



If It Be Possible

God's Plan of Salvation

John H. King

IF IT BE POSSIBLE: GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

*“And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” - Matthew 26:39
ESV*

“Christ himself was God. But he did not think that being equal in power and authority with God was something to cherish. So, He made himself His Father's Servant. He was born a man. And He obeyed even when that meant his death—on the Cross.” - Philippians 2:6-8

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ISBN :978-1-300-76901-9

2nd Edition

To My Sons and Granddaughters

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Preface

There are many who have been raised on the idea that the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus are part of a Christian myth or a story that was developed in support, ultimately, of a Christian lifestyle and its practices celebrated in ritual worship—much like non-Christian myths.

The idea of representing Old Testament Bible stories as myths is a modern explication in many seminaries and colleges. To include the incarnation, the Trinity, and the Deity of Christ along with these Old Testament stories seems to critics of the Gospel message a reasonable assumption. The incarnation implies a romantic relation between a god and a woman—a common motif in pagan myth. The gods were repeatedly taking human women as wives. The Trinity simply asserts more than one god in their understanding. And for a man to rise to the status of a god (an apotheosis) is also a part of many myths. Steven Tuck tells the account of “Menrva [or Athena in Greek] guided Hercules to his apotheosis” which decorated a number of 5th Century B.C. Etruscan Temples [Lecture 9, 59].

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Bible Stories

Myths were stories about the gods to explain cyclical and historical events to give in turn cultural significance in the festivals celebrating them. There is, however, no New Testament definition for Christian ritual or worship—not so much as a song title. Old Testament festivals were indeed linked to harvest times and significant events in the history of Israel—such as Purim around the barley harvest, the Passover and the Exodus around the wheat harvest, and Succoth (Sukkot or the Feast of Tabernacles) during the grape harvest. This only shows that God is linking His blessings with His deliverance. I could only hope Israel saw the same!

Perhaps, we should be a bit more understanding while viewing the Old Testament account through a scientific lens. The ancient Hebrew language is quite ill-equipped to explain creation, for example, in detail. According to “The Hymn of Creation,” from the 10th book of the Rigveda, The Hindu Scriptures, as Professor Mueller taught, “First beginnings present a real problem. Science cannot answer the question of where everything came from in the first place. The Rigveda, like modern science, confesses its ignorance before this insoluble problem. ... In the beginning the Golden Embryo arose. Once he was born, he was the one lord of creation. He held in place the earth and this sky” [Lecture #2, 18-19].

It might also be of some interest that as Professor John McWhorter, explained “There are 7,000 languages in the world, and all likely developed from a single, initial source.” [Introduction]. My mind went to the Biblical story of “the Tower of Babel.” [Genesis 11:6-7].

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The God-Man

The idea of a single hero in mythology being both god and man—as our Savior was—is unknown. In pagan religion: a man or woman is either human or divine—not both. This is a noted limitation of human logic. In my work on “*After Eden*” I will argue that the Greek idea of “nature” is only singular [notwithstanding the idea of “two-natures” used to explain Romans 7.] The Greek dictionary calls this “the sum of innate properties and powers by which one person differs from others, distinctive native peculiarities, natural characteristics” [Thayers, 661]. So, early theologians (especially the Gnostics who did not believe in Christ’s deity) arguing from the Greek words concluded either Christ was man or divine—not both.

In mythology: a man who was the offspring of a god impregnating a human woman was still only human. “Gods and mortals can interbreed;” explained Professor Elizabeth Vandiver [in Lecture 11, 54], “their offspring are human but usually exceptional.” Regardless, in pagan religion no god ever came to die for mankind’s sin!

Included in the back of this work is an overview of what I call “The God-Man Debate.” The discussion over our Savior’s nature consumed the interest in early church writings. “Modalism,” or the erroneous doctrine that the persons of the Trinity represent only three modes or aspects of the divine revelation, not distinct and coexisting persons in the divine nature, claimed that the doctrine of The Trinity was alien to the writings of the Apostles. In the effort to keep this work short and encourage you to consider reading it through, I will not argue the merits of this discussion. Howbeit, it consumed the attention of Church councils for centuries before they defined the Christian faith, as Paul indeed had, built on the crucifixion

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and resurrection of Jesus who was both God and Man—and as such He was a member of the Trinity.

It is unscriptural to believe that Jesus had a human father—as, indeed, He had a human mother [Theotokos]. His death, some say, might not have been by crucifixion—or if it was, it was the sad end to a good man, even a prophet! But neither of these is the Christian view, essential for salvation. We are simply and unequivocally saying here that Jesus, being God’s Son—and always from eternity past was God’s Son—always was and remains, Himself, God. To assume that Jesus was not God or that Jesus was not, at the same time, human, is to explain away the significance of His death on the Cross. Said another way: Anselm, a Benedictine monk, philosopher, theologian, and Archbishop of Canterbury, from the early 12th Century, wrote, “Our situation is compounded by the fact that in order to compensate God we need to give back more than we owed originally and by the gravity of our offense, having dishonored God, so that the debt we have incurred is of infinite proportion. So no one but God could pay a debt of such magnitude, but no one but man is obliged to pay it. It follows that our salvation requires God become man.” (Cur Deus homo 2.6 - Craig, page 118)

Here is not the place for an in depth look at the Biblical account. Our interest is the fulcrum or pivotal point of the Biblical story—the overarching theme of the record—*Jesus, as God, coming to die for sin*. I have taken upon myself the task of reading and listening to mythological accounts as well as the Greek philosophies through an online subscription to “*The Great Courses*” in order to submerge myself in Jesus’ and Paul’s world to ascertain whether any part of the Christian Story was “borrowed” or if, as I believe, it was exclusively given to Paul by divine revelation. (Quotes have been taken in large part from the Guidebooks that accompany the courses. I

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have enclosed each reference in brackets instead of in a footnote. These are all listed in the Bibliography at the end of the book.)

Dr. Gregory Boyd, a professor at Bethel College, St. Paul, Minnesota, wrote: "There is no other belief which does this... Only the Gospel dares to proclaim that God enters smack-dab into the middle of the hell we created. Only the Gospel dares to proclaim that God was born a baby in a bloody, crap-filled stable, that He lived a life befriending the prostitutes and lepers no one else would befriend, and that He suffered firsthand, the hellish depth of all that is nightmarish in human existence" [Boyd. 151].

Professor Steven Prothero told us, "It is often a mistake to refer to a religion as a "faith," or to its adherents as "believers." As odd as this might sound, faith and belief don't matter much in most religions. Often ritual is far more important, as in Confucianism. Or story, as in Yoruba religion. Many Jews do not believe in God, and the world's Hindus get along quite well without any creed. ...to be a Christian has typically been to care about both faith and belief. ... As the term Christianity implies, this faith revolves around the person of Jesus, whom Christians have traditionally regarded as Son of God, Savior, and Christ ...the coming king who will remake the world" [Prothero. 69-70].

We believe, being fully persuaded, that the crucifixion of our Savior was and is God's solution to evil. And no part of this divine plan is distorted legend, fable, or mythological imagination. Jesus' crucifixion really took place. In the simple language of a childlike faith: What Adam broke, Jesus fixed. N. T. Wright explained, "The Creator and Covenant God can be relied upon to act in accordance with His creating power and His covenant fidelity, to put the world to rights." [Wright, 25]. The same

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and only God who created the universe, died on the Cross [John 1].

It would benefit those individuals whose minds have been raised on sense perception as the only acceptable explanation for our reality (science) to rethink the possibility that there might be other worlds (other truth) unexplored and even unimagined that have a legitimate claim to reasonableness along with what is perceived. Professor Daniel N. Robinson informs us that, "Every factual claim grounded in perception is subject to distortion." [Lecture 26, *Descartes and the Authority of Reason*, 126].

Philippians 2:6-8

What makes God's plan for the salvation of mankind so remarkable is its very *illogic*. In Philippians 2:6-8 we read that God humbled Himself—something, in itself, that would have been unrecognizable among the gods on Olympus or the gods of the Nile. But our God did three things which by the mind of man [in Pagan thought] cannot be done because they contradict the mythological understanding who the "gods" are.

(1) God was incarnate although God is, by definition, a *Spirit*. In mythology gods are not incarnate but anthropomorphized. They take on human expression but are not human. In fact god cannot be commensurately hypostatized. Perhaps, the biggest mystery of Godliness was when He was "manifested in the flesh [1 Timothy 3:16]. He came in the *likeness* of man, "growing in wisdom"[Luke 23:40] and learning obedience through suffering [Hebrew 5:8]. How does this square in man's philosophy with divine omniscience! Secondly,

(2) Whoever thought God might *die*—let alone for our sin! And thirdly,

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(3) Paul taught that God's Son while being God, became a *servant* [Philippians 2:7]—a paradox, to be sure. Jesus once referenced this “illogic” with a question: “David therefore himself called him Lord; and whence is he then his son?” [Mark 12:37].

Finally, this work is not a study in comparative religions or mythology. The purpose here is to ascertain in the mythological stories of the gods and their interactions with man if there was any hint at the plan of God for the salvation of mankind. Was there already in the philosopher's notebook or the story-teller's traditions any indication that the mind of man could have imagined any part of the salvation message of Scripture. That message is that sin could not be eradicated through sacrifice, that sacrifices were only a reminder of mankind's need of a savior, that God would, in turn, provide a vicarious or substitutionary way for ending sin and reconciling mankind to Himself through and by His own death on the Cross.

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And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt. - Matthew 26:39.

Recorded in Matthew and Luke's account of Jesus' Garden prayer in Gethsemane is the Savior's anguish over His pending crucifixion. It might have gone unnoticed by His disciples who, we might imagine, knew nothing of the eternal weight pressing upon their Master bent to the ground in pain under—it turns out—the burden of our sin. We might surmise, they, otherwise, might have prayed with Him. Already, by Luke's account, [though not found in the earlier manuscripts] He was shedding His blood for the sins of the world [Luke 22:44]. According to Matthew, He confessed, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death" [Matthew 26:38]. We interpret Him saying, "My soul is wrapped in great pain; how can I go on!" The burden near unbearable and His strength all but spent, His body now feeling the wear and tear of endless ministry over the last few years, suggests to some that it was a miracle of God's grace He would survive long enough to breath His final breath—as planned—on that cross. "And they slept on," Matthew informs us [Matthew 26:45]. But, truth be discerned here, this was not their burden because He was bearing it *in their place!* He asked them to pray to

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avoid the tempter's snare [Luke 22:40]. That's another matter.

It is here He confided in His Father, perhaps a concern in some way, about the plan they discussed in Eternity past and His ability to see it through, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" [Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:35]. Let's not speak disparagingly of our Savior as if He was losing faith or about to back out.

These words, "If it be possible" were, in themselves, a miracle of providential superintendence by God that they should reach our ears! Jesus, was alone in that moment, which should beg the question, "Who heard Him?" He was only a "stone's throw" from them [Luke 22:41]. How far is that? Still close enough to hear Him praying if they might stay awake. Luke told us they were asleep for sorrow [Luke 22:45]. He was in pain; so, they were as well, but what was true outwardly was a metaphor of what was happening inside. As He went further in His solitude to pray, there was a similar distance between Him and them in terms of the pain they felt. He would not sleep, while they would not stay awake.

