems that for the 370 years from her introduction (928 B.C.) to the Temple's destruction (587 B.C.), for two thirds of the time, that is 236 years, Asherah was present in the Temple of Yahweh. The image of Asherah stood in the Jerusalem Temple, at the gateway leading to the altar: it was the famous "Image of Jealousy" of which Ezekiel complains in his eighth chapter.

The prophets and historical writers of the Bible fulminate continuously against the worship of Asherah the "Queen of Heaven" (that is, consort of the storm-god Baal), which took place, by their account, "on the hilltops and under every spreading tree." The mentions are too numerous to cite.

Naturally a goddess of such prominence was not without influence on the Hebrew religious imagination. Asherah was drawn on by the prophets to personify the nation and fertile land. In imitation of Canaanite Asherah, Israel was seen as the spouse of the sky-god Yahweh.

Hosea (who lived in the late eighth century B.C.) tells us, in his remarkable book of prophecies, that he married a whore to symbolize God's marriage to Israel (who had "played the harlot" with foreign gods). But Hosea is not bizarrely original in his plan of magically acting out the affairs of gods. Such "sacred marriage" ceremonies took place throughout the Ancient Near East as an ordinary part of a nation's ritual life. The king and high priestess coupled to symbolize and magically encourage the sky-god's fecundating embrace of the earth.

The union between Hosea and his wife was clearly intended as an act of magic similar to the union of the Canaanite king with a priestess to represent the union of Asherah and Baal. Hosea's marriage formula is:

And I will espouse you forever:  
I will espouse you with Righteousness and Justice  
and with Goodness and Mercy.  
And I will espouse you with Faithfulness;  
then you shall be devoted to the Lord.  
In that day  
I will respond

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— declares the Lord —  
I will respond to the sky  
and it shall respond to the earth,  
and the earth shall respond  
with new grain and wine and oil . . . (*Hosea 2*)

In the Canaanite epic material there is an account of Baal invites another the goddess Anat (another of his consorts) , to his “pleasant place” atop Mt. Tsaphon. Baal’s exhortation to Anat,

Pour peace into the heart of the earth,  
rain love on the heart of the fields.

is exactly parallel to Hosea’s formulation.

The tree-identified deity Asherah also provided a more symbolic way to represent Israel — as a plant. Israel is described in Psalm eighty as a fruit tree that God plucked from Egypt, which has grown till its shade covers mountains while its boughs stretch as far as the Mediterranean and the Euphrates. In the twenty-seventh chapter of Isaiah Israel is called God’s “Vineyard of Delight.”

In the third century B.C., Judaism was competing with Greek philosophies, and presented its own tradition of wisdom in the shape of the goddess Asherah. Though the figure bears the name Wisdom, the imagery is that of Asherah.

It is Wisdom calling,  
Understanding raising her voice.  
She takes her stand at the top of high places, by the wayside,  
at the crossroads.  
She shouts at the gates, at the entrance of the city . . .

Happy is the man who listens to me,  
coming early to my gates each day,  
waiting at my doorposts. (*Proverbs 8*)

I have already noted the prophetic denunciation of Asherah worship “*on the hilltops and under every spreading tree,*” and Ezekiel’s statement that the image of Asherah stood in the Jerusalem Temple *at the gateway* leading to the altar. The Greek fertility goddess Hecate, a close parallel to Asherah — and like Asherah frequently depicted as a tree — was venerated at all the places listed in our quotes from *The Book of Proverbs*.

Like all fertility goddesses, Wisdom confers a bountiful harvest, long life, health. This passage ends by describing her *as a tree!*

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Length of days is in her right hand,  
and in her left hand riches and honor.  
Her ways are pleasant ways,  
and her path conducts you to wellbeing.  
She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, whoever holds on  
to her is happy. (*Proverbs 3*)

Elsewhere in the same book, Wisdom is described as a divinity, with a temple of her own:

Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath carved for it  
seven pillars,  
she hath sacrificed an animal, now prepares its meat for a  
sacred feast, pours out the wine, makes ready her table . .  
(*Proverbs 9*)

The places where Wisdom takes her stand, her description as a *Tree of Life*, and her (literal) enshrinement in these last verses identify her as the latest incarnation of Asherah. This goddess had an eventful career, from popular idol, to symbol of a nation, to bride of God, ending as an emblem of Wisdom pressed into service to defend the Jewish religion from Greek scepticism!

### Anat

Another goddess among the Hebrew archetypes is one corresponding to the Canaanite war and fertility deity, Anat. Anat's bloody proclivities are clear from the following:

The gates of Anat's house were shut,  
and the lads met the lady of the mountain.  
And then Anat went to battle in the valley,  
she fought between the two cities:  
she killed the people of the coast,  
she annihilated the men of the east.  
Heads rolled under her like balls,  
hands flew over her like locusts,  
the warriors' hands like swarms of grasshoppers.  
She fastened the heads to her back,  
she tied the hands to her belt.  
She plunged knee-deep in the soldiers' blood,  
up to her thighs in the warriors' gore;  
with a staff she drove off her enemies,  
with the string of her bow her opponents.

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The image calls to mind the well known image of Kali, with her necklace of skulls and belt hung with severed hands. Not at all the sort of goddess the feminists imagine for their golden age of matriarchy! The description of Anat goes on to describe her bringing her battle frenzy into a feasting-hall, but the text here has so many gaps that it cannot be satisfactorily reconstructed. It seems as though there is some equation of the wine-shed of a banquet with the bloodshed of the battlefield, but one can only guess from the fragments. Yet this guess seems better founded when we see that something very much along these lines is suggested by a myth of Hathor, the Egyptian fertility goddess whom the Egyptians themselves equated with Anat.

In this myth, Ra has sent Hathor to destroy mankind. Later regretting his angry plan, Ra tricks her into abandoning the task by giving her red beer in place of blood to drink.

So then this goddess came and slew mankind in the desert. Ra said: "Hathor, have you accomplished the deed?" Hathor said: "As you live, I have prevailed against mankind, and my heart is glad!" Then Ra said: "My greatness grows as rebellious mankind is diminished!"

Then Ra said "Summon me messengers swift as a shadows!" (For nothing runs so fast its shadow can't keep up with it). Messengers were brought immediately. Ra said: "Go to Elephantine and bring me much red ochre." The red ochre was brought. Ra had his servants grind the red ochre fine, then he had them crush barley to make beer, and this red ochre was added to the mash. The beer they made was red like human blood, seven thousand jars of it. When day broke, and it was time for Hathor to continue the slaughter of mankind, Ra said: "How good is this red beer! I shall protect mankind with it!" Then Ra said: "Carry the beer to where she plans to slay mankind." Ra set his servants to work in the twilight of pre-dawn to have the sleep-making drink poured out. Then the fields were filled with beer three palms high.

Hathor went and found the place flooded and saw her beautiful face reflected in the beer. She kissed her lovely reflection and tasted how good the beer was on her lips; she drank, her heart was mellowed. She came back drunk, the plan to slay mankind forgotten . . .

The strange ambivalence of goddesses like Anat and Hathor, associated equally with love and war, is comprehensible when we note that some degree of human sacrifice is basic to goddess-oriented agricultural religion. Hunter-gatherers see the kill as a borrowing of the flesh of a creature who is placated by the reassembly or burial of the bones. The animal is a "given" in the landscape, and its slaughter results in myth and ritual expressing mutual obligation and respect, with no thought of atonement. The harvesting of

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crops, however, is a year-long premeditated “murder”: the long cultivation makes for a sense of responsibility and gives rise to myths of slain and resurrected gods whose flesh originates the use of a staple food.

Cannibalism, head-hunting and human sacrifice are ritual reflections of agricultural myths, and as such are not found among hunter-gatherers. Yet in archaic cereal cultivators we find these gruesome rites world wide. For example, the Aztec Aphrodite, *Xochiquetzal* (Precious Flower), queen of fruit, flowers, love and springtime, is, in one of her aspects *Itzpapalotl* (Obsidian Knife Butterfly), the deified sacrificial blade. Human sacrifice is not a primitive or “wild” act, but the *cultivated* behavior of the cultivator.

Anat’s orgy of slaughter, equating the violence of the sword with that of the scythe, provided the pattern for Joel’s fifth-century B.C. apocalypse:

Proclaim this among the nations!  
Consecrate yourselves for holy-war!  
Arouse the warriors,  
let all the fighters come and draw near!  
Beat your ploughshares into swords,  
the blades of your pruning hooks into spear-heads.  
Let even the weakling say: “I am a man of valor!”  
Hurry and come!  
all the nations are gathered there.  
Bring down, Yahweh, your warriors!  
Let the nations rouse themselves and march up to the  
valley of Yehoshaphat  
for there I will sit in judgement  
over all the nations round about.  
Swing the sickle  
for the crop is ripe;  
come and tread  
for the winepress is full,  
the vats are overflowing  
for great is the nations’ wickedness.  
Multitudes upon multitudes  
in the valley of Judgement,  
for the day of Yahweh is at hand  
in the valley of the verdict.  
The sun and moon are darkened  
and stars withdraw their brightness.  
Yahweh will roar from Zion,  
and shout aloud from Jerusalem,  
so that heaven and earth tremble.  
But Yahweh will be a shelter to his people,  
a refuge to the children of Israel.  
And you will know that I, Yahweh, am your God,  
who dwells in Zion my holy mount.

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And Jerusalem shall be holy,  
never more shall strangers pass through it.  
And in that day  
the mountains will drip with wine,  
the hills shall flow with milk.” (*Joel 4*)

The paradigm of agricultural violence is invoked with an inversion of Isaiah’s famous phrase about beating swords into ploughshares. It is horrifically continued to the point where the Valley of Yehoshaphat is filled with blood like a vast wine-vat — eerily reminiscent of Hathor’s blood-colored beer which covered the earth to the height of three palms!

Post-exilic Third Isaiah picks up the image of the bloody harvest in:

Who is this coming up from Edom,  
from Bozrah in garments stained purple —  
who is this, majestic in attire,  
pressing forward in his great might?  
“It is I who make good what I say, powerful to rescue.”

Why is your clothing so red,  
your garments like his who treads grapes?  
“I trod out the vintage alone,  
no one, of all the world’s peoples, assisted me.  
I trod them down in my anger,  
trampled them in my rage.  
Their life blood spurted on my garments  
and all my clothing was stained.  
For I had planned a day of vengeance  
and my year of redemption arrived.  
Then I looked, but there was none to help.  
I stared, but there was none to aid.  
So my own arm saved me,  
and my rage — that sustained me.  
I trampled peoples in my anger,  
I made them drunk with my rage,  
and I hurled them to the ground. (*Isaiah 63*)

Asherah and Anat were both assimilated to Yahweh; the one to express his love, the other to reveal his rage. And so the emotional life of the one true God was entrusted to two Canaanite fertility goddesses. So expressed, it may seem a little odd, but this is in fact the universal procedure among scriptural religions, the Virgin Mary and Kuan Yin being the best known examples.

Now we have the Canaanite archetypes before us fully analyzed: El for God’s omniscience, Baal for his Justice, the center symbols like mountain of

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the gods for his omnipresence, and Asherah and Anat to show his sometimes ferocious love.



## Literary Renderings

For the first chapter of this book I used my own translations. The following chapters originally appeared as an independent books, in which I used the standard (JPS) translation, (with minor corrections of censorship). At that time I feared that a literary rendering might leave me open to an accusation of altering the texts to suit my points. This now appears to me overly cautious. Those who can appreciate my insights will not be dismayed by good poetry, and those who can't won't like my ideas any better because the quotes that support them are tin-eared.

Here I append a few other texts that will help in understanding the topography of Hebrew myth, translated by me, in proper literary style.



## God amid the Seraphim

(Isaiah 6)

*The high point of Yahweh's storm god identification coincides, naturally enough, with the high point of Kingdom period poetry — in Isaiah. In a passage which, to this day, dominates the liturgy of the synagogue, the poet presents a complete Baal theophany.*

*A seraph is, in fact, a storm serpent. The word "seraph" is the ordinary Hebrew term for serpent, and the actually means "to burn." The Hebrews may have called snakes "burners" because of their poison or their gleaming appearance. In either case, the concept of "blazing" or "burning" is embedded in the word, and at a level which was clear to the ordinary Hebrew speaker (the way the English word "serpent" suggests "writhing thing" to the Latinist.)*

*Serpents are archetypally associated with water and often viewed as inhabitants of the cloud realm. Think of the celestial couple of Voodoo, the rainbow-serpents Damballah and Aida Wedo, the dragons of Chinese art, or the Aztec Quetzalcoatl (literally "plumed serpent").*

*Isaiah shows God appearing in a very detailed thunderstorm. In this context, we may read Isaiah's being struck by a coal from the storm god's altar in the hands of a thunder serpent as an account of the prophet's being symbolically struck by lightning. Among the Eskimo being thunderstruck is a sign of shamanic election, that is, it means that one has put off the profane human condition ("died") and is now able to communicate with spirits. Precisely such a transformation is described for Isaiah who is now no longer "unclean" (that is, profane), and may henceforth speak with God.*

In the year King Uzyahu died I saw Yahweh seated on his high exalted throne, so huge that the train of his robe covered the whole floor of the Temple.

Blazing, dragon-like seraphim hovered above him, and each had six wings — two folded modestly over the genitals, two to fly with, and two to shield their eyes from the glare of God

Three flashes of lightning accompanied the word they repeated to each other thrice:

"Bright, bright, bright!  
is the holiness of Yahweh  
who leads the army of stars across the night sky —  
every day he fills the earth with the sunlight of his splendor."

