In the Belly of the Beast

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Reflection Three

Image by Alison Hine from the Gospel of Mary Magdalene set
BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

Foundations
The temple of the Christian tradition rests upon the foundation of the sacred Scriptures--Hebrew, Christian, Occidental, Apocryphal, and Oriental. Jesus himself appears to have quoted from Hebrew and Apocryphal texts as his sacred Scripture. For example, he uses words and images from the apocalyptic books of Enoch, preserved for us by the Oriental Churches in Ethiopia. This magnificent and multi-volumes library is an encyclopedia of metaphors and apocalyptic images from the ancient Middle East. The question is, of course, what are we to make of these images today in the modern era of post-Christian society? Are they relevant? Are they meaningful? Can they convey any modicum of truth or reality to help us today?

Literalisms
I grew up within Christian fundamentalism. I was nursed at the breast of biblical prophecy and prediction. The "End Times" was the mother's milk of Christian conservatism and eventually found its way into mainstream America through best sellers like Hal Lindsey's The Late Great Planet Earth or the Left Behind series. I was taught that the literal seven years of tribulation was upon us. Ours was the moment that Jesus himself had predicted. The end was near. Maybe it had already begun.

Subsequent to my early fundamentalist upbringing, I rejected the whole literalist grab-bag of fevered prophetic warnings. There was every reason to reject the absurd alarms and multiple false-prophecies that I had heard throughout my childhood and adolescence (Hitler was the anti-Christ! No, now it was Mussolini. Then it had to be John F. Kennedy, or perhaps it was Martin Luther King the false black prophet?) Christian fundamentalists were often delirious in their breathless rush to explain and press us toward the apocalypse. When I finally could read the Bible again, I threw all the literalisms away and began to focus on the metaphoric ground of sacred Scripture. Symbolic truth, I argued, must surely lie beneath the literal words. I did not reject the clear-eyed seeing of the Prophets, nor did I jettison prophecy entirely, I simply had to temper it with alternative systems of interpretation. Once again, these alternatives are what I find fascinating today in light of our current transition to a new post-election era. I catch myself dusting off the old biblical metaphors, seeing them in a new light, and discovering gems of understanding and insight in the clutter of fundamentalist obfuscation.

Karmic Law or Clairvoyance
So, if we are to listen to the biblical text at all, and if we accept the category of some form of clairvoyant prophecy concerning "the end of history as we know it," then what are we to make of the ancient narratives and metaphors concerning the future humanity may be facing? How can we find guidance from sacred Scripture and these ancient texts? In light of the complexity of current events, perhaps it is time to ask, "Are the prophetic and apocalyptic texts simply historical curiosities, or do they presage guidance for the future? What are these texts actually talking about?"

If one counts him or herself to be a student of Jesus (I prefer to use his original name, Yeshua), then his recorded words are at least of interest, if not prescient carriers of a profound wisdom. My curiosity has returned about his obvious apocalyptic references. It is said that on the cusp of his own great trial and final execution that he wept, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I would have gathered your children together about me as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not" (Matthew 23:27). If these are
indeed his words, then we know from history that Yeshua knew or saw something of the horror of that city’s future demise, occurring in a little over 30 years. Jerusalem was destroyed and Herod’s temple torn down by the Romans. Did Yeshua see those events as a kind of template for future crises in history including our own? Does the Book of Revelation (another in the long line of our early prophetic and apocalyptic texts) hold a mother load of metaphors relevant not only to that day, but to the day in which we live?

One can no longer be unaware of the urgent consequences of humanity’s affect on the planet. We see that for better or for worse we are rapidly moving toward some crucial tipping point (or perhaps have already passed it). For the first time in history humanity risks the possibility of complete ecological collapse and even the demise of the human species. Humankind now has the capacity to destroy (or at least irreparably alter) its living environment making it more and more difficult for many species to survive swift extinction. Was that what was seen by the ancient prophets? Were the lines of karmic law (the law of cause and effect) already so bright then as to be obvious for the future? Or were the prophets granted a strange clairvoyance to see the out workings of such a likelihood? Given our current circumstances both seem eerily possible.

Metaphors and Fractal Patterns

So what about the specific metaphors? In light of the sudden shift in our political fortunes, how might we re-imagine their many meanings? What can we see through the biblical lens now that we might not have understood otherwise? Here is an abridged list of terms, images and specific metaphors found in various of the Christian texts describing future events in whatever period of history.

Yeshua spoke apocalyptically concerning: (found primarily in Matthew 24, and Mark 13).

1. The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple.
2. Years of tribulations (as a prelude to the fall), with multiplying wars, spreading crises and the genocidal slaughter of innocents and civilians.
3. An increase in earthquakes resulting in turmoil and pestilence in ever expanding circles of chaos.
4. Spiritual betrayal and the rise of false prophets and messiahs feeding humanity upon lies.