According to Luke's source, Jesus prayed, "Father, if you are willing... " [Luke 22:42]. There are times when circumstances warrant a little confirmation from the Father that we are indeed right where He wants us to be. Meanwhile no one ought deny the disciples their moment of slumber. The Savior didn't. If He found this moment crushing, how should they respond to it!

"O my Father," Jesus groaned, "if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" [Matthew 26:39]. "If it be possible"? Was it Peter or John who might have overheard Jesus? Perhaps, James, even though, he would have to pass

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it on of necessity because, sadly, his martyrdom was not far away [Acts 12:2]. There is nothing specious in this utterance. Accordingly, our Savior did utter these words and we have them in the record. They deserve a closer look.

If

What do we know about “if”? In our New Testament it is one of two “if’s” with different meanings. The other “if” in our language is best translated “if ever.” It looks ahead and thinks “Maybe ... maybe not.” There is no “maybe” here in Jesus’ heart or His prayer. So here must be the other “if.”

This word (used here) means that something is already settled or determined to happen—God wants to save us—but Jesus might have needed reassurance that He was doing the right thing.

Still we may ask: Was Jesus negotiating with His Father whether or not there could be found another path to saving mankind from their sins? Must there be a Cross!

This is not a question the divine Jesus [Christ] might ask, but it is one the human Jesus could. It would be a question coming out of His pain.

He appears to mean, “If I must, I must. I will do what you want, Father, to save others and end sin.”

Possible

Jesus, according to Matthew’s source, spoke of possibilities—and I, for one, am so very glad He did! From our perspective, looking back at the cross and entertaining the question of other possible ways God might have provided for our salvation is an acceptable inquiry. This is what religion is all about: answering such questions about the

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origins of evil, as well as what it is and how to escape it. It is because man understood in an intuitive sense that God had to get involved that myths were created to inspire hope—a hope that evil was conquerable, that suffering as the cause of such evil could be eradicated and that some form of a perfect utopian society was—here’s our word again—possible.

What excites my interest here is implied in Jesus’ next word, “nevertheless.” The Savior, then, resigns Himself—submits in His thoughts—to what the Father is intent on doing by Him. This, at the least, implies that no other path could be found to salvation for us accept by way of Calvary!

So you see, Jesus might have asked this question about possibilities for *our* benefit. Perhaps, He was asking *our* question—the very question world religions keep asking but without a satisfying answer because we, too, in a religious sense, have been asleep when it comes to God’s solution to evil.

Not Possible

The best man could do on his own was to invent myths enveloped in an aura of hope—stories about the gods, a Theogony of sorts, replete with all the human suffering that needs to be explained. The downside of all this was—and remains true—that God’s plan never did exist within the circle of human reason and logic. No one ever dreamed up what God decided to do—dying *Himself* for us on a Roman Cross—and to provide a solution to evil, which God called “sin.”

It is because logic cannot conclude this, the genius of God provided for our salvation *by Himself and for Himself* [Isaiah 43:25] while we were looking the other way in our religious endeavors [Romans 1:21]. And this is simply the

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reason why we can only accept it by faith [Romans 10:9-10]. We fail at explaining it! [1 Corinthians 2:7, 11].

The Cup

What was not possible unless Jesus drank from “the cup of suffering [The Cross]”? He appeared to negotiate with God for another way to provide salvation: “Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me” [Luke 22:42]. Jesus had just finished supper with His disciples including the Passover and the breaking of bread which He symbolized as His body [Luke 22:19]. He was clearly talking about His coming death.

Perhaps, though, the translation “if you are willing” requires explanation. “If you are willing” might better read “If you choose or purpose or counsel” to remove this cup from me And then His words fell off as if He paused to reconsider His prayer. It is not uncommon to see this when the sentence is logically leading somewhere the speaker does not want to go or does not need to go. In the language of the Old Testament it is used rhetorically in questions expecting a “No.” Answer. It is sometimes, though rarely, used in wishing or expressing strong desire.

It is also not unusual to see the rest of a sentence starting with “if” *missing*. It is as if in mid sentence Jesus changed His thought and conceded or surrendered to whatever was already decided before the world was even created [1 Peter 1:20; Revelation 13:8]. Jesus seem to correct Himself: “nevertheless not my will,... be done.” He knew what the Father knew that this “cup” was the only way to provide for our salvation.

My argument is *prima facie* but this is, perhaps, the only scripture that declares without equivocation that Jesus’ crucifixion was the only way through to our

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salvation. Although this truth is shared in a number of other verses in our Bible, that He would die for sin [1 Corinthians 5:7]; that He would pay a ransom to redeem us from sin [Mark 10:45]; that, indeed there was no other way to God except through Christ [John 14:6]; or that there is no other name that saves [Acts 4:12], Jesus' Garden prayer in His agony adds the distinct and emphatic notation that there was no alternative—His crucifixion was the sole path for us to reconciliation with God.

Hebrews 9:12 and 22 agreeably notes what Jesus' crucifixion provided "by his own blood ... having obtained eternal redemption [concluding] without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness." But it came up short in declaring that God did not consider another plan for our salvation—because *there was no other* to be considered!

Interestingly also, the writer limited the provision of Jesus' death to "forgiveness" although it was far more: propitious, expiatory, conciliatory, and redemptive. Some argue that His death might not have been necessary only to "forgive" sin. We forgive one another without the need for sacrifice. But this argument has no teeth because Jesus' death was a lot more! As Paul taught: "He made Him who knew no sin *to be sin for us*, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." [2 Corinthians 5:21 NKJV]. Forgiveness is a necessary aspect of reconciliation, though the reverse may not be true. I may forgive someone for hurting me but not want to restore them to friendship for a number of reasons. Perhaps, they have not changed? But if I am reconciled with them, there is no possible sense in which I have not forgiven them. Calvary was a lot more than mere forgiveness. The writer to the Hebrews spoke of forgiveness because that was the understanding behind the sin and trespass offerings [Something well worth studying].

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When the question is inevitably raised: Is it not possible to find another way to save mankind, we only need listen to Jesus' agony in the Garden to learn, "No, there is no other way!"

And now, we know!

Theories of Atonement

Still we seek to embellish faith in this simple truth: Jesus died on Calvary's Cross for our sins. We need to know "Why?" or "How?" And clearly, just calling this "love" is not sufficient because God plans to show us His love for eternity and He will not have to die again to do it. The severity of the solution to sin seems to exceed a simple "I love you" or "I forgive you" even coming from God! I think we diminish the importance of His death by only calling it an expression of His love—even though, most assuredly it was that. But Jesus told us in His hour of such suffering that "It was impossible to provide a salvation any other way! "If" it were possible, would God not have spared Jesus. "But spare Him, God did not," Paul told us [Romans 8:32]. Here Paul says God—not Judas Iscariot—"delivered Him up" (a word translated "betrayed" when mentioning Judas Iscariot - John 18:5). Almost as a footnote to this great truth, Paul adds "how shall God not freely give us [grace] all things [Ephesians 2:7]. This is a great love! This is a supreme grace! But must Jesus be crucified for me?

Christian theologies are not much more than imperfect theories of atonement. Logic requires we connect the dots in a completed circle of reason and somehow, to extend the thought, our greatest intellectual treatises, spiral out of control. Just as a quick example: How to envision freedom of will (upon which liability for sin must be based) and God's foreknowledge (which, if God cannot

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lie—and He cannot—leads in some minds to conclude predestination)?

Myths

My excitement level regarding Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane was raised—oddly enough—when I began studying about ancient mythology and other religious quests for answers to the questions of evil and the existence of a spiritual realm outside the natural world. Professor J. Rufus Fears in his Great Course lectures on "*Life Lessons from the Great Myths*" describes myths as "... the means by which all societies in all times have conveyed the highest truths." And here I am seeking the highest of all truths. "Is it possible?"

Myths are stories often involving God or gods which are seen as fictitious outside the group of adherents using them. Because the Creation story of Genesis—and for that matter the entire Biblical account—involves God creationism is considered as mythological by those whose faith is not in the God of the Scriptures.

If Jesus' crucifixion, as we maintain within Christianity, was *required*—and the only requirement—to bring about the end of evil and to usher in a utopian world, we call "heaven," then, indeed, such a salvation comes through Christ *alone* [Acts 4:12]. The Philippian jailor's question "What must I do to be saved?" [Acts 16:30] is the primary question for all religious inquiry—even if "saved" has no universal meaning. Paul Tillich, 20th Century German Theologian, spoke of religion as the "ultimate concern" and "saved" is a good way to say it. To persons outside Christianity this sounds separatist and exclusive, but it is based on the most universally accepted and cherished truth within Christianity of all Christian beliefs. To deny Jesus' conversation with His Father, when

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He asked if the cup was required, now, mere hours from death, would be to deny all Christian Dogma. Christian faith is founded upon this event—His crucifixion.

Paul told the Philippian jailor in Acts 16:31 “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, and this holds true also for everyone in your household.” If salvation is by faith or a mere but real heartfelt acceptance of His death and resurrection for salvation, Gnostics, who maintain a salvation by gnosis or knowing mysteries discerned by “the few,” probably got something wrong. Salvation cannot be based on knowledge (either personal and immediate or knowledge perceived or epistemological, that is, abstract and general). A salvation based on faith not knowledge, heart not head, is a salvation available for *all*. The only way to make this message available *for everyone* in a most global sense—in time and space—means it must be the offer of a grace that requires only that we accept it. We already alluded to the idea that no theology is complete logically; so, faith remains the sole guarantee of a salvation all can get in on if they so desire.

Now you at last know why I am writing this book. Put in the form of a thesis: God’s Son’s death was absolutely necessary without any other provision or requirement on our part to provide salvation for all mankind. This truth comes only by revelation.

Philosophy

Some wish to discuss religious ideas in terms of a theology instead of a mythological story. We cannot seem to talk about the Christian faith without finding ourselves lured away from the testimony of Christian history into the web of theological ideas. Professor James Hall in his lectures on *Philosophy of Religion* tells us, “Theologians in the process

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of describing and explaining and evaluating use concepts all the time. ... And it is in this sense that philosophy regularly appears in such forms as a philosophy of religion.”

Giving Up

Many give up on religion altogether, even throwing out God’s solution to evil! This life is all there is in their minds. Professor Hall described such a mindset as one that “simply sees the world as events occurring in space-time, absent intention, absent appraisal, absent source, absent destiny.” [Lecture 2].” They are scientists, now, putting their trust in what their five senses can detect and the consistent and predictable laws of nature which, they maintain, are discoverable. This is logic’s play area and they are resigned to play exclusively in it. If God is real, He needs to come over into their world and play by their rules! But that is exactly what Jesus did. He was God incarnate, entering our world, when He came starting at the beginning—as a baby!