As I stood there listening at the entrance of the temple, I saw how the thunder of their voices made the pillars of the entrance shake and filled the building with dark storm clouds.

I thought: “Now I’m going to die, I can no longer live as an ordinary human, because although neither I nor my people are ritually or morally pure — I have no personal or inherited merit — I’ve dared look at the face of Yahweh, king of the sun, moon and stars.”

But one of the storm spirits flew to me, and in that seraph’s hand was a pair of tongs holding a coal he’d taken from the altar.

Like a bolt of lightning, he struck my mouth with the coal, and said:

“Touching your lips with this I cause that guilt, which is the price of the merely human condition, to leave you — all your sins are atoned for. Now you may speak with God.”

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## Apocalypse

(Isaiah 24-27)

*According to the Canaanite myth which is satirized in this “apocalypse,” the severe heat of the Near Eastern summer is the reign of Mot, the lord of death and drought, who has slain Baal, lord of life and rain. In the Autumn, the thunder which begins the rainy season announces Baal’s resurrection. The reborn storm god kills Mot (the name means “death”), then defeats Leviathan, the Chaos-Dragon of the Ocean. Baal’s first battle was based on the sudden change in the landscape from dusty to flooded, the second one, with Leviathan, was probably inspired by the sight of the thunderstorms coming in from the Mediterranean. From Israel’s coast they can look very like the sky at war with the sea.*

*The events which the Ugaritic epic relates were reflected in ritual activities on earth, particularly an “enthronement procession” to a temple where the king, as representative of Baal, would be reconfirmed in his rule for the next year, thus ensuring Baal’s commitment to make the land fertile for another annual cycle. A harvest festival was surely a part of the festivities, and the present autumn holidays of the Jewish calendar, Rosh HaShannah and Sukkoth are evidently Monotheist replacements and modifications of Canaanite holidays.*

It’s high summer now, the season when they mourn for Baal, the time when Yahweh comes punishing the planet.

Everyone flees the heat – it looks like things have returned to primordial chaos:

see how Yahweh empties the earth, unpeoples it, inverts it, makes everything its opposite!

All the settled people – uprooted, scattered.

The hereditary high-priest suffers, the same as the peasant;

the slave, the same as his master; the serving girl’s served the same as her mistress;

buyer and seller, lender and borrower, debtor and creditor – meaningless distinctions

when the earth is deserted, sacked, left bare, picked clean

because Yahweh’s passed sentence upon it.

The land is bleaching under the sun, pales as if sick with sorrow,

the world wears out, dries up, discolors:

noble, commoner, all fade under the heat.

It isn’t just the time of year – it’s the time of reckoning!

The land was desecrated under its inhabitants! They broke God’s holy laws, they twisted the statutes

until the eternal covenant, the promise that rain would fall in season, the agreement between heaven and earth, was annulled.

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That's what kindled this heat! Do you dare expect you'll see clouds again?

That's why hot haze eats at earth like a curse. The guilty with their land are drubbed under sunlight.

That's why the world burns all punishing summer, why so few still walk these streets of endless August.

The new wine meant for Autumn dries up at its source: the very vines have withered.

The ones who partied the most can now only groan.

No more, the drum and harp of gladness, the gatherings noisy and joyous – they're done.

No more the toast and drinking song. It's too hot to drink now if there *were* wine.

The city's chaotic busiment's over, all motion broken off,  
the houses are shuttered against the sun. None go out, doors stay closed as if they were barricaded.

The silence of the streets is an unvoiced keening for the wine that was.

All delight has altered and gone, earthly happiness went into exile,  
nothing's left in the city but its own emptiness.

Silence, like an impalpable destroyer, broke inaudibly in through the city gates – this devastation didn't *occur*, it just *appeared*

here in the center of the world, in the midst of nations, in Jerusalem, earth's heart!

Now it's bare as a tree when the fruits have been shook down,  
as a field after harvest, where scavengers have stripped what the reapers missed.

Then the thunderstorm raises its voice in Yahweh's exalted sky-heights,  
the echo roars back glad across the Mediterranean:

"Glorify Yahweh with lightning flashes out over the Greek Islands,  
let sky-flame jag out the signature of Yahweh, God of Israel!"

We hear the sound of the storm as far off as earth's edge,  
a song of praise uttered in thunder, calling "Glory to righteous God!  
whose laws control the rainfall  
guarantee the seasons and watch over humankind!"

I said: "Oy vey! Now we're in for it!  
You thief and cheat and steal, men of earth,  
so God set up for you terror and a pit and a net!"

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The one who runs from the terror of news and rumor will fall into the pit,  
and if he climbs out of that, he'll be snared in the net.  
There'll be no escape when the windows of heaven open for the flood to rush down.  
The earth's foundations will shake, the world break up,  
the land will crumble, the whole planet stagger,  
swerve out of orbit, reeling like a drunk, shaking like a lean-to in a hurricane!

Am I talking about Autumn thunderstorms, the return of the rain-god Baal? All that's just an image, a likeness  
of what's coming down on you with the weight of your sins. All will fall and none get up.

It shall come to pass on that day that Yahweh, shouting from the clouds and spraying rain, will punish the gods on high,  
like Baal returning to retake his throne from Mot the lord of death and drought —  
but this will be no fable, and the godlings Yahweh disciplines will be the kings of the earth!  
And all the imprisoned, the chained ones in their dungeons —  
Yahweh will remember their case.

Then the heavens will blacken with storm clouds, the moon turn red — with shame,  
the sun itself darken, dismayed,  
when Yahweh shows his power, exerts his just kingship from Jerusalem's temple mount,  
adored by the people's leaders.

Yahweh, you're my god. I extol you and I praise you.  
You plan then you wondrously achieve, loyal and true from of old.  
You make a city into heaps of rubble, a fortified capitol — ruins.  
You bring proud citadels to such demolition they'll never again be rebuilt.  
And so even empires will honor you. Assyria,  
ruler of all the cruel nations along the Tigris and Euphrates,  
Assyria will fear you too,  
because you're a refuge to the poor, to the ones with nothing left.  
You're like a shelter in a rainstorm, a shadow that saves from the sun;  
for the threats of tyrants are like a winter squall, like the heat of the desert,

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but you bring them down from the heights of their pride. They aren't gods. Their words aren't wind — just breath.

You annul them from above, as a cloud shades out angry sunlight — so instantly, so easily, do you silence the tyrant's brag.

Yahweh, who marshals the stars like an army, will make a rich feast on this mountain, this Zion, for all the world's people,  
a feast of old wine, precious wine, pure and perfect wine.

Atop this mountain he'll tear away the veil that darkens all our eyes, the film of fear that dimmed the vision of all the nations of the world — like the impalpable blindfold a condemned prisoner already seems to feel.

Like Baal in the myth, Yahweh will destroy death — he'll eat Assyria and wipe the tears from every human face.

Then he'll take away from earth the disgrace of having submitted to tyranny. Yahweh has spoken it — it will come to pass, and on that day everyone will say:

"It's the hand of God! We hoped in him — he saved us!

It's Yahweh who was our true hope! And now we dance and laugh with joy;

he rescued us! His mighty hand now rests on this mountain — his power extends across the land,

crushing under it, like straw, Moab our enemy in the south, threshing Moab like straw, shattering and scattering.

As a powerful swimmer splits the water before him with outstretched arms,

he'll make Moab's forts and walls fly apart, to fall — all of them — down to the dirt.

On that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:

"We have a powerful city,  
walls and towers that will save us!

Open the gates

for the victory procession of Yahweh's people,  
the enthronement of the nation that worships God —  
the god of rain, the god of justice;

a people who understand that Baal's thunder is only an echo of Yahweh,

the people of a god who protects his faithful.

"Make your plans relying on Yahweh;  
he'll keep you safe — trust him!



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

Depend on him forever, a rock-solid everlasting basis of strength.  
He sinks exalted cities with all their haughty habitants,  
he humbles them, tumbles them earthwards, demotes them to dirt,  
has them trampled under the feet of the poor.”

The nation of God marches towards his temple:  
the path is flat for these just ones, the god of equity makes it level and straight.

The road God shows — by his laws and judgements — is the way to life, the path to Yahweh, in whom we have always hope.

That longing for something higher which is the glory of the human soul — it has a name — “Yahweh.”

My spirit within me desires God all night, waits for him as for dawn.  
When your judgements, Yahweh, are realized on earth, the people of this planet learn righteousness.

When you wait — when you spare the wicked — they learn nothing but how to further pervert the laws.

They’ll never recognize the majesty of God.

Yahweh, they’ll never divine that when you draw back your hand – it’s about to strike.

Let them see your zeal for your people, let them see their own shame.  
They’re your enemies – let fire eat them up!

Yahweh, vindicate us, give us at last our loyalty’s reward: you’ve already punished *our* sins without stint.

Yahweh, other kings and gods have owned us – now let us remember only you.

This much of the myth of Baal is true – he died.

The dead never resurrect, there are no ghosts to return.

Whom you punish, you destroy; you deaden all remembrance of them.

But you’ll gather and increase your people, and they’ll glorify you as you broaden the borders of their land.

They remembered you in their distress; when your punishment was on them, too weak to more than whisper, they poured out their prayers to you.

We were prostrate before you, like a pregnant woman about to birth, writhing and screaming to the pangs.

Our labor brought nothing to life. We couldn’t deliver our own deliverance, nor could anyone else on earth.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

We were dead – and *you* brought us back to life. Corpses, we rose from the ground;  
asleep under earth, we woke and shouted –  
you returned to us like the shining life-giving rain. The dead land, the land of ghosts, brought forth.

Now comes the storm. Go my people, back into your homes, bolt the door against it,  
hide yourselves for a moment, until the wrath be passed.  
Behold, Yahweh's punishing the planet for the people's sins.  
No crime will stay hidden – the earth itself will show the blood shed over her,  
the ground refuse to hide the bodies of the murdered any more.

And on that day, Yahweh will punish his enemies, the other nations,  
as Baal did Leviathan, that quick-slipping serpent, that great winding snake,  
as Baal did the dragon of the sea with his great, sharp and powerful sword.

# STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

## Paradise Regained

(Isaiah 2)

On the last day, at the end of time, the mountain where stands the Temple of Jah will be forever unshakeably set higher than all hills and above every height.

All the peoples will rush like rivers towards it,  
countless nations will come and say:

“Let’s climb up to Jah’s mountain, to the House of Jacob’s God,  
it’s there we’ll learn his ways and how to follow in his paths,

because the true teaching will come from Mount Zion, from  
Jerusalem God will speak to Man,

and settle the disputes between countries, resolve the quarrels  
between the many races —

they’ll hammer their swords into plough-blades, and their spears into  
hoes.

No more will one people take aim at another; the strategies of war will  
be forgotten arts.

# YAKOV RABINOVICH

## God-Knowledge

(Isaiah 11)

A branch will grow forth from Jesse's family tree, a flowering bough  
rise up from the wounded stump,

and the spirit of God will rest on this last, best offshoot of David's  
clan, a spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of courage and wise policy, a  
spirit conferring knowledge of God and awe of him,

and that son of David will eagerly breathe in the God-awe like  
delightful perfume;

he won't judge by appearances, by what his eyes see, or decide by  
what his ears hear,

but he'll see justice done to the poor and protect the rights of the  
wretched,

and the sentences he pronounces will strike like a rod, the sharp truth  
of his decisions'll cut down the wicked,

he'll gird on righteousness like a sword-belt, wear honesty like armor;  
then the wolf and the lamb will live together, the leopard and the goat  
will sleep in the shade side by side,

the calf, the lion and ox will be friends,

and a little boy will be able to lead them around,

the cow and the bear will graze together

and leave their young to rest in the same place,

lions will eat straw like cattle,

a toddler will safely play at the viper's hole,

securely stick his hand in the adder's den.

None will harm and none kill anywhere

on my holy mountain,

but the earth will be as full

of direct knowledge of God

as the ocean is of water.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

### The Dead

(Isaiah 14)

Silence on the whole now-peaceful land,  
then the very trees, the cypresses and Lebanon cedars, they laugh at  
you, they sing for joy:

You who used to cut us down, now you're the one fallen  
into a sleep you won't be waking from.  
We feel in our roots how your arrival excites the underworld,  
the earth trembles with Sheol's eagerness,  
waking the lordly dead, the sleepers who were chieftains,  
all the world's dead kings  
sit up on their dusty thrones and call to you:

"Now you too are as weak as us, no better than we dead,  
your pride is brought down low as Hell,  
the music of your harps is muffled underground,  
a pillow of worms is laid for your rotting head, maggots blanket you.  
The man who gleamed like the morning star is fallen from his heaven,  
the one who cut down the nations is felled like a tree.  
You thought you'd mount to heaven, set your throne on El's carpet  
of stars,  
sit on the mountain where the gods hold their councils, Mount Tsaphon  
far in the north,  
thought you'd make the clouds your castle, be like the most high —  
but you were brought down low as Hell, into the anti-mountain of  
Sheol's pit and downward altitude.

# YAKOV RABINOVICH

## Wisdom

(Proverbs 8)

*This late description of Wisdom owes something to the Canaanite fertility goddesses, but it owes more to the Greek conception of wisdom as something that stands outside and above material existence.*

“Jah made me as prologue to the creation,  
before the before of all his works,  
I was appointed since forever,  
before the start of the world’s origin,  
I was born before the ocean of primordial chaos,  
before the wells were dug in nothingness  
that fountained forth raw everything;  
he birthed me before the mountained land masses  
sank shoulder-deep in sea, before hills were even an idea,  
when the earth and its plains were things unmade,  
before there was soil or dust blown across it;

“I was there when he stabilized sky in the the above,  
when he locked the horizon like a lid  
onto ocean’s furthest verge,  
when he established clouds forever in the heavens,  
when he forced the underwater springs  
into position on ocean floor,  
when he spoke his law to the seas,  
that their waters shouldn’t overflow the given limits;

“when he legislated Earth’s foundations into place  
I was the Creator’s architect, by his side,  
I was his pleasure in each day of the creation  
as I schemed up the days, the seasons and the years:  
he gladly made earnest work of my play,  
my exhuberant inventings of planet and land,  
the final outburst of hilarity that produced Humanity.

