



## American Myths and the Bible

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In his recent book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom laments the trend in American education that students attending even the higher rated universities bring with them little or no knowledge of the classic literature that would enable them to establish time-honored values. Even a few decades ago, Bloom notes, most students possessed some knowledge of the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

The suggestion that the Bible has traditionally played a role in the formation of values among Americans is, of course, well known to any historian of the American experience. In the plethora of books and articles published in recent years as part of the celebration of this or that bicentennial, it is clear that Bloom's observation is true not only of relatively recent history but from the very beginning of the development of this land and country.

One can find references to the Bible, especially to the Old Testament, in many of the speeches and writings of the founders, even though many of them are best described as deists. Inaugural addresses of many a president include quotations from the Bible, and many readers will recall that John Kennedy's ill-fated speech in Dallas twenty-five years ago was to include a quotation from the Book of Isaiah.

Perhaps one should rejoice that Americans have had a source from which values were derived. Surely the people of a land as blessed in resources as ours ought to have some basis out of which to understand both abundance and responsibility. Yet over the years the use of the Bible, or better, the frequent allusion to some favorite passages and concepts in the Bible, has led to a variety of horrors and to a certain bankruptcy in our ability to think holistically.

### I. AMERICAN MYTHS AND THE BIBLE

Studies about the American myth and the Bible have concentrated on three heroic persons of the biblical story: Adam, Abraham, and Moses. The Adamic myth portrays the American as the innocent primal human, possessing virtually

<sup>1</sup>Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 62-67.

unlimited potential and set at the beginning of history. This view of Adam, of course, is based on the biblical story of Genesis 2, and does not include the story of rebellion and limitation which follows on its heels in Genesis 3. Strikingly, however, a completely opposite view seems to have influenced the thinking of some of the founders who wrote the Constitution. In his recent book *The Cycles of American History*, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., demonstrates how the emphasis of Augustine and Calvin on the depravity of man laid foundations of skepticism about the American

“experiment.”<sup>2</sup>

The Abrahamic myth emphasizes the election by God of a man who forsakes the past, his land and his heritage, as well as his security, in order to mark new trails, inhabit a new land, and thus experience the blessings promised by God. The biblical story of Abraham throughout the book of Genesis provided sufficient optimism to motivate the early settlers and to influence the thinking of generations of Americans. The myth has the advantage of freeing people from the restrictions of the past, but offers the disadvantage of allowing people to forsake and to deny their history.

It is probably the Mosaic myth that has had the most profound effect on American thinking. This story is not merely that of the man Moses who, like Abraham, was called by God to give up his comfortable life in order to fulfill a mission. It is not only the heroic tale of one who faced the overwhelming odds of the Egyptian court. It is the epic of a people who were called by God out of bondage to a foreign king, who were led by the same God through the trials of the wilderness, who were given laws to live by, and who by the promise of God received a land flowing with milk and honey. Equipped with the power of God and with the divinely given responsibility to be a blessing for all the earth, this people drove out the Canaanites before them with apparent relentless pursuit. Then they rested from their enemies round about.

Little imagination is required to see how this story was adapted to the early American myth. Egypt was Europe in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries; Pharaoh was the king of Europe; and Israelites were the early American settlers who fled their religious and economic taskmasters. America itself, of course, was the Promised Land, and the people who came to possess it were the new “chosen people,” the new Israel.

Such analogies lead inevitably, of course, to one more: the Canaanites were the natives who lived in the land, who had developed their own degree of culture and their own systems to govern their tribes. These native Americans also had their own religions which held their lives together. Yet, equated with the Canaanites of the Bible, these natives were considered as pagan, uncultured, virtually inhuman, and most of all, a barrier to God’s plan to give the land to the new chosen people. The Indians were thus manipulated, driven, and massacred—all justified by the immigrants because of the privilege of being God’s new elect in a new Promised Land.

The biblical passages which sanctioned this genocide are clearly delineated by James Michener in *The Covenant*. There Michener describes the traditional

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<sup>2</sup>Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986) 4.

arguments used by the Dutch to justify their treatment of the black citizens of southern Africa. The parallels between the apartheid system of South Africa and the early history of America are striking indeed. And it was the Bible in both cases that provided the rationale for the self-interest that led to such horrors.