The Sacrifice

“For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more sacrifice for sins.” - Hebrews 10:26

The purpose for writing this chapter is to compare the Pauline understanding (especially in Hebrews) of the sacrificial system instituted under Moses with sacrifices offered in conjunction with the mythological stories from which various cultures derive their significance. I took interest in Professor Kathryn McClymond’s work *“Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifices”* in order to more fully appreciate this comparison. Professor McClymond’s theme or purpose in her writing was not my primary concern here. My goal was to find within an overview of other sacrificial systems any association between the sacrifice, itself, and the advent of god as a lamb to, as John-the-Baptist proclaimed—“take away the sin of the world.” [John 1:29; 1 John 2:2]. Not even in Judaism or Ancient Israeli ritual was this interpretation attached in rabbinical teaching.

I noticed, also, the absence of a typological meaning attached to the sacrifice that would associate it with the death of a savior or the redemption of mankind. Origen, in the 3rd century AD had been credited with establishing an exegetical significance in the use of typology to interpret Scripture [Harl, 274]. This is

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surprising since there can be no other way to interpret The Epistle to the Hebrews or Paul's understanding about Jesus' death.

Said succinctly, Paul taught, "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us" [1 Corinthians 5:7]. Since Jesus had been crucified there would be now no lingering interest in the sacrificial system [1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2]. In Hebrews we read "There remains no more sacrifice for sins" [Hebrews 10:26], adding that He had hereby instituted "a new covenant [which means], he has made the first [the sacrificial system] old. Now that which decays and waxes old is ready to vanish away." [Hebrews 8:13].

Never are pagan sacrifices considered a type (as the Mosaic offerings were considered a type of Christ.) As an example: Professor McClymond wrote, "When we asked a Brahmin [regarding Vedic sacrifices] explicitly why the rituals are performed we never received an answer which refers to symbolic activity." [McClymond, 9, Ftnt; #16].

Pagan Sacrifice

In a brief overview of sacrificial ritual the following reasons are suggested for the importance of ancient sacrificial systems—some of which are still practiced. What struck me was the mutual exclusivity between pagan sacrifices and our Savior's Crucifixion. [I sought to keep this section brief, although, between the lines one could write pages of additional scholarly and supportive information. The following concepts help define pagan sacrifices *distinct* from Christ's death.

1. *Do et Des* [Latin for: *I give so that you might give*]. Pagan sacrifices were reciprocal because the person for whom the sacrifice was given, the supplicant, now expected, in return, something from the god to

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whom the sacrifice was given. Sacrifices were a quid-pro-quo prayer in which the supplicant expected something in exchange for their devotion. Sacrifices could be made to guarantee success or future blessings as well as a request for the god to avenge some supposed injustice done. Human sacrifice, as well, appears in myth, legend, sacred texts, and history.

- In Jeremiah 7:31 we read, however, “they have built the high places ... to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, *neither came it into my heart.*” In Exodus 34:20 God clarified that He redeems and does not sacrifice children: “All the firstborn of thy sons you shall redeem.”
 - Jesus’ death was not characterized by reciprocity. It became a free gift of grace. Christ’s death to redeem us was an act of God sacrificing His own son on our behalf.
2. Scapegoating: Sacrifices were substitutionary in which the animal died in exchange for the supplicant’s life to appease the ire or wrath of some god or gods. The gods often were enraged and taking out their displeasure on humans. Sacrifices were thought to placate that anger regardless the reason. The gods were good at projecting their displeasure on innocence. As an example: When Zeus withheld fire from humans because of something the god Prometheus did to anger him.
- These are not to be confused with a sacrifice for forgiveness or as a vicarious act of atonement. Jesus was not a scapegoat because He willingly complied to the plan of God for our redemption.

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- As regards God reason: It was love not wrath that sent Jesus to Calvary [John 3:16].
3. Pagan gods required worship. Pagan gods contended jealously for human attention.
 - I would caution believers not to confuse our God's "zeal" with a jealousy that is hurtful and vengeful. In the language of Scripture zealous and jealous are the same word. The first is driven by love, the later, a selfish interest. The gods in a polytheistic system are always vying for supremacy and power and the servitude of the devotee. Our God seeks reconciliation and a relationship with us.
 4. Pagan sacrifices represented a cultural structure employed through ritual to teach and support social compliance and obedience to law. Karl Marx called religion "the opium of the people." Religion can give a society or group of people a separate identity for which they might be willing to die to defend and maintain. To some, all wars are religious wars. The ritual is more important than a creed in such cases. Professor McClymond explained, "in which priority is given to issues of practice, observance, and law, and notions of tradition-identity are delineated primarily in terms of ethnic and cultural categories that reflect the predominantly non-missionary character of these traditions." [McClymond on Holdrege, Veda and Torah, 3]. In the Rigveda the sacred writing of the Hindus, for example, with the sacrifices the priests were required to sing hymns that instruct the supplicant. The Hindu religion does not have a theology or creed, as such. The singing of hymns provide teachings on proper living. The sacred

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hymns sung only by the priests were central to the sacrificial ritual.

- Christianity is the only “religion” with a creed. And that creed emphasizes love and peace among the fruit of the Spirit. God’s covenant is written now on the heart and not in ritualized practices.
5. A primary use of the sacrifice in paganism is for discerning the will of the gods. In ancient cultures sacrifices were made in seeking the council of the gods through divinations. In some cultures sacrifices were a point of communication with the gods through divination. Entrails, livers, and other organs could be “read” to ascertain the will of the gods.
- The Christian God spiritually leads us by conviction and the garrison of His peace on the reins of the heart.

Pagan Worship

Professor Hans-Friedrich Mueller’s work on “*The Pagan World: Ancient Religions Before Christianity*” is a great study in, among other aspects of pagan worship, the sacrifice. We can only give a brief overview here of some of the aspects of the ritual that shows clearly the difference between Jewish and Pagan sacrifices. Those who might maintain that the Jewish ritual derives from earlier pagan sacrifices or that there is a common ancestry from which both evolve—those who maintain this—must look more closely at the distinctions between the Mosaic sacrifices and what mythology offers. Pagan sacrifices, which included the sacrifice of children among others, is a sad commentary on the fear and condemnation they labored

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under. Their religious zeal in this regard was intended to placate not only the gods but probably their own sense of moral failure.

Paul used a word translated “too superstitious” [deisdaimonesterous] in Acts 17:22 when he noticed that the Athenians had erected an altar to an *unknown* god, covering their bases, no doubt, just in case they incur the wrath of a god they forgot about. This word breaks down this way—and it is worth mentioning. *Deis* is the word for an alarming fear and not the word used of God-fearing believers. God’s love casts out fear—fear of being punished or fear of a divine wrath [1 John 4:18]. *Daimones* refers to the gods; we get our word demon from this word. These included even the lesser gods. *Terous* is the comparative ending meaning “more” or “too much.”

Living under the fear of being forgetful of a god who expected but didn’t receive one’s worship speaks to Pagan superstition that doesn’t know the Christian’s God. God’s plan of grace was totally and alone the product of His divine thoughts and heart. Religious leaders and philosophers alike failed to even debate the matter of a God who dons the garb of human flesh and a human nature to die a human death for sin.

Incarnation, granted, is spoken of in, for example, Hinduism. “In some religions, God becomes incarnate,” Professor Grant L. Voth conceded. He gave an example: Vishnu is incarnated many times as Krishna to live among humans and to save their cosmos from destruction” [Lecture #19]. But there is no Cross.

In many tribal religions and myths reincarnation depicts the cycle of the seasons or the rebirth of an animal slain for food or someone returning in human form until all evil is purged and they reach god-likeness. None of these involve a Cross, either.

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Pagan Sacrifices

Professor Mueller identified 3 types of sacrifice:

1. Honorific sacrifices are made to please and honor the gods. They bring gods and humans together with a meal. Sad to think that regular and only sacrifices should substitute or represent a relationship with god.
 - Christ died once for all to reconcile us [Galatians 2:20].
2. Piacular [a word signifying a continuing need to atone] sacrifices are performed to expiate [Professor Mueller's word] sins or crimes. Expiation is a technical term for making amends for wrongs done.
 - Should we not be using the word appeasement here? Again, Jesus died once for all time.
3. Sacramental sacrifices, the rarest type, involve a mystical union with the god in addition to a meal and communion. Those present thus "eat the god." Worship of Dionysus or Bacchus may serve as an example. "When maenads [female followers of Bacchus traditionally associated with divine possession and frenzied rites.] tore apart and ate wild animals, they conceived of themselves as eating Bacchus himself in order to become one with him and in him [Lecture #6].
 - Some might in error see the Eucharist in this act [perhaps, because the word "sacramental" is used.] But nowhere in Christian teaching is it maintained that our fellowship with Jesus and the Father requires He die again and again.

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Communion—as the word suggest of the Eucharist—speaks to an ongoing awareness of the efficacy and provision of Christ’s one time crucifixion.

Pagan Prayers

Unlike the Mosaic sacrifice the pagan sacrifice was a 2 way communication: The sacrifice *to* one of the gods and the omen or divined message *from* them.

In Greek lore, there is the story of Chryses of Troy, a priest, whose daughter, Chryseis, is kidnapped by Agamemnon as his prize for defeating the Trojans. Chryses prayed to Apollo for revenge upon Agamemnon. Chryses reminds the god, Apollo, what he, Chryses, through sacrifices, has done for Apollo. “In short,” Professor Mueller says, “Apollo owes him.” The language of this prayer is absent any request for mercy. It is based not on grace but a quid-pro-quo.

The vow is a form of prayer—even in Scripture. In James 5:16 “pray one for another” uses the form of the word prayer which also can mean “vow.” But this is not the significance of the vow in myth. Professor Mueller wrote, “The structure of vows and prayers [in the pagan sacrifice] is similar to a commercial contract. There is an established ... offer of a specific payment, in exchange for which the human being asks for a specific service [request].” Professor Mueller referred to the god of whom the request and the corresponding vow were made as their own “debt-collector.” Agamemnon has to sacrifice his own daughter in order to appease the goddess, Artemis.

What we notice in all this is the marked absence of any mercy over a broken vow or even in a prayer for help. A divine grace is unimagined in this context. And if there

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is no message of grace, how could there be a Cross, the very instrument of God's grace.

The account of Agamemnon and Artemis is one of the final myths coming out of the Trojan war before the Greek writings transitioned from myth to history. God's message of the Cross and grace were completely unknown in myth.

Divining God's Will

Divining the will of the gods took on many forms—even, for example, a sneeze. Birds, and dreams—much like old German superstitions about dropped silverware or the remaining tea leaves in a drinking cup—could be interpreted as a god speaking. To ascertain the will of God for a Christian, one needs only pick up a Bible and read. No other religion has what has been called our orthodoxy or creed. Christianity alone has written the message of God's will in the record of His dealings with mankind—in which the Cross is the fulcrum point. Perhaps, we should make His death and resurrection and not His birth the BC and AD border of time and history.