“Now you, my children, listen to me,  
everyone who follows my lead learns luck,  
hear me when I warn — and you’re wise.  
Don’t dismiss my words.  
Happy is he who heeds me, who’s at my doorway every morning,  
always waiting at my gate.  
Who finds me finds life, gets God’s good will,

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

who loses me slices into his soul,  
who hates me loves his own death.”

Wisdom has built her house,  
she quarried and shaped seven pillars for it,  
she sacrificed and roasted the meat,  
mixed her spiced wine, her table’s laid out,  
she sent her maids to call from all  
the highest rooftops in the city:

“Whoever’s stupid, let him turn in here!”

And to everyone brainless she said:

“Come, fools, eat my bread, drink my wine,  
become strong and rich on Wisdom’s path.”





# **Bible Land Blues**



# Bible Land Blues

*dedicated to*

***Abaron Amir***

*poet, patriot, Canaanite,*

*friend to me where friends were very few*

## Prologue

I knew it was no answer to stare down the Bible, reading a page-flip animated cartoon of the past —

Yet still, it was a portal, an entrance —

For the center, the place where the three worlds (Heaven, Earth and Sheol) meet, was also here.

The holy book opened on the world of the dead. Its scholars weren't just unsunned library-pale, but wan with pouring heart's blood and life's time down the hellmouth of the past, drink-offering for the shadows that squeak their memories, flickering in and out of existence even as they speak, like frames in a silent movie or like you feel after too much coffee.

I made a last hero's descent into this land of the dead — a Hebrew initiatory ordeal — to wrest from the ghosts their secrets. I dug deep, beyond the time of the Bible itself, into the Canaanite and Near Eastern past which underlay it. These points of contact with Near Eastern mythology constitute the Earthly Sophia who "played before the Lord and was his darling and delight." They were the exuberant, image-rich spiritual earth under Yahweh's unimaginable heaven, the archetypes of ancient Canaan that had survived as extravagant metaphors in the prophets and renewed a fantastic and equivocal existence in the Kabbalah. These were the ground, both ontologically and physically, of Jewish spirituality.

And the ground is exactly what is at issue. We already experience the world primarily through the windshield or the television screen and risk becoming science fiction brains-in-a-jar, devotees of Our Lady of the Immaculate Perception, clicking the TV remote control as a rosary. But by restoring the Canaanite mythology, the soul of the recovered land, I meant to become, in a sense, the first spiritual Zionist, mixing a "cup of staggering" from Baal and the Baal Shem Tov.

There was nowhere left to go but Israel itself to make an attempt to reanimate the vision in the place it first arose. It was to be the *Alchemy of the Word* and Abyssinia all in one. It was a disaster.

But this is the chronicle of my attempt to reconquer the Holy Land.



# Bible Land Blues

## I

### The Night Journey

*Glory to the one who transported his servant by night . . .*

Surely I have attained the condition of spirits:  
the whole world's width between home and here  
flown in a night, a dream, a prolonged thought.

Did the mountains flatten, the valleys rise,  
the three dimensions condense to two  
that I skimmed across them, glib as a fingertip over a map?

Time's annihilated:  
my thirty-six years packed in thirteen boxes;  
a lifetime's accidents suddenly pattern  
around the single fact  
of return, of ascension to this state,  
this condition of Israel.

# YAKOV RABINOVICH

## II

### Surface Mail

In America, Israel was a map on my wall,  
a page of Bible, a newspaper headline,  
a star-chart whose constellations were the Hebrew alphabet  
— the swastika, a terrible comet-like Aleph.

I've mailed myself into the text:  
the proof is the photo on my ID card,  
Israel's seal stamped on my face  
like a heavenly postmark.

Flattened by the weight of Diaspora,  
I slip easily into the envelope,  
drop on a desk in the Ministry of Immigration  
like foreign mail from the nineteenth century,  
a thin, implausible arrival  
speaking the language as learned  
from Prayerbook and Bible — King James Hebrew,

and unequal to this life in three dimensions,  
inadequate before the white stone riddling the hills  
around Jerusalem, gathered into strata,  
tier on tier,  
slope-side crop-shelves of the farming Canaanites.

What message can I bring the shaggy columnar palms,  
the broad goose-bumped paddles of the cactus,  
the close-up foliage immediately green?

I place a cigarette in my wordless mouth,  
light that sullen joss of modernism.

With a cold mercy, it begins to rain.  
Jerusalem becomes a stone fountain,  
every outdoor stairs a waterfall,  
streets ankle deep.

As the white mist permits, Jerusalem's traffic,  
stones and foliage  
dissolve into Yahweh.

# STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

## III

### The World-to-Come

Proverb of the Diaspora:

“When you’re in love, the whole world looks Jewish.”

Here, I am, evidently, in love:

the late winter mist around me is a nimbus  
of indistinct affection for my fellow Israelites.

At the bus stop, a woman who looks like my grandmother.  
I stare, sucking the small and personal pang  
like a cut finger.

These streets are full of my dead relatives,  
drawn from the black well of the underworld,  
the silver waters of the gene-pool.

Surely this is the World-to-Come  
where the dead return, where men have wings —  
around me a flock of tourists descends  
to peck at falafels, flutter their coats  
and chirp in German.

# YAKOV RABINOVICH

## IV

### Spring

Skyward spray of wildflowers, delicate  
fireworks of yellow, white and red  
almost reaching your knees. You stand  
above them, peering down like a surprised giantess.

You name the flowers for me in Hebrew:

*Nurit, Cochvan, Dam Maccabeem —*

I try the words in my mouth  
like exotic fruit I'm not sure how to eat.

*And Jacob served seven years for Rachel  
and they seemed to him but a few days,  
for the love he had to her . . .*

and you're lying on the grass and your neck  
is the same timeless white as the stones of Judea  
which shone as now when Jacob first  
saw his pale Rachel and those seven years blanched  
into one nightless day.

You sit up, frown at me writing this,  
begudge the little heat my notebook's shadow  
steals from the day. But I promise

an autumn evening to come  
when you'll read by lamplight  
what I now write in sunlight  
and remember April's warmth in the season of rains.



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

### V

#### I Am That I Am

Map of the Holy Land, of *Terra Sancta*:  
Sodom flames in the south;  
eastward Babel towers;  
in the center, Jerusalem, a perfect circle.

Truer than modern geography  
to the spirit of this emphatic land,  
this strip of sand set beside the rest of the middle east  
like an exclamation point at the end of a phrase  
— to indicate stress —

for surely some important thing is shown  
in the bees big as birds, the weeds like trees,  
terrific thistles, a nightmare of spikes,  
from which the armored Crusaders,  
the clanking Franks, could perhaps have hacked  
bouquets. And something momentous, essential,  
is said by the buffeting sunlight, the carhorns,  
the shoving onto busses, the barking dogs,  
the babies howling insistent as existence;  
Israel, like her God, says, “I am, I still am,”  
— all her history and prophecy  
one relentless conjugation of the verb “to be.”

I listen like the true and antique pilgrim  
with beard and staff on the corner of my Latin map,  
like him I add my “praise ye the Lord”  
to these rude Hallelujahs.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

### VI

#### I Don't Understand, I Say Yes

So far a thousand words, some the same as in English —  
like raisins in the bread of Hebrew,  
so far an impossible Christmas list  
of words to memorize on bus rides.  
My thoughts struggle out in the words I know —  
ill-fitting, ridiculous clothes.  
Someone is telling me some rapid thing.  
I don't understand. I say yes.

These days I'm always at someone's door,  
a welcome — well at least a surprise.  
I'm like a man who fell out of the sky  
(which, in a manner of speaking, I did).  
I wish I could be as wise as my silence,  
Instead I re-read the letter from home  
and kiss the signature. Did I expect different?  
I don't understand. I say yes.

My head is full of what I can't speak,  
the bus-stop is full of girls I can't joke with,  
in uniform, younger and braver than me.  
Unpatriotically I just want to cry.  
Do you know what that's like?  
If you don't understand, just say yes.

# STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

## VII

### Jerusalem

*for Yehuda Amichai*

#### i

A coin with the seal of the Jewish kingdom  
in the hand of a Jerusalem beggar  
looks for an instant like a royal ring  
turned 'round on the finger so the bezel faces in.  
The ring on the hand of the disguised Messiah  
asking alms at the gate, as in the Talmudic legend?  
Once. Now it's the hand of Jerusalem  
accepting the small change of Tourism.

#### ii

Jerusalem's a city of the dead —  
the cemeteried slopes of the Mount of Olives  
are the least of it.  
Zion's rebuilders stack the land with granite  
as pilgrims lay stones on the grave of a saint.

Once the Hollywood of world religions,  
she's become the old folks' home of world scriptures  
— the Dead Sea Scrolls in their intensive-care shrine  
are the least of it.

#### iii

And you're the garrulous poetic sheriff  
of this ghost-town in the Judaeen desert,  
You're drunk with history, and like all drunks,  
like all history, you repeat yourself,  
grandmother stories, newspaper headlines,  
neighborhood gossip and popular songs —  
if we weren't here you'd talk to the Wall.  
An out-of-work prophet in the capitol,  
dead center, of a dreamy Mythuania,  
crooning over the graves

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

of extinct relationships.  
The man who's lost his faith in God  
believes in death, and women.

### iv

Jerusalem looks always east, sadly  
trying to see past the Wailing Wall:  
that rampart is the limit of history, each stone  
an implacable fact, a brick of tradition  
sealing this ghetto of second-hand time.

Traditionally, pious visitors  
write out requests on slips of paper  
then slide their folded prayers  
into the chinks between the stones —  
it's desperate, the way they caulk the Wall,  
as if they saw it beginning to leak.  
What terrible flood does the wall keep back,  
what pagan Euphrates?

Jerusalem's air is a smog of sorrow,  
polluted with prayers, misty with nostalgia.  
Not even the new and high hotels  
rise out of this fog for all their ugliness,  
not even they can see over the Wall  
that looms through time, shadowing the town  
into a twilight where Mother Tradition  
says: "Rest your head on my sagging breasts,  
eat my Sabbath table's challah bread,  
golden and braided like the hair of Asherah,  
the Canaanite goddess of Love."

# STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

## VIII

### Tel Aviv

Jerusalem's a Diaspora dream,  
familiar. In Tel Aviv, by the sea,  
you first realize that "there" is now here,  
giddily feel the distance down-planet  
to where you once were. Who stands in Tel Aviv  
stands in Israel, is precipitously *here*  
in the Promised Land, the pagan Canaan,  
under Shamash the sun-god, Yareyak the Moon,  
and El, lord of the stars.

Tel Aviv faces the sea,  
the fluid future, the West.  
Tel Aviv is the city of the ocean-god Yam,  
the palace of the water-dragon Leviathan,  
whose waters coil and uncoil at her feet,  
each wave a scale with a crescent edge of foam.  
The wind in these streets is the breath of sea,  
smelling like chaos, like salt, like sex.

# YAKOV RABINOVICH

## IX

### Prayer to the New Moon

We're a people who count our months by the moon,  
change is in our nature. Why weep  
for Jerusalems real or imagined?  
The sea of Time where Judaism sank  
cast up Tel Aviv and the Canaanite myths  
recovered from the ruins of ancient Ugarit.

Thirty-six years of changing moons  
have already passed over my head;  
my hair begins to silver, altered and conformed  
to the moonbeams that have stroked it.

Yareyak, the moon, goddess of changes,  
pulls us as she does the tides,  
with every pulse she tugs our blood,

flesh ebbs, bones blanch  
white as shells,  
as the ruins of Jericho.

# STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

## X

### The Happy Birthday of Death

*In Canaanite religion, the round of the seasons figured forth an ever-repeating cyclic history of the gods. Every summer Mot, the god of death and drought, killed Baal, the god of life and rainfall. Thereupon, as the July heat set in, the Canaanite sky-god El would retire to Har Tsaphon, a mountain in Syria, the Canaanite Olympus, to escape the rigors of the Israeli summer, and Mot had undisputed mastery of the earth.*

*Baal would, of course, return to life when the autumn rains came, but his "death" was signalized by ritual mourning at the height of summer. Similar myths and observances are recorded for the entire middle east, as, for example, for Baal's cognate gods Adonis and Tammuz.*

*Rabbinic Judaism reinterpreted this ancient and ineradicable holiday as a fast day to commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 587 B.C. on the ninth of Av (the Hebrew month which corresponds to July-August).*

When the day becomes one long soundless thud  
of sun, and motion is madness  
under light's white weight, the punishing summer  
when El abandons Israel for his mountain in the north,

when the land is blanching and spring's wildflowers  
have burned away like a colored haze,  
leaving only the butane-blue thistle —  
memorial candle for the death of Baal,

when "the whole world languisheth and fadeth away"  
dead wood silvers in the bleaching beams,  
chalk-dusty stone shines dry as shell  
in a landscape glaring like a shoreless beach

and the overhead blue has become Mot's ocean,  
dead clear and perfect, implacable sapphire  
where Shamash, the sun-god, unendurable star  
rules a view that shimmers mistlessly and glimmers without dew,

then day's night-quiet, and twilight's the dawn  
of lamplit parties in the dark and cool:  
Mot, in evening clothes, drinks Tequila  
in a Tel Aviv café and toasts the Ninth of Av.