Indeed, it seemed to the American mind that God had made a new covenant with this new people in a new land. It was a covenant in which God had given freedom, space, and turf, a covenant in which the new being had unlimited potential, a covenant in which God was to be worshiped and obeyed. Yet no one seemed to ask what God thought of this covenant or about the lesson to be learned from the fate of biblical Israel.

The comparison between America and South Africa leads immediately, of course, to

issues surrounding the deportation of blacks from Africa to America and their enslavement here, particularly, in the southern states. The idolatrous prejudice against black people in general was often justified by incomprehensible distortions of biblical passages. Classic was the use of the story about Noah's descendants in Genesis 9 and 10. The genealogy of Ham indicates that his sons were Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan. Cush is the Hebrew name for Ethiopia, and since Ethiopians are black, this list at Genesis 10:6 offers for the first time in the Bible the subject of race.

Now the genealogy follows directly upon the story in Genesis 9:20-27 about Ham seeing his father Noah naked, a taboo which resulted in a curse pronounced upon Ham's son Canaan. The content of that curse was the enslavement of Canaan to his uncles Shem and Japheth. In white racist thinking this story of the enslavement of Canaan was conveniently transferred to the following genealogy of Ham, and in the process the black Cush (Ethiopian) becomes enslaved to the white Semites (Shem). Since early Americans already saw themselves as the new Israel, it was inevitable that the descendants of Cush should be America's slaves.

With all the parallels drawn between America and biblical Israel, it is no wonder that when the founders came to the question of a seal for the United States, Thomas Jefferson proposed one depicting God's guidance of Israel through the wilderness by the cloud and the fire, and Benjamin Franklin one with Moses' parting the sea. It is not surprising either that in the discussion about an official language in the land, one of the founders suggested it should be Hebrew rather than the language of the empire from which the colonies had freed themselves.

Even these few examples of the use of the Bible in the development of American thinking suffice to demonstrate some of the dangers which lurk in the pages of Holy Scripture. Indeed, if these examples demonstrate the use of the Bible in establishing values in contemporary minds, then one cannot wail too loudly over Allan Bloom's observation that students attending universities today do not have the knowledge of the Bible that he observed in students several decades ago.

The problem, of course, is not with the Bible itself but with the use of it to justify self-interest and its accompanying bigotries. Several centuries of such abuse of Scripture have led us to the point that the discerning of human and community values is a rare commodity. We have arrived at the point where all

things done by one's favorite in-group are acceptable, where even the President of the United States can assert about his indicted staff, "I don't think they've done anything wrong." We have come to the point at which a group of graduating seniors at a respectable university defines success as being able to look down on others. We have lost, as Robert Bellah and others put it in *Habits of the Heart*,<sup>3</sup> even the language necessary to think in terms of commitment to society.

At this point the obligation rests upon the present writer to indicate what is wrong with this traditional approach to the Bible and further to indicate what alternative might be offered. Questions about the use and interpretation of the Bible are not mere exercises of intellectual curiosity. If indeed the Bible serves as the norm for our preaching and teaching in the church, then its interpretation and its use must always be the subject of the church's inquiry.

## II. ANALOGY AND HISTORY

The equating of biblical Israel and early America demands the forcing of an analogy

beyond its acceptable limits. Perhaps one aspect of the problem is indeed our inability to think historically, to recognize the particularity of another people's past, and to allow that particular past to speak for itself and on its own terms. Surely part of historical thinking is to learn from the past, to correct mistakes seen from the vantage of hindsight, and to replicate what seem to have been positive actions of another time and place.

Yet to steal another's past and to claim it as one's own to existentialize to such a degree that the meaning of another's history is sublimated to its significance for someone else, is to deny history and the particularity with which the God of the Bible revealed divine identity and will.

The witness literature of the Old Testament points to a God who dealt with Israel in a way different from all others. While God is confessed to be Creator of all, and while the whole earth belongs to God, the Old Testament asserts that Israel alone was elected by God to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). This particular status for Israel was promised to Abraham at the beginning of the Bible's "historical" period, and the fulfillment of that promise was utterly and solely the work of God. So close, indeed so intimate, was this relationship between God and the people of Israel that the metaphors of father and son, even of husband and wife, were employed to describe the covenantal relationship. So exclusive is this "marriage" that God speaks to Israel thus: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2; the phrase "know in the biblical sense" explains it all).