Mosaic Sacrifices

The biblical sacrifice to God was more than ritual. In fact, we might say that it was not ritual at all because to be acceptable to God, it had to come from the heart [Isaiah 1:11-14; Psalm 51:17]. Biblical sacrifices were expressions of a worshipper's

1. Adoration or love for God [the Burnt Offering, Leviticus 6:8-13],
2. Thanksgiving to God [the Peace Offering, Leviticus 7:11-12],

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3. Desire for reconciliation with God [the Sin Offering, Leviticus 5:1-13],
4. Devotion to God [the Meal Offering, Leviticus 2:11-13]
5. The Need for Cleansing from sin [The Trespass Offering, Leviticus 5:14-19]
6. A Desire for Fellowship with God [the Drink Offering, Exodus 29:14]
7. A Desire for Communion with God [the Incense Offering, Exodus 30:1-10]

God instituted this worship in the form of a sacrifice looking ahead to the death of His Son on the Cross. John, the Baptist, called Him “the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world” [John 1:29]. Paul called Jesus the Passover Lamb [1 Corinthians 5:7].

None of this parallels pagan sacrifices which were designed to appease the wrath of the gods. When the Lord desired mercy and not sacrifice [Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; 12:7] His forgiveness was predicated on His love and not a supplicant’s act of appeasement. Pagan gods *required* worship through sacrifices. Our God saw the sacrifices as a *type* of His Son’s coming crucifixion. True worship is freely given requiring only the faith of the worshipper. “The true worshippers,” Jesus told us, “shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeks such [this kind of worshipper] to worship him.” [John 4:23] A God that *seeks* is not demanding. The primary reason for sacrifices according to Paul was as a schoolmaster to remind us of our need for God’s mercy and His salvation [Galatians 3:24].

God's Sacrifice

In Genesis 15:9-18 God makes a covenant with Abram. Verse 17 reads, “And it came to pass, that, when the sun

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went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces." C. F. Keil in his commentary interpreted this: "In this symbol Jehovah manifested himself to Abram. ... Passing through the pieces, he ratified the covenant which he made with Abram" [Keil, I, 216]. Dr. Lange concurs, adding, "Jehovah goes with the sacrificial fire between the pieces of the animals" [Ibid].

But what was happening here when God walked between the sacrificial animal pieces? After Abram prepared the sacrifice in verses 9-10 Abram laid down and fell asleep. While Abram dreamt of a dark time coming [vs. 12-14] in his future (more correctly that of his descendants in Egypt) God set fire to the sacrificial pieces and proceeded to walk through them [vs. 17].

Some believe that in this act God finalized His covenant with Abram. Others believe this could not have happened unless Abram was awake. But the entire context is about God's covenant with Abram making of his progeny a mighty nation. It is here some maintain this entire scene symbolized God, Himself, becoming part of the sacrifice—mindful that He would, in the person of His Son, become the real sacrifice to effectively ratify the covenant He is making with the patriarch. This was the Covenant of faith Paul spoke of in Romans 4, a covenant ratified by Jesus' own blood, as C. F. Keil said, "of which under the New Testament, baptism and the Lord's Supper are the seals." [Lange, I, 413].

Grant it: we are always looking to interpret what is better understood symbolically as something related to our Savior's death or burial—since the Old Testament has many such possible references. Every Covenant God makes has an eternal or lasting provision associated with it, even if it is presented in a typological way. Circumcision, a sign of being separated out of the nations

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and unto God as His own people, on Abram's part, for example, would be a temporary provision while the nation God spoke of would someday encompass the globe and become the Bride of Christ.

C. F. Keil again says, "A vision wrought by God was not a mere fancy,... but a spiritual fact, which was not only in all respects as real as things discernible by the senses, but which surpassed in its lasting significance the acts and events that strike the eye" [Keil, I, 210].

However we see this text, we must admit that this event is lightyears removed from any Pagan idea—which is the reason it is included here. God's sacrifice and covenant to Abram could easily echo off the future as His sacrifice and covenant with us. "For if the inheritance is based on the law," Paul reminded us, "it is no longer based on the promise, but God graciously gave it to Abraham through the promise" [Galatians 3:18].

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“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD:” Deuteronomy 6:4

Monotheism alone is logically capable of accepting a divine sacrifice for sin. And the God of Ethical Monotheism, the Judeo-Christian Tradition, alone has the passionate interest in doing so.

In the Babylonian account of The Creation: “The Enuma Elish,” Kathryn McClymond taught, “teaches that we are a kind of afterthought, subordinate to the gods, and our lot in life is to serve and worship them.” [Lecture 15, 99]. The story is told that Marduk, the Supreme God creates the heavens from one half of Tiamat’s dismembered body [his grandmother, the God of salt water] and the earth from the other half. [Lecture #14, 97]. Marduk had *no intentions* of creating mankind (from Kingu, his stepfather’s blood) but the other gods also wanted servants to worship them. As an “afterthought” mythological deities betray an attitude about mankind in stark contrast with the God of Genesis 1 and 2 who *purposely and with forethought* made man in His own image to love and for fellowship [1 John 1:3]. Adam participates with God as gardeners and in naming the animals, for starters. In Genesis God made Eve, not for Himself but, for Adam!

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Elizabeth Vandiver tells us, “The gods do not love humans or feel compelled to treat them fairly; rather, humans are useful but expendable. In his role as god of justice, Zeus supervises justice between humans; this does not necessarily imply that a comparable form of justice exists between gods and humans” [Lectures 6, 30]. There is nothing in these myths that suggests a personal God who cared about His creation in their need for His redemption; so, it is unreasonable to assume that anywhere in the mind of the storyteller there might be a thought of a divine crucifixion, of a John 3:16 narrative.

Professor Hall in his *“The Philosophy of Religion”* lecture #7 observed that among the world religions “Theism, generally speaking, aims its worship at beings or spirits that have ‘personal’ characteristics, interests, and passions and are capable of interaction with humans.” Said simply, It is solely the God of monotheism who is capable of being a God of love and caring about mankind.

All non theistic religions [see the reference at the back of this work] promote either an impersonal God (such as: Animism or Pantheism) who would not be capable of an interest in human affairs. Sin would not be definable in this system. Or a polytheistic worship of many gods which would not solve the sin question either. Such gods tend to vie for our worship and have no further interest in our welfare as humans. A polytheistic world is that of a hierarchy of gods who answer to the supreme being at the top and who crave more power. None of them show the humility necessary to offer himself or herself to die for sins.

Deism, also, can be checked off the list while it promotes a transcendent God with no interest at all in human affairs.

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In lesson #5 Professor Hall wrote, "In theism ... there is an intimacy between "the other" [God] and ourselves. ... In theism, contra the austerity of deism and contra the impersonality of animism and dynamism, theism emphasizes [God] as having concerns and interests, ... as a person." I would only add here what Bishop Lightfoot noted in his introduction to Paul's Epistle to the Philippians: "Though the gospel is capable of doctrinal exposition, though it is eminently fertile in moral results, yet its substance is neither a dogmatic system nor ethical code, but a Person and a Life." He is talking about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Ethical Monotheism

To go a step further: In an ethical monotheism, Professor Hall taught, that God is seen ".. to be involved in everything we do ... [but] we puzzle and worry over whether or not this is a consistent package [with His omnipotence]. Can something [or someone—God] be simultaneously [all knowing and all powerful] ... without moral flaw *and* [at the same time be] interested in us [morally flawed beings], [or] concerned of the dynamics of the world ... the way it is...."? [Lesson #7]. All Professor Hall is telling me here is that God has allowed Himself to be cornered, in a logical sense, and His only recourse is the Cross! He has created a being that—even I could have guessed—would fall to a satanic schadenfreude when tempted—a being now estranged from God. And that being is *me!* And *you!*

Another astute observation by the professor: "If [God] is going to be seen as God ... worthy of, deserving our respect, our worship, our obedience, then there can't be a whole bunch of them; if [God] is going to be worthy of

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our respect because [He] is superior [He's] going to need to not have any equals." [Lesson #7].

I might add that the plan of salvation requiring God's crucifixion must point to a single divine being. According to this solution to the sin question, the way to salvation is only through acceptance of His crucifixion for us and in becoming His followers.

Also He died "once for all" to make that salvation available to everyone [Hebrews 9:28]. A Pantheon of immortals would become enraged with jealousy when all our affection was toward this single "Savior."

What also supports the contention that Christianity has to be an ethical monotheism is the notion that the free distribution of this gift of salvation to *every* mortal has excluded no one. There is no other salvation [Acts 4:12]. If Polytheism were a reality, only one God now receives all our affection because none of the others would be worthy our worship. Such a system is clearly untenable.

Mythology

Mythology after a very human style of imagination is more a story of power struggles, rape, incestuous behavior, as well as grotesque images. Elizabeth Vandiver tells, as an example, the story of the births of the Titans [12 aspects of creation]: "Ouranos [Sky] does not allow the children to be born, but pushes them back into Gaia's [his wife's, earth's] womb. With the help of her youngest son, Cronos [time], Gaia disables Ouranos. Cronos hides inside his mother's body and castrates his father." [Lecture #4, 20]. "In other words," Professor Vandiver explains, "the earth is taking recognizable shape, creating the Mediterranean Sea and the important mountains known to Hesiod. (I failed to mention that Ouranos was both Gaia's son *and* husband.)

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This kind of—what we might call ‘dysfunctional’—behavior follows in the stories of the next generation of gods on Olympus. The curse of the House of Atreus provides an interesting account of such dysfunctionality. Aeschylus, the Tragedian, in his trilogy, *Oresteia*, brings to a conclusion the violence of 5 generations of incest and parricide in the family of Tantalus. Orestes was his great-great grandson who killed his mother, Clytemnestra, for killing his father, Agamemnon, for killing his sister, Iphigenia. The goddess, Athena, conducted his trial in which Orestes was acquitted arguing that justice should be restorative and not retributive, else this family will continue a war of revenge. This form of Platonic justice later influenced Christian soteriology arguing that a divine ransom was in like manner a form of justice through the Savior’s death restoring the sinner.

Even though there are biblical accounts of unconscionable acts of human violence, the God of the Ancient Hebrews is rather known instead for His *mercy*—something Paul picked up on in discussing divine grace and saving faith [Romans 9:15]. This is not incidental to the biblical message but mainstream! And along with this, it was paramount that Israel worship only this God of mercy (Recall the Shema’ in Deuteronomy 6:4). Unlike the pantheism or polytheism from which mythological stories derive their importance, the Abrahamic covenant birthed a monotheism that could give meaning to a forgiveness and mercy unknown in cultic sacrificial rituals. The message in the sacrificial ritual for mythological gods was appeasement—unlike monotheism where it spoke of forgiveness!

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The Mother Goddess

Mythologies, unlike the Mosaic story, also spoke of mother goddesses. Kathryn McClymond in *The Great Mythologies of the World*, tells us that mother goddesses as goddesses of fertility and protection were part of the mythological story of every culture. “Although each goddess has distinct features reflecting her individual cultural origins,” Professor McClymond tells us, “certain elements seem virtually universal. ... sympathetic on the one hand, seductive and sometimes terrifying on the other.” [Lecture 9, 64]. Carl Jung called this “mother imagery” in mythology “part of the collective unconscious.” [Lecture 9, 64].