# YAKOV RABINOVICH

## XI

### Gehenna

*Gehenna is the Hell of Jewish legend: the name comes from the Hebrew for "Valley of the sons of Hinnom" — a small ravine to the southeast of the Old City of Jerusalem, now a park.*

Friends of my parents visited, took me out  
to a French restaurant, *Mishkanot Sha'ananim*,  
expensively overlooking the Valley of Hinnom  
where the Canaanites burned babes for Moloch  
and the Hebrew kingdom buried its wealthier dead.

When, if not our heavens, at least our earth  
was "rolled up like a scroll", became the Torah's  
portable world, Gehenna flamed  
for sinners.

Nowadays the Hebrew Hell's  
a public garden, and in its midst  
the Cinemathèque remains infernally open  
even on Shabbat, to offer Jerusalem  
visions of the world of the dead:  
movie stars of fifty years ago  
appear as in life, flattened on the screen  
as though pressing their faces eagerly against  
the windows of this world.

Tranquil,  
several hundred meters above the green  
and pleasant hell, myself something less  
than a hundred shekels above destitution,  
I stare out at Judah's bare hills, clear skies  
filled with my unsaleable visions.



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

### XII

#### *Tristia ex Judaea*

End of August, first cool nights:  
the heat fades like anger, leaving an exhausted earth  
beneath a sky that at last forgives  
this land, as I do not.

For all its noise, a speechless land,  
for all its life, a dead one;  
for all its wars, a land at peace  
with all it's failed to be.

# YAKOV RABINOVICH

## XIII

### Exilarch

My friends, ready for every adventure  
back in drunken high-school nights,  
traded it in for a mammal reality:  
parmesan baby-puke stiff on their shoulder,  
furniture, vacations and the will of the wife  
whose thighs are the arch of Woman's final triumph  
over a man and his dreams.

I alone am escaped to tell thee  
if only because I fucked up every chance  
to become the slave of pleasant circumstance.  
I've kept, if nothing else, *my* dream —  
of time lived vivid, mythic, rich,  
deepened with meaning, where accidents pattern  
and days have shape, where stories are valid  
as maps of the world.

And so, this furnished room,  
toy shop of the gods,  
filled with clay statues of Asherah  
I sell to tourists, books, papers, teacups,  
unperformed plays, unpublished poems, unanswered mail —  
cascade of papers, like the bureaucracy  
of some small, proud, forgotten, independent  
Balkan state too tiny to appear  
on any map — my rented realm,  
my Mythuanian embassy in mid-Jerusalem  
issuing poems as passports  
to pagan, imaginal Canaan.  
Here I live, like Lenin in Zurich,  
wondering, while my hairline recedes,  
how long till my losses are too great  
(or too silly) for any revolution to redeem?

# STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

## XIV

### Days of Awe

*The “Days of Awe” are the holidays Rosh HaShannah (New Year) and Yom Kippur (a day of fasting and repentance). These observances correspond temporally and symbolically to the Canaanite myth and ritual which marked the return to life of Baal and the onset of the Autumn rains, at which time he, the storm-god, “wedded” the earth.*

*In Canaan, as throughout the ancient middle east, a sacred marriage rite celebrated these events: the king, representing the storm-god, copulated with the high priestess, who stood for the goddess of earth and fertility. Their union would magically encourage the sky to fertilize the earth with his rain.*

*The Hebrew prophets, who borrowed largely from Canaanite myth and poetry, did not omit this striking bit of religious theatre: the prophet Hosea was commanded by God to marry a whore in order to symbolize God’s enduring romantic commitment to Israel, who had “played the whore” with foreign gods. In chapter two of Hosea, Yahweh describes his final reconciliation with Israel, which the prophet’s marriage has mimed, in terms that explicitly invoke the Canaanite rite — Yahweh promises Israel he will “sow his seed in her in the land,” with verbal elaborations on the theme that are by turns erotic and agricultural. One phrase from this rather awesome, and sometimes geographical, declaration of love has found a very prominent place in the everyday worship of Rabbinic Judaism: the placing and binding on the arm of Tefillin.*

*Tefillin are black leather cubes containing parchments inscribed with verses from scripture. They are equipped with long leather straps and worn on the forehead and the left arm by orthodox Jews during morning prayer. The strap of the arm-tefillin is wound seven times around the forearm and then looped around the ring-finger of the left hand. While this last action is performed one recites the verse Erastik li Polam, “I betrothe thee to me forever” the formula of marriage between God and Israel from Hosea 2: 21.*

# YAKOV RABINOVICH

## i

### *Resurrection*

The long dry heat went thick with mist.  
September's end.

The sweat-slick body of the god  
bandaged in soaking clothes lies, an unalive  
Osiris in its oblong box, a hotel room  
in downtown Haifa, airless and cheap.

Yom Kippur. Busy Haifa stifles  
under its heat and its religion.  
The streets are eerily empty, and deader  
than Shabbat in Jerusalem. Baal,  
in his coffin, turns the pillow  
drier side up, slips uneasily  
back into uneven sleep.

Sunset. In the synagogues they sing the *Ne'ilah*,  
the closing prayer of the Yom Kippur service,  
as Baal, curled around an erotic dream  
sprays his belly with fertilizing rain  
and the first cool wind since Spring  
blows in off the sea, lifting the heat.  
Baal wakes, gulps the last  
wine in the bedside bottle,  
goes out to look for the whore  
Israel.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

ii

### *Sacred Marriage*

He found her, flat on her back in an alley.  
a long piece of cardboard for a mattress,  
fucking some immigrant drunk for fifty sheckels.

(This was the poet Rabinovich who,  
recognizing the god — poets are still capable  
of such piety — lifted himself

from the prostrate nation, readjusted  
his clothes, implausibly elegant  
as a homeless cat grooming itself on a dumpster.)

The lovers rejoined went back to her concrete  
cell of an apartment where she tied up  
with gesture so deft as could only come of  
2,000 years of laying tefillin.

Baal held the syringe, and as he pressed  
the smack-rich blood back down her vein  
he whispered “*Erastik li l’olam.*”

Then when opiates had given Israel back  
at least the feel of immortality,  
she was bold to ask “Will you really be my boyfriend?

take me to movies? You really don’t mind  
that I got fat?” Baal, touching her lips  
with a divine finger, says “Shhhhhhhhhh . . .”

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

### XV

### OY

At the end of the Jewish Sabbath  
a many-wicked candle is extinguished  
in a cup of wine: this is called *havdallah*:  
it breaks the spell of the seventh day  
and marks the resumption of vulgar time.

Once Shamash plunged his solar torch  
into the western sea, *havdallah* of the gods,  
beginning not a week but an age

in which an old-new people hurries  
to forget its past, erecting around itself  
not, as St. John envisaged, the New  
Jerusalem, not yet as Aharon Amir  
exults, the New Rome — it's more like the second  
New Jersey —

At the edge of Haifa they're bulldozing the last  
fine examples of Ottoman architecture  
to build a mall. In the Ministry of Immigration  
they're demolishing the last fine example  
of Zionist idealism. "What are you, a child?  
Do we have to do everything for you?  
You don't even have the form. You'll have to come back  
tomorrow at 2 (when I won't be here)."

I have three degrees, I speak ten languages,  
I'm almost forty, thirty-nine apartments  
wouldn't rent to me because I'm a dirty immigrant.  
"What do you want *me* to do about it?"

In Israel, they know how to treat you like a Jew.

I'm staring at nothing, pouring Arak  
down my guts to cauterize my existential wounds,  
to throw another jolt through my bloated sick liver,  
to write in poet's blood, most indelible of inks,  
for a sign above your gates, upon the doorposts of your houses

*Aliyah Macht Frei.*

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

Looking down from Mt. Carmel, through the haze,  
shore-sky-land all blend, vague and bright —  
not even Shamash can separate the realms.

November returns with the mist which is life,  
and nothing in life is all that clear . . .

# YAKOV RABINOVICH

## XVI

### The Great Resurrection

*for Peter Wilson*

December. Baal keeps running windy fingers  
over Carmel's curves, flogging back the trees.  
He moans, and loud, and for days on end.  
Someone's shutter bangs bangs bangs  
in inanimate copulation.  
"It's too cold," says Asherah, the sleeping earth,  
"not *now* . . ."

Unlike Baal, I do believe Spring will return,  
and unlike Adonai, I'm no longer intrigued by Belief.

The State of Israel doesn't coincide  
with my *condition* of Israel  
which is realized, it seems  
in motion alone,  
mapless as desire,  
existing by instants, furtive as a glance,  
tho' ready to steal itself some realness,  
an Israel whose scriptures are innocent  
as a dirty joke, and truthful as travellers' tales.

I glimpsed it yesterday — the sea was windless,  
the sea Baal's been whipping white all month,  
now still as though time itself had stopped  
under sunset gold of incandescing cloud-edge  
(*my* wealth — fairy gold and temporary gems).  
I looked and looked, stupid and lucid,  
for a moment and finally arrived.



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

### XVII

**For now, it's cold . . .**

This killing Winter damp has touched the bone  
through flesh, through sweater, and through countless cups  
of tea, through pastures worth of knitted wool  
and steaming leagues of tea; still cold, I lean  
above the heater, palms out, dreamy, dull.

The Winter rain seeps down grave-deep. The souls  
whose bodies are dissolving in the dirt  
swim clear and downward, slowly peopling  
the earth's unending dream. Ereshkigal,  
the queen of Under-earth, black Asherah,  
the kindly one, accepts them with her vast  
and necessary love, rejecting none.

Oh when it's warm again I'll face the world,  
recording angels of the TV news,  
the frightened Arabs and we frightened Jews,  
our backs against the wall, the Wailing Wall,

unhappy soldiers. When it's warm again  
I'll think it through, or maybe let it fade  
to vagueness on the beach of Tel Aviv  
where college kids, the Uzis on their back  
forgotten, eat ice-cream, inhabiting  
the fragile California of an hour,  
TV unreal and sweet as magazines,  
imaginal America . . .

# YAKOV RABINOVICH

## XVIII

### Shalom

It's like when you no longer are in love  
with someone — for the first time you can see  
just what they really look like — man, that's cold!

The landscape grows opaque and flat — the shops  
I'll never enter more, the friends I see  
this last time, faces sad as photographs  
and just as silent. Nothing more to say.  
I'm guest at my own absence, shaking hands  
and turning, heading off I don't know where.

I've no more stars of David in my eyes;  
they knocked *that* nonsense out of me, long since.  
I'd watch the girls on busses — like the girls  
in ads — their smiles weren't meant for me.

Inanna, Sumer's Asherah, once tried  
to seize control of Hell, the kingdom of  
Ereshkigal, her sister: to extend  
the realm of Love and of Fertility  
beyond the grave, and to abolish death.  
But entering the seven gates of Hell  
she had to yield successively her clothes,  
her ornaments, her pride, until she stood  
all naked — as a corpse is naked — dead.  
Inanna-like, I left at every step  
(from customs to the unemployment line)  
some level of my being: family,  
friends, language, dignity — without complaint  
I stripped as for the doctor, stripped away  
my Judaism, Zionism — flayed,

the wind of history blows cool across  
the bones of this as yet unburied man  
who stands as Moses stood on Pisgah, saw  
far off the land that would be Israel, land  
that he could never enter. There he died.  
He scanned the people's future, I their past,

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

a palimpsest of glowing Torah spread  
unfurled below, its time transformed to space,  
a patterned animated Israel map  
done on a scale of one-to-one — sometimes  
it coincides with this endangered strip  
of shore-front middle-east, but mostly not.

My gods, they failed me. Baal became a drunk  
and Asherah a prostitute, the realm  
a room, the books I hadn't sold as yet  
for bread, a loneliness as big as all  
I saw when I looked out to sea — out there's  
Marseilles, the bigger sea, America,  
indifferent El, off in his stupid clouds.  
And Yahweh, he's the sum of all of this.

Israel, I loved you as a man can love  
his future, pitied you like my own past.  
I learned to be a Jewish Arab here,  
slave labor, public property. Two years!  
Two years and still my Hebrew's out of books —  
so few of you would even speak to me!  
I ghosted through here, an invisible  
man wandering across an empty land  
and talking to himself

. . . in a dead language.

One message more I'll broadcast into space,  
one further valentine into the void,  
yet useless, yet at least the final word  
of one who won't return — peace be within  
these gates I could not enter, in God's name  
*shalom*.

It's night, and I'll be going soon.  
At night we all left Egypt. Leaving is  
an art the Jew has mastered.

That I came —  
an error. But like all the great mistakes  
I've made in life, I made this out of love —  
my love of Jacob's race. Some comfort, that.



## *Epilogue*

From Chaldee Ur to Tel Aviv  
we've counted our months by the moon, Israel,  
watched the zodiac's circling stars.  
But since we viewed earth from moon  
the many flat lands curved into one planet,  
all outer space became our sky —  
we had no map or calendar more,  
the scriptures suddenly looked their age.

We have indeed "been made like the stars of heaven,"  
like them we ride this horizonless dark . . .

Where now? In exile everywhere, my kingdom is the ancient books  
and a wandering among peoples who can have no love for my visions.  
Like Jeremiah in Egypt, I have nothing left but the grandeur of my failure,  
and it is of this I speak, if only to myself, and perhaps to God, who, if he  
doesn't listen, at least doesn't annoy me with advice.