The entire history of God's dealing with Israel, be it in terms of salvation or judgment, is due to this unique relationship. The exodus of the people of Israel from the land of Egypt is due not to God's special care of oppressed people generally but to the relationship of Israel to God as a "first-born son" (Exod 4:22). Likewise the judgment which came upon Israel was due, among other

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<sup>3</sup>Robert N. Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

things, to Israel's failure to recognize God either as Father or as husband (Jer 3:19-20; see again Amos 3:2).

This particular and unique election of Israel by God is set within the broader scope of God's role as Creator of all. Not only the beginning of the Bible but the many prophetic speeches about the new day to come, the future reign of God, point to God's concern for all people created "in the image of God." The new day of the kingdom would be a time when gentiles would join the people of Israel in worshiping the Lord on Mount Zion and in learning the will of God (Isa 2:2-4). The kingdom to come was to be a universal one in which peoples of the earth would live in peace.

The New Testament bears witness to the beginning of this new time in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The preaching of Jesus, as summarized in Mark 1:14-15, points to its imminence. Jesus' exorcism of demons, as well as his healing miracles, are signs that the kingdom has already begun. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are also interpreted eschatologically, so that Jesus' resurrection is described by Paul as "the first fruits" of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor 15:22). Furthermore, the day of Pentecost marks the birth of the church, an event which is said by Peter to be the fulfillment of prophecy (Acts 2). Finally, Paul interprets the congregation in Rome, consisting of Jews and gentiles, to be the eschatological miracle

prophesied in Scripture (Rom 15:7-13).

The New Testament does not use the expressions “the new people of God” or “the new Israel” to define the church. The Christians in Asia Minor are, however, addressed as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pet 2:9), all expressions derived from Exodus 19:5-6 where they refer to biblical Israel.

Such terminology, along with all the testimony about the beginning of the prophesied kingdom of God, indicates that the only acceptable analogy is that between Israel and the universal church. The usurpation of that distinction by any particular nation represents an idolatrous claim on God’s favor. Whether the nation be America, South Africa, or any other, the presumption to be a national “chosen people” with rights and privileges above all others denies what God initiated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Thus the land of the United States, blessed with abundant natural resources, possessing a variety of climates and a vast spaciousness which make possible the production of all sorts of food, is not *the* Promised Land given by God to northern European immigrants. It is, however, a land where many people found—and still find—freedom from various kinds of tyrannies. It is a land of opportunity, even if the opportunities are not available in equal measure to all. It is a land where Christians, Jews, and people of other or no faiths live side by side. As such, it is good, but it is not the kingdom of God, and the nation is not the new people of God.

Now about the analogy between the curse on Canaan and the slavery of those who are black. The story of Noah in Genesis 9 and the genealogy of his sons in Genesis 10 are part of a larger story which runs from Genesis 1 through chapter 11. This larger story is sometimes called the “pre-history” in order to distinguish it from the story about God’s dealings with the ancestors of Israel

beginning in Genesis 12. Whether or not the description is appropriate, it might be more accurate to suggest that Genesis 1-11 is the story of humanity before God. In this complex of traditions several ancient writers made their contributions. We call the earlier one the Yahwist (because of the name he uses for God), and the later one we call the Priest. Each one had different purposes in describing this story of humanity before God.

The Yahwist, after his description of the paradise garden in Genesis 2, explains in one story after another the alienation and brokenness which developed in the relationship between God and humans: the story of the forbidden fruit, the fratricide by Cain, the general wickedness of humanity before the Flood, and the tower of Babel. The Priest, on the other hand, in his presentation of the universe in Genesis 1, includes the blessing pronounced on the male and female made in God’s image, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28). This writer then proceeds to demonstrate how that creation blessing was experienced: the genealogy of Genesis 5 from Adam to Noah. Following his version of the Flood story, the Priest continues his genealogy, covering now the generations from Noah to the sons of Shem, the ancestor of the Hebrews (Gen 10:1-7,20,22). At 10:6 lies the reference to Cush (Ethiopia).

Seen from the perspective of this writer’s story of humanity, the eventual development of humankind into races is part of the story of God’s creative work. It is a fulfillment of the blessing, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” and is not to be understood as part of God’s judgment on human sin.

That this genealogy now follows the Yahwist's story about the curse on Cain because of Ham's seeing his father Noah naked is due only to the work of the ancient editor who wanted to keep his characters together. There is no indication in the biblical material that the ancient writers and editors intended any other connection between the two. Furthermore, it requires little imagination to see that the curse on Canaan as a slave to Shem had to do with later Israel's conflict with Canaanites in the land.