But Professor McClymond added, “One exception to the near universality of the mother goddess can be found in communities dominated by the Abrahamic religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although these traditions feature strong women, such as Sarah, the Virgin Mary...” [Lecture 9, 64]. Professor McClymond interpreted this as a cultural development coming out of what scholars call “a patriarchic monotheism” or a culture in which women are basically chattel and in which men alone hold positions of leadership in society.

But here we might simply observe that there is another marked difference between the Judeo-Christian Bible stories and ancient polytheistic mythologies. Hosea 2:16 prophesied that this was never our God’s heart to become a master. He sought to be a *husband* to Israel and to have women become *aids* [a word often used of allies in battle] not servants according to the Eden account. Professor McClymond’s observation is noteworthy but she only correctly noted the consequence of sin [Mark 10:5-8].

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Norse Mythology

There is an interesting story, according to Professor McClymond, found in Norse mythology that narrates: Odin, the Norse god, who rules all things, is the “oldest of the gods. And no matter how mighty the other gods may be, they all serve him as children do their father. “In the poem that describes this event,” the professor tells us, “Odin describes his own tree; ‘for nine long nights I hung there. I was pierced by a spear. I was an offering to Odin, an offering from myself to myself.’”

Of course a reference to a tree and a self-sacrifice might suggest some form of redemption being offered by Odin as a god. But, Professor McClymond quickly assures us, “Odin’s death isn’t truly comparable to Jesus’s death because Odin isn’t atoning for anyone’s sins. Odin’s death is better understood as a shamanistic act designed to prompt a mystical experience” [Lecture #11, 76]. Beside, the experience did not kill Odin. Odin, in Norse mythology dies, to be sure. But not during this account. Odin, even though called a “god” is not immortal.

When Jesus died on His cross, His thoughts were of others: prophecy fulfillment, Mary, His earthly mother, His heavenly Father, and most of all—all of us. When Odin died he thought of himself; he wanted what such a shamanistic experience would give him.

Divine Agency

The agency of the God of the Bible is distinct and different (He alone is ‘holy’ Revelation 15:4). The gods and goddesses in myths take on anthropomorphic or human traits [Romans 1:23]. In a psychological sense such stories are a projection of human moral weakness. Professor Vandiver taught, “The myth of Pandora lends itself

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especially well to psychological interpretations. The jar [not a box as some later related the story] can be read as representing Pandora's womb. Pandora—and all women—are responsible for evil in that they are responsible for life itself, by giving birth."

Sounds a bit like David, tormented by guilt over Uriah's death and his own adulterous affair with Uriah's wife; he decided to fault his own birth! "Behold, I was shaped in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" [Psalm 51:5]. (The language in the Hebrew in this verse is raw and rude. David spoke here of his mother in the heat of animalistic passion conceiving him—as if it was not planned by parent or God.) It is a sad moment before he knows God's forgiveness.

Making the gods guilty of the same, in a twisted sense, justifies our own failings. Mythology, we might say, has "changed the glory of the immortal God into an image made like to mortal man [Romans 1:23]. Professor Steven Tuck wrote, "The Greek philosopher Xenophanes said that if horses had gods, their gods would look like horses. The forms and powers of deities reflect the societies that worship them." [Episode #7].

It should be obvious to anyone that these accounts do not parallel the stories in our Bible because in the Biblical account we are made in God's image while in the Greek myth, the gods are made in ours. Some understand the "Image of God" to refer to the anthropomorphic expressions prevalent in the Old Testament where God appears in human form, but anthropomorphism in the Bible is less about who God is and more simply about His appearance to the Patriarchs in a less shocking way. [Compare Genesis 18:1 with Ezekiel 1:28]

If God does not make us in His Image, we will make Him in ours. In ethical monotheism there is revived the hope of bringing about a truer understanding of God.

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Holiness can once again be reached to bring us, as mankind, up to the standard of God. It is the restoration of this relationship that necessitated Christ's, God's, crucifixion—a thought never offered in mythology or any of man's imaginings about the gods.

The Origin of Monotheism

William Foxwell Albright, once considered the father of biblical archeology, in his work *"From the Stone Age to Christianity"* traced monotheism to Moses receiving the tablets on Mount Sinai. The more modern theory traces it back further to 14th century B.C., and the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten, the most controversial of all the Pharaohs. Professor Brier tells us in his course on the Great Egyptian Pharaohs that Akhenaten was devoted only to their sun god, Aton. He was said to destroy images of other gods.

Egyptian religious life was ultra-conservative. In thousands of years nothing changed except the location of the Temple depending on where Pharaoh resided or perhaps, one god becomes a little more important for a time. But in 3,000 years the Egyptian religion was unchanged, the same pantheon—that was, before Akhenaten came along. In his 5th year he changed his name to Akhenaton from Amenhotep IV [from "Amun is pleased, Amun was a highly worshipped god" to "It is beneficial to the Aten," a lesser sun god]. He then proclaimed, "All the other gods don't exist" [Bob Brier. Lecture #4]. Many temples in Egypt were now closed.

Akhenaton then moved from Thebes, the Capitol of Egypt, north to build Tell el Amarna where he established a new religious community in the desert. Akhenaten is a religious mystic according to Professor Brier, "pioneering things no one has ever heard." [Lecture #4]. Akhenaten

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locked himself within the new city's boundaries never intending to leave.

Egyptian religious life and worship depended on concrete [statues of the] gods. Akhenaten's "god" was more abstract. He wrote to his god on a stele "No one can make an image of you." When he died in his 17th year of reign, Egypt had to make a decision—are we now monotheists? No. His son, Tutankhamen, who was only 10 years old, was brought back to Thebes where the Old Pantheon was reestablished.

Monotheism lasted only for the 17 year reign of Akhenaten. Egyptian scribes expunged the brief record of Akhenaten's reign from the annals of their history but stories left unwritten may still be told. What influence—if any—this entire episode in Egyptian history might have had on future generations of Egyptians is not clear. What we do know is that Egypt at the time rejected the idea. In a half century or so, the Hebrews would find themselves in Goshen and although they did not know YHWH at the time, perhaps, God might have wanted to circulate the idea as a precursor of a different kind of worship that would be introduced to them under Moses.

It appears that a monotheistic God would have to be introduced by Moses suggesting that any clear reference to "The God who dies for sin" would have to wait.

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“...flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” - Matthew 16:17

The question should arise as to whether or not Paul, himself, came up with an interpretation of the Scripture (in his time: The Old Testament) that led to the message of a salvation provided through the death of God's Son. Did Paul on his own propose the Savior's death as the means of salvation? We might ask this same question of the other New Testament writers. On what basis might they have read “crucifixion” into an Old Testament promise of future restoration for Israel and then allow Paul to open this up to all the world? Or could Jesus' words be so construed as to reveal that He was God incarnate come to die for sin?

This is a tough conversation no believer cares to engage in but if it be not so that “the precious blood of Christ ... ” as Peter alleged, “verily was *foreordained before* the foundation of the world” [1 Peter 1:19-20], if somehow Jesus' death as God's Only Begotten Son was Paul's idea or John's idea, then it loses some of the luster of a “plan” of *God*. It becomes no more or less meaningful than the Gnostic view of a salvation by gnosis [knowledge]. Gnostics taught that the plan of salvation was a secret known only to the initiates who accepted, what Professor Blakke, in his opening sentence in his course on

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Gnosticism, called, “direct knowledge of God—expressed in complicated myths.”

Such an idea contradicts the very nature of grace which proclaims “*whosoever will may come.*” [John 3:16]. The Revelation reads in closing: “And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that hears say, Come. And let him that is thirsty come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely” [Revelations 22:17]. Paul writing to the Ephesian Church encapsulated the truth in a timeless dictum “by grace are you saved through *faith*” [Ephesians 2:8].

Paul

We should have an interest in Paul’s own testimony: “But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called *me* by his grace, to reveal *his Son* in me, that I might preach him among the heathen;” Paul professed, “*immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood:* Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into *Arabia* [Sinai Peninsula: Galatians 4:25], and returned again unto Damascus.” It would be 3 years since his conversion before he would meet Peter and James for the first time [Galatians 1:15-18].

Of particular notice is Galatians 1:16, “*immediately I conferred not with anyone*” telling us that Paul’s understanding of the Gospel and who Jesus was, as God’s Son, was by revelation alone. Perhaps, Mount Sinai was the place where he covenanted with God as Moses had centuries earlier.

He had no theological schooling, outside Judaism, nor did he discuss these matters with anyone in leadership within the young church. Paul’s knowledge of the Greek poets [Acts 17:28] and Greek philosophers [Acts 17:18] is

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noteworthy, but, as we will see, aside from some general principles of Stoicism entertained by the church later in its history, there is nothing of value here for the message of Grace to use. In my work on *Essays on Grace* I show that on a continuum or scale from Hedonism to Stoicism, there is no place we find God's grace because this is a scale of happiness based on self-endeavors and not God. Perhaps, the statue to the "Unknown" God Paul saw while visiting the Areopagus [Acts 17:23] measures in some ways the distance in thought between his message and theirs. They called his words babble [empty talk]. In Acts 17:19 these amateur philosophers, though quite educated, called Paul's message of grace a "new doctrine."

God has to somehow employ ordinary language to explain spiritual truths which is why the Spirit of God within is needed as a kind of interpreter. The well-known example is Agape love, God's love, which is a Biblical term not found in the Classical language.

What is suggested in this is that either Paul was uniquely gifted in purposing a theological treatise on the crucifixion of the "God-man" or the Savior disclosed to Paul while in the Arabian desert Who He really was and why He came, explaining the events of His life and sacrificial death in terms of an all embracing grace that could now be extended to all nations.

It is reasonable to conclude that what Paul wrote about the plan of Salvation was *not his own* but the plan God drew up in eternity past. "But when the fulness of the time was come," Paul began, "God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." [Galatians 4:4-5]. (Even this phrase "the fulness of time" speaks to the preparations God had to make not only in the social order of things but also in language to prepare souls for the message His followers

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would bring to the world.) And then God opens the heart to receive them [Acts 16:14].

Paul intended to make it crystal clear that Jesus alone shared with Him the message of a grace built upon His [Christ's] own death and resurrection. He testified that he avoided Jerusalem for 3 years and when he did go, he saw only James and Peter, no one else. No one in Judea knew who he was. They only recall a "Saul" that persecuted the church—not this "Paul" [Galatians 1:22]. This sounded so fantastic, Paul had to reassure the few who had some knowledge of his Damascus road experience. "I lie not." [Galatians 1:20]. He exclaimed. Paul's own testimony was a veritable deposition before the court of those he was called to and the church. He pointedly declared to the Galatian believers, "The gospel which was preached of me is *not* from man. I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but *by the revelation* of Jesus Christ." [Galatians 1:11-12].

It may be important to note in passing that not even angels could have disclosed the mystery of Godliness: "God was manifest in the flesh..." [1 Timothy 3:16]. Peter described angels—in effect—as mere couriers of the Gospel until the time the Spirit would reveal it: "Even angels long to look into these things." [1 Peter 1:12].