The Revelation(s) through John

1. The appearance of an Anti-Christ (I John 2:18, 4:3, II John 7)
2. The powerful four metaphoric horsemen unleashed intensifying human travail upon the earth—war, genocide, famine, and death (Revelation 6).
3. The breaking of the metaphoric seven seals, the sounding of the seven trumpets, and the pouring out of the seven vials upon the earth which multiply earthquakes, cataclysms, and ruin to the natural order and its living systems, poisoning the oceans and the earth’s air and freshwater resources (Revelation 6-7, 11)
4. The rise of Dragon-like and beastial figures who act as false prophets for humanity because they oppose the teachings of the Anointed One (Revelation 12-13)
5. Persecution of and disrespect for spiritual humanity’s spiritual heritage and its saints and sages (Revelation 13).
6. The breakout and intensification of fire on Earth, the atmospheric darkening of the sun and moon, and other strange celestial displays (Revelation 8-9).
7. War brought against the divine woman and her child (Revelation 12).

Volumes have been written on the exegetical and historical meaning of these and other passages. What is now required perhaps is a simple metaphoric reading allowing us to see that the unfolding of history makes
sense as some kind of fractal patterning--the images amplifying themselves over and over again in self-replicating patterns.

It would be possible, then, to see the events of our own time as an intensification of universal prototypes already present in Yeshua’s day. Once distortion embeds itself in the web of human society, it’s deformities increase as they ripple out across history. Again, what the prophets may have seen were fractal patterns that would self-replicate into our era. Yes, there have always been earthquakes, they are the necessary effects of a living planet with its magnificent but dangerous tectonics, but something has also radically changed.

Earthquakes and Fires

I was lying in bed the other evening watching television when my house began to shake. It lasted for a minute. Having grown up in California, I knew exactly what it was. I checked Google and discovered that a 5.3 magnitude earthquake had just struck Oklahoma at the heart of its massive fracking fields, which I already knew was at the epicenter of hundreds of similar events occurring now almost daily. Suddenly it is not the West Coast (where the natural fault lines lie), but stable heartlands (where the fracking is taking place) that are now danger zones for earthquakes. Earthquakes are increasing, right in my own living space. This particular earthquake was felt all the way to Dallas and to Kansas City, and this is not only a local phenomenon. It is occurring worldwide wherever the technology of fracking is taking place. Who would have thought of such a possibility, or that man-made earthquakes would increase? It was unimaginable before now.

The prophets saw that fire and heat would be a destroyer at the end of history as we know it. (Many of my fundamentalist interpreters have argued that this is surely a warning about nuclear holocaust, but who would have imagined that heat (the “fires”) of global warming could become an even more inside insidious cause of death across the planet and its living systems? And who would have imagined that pollution would run septic through the veins of its continental fresh waters? Who could have foreseen that the poisoning of the seas through toxic waste and the rise in acidity would kill off its life, fisheries, and ancient coral beds? You cannot examine the long prophetic list, reading it metaphorically, without realizing that prophecy is a prescient seeing into real and present dangers rapidly building force in the world around us.

Goodness and the Beast

And then when these texts turn their eyes toward the political and social conditions of the human world, they see images of a metaphoric Dragon and its companion Beast. They also warn of the proliferation of false prophecy and false prophets. Many years ago, President Eisenhower had the foresight to alert us the possibility of an insidious takeover of western society by the vast Military-Industrial-(and I would add)-Corporate Complex. Perhaps we can begin to comprehend that we now be living within the belly of that vast Beast. We also live within a world where the dragon-like effects of carefully crafted propaganda and false stories drive a narrative that manipulates individuals, movements and ideologies bringing deception to power, burning down the walls of its long-lived institutions. The proliferation of falsehoods and lies (false news rampant in the world of social media) compel gullible minds and vulnerable populations toward bigotry, hate, racism, and misogyny. Spokes-persons for these lies (perceived as modern prophets and messiahs) multiply in such an environment. Empty and hollow of any real substance except vitriol, their fiery voices singe the earth and destroy the fabric of a civil society they claim they are protecting. Yes, through lies anti-Christ-principles (principles of behavior and conduct antithetical to Christ and his teachings) ascend the seats of power and rule our world. We can either worship and bow down, or we can stand and resist.

Did the prophets foresee and foretell this, or did they simply observe the patterns already existing in their world and predict ultimate outcomes should these forces overtake the deep structures of a future world?
Whatever the case may be, prophetic and apocalyptic premonitions are not simply warnings, but channels of wisdom. Like a parent who can predict the inevitable outcomes of their children’s bad behavior, their admonitions can be occasions for learning and awakening. It is heartening that what may be happening now is somehow a blessed reversal. As people awaken, the powers-that-be may have unknowingly unleashed fresh and powerful forces for good (and not simply for evil) into the very belly of the Beast they have created. Wisdom, love, goodness and compassion are powerful and subversive energies. Ultimately, we are promised, they will disable the powers of evil and distortion. In the end, prophecy may be the medicine that cures the poisoning of our minds, the lift that raises our levels of our consciousness, and the hands that rip the veil off our blind distortions. Prophecy may indeed catalyze an awakening.

**AN OCCASIONAL REFLECTION**

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**PROVERBIAL WISDOM**

Civilized life, you know, is based on a huge number of illusions in which we all collaborate willingly. The trouble is we forget after a while that they are illusions and we are deeply shocked when reality is torn down around us.

J. G. Ballard

We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.

Anais Nin

We need to take dreams more literally, and waking life more symbolically.

Robert Moss