He doesn't have to — I did nothing wrong — I'm not like Rimbaud,  
asking pardon for eating myself sick on lies, and ready to get modern with  
a penitent's zeal. Like Jeremiah, or better still, like Job, I protest my  
innocence with a neck unbent.

So I'm cast into outer diasporic darkness. I don't live anywhere,

Does anyone *live anywhere*?

Airplane travel flattens every land to an unmountained map,  
two dreary dimensions, and distances measured not in miles but in  
money,  
and when you get where you're going, you're still where you were —  
same highway, junk food, pop music —  
we've achieved a fast-paced frightful immobility:  
after 2,000 years it might as well still be the Roman empire —  
everywhere aqueduct, forum, amphitheatre,  
every little town laid out exactly the same, every language flattened  
under Latin;

for us its the highway, that most Roman road, the suburb, most  
nowhere of places

lawn-lined avenues curling endless and repetitive, green sprawl of  
inane paisley,

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or the uniform grid of city streets, all roads leading to Rome . . .  
who needs a map or calendar? — there's only one day, the work-day,  
and only one place, without an elsewhere.

It's the destination makes the road become the real, the path become  
the place —

to where the world realigns around us, every direction radiating  
equidistant off, then the vision, then the *overview*.

This is the the *Invitation to the Voyage*, the Caravan leaving, the pathway  
back

about to vanish like incense on the wind,  
the long distance call — will you accept the charges? take the stand,  
and by your facing proclaim there *is* direction?

How many miles to Jerusalem? Is it further away than China, than  
childhood? Can I get you there by candle light?

Will you follow your nostalgia to the place that's really yours? Will  
you come away with me now  
while everyone's asleep?

Listen, every town, every house must be a model of the world, a 3-D  
mandala, radiating from a core soul-white and burning.

In a City, that center is a garden, a palace, a temple: in every house, it's  
the hearth.

But they made the city center an auto intersection, a mere  
convergence of roads, not one of them a Path.

Where the world-tree had been planted, they pitched a church  
steeple, shadow-shrine of their death-tree.

In every house where the hearth should be they placed the cold blue  
fires of the TV screen — schlock portal on an under-world of spirits who  
try to sell you things . . .

Nor do I suggest you make the trip to Israel; I've been there, and even  
Jerusalem isn't necessarily Jerusalem . . .

If it isn't here, it's nowhere. *Therefore* it must be here.

The center, the point of pilgrimage, the crossroads, could it be  
wherever our paths cross, is it easy as our meeting?

Few the places, few the times, you'll literally see  
the lights you'd call Jerusalem's  
flaring beyond the horizon like dawn seeping through a dream,  
when you'll hear it far off, homesick music in the wind,

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

beyond the roar of traffic  
and every angry voice,  
can you hear the Levites singing,  
sad as man and strange as angel  
and as lonely as a choice?

It may be all we can do for now is remember she exists — and Rome wants nothing more than for you to forget.

Remember! be it no more than a *mizrahi* on the wall, three stones heaped ziggurat-wise, a prayer said facing east . . . from a hilltop, a rooftop,

a prayer-rug, its patterns a map of where you are right now under heaven, an alignment with the place the realms interpenetrate...

“If I forget thee O Jerusalem . . . ”

Point of origin, first land risen from the chaos-flood, still radiating the power of that *strong time*,

of all places on earth the oldest, and the newest and the highest and the best.

“On this holy mountain you stand reborn, a child of dawn, day itself, damp and new . . . ”





# The Judaism-X Manifesto



# The Judaism-X Manifesto

## 1: What is Is

Whether or not we've thought it out to the remotest details, we all know that Judaism, like the other scriptural religions (and that includes Buddhism), is untenable. Educated people assume that anyone who claims to be pious is either joking, not very bright, or suffering from psychological problems. We treat religion with the same blend of politeness and embarrassment we reserve for cripples.

All the most creative and virile Jewish minds of the twentieth century, from Freud to Allen Ginsberg, parachuted out of this ethnic venture. (The exceptions, Buber, Scholem &c., don't really figure in since they rigorously avoided contemplating anything besides the Jewish past.)

A movement without an avant-garde is defunct. If it keeps going through the motions, it's a zombie jamboree. Judaism has become a Club Dead for safeguarding failures of awareness. There are two basic packages to choose from. The Orthodox-Conservative, who have preserved some real learning, though at the price of living in the nineteenth century — Judaism as the indulgence of an archaizing taste. Then the Reform-to-Renewal crowd, who are mainly concerned with being the last living hippies — Judaism as moral summer-camp.

What is Judaism? The Rabbinic elaboration of its content long ago became so baroque as to make the original inspiration seem irrecoverable. The shadowy figures of the patriarchs offer us no adequate antecedents. To try and reach back across the “dark backward and abysm of time” to Moses, we may have to take the dangerous step of actually looking to where he lived. Well, duh!

Moses realized the monotheism pioneered by Akhenaten. The circumstantial evidence alone is impressive: a precise agreement in time (mid 14th century B.C.) and place (Egypt.) The harder evidence comes from Akhenaten's own writings:

How infinite are your actions! No one can view them all,  
or even see one completely, o sole God — there is no other  
beside you.

You made the world as you wished it — you and you  
alone —

humans, cattle, flocks, all on earth that travel on legs  
and all that, being bird, go aloft upon their wings.

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Akhenaten's monotheism came to be as a result of 1500 years of Egyptian metaphysical speculation, for which we have detailed record of the sun's progress from god, to principal god, to universal god. Did this influence Moses — who happened to be there at the time — or should we assume Mosaic monotheism fell out of the sky onto a convenient mountaintop?

The only interesting objection to the Akhenaten theory is the problem of connecting the highly abstract Aten-worship with the very concrete moral preoccupations of the Hebrews. (Even without the Aten, the connection of the first two commandments with the succeeding eight has hung a serious question-mark over our understanding of Judaism.) Freud himself, this theory's leading exponent, had difficulty here, and postulated a dubious connection between suppression of the image (Akhenaten's iconoclasm) and suppression of the impulse (Jewish morality).

The point of contact that allowed the Hebrew-Atenist fusion was the concept of the *human*.

Atenism, because it was a true monotheism, naturally produced a humanism. All children of one god: all human, all equal. Akhenaten writes:

You give every man his place — be it Syria, Ethiopia or  
Egypt — where he'll find food to sustain him all his life,  
each people with its own language and character, and a  
different skin color, since you made each country distinct.

You placed the Nile underground so you could make it  
emerge for your beloved Egypt, to give life to the people you  
made your own,  
you who own them totally, who exhaust yourself helping  
them, O lord of the earth, who rises for them as the sun,  
the orb of day adored by all. You make live all foreign  
lands as well, by giving them clouds — a kind of Nile in the sky  
that pours waters onto their hills and overflows their fields  
with rivers, whole oceans of rain!

No other god of the pre-scriptural period is described with anything approaching this universal care for Mankind in general.

The Hebrews, being nomads of the fertile crescent, developed a similar view, expressed in their international code of law. Contact with many peoples made the legal recognition of universal human rights (like those of a guest or stranger) a necessity. (The same thing would happen in the wake of Alexander. The international empires of Greece and Rome evolved laws and a conception of humanity that finally produced the philosophic humanism of the Stoics — which is where the western liberal tradition gets its concept of human rights.)

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

Moses must have understood or intuited that a synthesis of the Aten with the Hebrew sky-god El would give massive and supernatural valuation to the Hebrews' dearest beliefs, their codes of right and wrong. (Again, something very similar happens when Mohammed brings monotheism to later pagan Semitic nomads with a well-developed international code of oral law.)

The mythic echoes of the Mosaic synthesis are clear and unambiguous. The *fact* that monotheist humanism gave transcendent power to the practical humanism of a cosmopolitan law-code produced the *myth* that the code was given by God.

The *fact* that the monotheist conception of God logically and inevitably results in a new and supernal valuation of the human produces the *myth* that humanity was made in God's image.

The above hypothesis, though true, does not annihilate the Jewish religion as a religion. In fact, it makes it possible again.

Akhenaten, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, were prophets; they arrived at and transmitted truths about existence which are not attainable by reason alone — even though, once revealed, they can be understood and confirmed by reason. (Reform Jews take note: religion isn't about "universal truths," that is, platitudes. It's about aphorism! The above mentioned mythic tropes are true paradoxes, they unite the absolute opposites: God and Man.)

Equally important: the symbols and myths that are the vehicle of revaluation are not a husk to be discarded after the abstract kernel is grasped — the poetic form is of one substance (*Adonai echad u'shmo echad!* — God is one and His name is one!) with supernatural truth, and the best evidence of its authenticity. The poetic imagination is the vehicular form of prophecy.

And truly, there is enough to occupy the intellect and make drunk the soul in the intelligible philosophy and meaningful mythic images of Judaism. We needn't waste our time trying to pretend we credit impossible fables.

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## 2: Strong Time Liturgy

The Jewish prayerbook — is it the kabbalistic-looking jumble of square-letter texts and rubrics printed to the edge of the page from plates that should have been retired by the time of the Crimean war? Or is it a Reconstructionist all-English version done from a feminist animal-rights perspective, twenty pages long, with the *Amidah* replaced by a prayer for the welfare of the PLO?

Let's start over. Ritual is a re-actualization of mythic events that provide meaningful patterns for our existence. We don't re-enact or commemorate them, we rejoin the original experience of exemplary events, in the strong time of the origin. As the *haggadah* says: In every generation we are obliged to regard ourselves as having personally and actually come out of Egypt. (If you want the technical detail, see Eliade's *Eternal Return*.)

Looking over the *Siddur*, discerning the pattern that underlies the details, we find that the mythic event unendingly celebrated is the reception of the law on Sinai. The service recapitulates the Exodus daily, through the parting of the Red Sea (including a recitation of Moses' poem on that event), climaxing in the reading of the Torah, which is brought down from the ark with explicit invocation of that text's first descent.

(The morning prayers' elaborate recitation of temple texts, which include such crude magical extravaganzas as reading the recipe for the incense, were put in as a sop to national feeling when a restoration of the temple was still thought possible, that is, around the late first or early second century A.D.. The ritually peripheral nature of the material is shown by its relegation to an outlying — if sprawling — suburb of the liturgy.)

Once we see that the ritual machinery of the *Siddur*, the structure that underlies and provides the power, is the Journey to Sinai mythos, we can, for the first time, tune up the celestial engine with real precision. (Mere *kavannah* (mystical intention) won't help a dead prayerbook any more than it would a stalled car.)

So far I've only spoken of ritual. Liturgy is the what you have when ritual takes on explicit philosophical content, when the focus isn't on pure unimproved myth but on solemn avowal of a body of supernal truths. The Akhenaten connection makes it possible to see what in Jewish liturgy touches on the hot core of Jewish monism and humanism. One example is the *Sh'ma*, that summation of the whole religion's content in one world-affirming phrase. The Akhenaten information also makes clear that the *shmon'esreh* is an emotional wish list, and Maimonides' thirteen articles of faith are both an overstatement and an obscuration of the case.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

What I have mentioned so far is the *shacharit*, the daily morning prayers. The *mincha* (afternoon service) is just an afterthought (and is so treated by those who bother to say it) and the *ma'ariv* (evening service), despite some lovely lines, is no more than a late echo of the *shacharit*. The only part of the non-holiday liturgy that needs special mention is *kabbalat shabbat* (an expansion of the Friday evening prayers made by seventeenth century Kabbalists) which welcomes the Sabbath in imagery that resurrects the most deeply rooted of Hebrew idolatries, Asherah, the Canannite fertility goddess. Such essentially pagan elements as this need to be greatly accentuated.

Most of the accretions to Judaism's vastly over-extended liturgy were inserted because of ingenious but irrelevant textual associations. (For example, the awful, directionless psalm *ashrei* is remorselessly repeated merely because it is an alphabetic acrostic. To the mystically overdeveloped text-veneration of talmudic times, this deployment of the whole alphabet — wow! — seemed proof positive this psalm covered all contingencies.)

Well, we've seen enough print by now to not be hypnotized by every eye-chart. What does work for us (the evidence is in everyone's affection) are the pagan elements, Kabbalat Shabbat, Kiddush Levanah, &c. — which at present do us unacknowledged good from their place in the textual unconscious.

They no longer pose a threat as idolatry because they have been highly subordinated to Judaism's philosophical agenda. And even if they weren't, no one could seriously pray to Baal today any more than they could bow to a statue of Zeus in a Museum. Now I have a few neo-pagan friends who actually do that sort of thing, but they're simply eccentrics and hobbyists playing a game of dress up they sometimes even believe. But for all their self-seriousness, they're merely silly, in exactly the same way the orthodox are. Pretending historical perspective, psychoanalysis and modern science never happened is just that — pretending. It can surely make you giddy, but it'll never make you real.

But all this is perhaps beside the point. Reciting liturgy is as over now as animal sacrifice. Even as religion, watching a movie makes more sense.

## YAKOV RABINOVICH

### 3: A Rock for Chagall's Window

Why does Judaism have such a lousy aesthetic sense? Really, it's a *shanda*. Last Hanukkah I went out menorah-hunting to the Israel Bookshop in Boston's Somerville Borscht-Belt (perhaps I should say Bulghur Belt). There I viewed nearly 300 different models. Admittedly I had made the task impossible by ruling out the eighteenth and nineteenth century styles. I wanted evidence that the Jews had produced, and mass-produced, at least one menorah in the 20th century I wouldn't have to hide when friends who'd been to art school came to visit. What I found was a sorry spectacle indeed, and for the first time in my life I boycotted the holiday. I wondered sorely whether we as a people don't have some sort of animus against the visual arts that goes beyond monotheist scrupulousness. Something like Mencken's *Libido for the Ugly*.