Prophecies

Rabbis traditionally had trouble understanding Isaiah 53 and the prophecy of the suffering servant it speaks of. How did Matthew [Matthew 8:17] or Paul [Romans 10:16] figure it out? We might maintain that they knew because— isn't it obvious, Jesus knew who He was and why He came? He told them! [Matthew 5:17; Luke 4:43; 12:50; 22:20; John 21:19]. Even to a troubled Samaritan woman, Jesus revealed His true identity, (in His disciples' absence,

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though). [John 4:26]. I also wonder what Nicodemus thought of His words “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up” [John 3:14]. Jesus’ final meetings with His disciples were replete with hints, if not straight out references, to His mission to save mankind [John 12:33; 14].

Of special significance is the saying found twice in the Gospels and written exactly the same in the Greek in both verses, “For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to *give his life* a ransom for many” [Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45]. Such a saying must have been circulating almost as an adage among the inhabitants of the New Testament World, perhaps in an early creedal form among the believers. And they knew what it meant, as we know what it means. Does not this suggest that Jesus taught it or mentioned it often enough to His hearers, especially His disciples or followers, that it was ingrained in memory?

Isaiah 53 is a good place to begin to explain grace to Jewish-Christians [Acts 8:30]. Regarding Jesus as our ransom: we also know that modern scholarship proposes a common source for both Matthew and Mark which might explain why this phrase is identical in both texts, but there are examples that differ such as Jesus’ journey through Jericho and the story of blind Bartimaeus [Mark 10:46]. Matthew mentioned *two* blind men. Mark mentioned Jesus *entering* Jericho not just leaving it—as Matthew recalled. We can join the 2 accounts. There were 2, one of whom was Bartimaeus, who continued to call out for the Son of David to be merciful unto him, all the while Jesus continued to seemingly ignore his cries as the crowds gathered and as they walked *through* Jericho.

Paul writing to Timothy, also, called the Savior God’s ransom [1 Timothy 2:6]. But Jesus called himself “the son of man” and not “the son of God.” Paul

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understood this, calling him “the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all...” [1 Timothy 2:5-6]. The only difference in Paul’s understanding is that “many” becomes “all” and the ransom Jesus spoke of after the Old Testament use of the term was modified by Paul to add the idea: “given in exchange for another.” Both Jesus’ words and Paul’s are the same. Both speak of His humanity as Paul said to the Philippians: Jesus “was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he ... became obedient unto death” [Philippians 2:7-8].

Peter

Peter as well spoke of this glorious divine plan to redeem us in his first epistle: 1 Peter 1:18-23. Employing the same techniques to analyze this text as one might use on some literary work has led skeptics to conclude that a fisherman from Galilee would not have had the command of language necessary to write these verses.

Bart Ehrman, a textual critic, claimed that “most critical scholars” believe that Peter’s works were “not actually written by Peter but by one of his followers, pseudonymously” [Ehrman. 31]. Some thought Silas might have been his “ghostwriter.” 1 Peter 5:12].

I obviously disagree if they are saying that this is not Peter’s message to the church or if they are implying that Silas did not have to be a believer of this message to write it down or that it was only written in prose to impress. These are Peter’s thoughts and Peter’s heart. And as Jesus already affirmed that this is a revelation from His Father in Heaven [Matthew 16:17].

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Confused?

John reminds us, however, that “These things understood not his disciples at the first: but when Jesus was glorified, then remembered they that these things were written of him, and that they had done these things unto him.” [John 12:16]. Perhaps things were confusing for His disciples because they were not saved yet and the Spirit was not yet dwelling within them sharing the meaning of Jesus’ words with them [John 14:17; 16:14]. Or perhaps their grief was overwhelming making them inattentive in the moment to what He told them. Or perhaps the parables confused them and they might have wondered if His account now about His death might be symbolic. Or perhaps, like all Israel waiting for the Messiah, they struggled to understand how His death would fit in to that scenario.

Regardless, before Jesus’ ascension, none of the disciples understood recent history as “the” plan of God for our salvation. The best, we might assume, they might explain things is recorded in the dialog of two disciples talking to Jesus walking to Emmaus when He asked them what things could have happened to make them so forlorn. (They did not know it was He): “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth,” they told Him, “which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people: ... the chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him. But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel...” [Luke 24:19-21]. They still at this time lacked a true understanding of what transpired on the Cross.

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Son of Man

Also the phrase “Son of Man” might have needed some clarity. We take it to mean simply “human” after its use in Ezekiel [Ezekiel 2:1; see also Jeremiah 50:40]. But I have been waiting for an opportunity to say that the phrase “son of man” is grammatically incorrect! If referring to a particular son [and we are, since it is Jesus in Daniel 7:13], it should be a son of “the” [or a particular] man. But Jesus’ Father was *God*. Consequently this phrase was meant to only reference his humanity. The word “the” was left out before “man.” He was not the son of “a” man (no article should be supplied). He was simply “The Son of Man.” He was and is “the God-man.”

Today's Critics

When the question circulated among today’s scholars as to whether or not Jesus ever called Himself “God” they were divided in their response. I owe it to you to tell you this since we are seeking to know “beyond a reasonable doubt” that God’s plan to come *Himself* to save us was not the ingenious invention of human reason—that no story invented in the mind of man ever came up with this plan to save mankind.

Dr. Ehrman found C. S. Lewis’ argument for the Divinity of Christ “*completely convincing*” [Ehrman, 141] when Lewis argued that Jesus claiming Himself to be God had to be either a liar, a lunatic, or actually, our Lord. If Jesus was wrong in His claim to be God, he was either a lunatic or a liar. If he knew he was wrong, he would have been a liar. If he didn’t know that he was wrong, he would be a lunatic. And since He was shown to be neither a liar nor a lunatic, His claim to deity is genuine.

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Today, Ehrman is a professed agnostic claiming that Jesus never did call Himself divine—making Lewis' argument mute. Erhman considered a fourth possibility: Liar, Lunatic, Lord... or *legend*. [Erhman, 142]. It is this 4th idea that we are refuting in this work.

When Jesus asked Peter who Peter thought He was, Peter called Jesus “the Son of the living God” to which Jesus responded, “You heard that from my Father” [Matthew 16:17]. He didn't deny it.

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“the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God” - 1
Corinthians 2:14

I apologize for this chapter since few have any interest in “philosophy” in the modern sense. Most of the good stuff that use to be under the heading of philosophy has bifurcated or forked off into a science discipline. When the Greeks entertained their “love of wisdom” it was mostly discussions about justice, virtue, morals, and the like. They had no phrase such as “the law of nature” because scientific thought, for which we can thank Aristotle and Pythagoras, was very much in its infancy. But I had to enquire if any of these brilliant minds ever thought about God sending His Son to die for sin. It might seem obvious that they didn’t because they were polytheists, but I thought it worth while to ask. If they had, we might conclude it was *not* God’s idea, God’s plan, to send His Son, and it wasn’t drawn up before the creation of the universe. And at this point, I will admit, my faith would be in trouble, though, none of this should alter the fact that He did send Him to die for me.

Professor Robinson taught that “Unencumbered by a providential monotheistic religion, the pagan world of Greek philosophy did not have that problem of evil that plagues the Christian apologists.” [Robinson, 83].

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We have been arguing that only a belief in a single God can make sense out of His crucifixion to save mankind. "Evil" in the philosopher's mind was a social or political problem—not a spiritual one! It seems, therefore, best, among the many Greek thoughts circulating in those early days of the birth of logic, Stoicism is a good representative.

"For the Stoics," Dr. Robinson informed us, "God is a divine force working in creation but not something or someone who is revealed to human intelligence—not something that communicates it or his will to humans" [Robinson, Lesson #16]. Stoics did not believe in a personal God who is involved in the affairs of men.

The Stoics

Stoicism, the dictionary reads, "taught that virtue, the highest good, is based on knowledge; the wise live in harmony with the divine Reason (also identified with Fate and Providence) that governs nature, and are indifferent to the vicissitudes of fortune and to pleasure and pain." Stoicism was mentioned by Luke when Paul was on Mar's Hill [Acts 17:18].

"The god of the Stoics," Professor Robinson tells us, "is not a personal being concerned with human welfare as such, but a powerful divine fire of sorts working through physical and material modes of operation." [Lesson #16]

"Fire" is a good description. The Stoics saw the divine presence as a natural force that—like fire—impacts nature—and us, but unlike the Christian God, it is not personal. If we were stoics, we might call this "Mother Nature" Natural law is Stoic Law but it is also *moral*." Perhaps, it is best to say: to be Stoic is to live life in accordance with what is natural for being human. Stoics

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maintain that such a life is built on moral virtue. This all sounds good. In fact, stoicism is still employed in education as a stress reducer and to help young adults find their purpose in society and develop an acceptance of who they are among others.

But still: what about the babe in a manger? “The incarnation, however, whereby God comes to earth to redeem us is the work of a personal God,” says Professor Robinson. He went on, “...the immaterial incarnating itself materially [the incarnation] in order to realize or further guarantee what on a Stoic account might be regarded as the Logos [the Stoic idea of the divine]. ... Why would God do this? Stoicism leaves [this question] unanswered.” the Professor responded.

“Here [an incarnate God],” Professor Robinson concluded, “is a providential God who takes a personal interest in us. *How distance this is from Olympianism* [Greek mythology] *and the divine fire of the Stoics.*” (Italics added).

Finally, the good Professor tells us what Greek philosophy does *not* offer: “But... a providential God that has endowed us with ... abilities [to be just, reasonable, moral], that has created a world that is right for us, for our good, so that we might conduct ourselves in this world in such a way as to earn eternal presence of this very God—well, this is something the Stoics do *not* offer in their philosophy.”

The Problem

The problem is the problem of “evil.” If a perfect Creator created a perfect universe and a perfect world for a perfect man to live in, what caused the chaos; where did evil come from and how did it get in or why?

If God is omniscient and omnipotent, He must have permitted evil and therefore He must have

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predetermined it. Stoicism's law and order in creation has painted God into a corner. The Will of God is ultimately the cause of all things? The good professor gave me goose pimples with what he said next. It was so spot on!

"Christianity has to be based on something firmer than that—something much more resistant to change. It has to be based on truths that are not near productions of philosophy but are creations of divinity made available to us by the grace of God." [Lesson #16].

A Philosophy for Life

Zeno of Citium (334 .B.C.) is credited with being the founder of Stoicism. We are using Stoicism as representative of all philosophical thought in that it leaves unresolved the problem of evil. In a metaphorical sense, all philosophy and all mythology finds itself in the deep ditch of utter despair and only God remains above it to throw us a robe. Not knowing that God is there, mankind employs reasonable coping skills to pass the time.

Stoicism is a philosophy for living a more meaningful, happier life not only with others but with tragedies, too, that come unannounced. The stoic lives by his or her own "moral" compass or conscience rather than crisis managing life.

According to Professor Massimo Pigliucci in his lectures on "Think Like a Stoic" Stoicism is based one basic premise: "Live according to nature." [Lecture #1]. Like a fish was made for water, we were created to live in the natural environment of earth. It is important that we, as human beings, know what it means to be human in this natural sense.