Those awful illuminated manuscripts they press into service for calendars fool no one. The vicissitudes of Diaspora explain nothing — we've been settled in single and prosperous locations for nearly a millenium at a time. There's the prohibition against images, but what about design? What about calligraphy? How could we have done all that time in *al-Andalus* without developing so much as a ligature? (I might add that modern Israeli typefaces are exemplary for their ink-pig ugliness: bare without seeming crisp, dense without being ornamental, like the worst of Helvetica and Black Letter all in one place.)

The problem wasn't wouldn't, but couldn't. We weren't able to come up with a form or a style that visually expressed Judaism's content. Christianity, for example, could embrace the plastic arts, because they echo the idea of the incarnation. The Moslems developed the greatest of the world's non-ideographic calligraphies because they saw the presence of God in an utterance: the Koran is, in effect, God made Word, just as Jesus is the Word made flesh.

The Jews, however, see God in the relations between people in *this* world (you know, laws and all that), and that's a concept for which it is harder to find an art form. So the creativity went into morality and literature instead. (A good parallel comes from chess, where all the genius went into the game and none into the pieces.) This doesn't mean that a Jewish aesthetic can't exist. And I believe that if it doesn't, and soon, we're finished.

For the Jews, the whole of the human reality is the face of God. The realism of Amarna art expressed this by showing the temporary, accidental forms of mankind and the natural world where the ancient Egyptian eye expected monumental gods. By context, by playing on the viewer's expectations, Amarna art made the implicit statement that



## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

human existence is saturated with holiness. But what now we expect from art is very different, so simple realism is not going to work for us.

Another (curious and accidental) echo of the Amarna idea can be seen in Leonardo's famous sketch known as the Vitruvian Man, the fellow in the circle demonstrating his proportions, arms and legs in several positions superimposed. The image is a talisman, a mandala, for the linked notions of Man in motion embodying eternal Design.

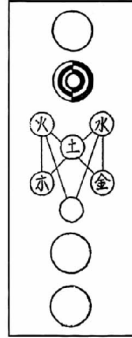
Then there's Muybridge's human locomotion series, that first glimpse of the invisible world of the mobile, revealing the range of changes that underlie the blur we take for granted as stable human reality. The series, enshrining each demi-moment, has a power neither the single still nor the movie can approach. The series succeeds in giving the idea of eternity, because in eternity there aren't past, present and future in succession but all three at once. (*In aeternitate non est praesens, praeteritum, vel futurum, cum sit tota simul*, in Aquinas' phrase.) Thus human locomotion is a tricky and oblique emblem of the Jewish idea. (Philip Glass, who sold his Judaism for the Buddhist bowl of lentils, was unconsciously true to type when he chose Akhenaten and Muybridge as subjects for operas.)

These begin to sketch the direction truly Jewish art would take. A further hint comes from Taoist and Zen art. Appropriately: Taoism, despite its being nearly overwhelmed by its popular and folk-religion side, was intellectually articulated (by Chuang Tzu) as a true monism. In fact, philosophic Taoism is probably closer to Judaism than is any other religion. Zen is of course Buddhism that, on its way through China to Japan, picked up a serious tinge of Taoism. Think of the cloud paintings and scholars' rocks of Taoism, which are similar to the yet more over-refined use of naturally occurring patterns in the Zen aesthetic. These both highlight the underlying harmony and spontaneous order in the mutable material world, and are a hint at what art Judaism might have evolved — if it didn't have the humanism

A fairly vivid confirmation of the above assertion comes from a look at this Taoist illustration, "The Empty Tao Develops into the World: The Diagram of the Great Ultimate." (See following page.)

Its remarkable similarity to the oft-reproduced Kabbalistic diagram of the ten Sephiroth is determined by a number of structural parallels in the belief systems. The use of circles as emblems of totality and perfection is universal. The concept of a unified and total reality out of which multiplicity radiates is what causes the spheres to beget spheres. The higher up one goes, that is to say, the more abstract the diagram is, the more precise the parallels are. The top sphere, the *Empty Tao*, corresponds closely to the *Ain Soph* ("without limit or definition") of the Kabbalah. The next sphere, which shows Yin and Yang, female and male energy radiating from the Empty Tao in semicircles of black and white, corresponds to *Keter* ("crown") whose androgynous perfection radiates to the primordial couple *Hokhmah* and

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### The Empty Tao Develops into the World

*Binah.* From here down the divergence becomes pronounced, with the Taoist diagram showing spheres that hold characters for the Chinese five elements (Earth, Water, Fire, Wood and Metal).

Needless to say, the Taoist aesthetic has a great deal to suggest to Judaism-X. Starting with an appreciation of the accidental, unbalanced yet complete compositions that occur in nature which are so well understood in Japanese aesthetics. We would update this in the direction of a sort of Teen *Wabi*.

The configuration of your rumpled sheets and blankets when you get out of bed; short hair treated with mousse and then man-handled and left to stiffen in jagged touselment — what the hair-burners used to call the “just-fucked” look; patterns of rust, of lichen, layers of peeled posters on a brick wall; candle-drippings; the moon; inspired free-association (such as Kerouac achieved at his rare best).

That only touches on the question of style. Along with this is the mature humanity which one would expect from Jewish art, and which would make it more than modish orientalism. Perhaps the nearest approach is to be found in Rembrandt. Certainly there was a good deal at stake in his predilection for Old Testament themes. Few artists evince so profound a liking for people. One could almost imagine Rembrandt illustrating Scholem Aleichem’s stories — only he didn’t have the sense of humor.

I’m not an artist or a designer, so I can’t do more than hint with my suggestions and my computerized collages. It’s quite enough if I can offer a real graphics person a target to tilt at.

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Judaism-X propaganda postcard: The figure suggests Judaism's roots in ancient near eastern mythology by its head, which is that of the Egyptian fertility goddess Hathor (the "golden calf" of the Bible). The body, broken down into its geometric components, hints that human and mortal forms share in the immortality and perfection we recognize in mathematical truth. The text, *ab aeterno ordita sum*, is the self-description of Wisdom from the book of Proverbs, "My existence was eternally ordained."

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### *droll afterthought*

The whole subject of art abuts on another and equally important theme, which we may term “the cool stuff of God.”

“What do you guys actually do?” is a question I keep getting from my neo-pagan friends — a question that is more difficult to respond to politely due to their unspoken and questionable assumption that reading, thinking and conversing don’t count as *doing* anything. What do we do? Well let’s start simple: anything that causes us to stand around in circles holding hands is probably right out.

It’s the twenty-first century already, so we can hardly be expected to engage in nineteenth century religious mummary. On the positive side, we profess the same awestruck reverence for good conversation that primitive people have for the written word. We like costume as much as the next fellow, but it has to make sense in terms of style. As the pagans claim to, we want something real. Not a communion table but a dinner party; not a reading from the Torah but actual Theater.

Mostly religion is dogma, dress-up and make-pretend. I mean, on the contrary, to honor what can be touched, tasted, felt, seen, and (especially) understood. Perhaps my greatest innovation is the idea of religion as “cool stuff.” Other faiths have, incidentally, as an epiphenomenon, art, statues, incense, bumper-stickers, in fine: *tchotchkas*. For me, on one level, the religion *is* the promo items. I don’t ask you to have been there, much less to have done that — quite enough if you get the t-shirt. Very Zen of me, come to think of it.

Ideally, when you have all the toys, clothes and furnishings — outward signs of an inward grace! — it will amount to what the fashion people call “a pulled-together look,” but which we spiritual types more precisely denominate “alignment of the *tchotchkas*.”

“No ideas but in things” was one of Allen Ginsberg’s favorite poetic slogans, and a fine phrase it is if you take it a little less literally than he did. The best way to convey philosophy is via art. Paul well understood this principle when he condensed the whole elaboration of late-antique mystic-philosophical myth into the single, simple image of the crucified god. The other strains of gnosticism fell before Christianity not because they were any more false, but because they were just too *fussy*.

Of course I’d like everyone to learn Hebrew and Arabic and read Maimonides, or even learn adequate English so as to read my rantings without a dictionary, but that’s not going to happen. Quite enough if I can put across a style — and to give even a few Americans a sense of style in clothing, food, or music would already be a wildly transformative act.

Judaism-X approaches religion as art. Art isn’t true and it isn’t untrue. It doesn’t flinch from critical analysis and it doesn’t ask for a leap of faith.

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It isn't "mere entertainment," it isn't a moral lesson, and it doesn't make you run around in robes—unless you're on a real stage. Being able to take religion seriously in the twenty-first st century is not only not difficult, it's not relevant. Being able to take art seriously is what was really at stake all along. And if you can't do that, maybe you should try the chat rooms. I'm told the people there are only too happy to talk to you about what they believe. Otherwise put, we're Jews — not philistines.

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### 4: Are You In?

The question of who is a Jew is one discussed with no proportion to the number of people who are actually interested in joining the club. Still, the definitions out there are so mischievous that I can well spare the time to tidy up the topic.

The orthodox position is unassailable — granting, as we cannot, that the foundational documents are all authentic, in our possession, and that they have already been decisively interpreted. The orthodox argument is an argument from authority — the weakest of proofs, particularly when the authority is as various as the scriptures. But one thing I'll say for the orthodox: they do understand and act upon this truth: that no one deserves to be called religious who doesn't allow his religion to make demands of him.

The more liberal, in all their gradations down to utterly indifferent, base their claim on ancestry and acculturation — which are quite beside the point, since Judaism isn't a race or a nationality but a religion. A particularly ugly and much favored dodge among this gentry is to say "When they come to get the Jews they'll take me too!" The evil here is twofold. First, it makes Hitler an authority on Jewish identity. Also, it implicitly makes cynical use of our murdered kin to justify a lazy indifference to our cultural survival. This is, in the classical sense, obscene: it is shameless, filthy, and ominous. Like those grisly peep-shows, the Holocaust "museums." As though picking one's teeth in a boneyard conferred identity! There's no business like *Shoah* business. . .

Better light may be cast on the problem if our enquiry is opened on a wider question: what does it mean to have a religion? In America, where people love to play at identities, one can buy the toys, try on the clothes, and be a Jew — or a Druid for that matter — for as long as the novelty lasts. Superficiality is taken as a sign of liberation from empty forms, and faith's idlers boast the superiority of their "spirituality" to mere mundane religion.

Trying to define what real religion entails, the best touchstones I was able to find were these: occult epiphenomena, profound feeling and serious thought.

Magic — using the will and imagination to influence events — is real, though not very useful. At best, magic allows one to bend probabilities somewhat, so it's handy in matters like health or the weather. Not much good in love, since there chance plays so small a part, as you realize by the time you have forty years to look back on. Magic has no power to finagle the impossible. The greatest magician who ever lived couldn't levitate so much as a ping-pong ball. And if your aim is just to impress other people, illusion is vastly more effective than the magical arts.

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Magic comes into play in religion as an epiphenomenon. Mystical practice is accompanied by synchronicities, telepathic incidents, miraculous healings, &c. — which are best ignored. To concentrate on them is to frighten off these timid and tentative phenomena, and they don't in themselves mean anything or lead anywhere. They're just nice as signs indicating that you're on the right track. And in fact, that's what the outwardly wondrous aspect of religion is mainly used for in archaic societies: fire-walking and the like are a display of credentials, not a goal.

The next touchstone of religious authenticity, profound feelings, are the downfall of American religiosity. Sentimentality is most folks' idea of religious experience, and if it ends in a good cry, no greater success can be wished. Now a real engagement of the emotions, that is a psychological projection of oneself into the mythic narrative of a faith, is essential, all agree. And it's not that difficult, at least for Americans, to engage their feelings. (After all, *feelings are important* . . . as we are taught from kindergarten on.) It's *thought* that's the kicker. Without intellectual content, religion is nothing but fun with imaginary friends. Admittedly pre-scriptural, archaic religions didn't have a deliberately articulated abstract content, and despite this, their religiosity was real. But their whole way of thinking was different from ours. They didn't *have* abstraction and logic as we understand it, and such reasoning as there was took place via free associations of images and anecdotes that would seem to us giddy. (Read one of the speeches in the *Iliad*, or in first *Isaiah*, to see what I mean.)

Modern man can think like that, in myth and symbol, only with a mighty backward effort of the mind. Not narrative but *analysis* is the modality of our thought. Thus I'm putting forth my message in a manifesto and not in a poem. We should not, out of an archaizing taste, expect religion to continue expressing itself in ecstatic poetry and scriptural form. Attempts in this direction were particularly plentiful in the nineteenth century, and ranged from the ridiculous like *The Book of Mormon* to the sublime like *Leaves of Grass*. But neither of these really achieved its goal, since we can no longer accept muddled thought as religious truth, or call a *magnum mysterium* that which is adequately explained by bad lighting.

Otherwise put, religion consists of the marvelous, and the religious mood is necessarily based on wonder. But wonder is the desire to know the cause of the effect seen, of the marvel. And thought is the means of satisfying this most human of desires. Thus *understanding* one's religion is superior to getting worked up over it, because possession of a good is superior to merely longing for it. It follows that for a religion to be taken seriously by us, it must be able to give an intelligible account of the historical context and philosophic content of its myths — not just homilies, exhortations, allegories and paraphrases! Scriptural religion is about having a book in your hand and

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learning something, not just standing there with your mouth open. What is beyond learning is mysticism, which I'll have something to say about anon. What is beneath learning is piety, and that I can waste no more time even discussing.