The 2 pillars of this premise are: One, we are reasoning beings—*homo sapientis*. And two, we are social

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beings. We need community. So Stoicism maintains that a well lived life is one that uses reason to benefit the society.

The four cardinal virtues, practical wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance, which Stoicism adheres to—well these—sound almost biblical. This last is a Fruit of the Spirit, but—like all Bible truths—it, temperance, is nuanced in Scripture to point to the Spirit's leading in a believer's life. For the Stoic, it is more self-reliance. The Greeks taught, "*gnothi sauton* and *meden agan*: "Know yourself" and "Nothing in excess." "Know yourself" means know what kind of creature you are, remember your limitations, remember that you are not a god [Vandiver *Classical Mythology*, 44]. Find the median between despondency and arrogance, underestimating and overestimating your own place in life. That is temperance to the Stoic; what we call "moderation." Courage is the mid-point between recklessness and cowardice. Moral virtue to the stoic is the formation of character and harmonious living within society.

This is not the Biblical word in Philippians 4:5 "Let your moderation be known to all." In this verse it means "reasonableness" which, I suppose, is an example of a middle point between the extremes of always demanding your own way and letting everyone else "push you around."

Stoicism spoke of "the dichotomy of control" which is best understood in the AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] serenity prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." This brings us to what Democritus called *ataraxia* [impassiveness, calmness].

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Other Philosophies

While the Greek world was rethinking their loyalties and devotion to the mythological gods, Greek tragedians and comics were taking bold steps to question their [the gods'] existence. What is known as the pre-socratic period of philosophy [when the pantheon on Mount Olympus was still revered] was being replaced in philosophical thought with the so-called "socratic" method of inquiry in which that very question of the existence of the gods was now clothed in the garb of a philosophical dialogue for which Socrates gave his life. When Aristotle came along and wrote his "Metaphysics" [after nature] a more scientific or natural explanation for nature was beginning to be accepted. This would prepare the way for the Gospel since mythologies were falling out of favor.

But Professor Harl in his teaching on "The Fall of the Pagans" raised an interesting issue, "Some scholars have wondered whether philosophy was a substitute for religion for the elite or if educated Romans really believed in their gods. [Harl, 42]. Many maintained the "traditional rites" not because they believed the gods heard them but simply because these rites were "ancestral." Professor Harl adds, "The Platonists nor the Stoics ever formed a clergy. ... What is more, they were not necessarily hostile to Christians" [Ibid].

There is obviously much more to the story of a world transitioning from pagan myth to Christian creed than we allot for it here. But any more said would be tangent to our main question, "Where did the message (God dying on a cross to redeem us) come from if not from God, Himself? If we maintain that it had to come from God—God who cannot lie—then (1) He necessarily exists; (2) He is the only God; (3) He is a personal God; and (4) our salvation is real!

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In the meanwhile in the centuries just preceding our Lord's incarnation a number of Greek philosophies were popularized—all which gave us something to do while living out our existence in "the deep hole" we spoke of earlier. Until the Apostles received the revelation of who Jesus was and why exactly He came and why He had to be crucified, mankind, in all their meditating, never imagined there was a God up there with a robe to pull them (all of us) up and out of our meaninglessness. In Plato's *Republic* there is the famous "allegory of the cave." Professor Robinson tells us, "In the cave, men are shackled and can see only a wall on which shadows are projected; they take the shadows for reality." [Robinson, 44].

As I see the philosopher's tale, there were many shades (shadows or expressions) of despair: Epicureanism [the good life is the happy life, the enjoyed life]; Cynicism [physical pleasure was the chief good in moderation]; Peripateticism [the happy life must be guided by virtue]; Skepticism [some knowledge is unknowable]; as well as, Stoicism [the chief good was to achieve a state of ataraxia, or mental tranquility]. But there is only one true source of happiness, to be found in a salvation provided by Christ's substitutionary death on Calvary.

In Summary

In summary, the Greek philosopher kept his focus on this life. He imagined an after life, to be sure, since, like the Preacher in Ecclesiastes kept reminding us, "all is vanity, i.e. This life is fleeting. It seemed great effort for little reward. But the subject of evil as an offense against God appears of no immediate interest to the philosopher, being taken up with this life. The myth proposed appeasement—not forgiveness—through sacrifice. As already noted, the

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gods had no interest in mankind other than for worship and food.

The thought that a personal God would, notwithstanding, leave His throne to wear the robe of human flesh and not as a mere anthropomorphic symbolism but for real—real flesh and blood and a real humanity—come to die over our rebellion in order to get us back, [this thought] was never even hinted at or in part imagined in any writings or traditions beside the Biblical Scriptures.

When one considers this along with the language of Scripture, a language uniquely equipped to present this truth in terms of grace and faith, as well as, the historical changes that made Paul's missionary journeys possible, it becomes impossible to deny—at least in a reasonable sense—that Christian monotheism deserves a serious look by atheists, agnostics, and all those who have heard of the Savior but have not yet considered what this might mean for their eternal well-being.

Professor William R. Cook in his lecture #13 on *St. Augustine's Confessions*, tells the story of Augustine's conversion to Christianity and the part Greek philosophy played helping Augustine reconcile faith and reason. Professor Cook discovered that the intellectual awakening of the philosopher was on the right track but simply didn't go far enough to reach Christian Truth: "What is the essence of what he [Augustine] did not read [in the Neo-Platonists] ," Says Dr. Cook, "it is, in fact, the two great Christian mysteries; that is to say, incarnation, God becoming human, and atonement, Christ's death on the cross taking away the sins of the world. Those he did not find in the Platonists." [Book VII - Neo-Platonism and Truth].

Postscript

“It was therefore necessary ... now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” - Hebrews 9:23, 26

Professor John Hale, whose interest was archeology but whose focus was religion in his lessons on “*Exploring the Roots of Religion*” in Lesson 36, “Faiths Lost and Found,” summed up his study by referring to, what he called, “some enduring elements of human religion.” There are some places and artifacts, globally and through time, common among religious rituals and practices that suggest a common evolution of thought as well as purpose in mankind’s need to deal with evil against unknown forces or beings (gods), the propitious ritual of appeasing and satisfying these forces and gods, and man’s eventual death and the afterlife.

These outline the common questions that religion—not philosophy or science—must answer. Professor Hale wrote, “Ancient traditions outlive the religions from which they originated and are woven into the fabric of later religious experience, art, and ritual. Above all, archaeology shows how religion lies at the core of every society’s perception of its own identity.” He wrote about caves and bulls, sacrifices, and temples, the sun... and even the formations of creeds and hymns that teach the importance

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of living right—but there is no mention in any of this of “a Cross.”

Mithraism

When the naturalistic definition of a myth became popular, it was only a short step to claiming that all the major bible stories were borrowed from more ancient cultures. The most popular idea says that Christianity is a borrowed religion from Mithraism. But Bart Ehrman, a professed agnostic scholar, says: “The alleged parallels between Jesus and the “pagan” savior-gods in most instances reside in the modern imagination: We do not have accounts of others who were born to virgin mothers and who died as an atonement for sin and then were raised from the dead (despite what the sensationalists claim ad nauseam in their propagandized versions).” [cp. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.html].

Nonetheless: “The Mithraic influence on Christianity,” says Payam Nabarz, “is the subject of much good historical research” [Nabarz, *Kindle Locations 921-922*]. From the third century, the Greek philosophers were wont to draw parallels between the Persian Mysteries and Christianity.

A closer look at—what Dr. Franz Cumont, a Belgian archaeologist, historian and philologist, called “*a strained parallelism*.” reveals the limitation of that comparison: That unfailing wellspring of religious emotion supplied by the teachings and the passion of the God sacrificed on the cross, *never* flowed for the disciples of Mithra.

What all of this boils down to is that the Message of Calvary is NOT pagan! Other similarities are an innocent but understandable union of thought, such as both

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Christianity and Mithraism maintain a system of ethics. Or somethings were borrowed but we could do nicely without. We should celebrate Christmas another day than December 25.

“It was a strong source of inferiority for Mazdaism that it believed in only a mythical redeemer. That unfailing wellspring of religious emotion supplied by the teachings and the passion of the God sacrificed on the cross, never flowed for the disciples of Mithra” [Franz Cumont. *The Mysteries of Mithra*. 196. Kindle Edition.]

My Mythological Journey

My journey, as brief and incomplete that it assuredly was, gave me a greater appreciation for the Ancient myths. I could see their inquiry into and longing for, a life after death, how they valued moral virtue, and how, through the rituals, which gave expression to these stories, they might offer a legacy to subsequent generations. Generations of cultural interpretation of right from wrong in explaining where evil came from, why we are seemingly abandoned without regard in the middle of this evil to struggle against it. Scholars even identify in the stories two Aphrodites: one spiritual and true love and the other more animalistic and selfish.

The spiritual interpretation of the Indian *Bhagavad Gita* (the song of the lord) for Mahatma Ghandi spoke of the war within each of us to fulfil our dharma or duty. “We are at war within ourselves,” says Kathryn McClymond, “fighting to determine which aspects of our natures [plural] will win.” [Lecture 20, 141]. The Sanskrit word is *varnashramadharma*, our duty dictated by our social class and stage in life. Kathryn McClymond concludes that the

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theme and force of the “song” is to commit ourselves to this battle but leave the results to Krishna, the lord.

Obviously, biblical thought will modify this advice by replacing Jesus’ name for Krishna. And in western cultures “class” can be a more fluid idea as one’s life opportunities change. “It isn’t,” someone said, “about the destination but the journey.” [Though it is also about the destination since we believe life has eternal meaning and purpose] Here, however, in philosophy and myth, the inward struggle: the spiritual and the flesh, is emphasized. Life for the Gita, for example, is about absolute devotion to Krishna; for the Christian, it is faithfully following Christ. These are not the same, as we have discovered. Duty and faithfulness are contextually different since the Cross.

Even in the Babylonian Epic about Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh meets Enkido, a wild looking, Neanderthal-like man. They journey together as friends after a brief fight in which neither is victor. These two men easily represent the two natures [the spiritual and the ‘flesh’] within the believer that struggle for preeminence over each other. But for Gilgamesh there is no Romans 7:25: “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.”

Gilgamesh’s biggest fear was a death that brought everything to an end. Utnapishtim, a legendary king of the ancient city of Shuruppak, encourages Gilgamesh to accept the fact that he will eventually die and to enjoy the life he has. I am reminded of the advice of the “Preacher” in Ecclesiastes 9:7 “Go your way, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God now accepts your works.” (The Preacher has much more to say but Gilgamesh does not have the assurance that comes when we “fear God” instead.)

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The philosopher chimed in. "Temperance" is the answer! We must do all things in moderation and avoid the extremes of life. On the one side avoid an anxiety that is always sorry for life, repenting of everything. And on the other, avoid the careless life, the prodigal life, in which personal pleasure is the only source of happiness until there is nothing left that brings that happiness. Aristotle was reported to have puzzled, "When water chokes you, what do you take to wash it down?" The virtuous life, we are told by the Greek philosopher, lies between.