If a lot of thought, some real feeling, and the occasional occult phenomenon are present, it's safe to say we have a religion. Whether that religion is Judaism depends on the part Jewish values and ideas play. And in truth, Thomas Aquinas and William Blake, on the level of their profound engagement with Hebrew scripture, have a better claim to be considered Jews than most of the Jews I've met. Admittedly, one doesn't make many friends holding people up to such a standard. and I don't think it worthwhile to run around telling Jews they're not Jews any more. It's enough if we no longer take them for such.

It may be objected, that's all very well for Blake and Aquinas, but what about plain old you and me? Do I need a Ph.D. to be Jewish? Considering how many Jews there are out there with doctorates, the question may not be frivolous.



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### 5: Divine Law

This is a subject which gets a rather bad (alternative) press nowadays. Enthusiastic young people are much given to chalking up walls with circle-A's, and that seems to be as far as they got with their *Aleph-Beth*. Conservatives use the Bible to rubber-stamp any barbaric old legal prohibition that takes their fancy. My political interest in scripture, however, is scripture as a bill of rights.

Here the anarchists are at a great disadvantage. Without a creator to endow one with them, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are not rights, but merely matters of luck. The same problem arose early last century, in the Coke-or-Pepsi controversy between Fascism, Communism and Capitalism. All three ideologies were brutally materialist. Fascism was candid about the brutality. Communism was candid about the materialism. Capitalism was candid about nothing whatsoever.

Hitler's greatest victory came when he mocked western liberalism's values and got only silence in reply. That the only answer to Fascism came out of a gun-barrel was a statement of moral bankruptcy. Now that Communism has been added to the evolution chart, Capitalism is showing it's true amoral colors. Why shouldn't it? There are no longer any alternatives. Not that there ever were. All three were eerily alike from the start, in their architecture, their indifference to human rights, and their naive belief in power.

Against all three stands the western Liberal tradition, with its steady assertion that the limitation of government, protection of the individual's rights, and the exaltation of free speech are the political dimensions of moral good taste. The theory goes traceably back through Locke to the Stoics, but more important than the genealogy are the constant traits. If God is, as the Stoics maintained, the great Intelligence of the universe, man is sacred and inviolable insofar as he thinks, for therein his likeness to God consists. His intellectual fire is of one substance with the universal Light.

When we first came to understand the influence of physiology and chemistry on thought, man's mind appeared mere malfunction- prone wet-ware — in Burgess' opaque but memorable phrase, "a clockwork orange." For those who weren't too uptight to listen, Freud's discovery of the unconscious reduced what human-ness remained to a subset of animal behavior. In this context, the anarchist prating about "the innocence of desire" is as silly and shrill as the conservatives with their claptrap about "values." There's no scientific basis for either.

A real response became possible only after the mid twentieth century, when Eliade discovered the archetypal structure of the religious

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imagination. Here was a world of universal and evidently timeless symbols that couldn't be explained away in terms of molecules or unconscious drives. Order, harmony, beauty and meaning emerged like a new constellation from the outer-space darkness of the mind.

A new definition of the human, a new Humanism, became possible in a way which excelled the old one based solely on reason — in which we could be exceeded by machines. *Man is the being who combines thought and image in the meaningful dreaming which is mythology.*

As a Jew, I am (on page one of the manual) uniquely called to revalidate the conception of mankind along these lines: no other scripture has Man, conceived of as both male and female, created in the image of a universal and intellectual God (whose thought is intelligible light). The Jews alone made Man the great miracle of their primary myth. And as the first Jews of the postmodern era, not orthodox or heterodox but paradox, we can read that page for its Stoic-like philosophical content, and see the same as not diminished but completed and validated by the *mythic* formulation.

We are here consciously enunciating the implicit content of Mohammed's challenge to those who called him a fraud: he said, if the Quran's a fabrication, let's see you make up a new verse like the ones in it! We say consciously and explicitly what the Prophet wisely and intuitively implied. Mythologic creation is the miracle that makes man Man.

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### 6: Kabbalah and the Tao

Religious tradition has carefully de-politicized the Torah. The official mysticism, the Kabbalah, says that the most proper and sublime use of religion is to reunderstand the symbolic language of Torah in a way that enables one to enter more fully into the observance of religious law.

Sounds like a whole lot of no fun to us.

Since the *Nag Hammadi* finds, the gnostic mythology of the Hellenistic world has become knowable in detail, and the Kabbalah is evidently of a piece with this. Enough archetypal features of gnosticism had been absorbed by the time the biblical canon was closed (the ghostly voice uttering light in Genesis, *Hokmah* the goddess of Thought in Proverbs, &c.) for the whole goopy Greek filo-sophical pastry to reconstruct itself — eight hundred years later — as the *Zohar*. The Parent of the Entirety is *Ain Soph*, Sophia is the *Shechina*, the Aeons are the *Sephiroth*, &c. The necessary adjustments were made, e.g., the evil god of the Old Testament, Ialdabaoth, was reconstructed — though at the cost of a “shattered” creation. Jewish mysticism, viewed candidly, is a contamination of Judaism by the philosophic myths of late Hellenism. Hassidism, the last ecstasy of Kabbalah, only made one innovation: to drown the whole detail in sentimentality. As if it needed more sugar! But if you know anything about Polish cooking . . .

Judaism-X preserves the Kabbalah’s mythology for its decorative merits, as “icing on the cake,” but resumes the evolution of Judaism in the direction it would have taken had it developed without interference from the baklava boys. This isn’t exactly “Jewish Taoism,” because Judaism is already a Tao — a word for which “Torah” is a most adequate translation.

An attenuated late testimony to this appears even in the Kabbalah. Far above that super-haunted gnostic vegetable, the Tree of Life menaced, Yggdrasil-like, by the Nidhogg horrors of *Sitra Ahrab*, elevated to a distant, beneficent heaven is *Ain Sof*, “Without Limitation,” the highest form of God, formless and active through his inactivity.

That the name Yahweh is a form of the verb “to be,” set beside the prohibition of images for him, well expresses the idea of God as the totality from which all forms arise. A different expression of the same concept is Elijah’s vision in the First Book of Kings:

. . . and look, Yahweh passed by, there was an enormous and powerful wind, breaking mountains and shattering cliffs before it, but the wind was not Yahweh. After the wind, thunder, but the thunder wasn’t Yahweh. After the thunder, lightning, but the lightning wasn’t Yahweh. After the lightning came a subtle, silent voice (*qol d’mamah thaqqah*).

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This is the language of silence; you have felt it in the pause that persuades, what the comic actors know as “timing” . . .

This is Ecclesiastes’ “season” which accords with every act, the “time for every purpose under heaven,” the moment when the Torah, the Direction, the Tao, becomes clear, and you proceed at ease through every obstacle as though a sea had parted before you. . . the Red sea to be precise. This is where Egypt ends and Sinai begins.

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### 7: Jubu Roi



Whence came to be that comic and portentous otherworld monster, Jubu Roi, the Knecht Ruprecht who steals naughty Jewish boys and leaves them, shivering and shaved of head in the Zen monasteries of upstate New York?

The defection of many of the brightest Jews to Buddhism is a well-publicised scandal, but one which has so far not been adequately explained. The point has been fairly made that Buddhism has a contemplative tradition that far surpasses anything found in Judaism. Yes — or in Christianity for that matter. Rearguard actions by Jews and Christians, dusting off their own marginal and distrusted mystical paths, fool only those making the attempt. (Sufism, on the other hand, is a serious contender.)

To be clear: what I mean by contemplation is the attainment, by meditative technique and philosophical consideration, of a sustainable world-view that looks beyond material circumstances, not only death and change, but even desire, emotion and thought. To be honest: when the Romans did in the Essenes in sixty-eight A.D., Judaism's potential for developing in the direction of mysticism was finished. The Pharasaic party was all that was left, and nothing beyond their religiously-premised moral philosophy in legal form was acceptable. The Rabbis, which is the name given to the Pharisees once they were no longer one faction but the norm, slapped heavy muzzles on both philosophy (Maimonides) and mysticism (the Kabbalah) in the middle ages. So much energy went into defensive assertions of orthopraxis, that what was left in the contemplative line was stunted beyond repair.

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The personal benefits of mystical practice are of course manifold, and on one level, familiar to everyone. Anyone who puts a pause between impulse and action has “transcended material being” to a limited degree. Mysticism permits this on a grand and ongoing scale, and certain dispositions, like alcoholism, which we might call an acute case of material existence, desperately need mystical tools just to function normally. But full entry into a transcendent path, such as Buddhism, necessarily entails adopting a horrified view of the material world. Not just rising above it — shrinking from it in dread. Insofar as Judaism went in for mysticism, via Kabbalah, the material world appeared demonic. And this bargain, Jews feel, is too much like paying retail.

But a contemplative tradition whose philosophic price is not immediately apparent is far from being Buddhism’s only appeal to the Jew. Were that the case, the far superior options offered by Raja Yoga would have pride of place among Jewish apostates. Buddhism has further points in its favor: non-theism and the warmth of Mahayana ethics. It’s easy to see how the latter would appeal to the people who, beyond all others, have made morality an art. And the draw of non-theism makes sense if we recall that the very abstract, imageless and non-personal God of the Jews is very compatible with Theravada non-theism, as it is with Mahayana Emptiness. Thus we find in the Juba a very comfortable sort of renegade: one who has fled the familiar for the similar.

Buddhism also has something even more positive to offer the Jewish sensibility in the aesthetic line. There is perhaps nothing in the iconography of world religion that offers so exalted a humanism as Buddhism. In viewing the Mahayana pantheon, and acknowledging its debt to Greek sculpture and Hindu mythology, we yet note something altogether new in the history of religious art: idealized human forms exemplifying the uniquely human activities of comprehension and contemplation.

On the archetypal level, these lotus-throned colossi of the mystic bear comparison with the human created in the image of God in Genesis One. If the figures were shown standing and not sitting cross-legged, these could easily be mistaken for Adam Kadmon. The parallels are both precise and detailed, and the Bodhi tree of Buddha’s realization is the archetypal counterpart of Eden’s Tree of Knowledge. But an Eliadean analysis of this kind is unnecessary here. The Jews who go in for Buddhism rarely look into its artistic tradition any more than they wonder about archetypes. It is quite enough for our purposes to note that Buddhist art has a resonance for Judaism.

The comparison with Buddhism is particularly helpful, for Buddhism, as a contemplative path, exemplifies so much of what Judaism is not, and which most people raised in the post-Christian west consider to be truly religious. No reason to challenge this. Judaism is, strictly speaking, not a religion, any more than it’s a system of jurisprudence. It is a moral philosophy that

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expresses itself in religious language and legal forms. In my own search for the essence of Judaism, I spent years seeking out the mythology of the Kabbalah, tracing its outlines back through the metaphors of the prophets to the Canaanite myths they drew on—this was Judaism as paganism. During my bouts of orthopraxis, I attempted a Beshtian Hassidism — Judaism as an ecstatic pietism. Both approaches had to fail, because they looked for what Judaism didn't have, except accidentally.

Judaism stems from the most ancient and venerable religious tradition on earth, that of Egypt: and from the most individual and irreligious man that nation ever bore. Akhenaten's teaching fused with the code of the freest and most worldly species of humanity, the nomad. These are Judaism's facts, its glory and its limits. If one is drawn to Buddhism, there is no reason to adopt it at the expense of Judaism. The two are so very different in aims that they supply each others' lacks. I would here note that Asian cultures take exactly this view of Buddhism, and practice it alongside other paths. Why the all-or-nothing approach of the Jubu?

A simple ignorance of Judaism, the pressure to make oneself palatable to gentiles, and the twentieth-century obsession with ideological purity, are all factors. To this one might add the perennial appeal of the "Mysterious East," and the fact that of all the far eastern options this was the only one deliberately designed from the start for export and proselytizing. These factors, together with the authentic merits of Buddhism, let us understand the gruesome zeal with which many cut themselves from the body of the Jewish people to graft their *Yiddishe kopf* onto Buddhism.

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## 8: Melchizedek — Ecological War

*“Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”*

### I

In ancient Rome one was declared an outlaw with this formula: “he shall be denied fire and water,” that is, one was to be refused all the simple necessities of human existence, such as firewood and drinking water, which nature offers free to all.

By slow degrees of degradation we have been brought to where we buy clear water by the bottle and pay a week’s wages to heat a modest home for a month. In some ways we’re far worse off than Rome’s outlaws, who at least breathed clean air! And we don’t even seem to realize that, when every element — earth, air, fire and water — is fouled around us and offered back at a price, we’re outlaws and warred upon.

As always, organized religion has failed us. The the most forward-looking bureaucrats of the Book, in a desperate last-ditch effort to make themselves presentable, may now try to show they care about the planet. But in fact, the official scriptures, by the official reading, have nothing useful to say. The Quran of the mullahs views nature only as a demonstration of God’s fine qualities: Nature’s value is purely intellectual, and it isn’t even meant to last. Everything’s to be effaced on the imminent Last Day.

Official Christianity is similarly eager for the end, when irreparably fallen nature will be improved into a paved city, the New Jerusalem. Conventional Judaism has a sane relation to nature, but a neutral and pragmatic one with nothing to add to the ecology debate.

Yet religion is indeed what we need to mobilize forces for the earth, and we have to sieze back the scriptures from their unworthy stewards. Those who have translated and interpreted the scriptures for us have been men of conventional faith, whose piety censored and misrepresented the texts. But the great prophets of our shared traditions, Moses, Isaiah, Jesus and Mohammed, were archetypal dissidents, in every way alien to the committees that have translated them into English from the time of King James and George Sales on to the present day.

### II

There is, for instance, a Hebrew word for ecological balance, and one of the most commonly occurring words in the Bible: *tsedeq*. It is translated, perfunctorily, as “righteousness,” because to translate it fully and fairly, with its dazzling range of meanings, would have revealed an unacceptable degree of “paganism” in the Bible. At root, it means “rainfall in due proportion,” and meanings like “rightness,” “justice” and “righteousness” arose as



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extensions and expansions of the original meaning. This is no surprise. For the archaic societies of the ancient near east, important concept words are always deeply rooted in the realities of physical life. Abstractions, even for things like colors, don't enter the vocabulary of Hebrew, until well into period A.D.

We'll get a clearer understanding of how *tsedeq* evolved by examining the parallel Egyptian world *ma'at*. It comes from the verb *ma-a* which originally meant "to rightly measure," and referred to the resurveying of the fields after the Nile's floodwaters withdrew each spring. The existence of private property depended on an accurate *ma-a* of the silt-covered land.

There is a large choice of glyphs with the same phonetic value in Egyptian, so the ones which are *chosen* can often signify a word's meaning. *Ma-a* is spelled with a mound of earth emerging from under floodwaters, a scythe, and an arm. This notion of rightness, evidently grew right out of the well-worked riverside acres. The word was early on made an abstract feminine noun, *Ma-at*, which means rightness both in the agricultural and moral sense.

Israel depended on rainfall as Egypt did on the Nile's flooding. Like *ma'at*, *tsedeq* came to take on a more general sense, but it evolved in ways far more profound and meaningful for us than *ma'at*.

The genius of the Hebrews was to always adopt the best poetic and religious conceptions of their neighbors, but then deepen them with moral meaning. It was the chief god of the farming Canaanites, the storm god Baal, who guaranteed *tsedeq*, rainfall and crop growth. The Hebrews, who adopted so many features from this Canaanite Zeus, took over *tsedeq* as well, but enlarged it to create a view of the moral and natural worlds as inseparable. (Very unlike we Americans, who see ecological devastation as not a crime, but merely a pity.)

The word *tsedeq*, in its fullest sense, can mean "world in balance" both ecologically and politically. The eighty-fifth psalms says:

He's quick to save those who regard him with awe, his  
glory shines across their country like sunlight,  
fairness and generosity meet in how God treats a just  
people,  
the balance of the scales of justice, the balance of nature  
(*tsedeq*) coincide, sweetly they meet, like a kiss,  
the land brings forth abundant wheat, abundant honesty  
beneath a sky clear as a conscience.  
If God will grant us the power to be good, the land will  
give us good things.

The ecological balance of the ancient near east was not the exclusive responsibility of the gods. The king, as vice-regent of the sky god, guaranteed

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his people the benevolence of earth and sky. The kings of Israel were monarchs on this sacerdotal model with a special moral dimension, as we see in the seventy-second psalm, a coronation hymn:

O God, make the king just! May his sons after him  
maintain the world in balance (*tsedeq*), may he make society fair  
and give the poor their rights

so the hills and valleys can bring forth their crops, the fair  
return for fairly paid work.

Let the king defend the rights of the poor, protect the  
impoverished, let him crush and humble those who cheat the  
people,

O king, do this and you'll be more glorious to your people  
than the sun, more splendid than the moon, remembered from  
age to age,

you will be like the autumn rain that renews the mown  
fields after harvest, like the heavy rains of winter that soak the  
dry land to its depths.

In the days of such a king, good men, perfect men, will  
flourish, and abundance will be unaltering beneath the  
changing moons.

### III

The god of the Hebrews appropriated not only specialized vocabulary from the Canaanites, but myths and images too. One can see something parallel in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the God of the Bible is sometimes referred to as "Jove," and Hesiod's battle of the titans was adapted to become the war of the rebel angels. The most important Canaanite myth Yahweh absorbed was that of Baal, the god of rain, who is every year defeated by Mot, the god of death and drought. Each autumn Baal returns with the autumn rains, to restore *tsedeq*.

Isaiah, Habakkuk, Joel, Hosea, and Nahum all draw on this myth for their apocalyptic poems. Isaiah's version gives a description of the country robbed of *tsedeq*, which foretells global warming:

The land is bleaching under the sun, pales as if sick with  
sorrow,

the world wears out, dries up, discolors,  
noble, commoner, all fade under the heat.

It isn't just the time of year — it's the time of reckoning!

The land was desecrated under its inhabitants! They broke  
God's holy law, they twisted the statutes,

till the Eternal Covenant, the promise that the rains would fall  
in season, the agreement between heaven and earth, was annulled.

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

That's what kindled this heat! Do you dare expect you'll see clouds again?

That's why hot haze eats at earth like a curse. The guilty with their land are drubbed under sunlight.

That's why the world burns all punishing summer, why so few still walk these streets of endless August.

I remember when we still had four seasons, not just one chill drizzling winter which lasted till June to be replaced by three months of greenhouse haze. And I remember the lies of servile scientists on the TV news, assuring us global warming wouldn't happen, that the weirdness of our weather was a normal variation. And now we have a generation of children for whom "Aprill, with his shoures soote" is as baffling for the meteorology as it is for the spelling. And we're all so happy to play with our cell phones seated high in our SUV's that none can be persuaded to care.

The prophet Habakkuk's second chapter ties global warming to capitalism, represented by Baal's old enemy Mot, the god of drought and death:

They wanted, they took. They had money and force, it was theirs.

Their fat faces gaped wide as the grave. They were Mot, they became the god of Death — they were never satisfied, they harvested all the goods of the nations, what belonged to every people they heaped up at home.

The contemporary circumstance that inspired Habakkuk was the Babylonian Empire, which differed from modern imperialism only in scale. In his seventh chapter, Habakkuk explains the final fate of empire in terms of the contradictions of capitalism:

Keep on shopping, haul it home, you've got credit, take some more,

till quick as a snake bites the bill falls due: pay it all, with the interest, now!

## IV

Melchizedek appears for the first time in Genesis 14, in a scene set around 1800 B.C. Abraham has just rescued his nephew Lot, captured during a war between the city-states immediately south of Jerusalem. Returning victorious from battle, Abraham is acknowledged as ruler of the region by Melchizedek, king of Jerusalem, who utters this blessing:

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Blessed be Abram  
by God Most High,  
creator of heaven and earth.

The impeccably monotheist blessing was added when the tale was written down, some 800 years after the events narrated. Melchizedek, petty king of a then inconsiderable Jerusalem, doubtless existed, though the name is actually a title. It means “I acknowledge the kingship of the god (Baal) who brings the rainfall.” Names on this pattern, compounded with the word *tsedeq*, and indicating that this was a sacred king who magically represented the storm god in state rituals, were common among Canaanite sovereigns. A few centuries later Joshua will encounter another king of Jerusalem whose name is Adonizedek, which is identical, except that the word for lord (*adon*) is used instead of that for king (*melek*).

When Yahweh gave the Hebrews Jerusalem as their capitol, he gave them with it much of the cult of middle eastern sacred kingship. Psalm 110, a coronation hymn, acknowledges this:

The Lord has sworn it: he will not back down:  
you are sacred king for all time, like Melchizedek.

The Hebrews saw themselves as a continuation of Canaanite civilization, just as the Germanic barbarians who became the kings of Europe saw themselves as the heirs of Rome. The Hebrew kings were all Melchizedeks just as the Tsars and Kaisers were Caesars. And in the course of time Melchizedek became, as Caesar has in European literature, an independent mythological figure.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, the first-century A.D. library of the Essenes discovered in 1947, contains a scroll of Melchizedek. The Essenes practised a pure form of communism, and their scroll, written in the context of Israel's struggle against Roman domination, describes Melchizedek as an eschatological hero who will fairly redistribute property, defeat the armies of evil, and sound the ram's horn to announce abolition of all debts (the Jubilee). The scroll is valuable because it shows that the Melchizedek myth was drawn on as an important source of spiritual strength in Israel's struggle to the death against the Roman Empire. A struggle which was obviously anti-imperialist, and from the viewpoint of the Essenes, anti-capitalist.

So important a part of the national mythology was Melchizedek, that Paul acknowledges him in his letter to the Hebrews, written at roughly the same time as the Melchizedek scroll. (Though of course Paul is only mentioning Melchizedek to bolster the prestige of Jesus.)

## STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE

His name, in the first place, means “king of righteousness;” next, he is king of Salem, that is, “King of Peace.” He has no father, no mother, no lineage; his years have no beginning, his life no end. He is like the son of God. He remains a priest for all time.

There is an Apocalypse of Mechizedek, preserved in the fourth-century A.D. library of Gnostic manuscripts found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945. This book contains revelations made to Mechizedek by various angelic messengers. The fourth-century Cypriot bishop Epiphanius, in his book *Against the Heresies*, tells us enough to confirm that there was a Mechizedekian Christian sect and that the book from Nag Hammadi is theirs. This late account of Melchizedek is of interest to us because it provides an esoteric (though equally epic) counterpart to the Melchizedek of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Paul. This Melchizedek describes his own experience of gnosis, or ultimate self-recognition, thus:

O Father of the All, you have had pity on me and you have sent the angel of light from your aeons to reveal, he caused me to be raised up from ignorance, from death into life. For I have a name, I am Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High; I know that it is I who am truly the image of the true High Priest of God Most High . . .

Melchizedek is Christ! He recalls his crucifixion and his rising from the dead. He recounts how the angels announced his victory in terms that made it clear he was still the eschatological warrior of the Dead Sea Scrolls:

They said to me, “Be strong, O Melchizedek, great High Priest of God Most High, for the archons who are your enemies made war; you have prevailed over them, and they did not prevail over you, and you endured, and you destroyed your enemies.”

### V

We are called to use the concept of *tsedeq*, (world in balance) to bring to the ecological struggle powers which are only unleashed by religious belief. In doing this we are entitled to the name of Melchizedek. The title of the old Canaanite priest-kings who guaranteed the land’s *tsedeq* was more fully understood by Old and New Testament period prophets. It came to be the title of a royal warrior who defends sacred ecology and resists the forces of capital. The Gnostic Melchizedek of Nag Hammadi further deepens the figure into a one whose ultimate heroic act is that of achieving self-awareness: the understanding that he

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is the Melchizedek, that he has the annointed King, the Messiah, the Christ, within him.

We are *all* called to this new order or mystical chivalry, the *Order of Melchizedek*. Kingship is a powerful metaphor and has a long tradition of democratization and esoteric reinterpretation. The Stoics, who made it their ideal to live in accord with nature, *secundam naturam*, used to say that only the wise man deserves to be called a king, *solus sapiens rex*. This is the sort of kingship I have in mind, a gnostic one, that need only be *realized* to be made real, a royalty that can be shared by all, like that of Tennyson's Arthur:

But when he spake and cheered his Table Round  
With large, divine, and comfortable words,  
Beyond my tongue to tell thee — I beheld  
From eye to eye through all their Order flash  
A momentary likeness of the King . . .

This is the kingship of which Isaiah spoke, a royal defense of the whole natural world. His vision begins with *the vindication of an injured tree*, and expands into universal harmony of human with human and with every other species.

A branch will grow forth from Jesse's family tree, a  
flowering bough rise up from the wounded stump,  
and the spirit of God will rest on this last, best offshoot of  
David's clan, a spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of courage  
and wise policy, a spirit conferring knowlege of God and awe  
of him,  
and that son of David will eagerly breathe in the God-awe  
like a delightful perfume;  
he won't judge by appearances, by what his eyes see, or  
decide by what his ears hear,  
but he'll see justice done to the poor and protect the rights  
of the wretched of this world,  
and the sentences he pronounces will strike like a rod, the  
sharp truth of his decisions will cut down the wicked,  
he'll gird on righteousness (*tsedeq*) like a sword-belt, wear  
honesty like armor;  
then the wolf and the lamb will live together, the leopard  
and the goat will sleep in the shade side by side,  
the calf, the lion andf ox will be friends, and a little boy  
will be able to lead them around,  
the cow and the bear will graze together and leave their  
young to rest in the same place, lions will eat straw like cattle,  
and a toddler will safely play at the viper's hole and  
securely stick his hand in the adder's den

## **STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE**

None will harm and none kill anywhere on my holy mountain,  
but the earth will be as full of direct knowlege of God as  
the ocean is of water.





## About the Author

I was born in 1958 in Paterson N.J., home to William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg. I will pass over the follies of my youth, and only note that I went on to take a BA from Columbia, and a PhD in Classics from Brown, which rendered me virtually unemployable, and for some time not very good company. After almost a decade of waiting tables, digging ditches, selling idols, writing for a small newspaper, &c. &c. in Israel, Ireland and New England, the shifting demographic finally brought demand for my skills, and I am now employed as a High School Latin teacher in New Jersey.

It is unlikely that I will move to college teaching in the foreseeable future, since there are presently several hundred applicants for every job in Classics. Further, High School teaching is, compared to the other jobs a liberal arts degree fits one for, an extremely good gig, and I would have to be quite a fool to trade this for an adjunct position in some desolate place at a third my present salary. Nonetheless, I cherish a faint hope that someday society may find a better use for my talents than explaining the rudiments of person, number and tense, or deciding who really needs to go to the bathroom.

I am the author of a number of books. As often (rarely) as my writing is noticed by the academic reviewer, it is vilified, which puts to rest any doubts I may have had about the lasting value of my work.

Tiring at last of the ancient Mediterranean, I have turned my attention to China, and am presently memorizing thousands of cryptic little pictures so as to read the traditional Chinese classics. For less cerebral excitement, I ride a Honda Rebel into the blissful mythic distance. My current project is running Invisible Books. I am always glad to hear from interesting people, so don't hesitate to drop me a line, which may be done through the Invisible Books website.