The Book of Job

Some treat the book of Job as a simple story that attempts to solve another philosophical puzzle: Why do bad things happen to good people? "This story," says Kathryn McClymond in an opening comment to her 18th lecture on the *Great Mythologies of the World*, "addresses many of the most basic questions of mythology." What is humanity's place in the universe? What is the nature of the divine? What meaning can be found in human experience? What is the nature of suffering and why do good people suffer?

This brief work will not answer these questions, but we must point out that if mythologies have been burdened with such questions left unanswered, then the people for whom and about whom the myths were written must have been plagued with the fear and anxiety that accompanies such unknowns. Until Christ, until Paul wrote about the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 (which Jewry was blinded from seeing), until God gave His Son, until Jesus in the form [in the person] of God died on the Cross and rose again, there could be no satisfactory answers.

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But the questions must first be asked and mankind must put their best minds to the task of finding those answers. Philosophers, scribes, religious leaders, Rabbis and Shamans and the like, together with all the ancient scholars who interpreted myths and discussed such matters in public forums or in the privacy of their own fears—all and everyone—must be given opportunity to find the answers. This is the Holy Grail or the Golden Fleece or the single task (not 12) that Hercules need fulfill in penance for his sins. All the good works of all the saints would not be soap enough to wipe away the stain of his guilt. But without God's message of grace through faith—without the story behind Philippians 2:6-8—the hope of forgiveness is not even in the conversation!

There is a rather strange paradox here that is almost impossible to see unless in retrospect we see God's part in all of this madness. The Jews in Paul's day couldn't see it. They thought Paul was encouraging sin to give God greater opportunity to be merciful since—according to Paul—God lives to be merciful to man [Romans 6:1]. Job's life was the underside of the tapestry that was Eden for Adam and Eve; and it was no coincidence that it was Adam and not Job that rebelled against his Creator.

Strangely, as God would prove to Satan (if he were capable of learning) and us that the flower of man's love for God and his knowledge of that love flourishes best in the soil of such suffering. Go figure! The myrtle tree most sacred tree of all/perfumes the very ax that bids it fall.

Another Question

What if the Father had responded to His Son's pain, telling Him you won't have to die; we will find another way! "But, you say (and rightly so), God does not vacillate

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in indecision [Malachi 3:6; Romans 11:29]. He assured us, "My covenant will I not break, *nor alter*" [Psalm 89:34].

Yet in our imaginations we can still ask, "What if." The religions of the world have suggested alternative solutions to evil and poverty, injury and pain. Some even pass it off as unreal. Some learn to cope. In Buddhism, the devotee is encouraged to simply except suffering as a real part of life.

But of Jesus it was said, "...in the days of his flesh, ... he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death..." [Hebrews 5:7].

It appears from the writer to the Hebrews that this mission may have been on the Savior's mind continually as He traversed the land. Perhaps, teaching and healing the sick, the love of a disciple and the crowds following might have distracted Him from this heavy weight He carried. Perhaps, His love for them and His burden could not be distinguished.

But I ask you another question: If no man, no philosopher or religious leader, scribe, shaman, magi, wise man, poet, playwright, tragedian, comic, or even a novelist, no commoner—no man or woman—could have imagined such a thing as God dying for our sins as the solution to all evil and all suffering, ... well then, where could this idea have come from if there is no God, if not by revelation?

Myths are the creation of a culture that longs to believe in God but has no knowledge of Him until a Paul visits their Mars Hill with the good news. When the Greek world began to transition to a philosophy of the metaphysical [from pre-socratic thought to socratic] the world was raising serious questions about: Why we were here, how did we get here, and what about an after-life?

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One Tibetan Buddhist tradition teaches that Avalokiteshvara, an enlightened being, was moved to tears by the suffering endured by all sentient beings. His tears formed a lake out of which grew the Lotus Flower which revealed Tara, the goddess of compassion and healing.

So, despite the prevalent violence mythology is known for, there is a tender tale of concern to tell underneath its rough and warlike facade. The stories perhaps were, after all, only testimonials of a people of a given culture relating their suffering and their desire for happiness. They somehow knew it would take a god to correct all that has gone amiss in their world. Yet they could not guess how!

However, the stories of the gods could no longer pretend to satisfy that inner hunger to know God for real. When Jesus asked “If it be possible” He was saying to us that there was no other possible solution to sin, no other way to get to know God except by this Cross! No other answer for suffering, or the way to lasting happiness. As Jesus promised “whosoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” [John 4:14].

And what can we say about Philippians 2:6-8 which encapsulates in so few words the entire story of God’s Son’s advent to die for us? If it sounds illogical or too fanciful a story to be credible, we must recall, its appeal is to the heart not the head. The very fact that Paul shared it with us through the sacred text—knowing that it was beyond the mind of man to imagine it—tells us there is a God who wanted us to know.

One of my college instructors, Dr. Beuttler, who traveled the world teaching God’s Word, found himself stranded in an airport in Amsterdam while a heavy fog descended, grounding all flights in or out. Hours had

Postscript

elapsed when a businessman came up to him and introduced himself, saying, "I have been observing you all this time. I have been traveling the world searching into many religions, looking for something—I am not sure what." (God knew and put that "searching" in his heart.) He then said to Dr. Beuttler, "I think you have what I am looking for." Dr. Beuttler than told him about Christ, about the day God died for him. No sooner had they parted company than the fog lifted!

The God-Man Debate

Jesus' divinity and His humanity are both vital aspects of His being, and both play irreplaceable roles in His death and our salvation. But this was, oddly, not an easy conclusion for sensible minds that thought that somehow logic could be used to explain Calvary. Logic is insufficient for the task. That means faith remains our only resource for accepting the unmatched provisions of our Savior's continuing ministry to us. Here is offered some of the "reasoning" that is theologically "weak" at best, heretical at worse, that we are encouraged to set aside for the fuller understanding that Paul in his gospel offers us [Philippians 2:5-8].

- ◆ **Arius** believed that Jesus had to be created as the Son of God. He couldn't just 'be' God.
- ◆ **Nestorius** never recognized Mary as the 'Mother of God.'
- ◆ **Apollinaris** believed the Jesus was God's mind in a human body. Jesus had one nature not two.
- ◆ **Eutyches** maintained that Christ had a human nature but it was unlike the rest of humanity.
- ◆ **Serapion** believed that Jesus' body was an illusion. (Docetism meaning 'to seem to be')
- ◆ **Sabellius** couldn't buy into the idea of a trinity. He believed that God was not three persons in one but three characteristics in one.
- ◆ **Marion** didn't believe that the God of the Old Testament was equal with Jesus. Marion was a docetist.

The God-Man Debate

- ◆ The **Ebionites** were Jewish Christians who believed that the laws of Moses were still applicable in Christ.
- ◆ The **Patripassians**- Monarchianism is a set of beliefs that emphasize God as being one person, in direct contrast to Trinitarianism which defines God as three persons coexisting con-substantially as one in being. Patripassianism, the teaching that the Father suffered. The idea of "The Father's" suffering and death on Calvary was introduced to deny Christ's deity as the son. Also called,
- ◆ **Theopaschism** [God suffered] claimed that Christ's divine nature suffered as well as His human nature during the Passion. [a 6th-century heretical doctrine maintaining that Christ had only one nature, the divine, and that this nature suffered at the Crucifixion. This becomes a question of *passibility* or capable of feeling suffering.]

Religious Classifications

Animism: A form of religious belief that vests various natural objects (such as trees, hills, and so on) with indwelling spirits.

Bitheism: [or ditheism] in religious contexts, that there are two divine powers, usually separated in function as well as in identity.

Deism: the view (common in the eighteenth century) that the divine being that produced the natural world is detached from and disinterested in it.

Dynamism: A form of religious belief that vests various natural objects (such as trees, hills, and so on) with innate but impersonal and unpredictable powers.

Henotheism: A form of religious belief in which the existence of numerous divine beings may be recognized, but allegiance to the particular one associated with one's tribe or culture is demanded.

Monotheist: One affirming *monotheism*, the view that exactly one God exists and, typically, that the divine is interested and involved in human affairs

Pantheism: A form of religious belief in which everything is held to be divine or held to be a manifestation of the divine.

Polytheism: A form of religion that holds there are many gods, often (but not always) placed in a hierarchy and differentiated in terms of their interests or spheres of influence.

The Biblical Sacrifices

The Sacrifices			
Offering	Text	Features	Significance
Burnt Offering	Deuteronomy 33:10; Psalms 51:19; Numbers 28; Leviticus 2:13; 6:8-13	Male animal less the thigh, entrails, wings, or feathers. Genesis 32:32.	Devotion & service. The only sacrifice God could offer. Sifted as a sign of covenant (Romans 12:1).
Sin Offering	Numbers 29:12-38; Leviticus 5:1-13; 16:29-34; 23:27	Represented the sins of the people or sinning "in ignorance," (never a ram used in the guilt offering). Substitutions allowed for poverty. Public sins require a male animal sacrifice; private sins, a female animal sacrifice.	To make atonement for the nation on festive occasions or as a general redemption . The most solemn of all atonement. The High-priest stood before the Lord to purify all: the sanctuary; the priests; & the people of all defilement. Ceremonial & moral (Hebrews 2:17).
Trespass or Guilt Offering*	Leviticus 5:14-19; 14:12, 21; Numbers 6:12; Isaiah 53:10; Psalm 51:4	Male animal (a ram or a lamb). Represented an individual's sin done "in ignorance." Substitutions never allowed.	A ransom for a specific individual wrong/sin. "A wrong done against another was considered done against the Lord. Some offered trespass offerings pre-supposing guilt or living with a sense of shame, though no sin was specified." (1 John 1:5).
Peace Offering	Psalms 51:17; 54:6; 56:12; 116:17; Leviticus 7:11-12, 16	The offering of completeness. A special term is used to designate this "killing." The only public offering called "most holy" accompanied by a meal and drink offering.	The grateful homage of a soul justified and accepted before God. Three types: for thanksgiving , vows, and strictly voluntary (Hebrews 13:20).
Grain or Meal Offering	Leviticus 2:11-13; Psalm 40:7; Jeremiah 17:26	Always offered with either the burnt or the peace offering—an Omer of wheat made into 10 (number of completeness) or 12 (representing all Israel) cakes. (1 Chronicles 21:23).	"A gift" which when with the burnt offering is totally consumed in the fire, made with oil & salt without yeast (pure). (Hebrews 10:22).
Drink Offering	Exodus 29:14	Wine poured at the base of the altar	Fellowship (Matt 26:29; Rev. 3:20).
Incense Offering	Exodus 30:1-10; 37:29	A holy formula not used elsewhere	Prayer (Revelation 8:3-4)

* Sins committed in ignorance for want of knowledge, unintentional, through weakness, or did not know his liability at the time. Sins done intentionally (mens rea) were considered (lex talionis) punishable without a gratuitous forgiveness.

** With both the sin and guilt offering, "repentance" must be genuine, that is, a remembrance of sins.

***Trespasses (individual sins) were violations of any of the 613 injunctions in the Mosaic Law.

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