The basic problem with the analogies between Israel and the early Americans and between Canaanites and black people is the isolation of pieces of the Bible without perceiving how those pieces relate to the whole. The latter analogy breaks down when one considers the eleven chapters of which Genesis 9-10 is a part. The former becomes ludicrous when one considers that the story of ancient Israel is framed between those same eleven chapters and the entire testimony of the New Testament.

### III. AMERICA IN GOD'S CREATION

The foregoing should in no way lead to the conclusion that the Bible has nothing to say to those living as citizens in this land of ours. On the contrary, when one looks at the Bible as a whole, the possibilities of comprehending a set of values for making moral decisions are enormous. Perhaps for Christians living as citizens in America, it is best to look at the Bible from end to beginning.

The gift of justification which plays such a significant role in the writings of Paul is offered to all by faith. This gift is the declaration of innocence to all of us who are guilty of sin before God. Its result is a new relationship between God

and humans, a reconciliation of the alienation and brokenness which defined the relationship earlier. Yet that new relationship does not take Christians out of this world. Rather, Christians are sent into the world to serve it on God's behalf, indeed to offer ourselves "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual [or better, "rational"] service. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom12:1-2).

Such an approach to the world is a far cry from the triumphalism which justifies the conquest of the land from native Americans or the enslavement of black Africans. While the pursuit of self interest at the expense of others might be the way of the world, the followers of Jesus Christ are called to be different.

Yet the world is nevertheless God's. It is the arena for Christian service and sacrifice, just as it was for the service and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is a world intended by God to be orderly and just, harmonious and peaceful, and in this creation God has begun a new community of faith called the church. This new people, still as much sinful as saintly, approaches life and the rest of the world with a transformed mind.

From this vantage point the Christian in America asks what God wills for a society that is based on freedom, including everyone's right to worship or not worship as he or she sees fit. The church asks not what this Christian nation should be but what the Christian and the church *in* this society can do to enable this powerful nation to fulfill its destiny. In its call to serve on God's behalf, the church brings to this task a vision of God's intentions for creation.

While it is difficult to imagine a paradise period like that portrayed in Genesis 1 and 2, the stories about God's creating in these chapters portray the divine intention for human life. In the first place, it is imperative that we take most seriously the creation of "male and female" in the "image of God." While the possibilities of this phrase and its interpretations might be endless, it is sufficient at this point to say that every human being ever born, regardless of race, color, or language, is given an identity of indescribable worth. The dignity given to all humans, even prior to occupations, sets the stage for all other gifts. In the metaphor of the Priestly writer's day, the image of God was usually reserved for royalty. Yet here in this account every male and female of the human race is considered a king and a queen. From this special status in creation all other gifts to humans flow.

First, humanity is given living space. According to the Priest, the whole creation was set in order before humans were created. The universal neighborhood was fitting for those made in God's image. The writer of Genesis 2 indicates that as soon as God had formed the human out of the dirt, God set out to build a garden so that Adam would have his space.

Second, all humanity is given an occupation: to have dominion over the rest of the creatures. This dominion is not the privilege to use or abuse on the basis of self-interest but to care responsibly for the creatures God had made. In Genesis 2 the occupation given is to protect the soil, "to till and to keep" it, so that it might produce for all perpetuity. Later, according to this author (the Yahwist), occupations will extend to cattle raising and to metallurgy (Gen 4:20-22), but basic is the responsibility to care for the soil.

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Third, the gift of plants for food is assured by God for all people and for all other creatures as well (Gen 1:29-30). Such is also the purpose of Adam's occupation of tilling and keeping the soil. Later, after the story of the Flood, is given the sanction to humans that they may eat meat as well (9:3).

Fourth, community is given because it is not good that humans live alone. Far from the rugged individualism of the Adamic and Abrahamic myths in American thinking, the biblical portrayal is that of human-in-community. Generically male and female are created together in the first story, and in the second the woman is made to be the man's counterpart. Humanity is intended to be a co-humanity.

Fifth, God provides the means to community, namely the gift of language. First used in the naming of the animals (quite an intellectual task for the first day of life), language soon becomes the means by which humans communicate with one another.

Surely the list could continue. But enough has been seen to demonstrate that the stories of God as Creator provide a certain picture of life as one in which all people are intended by God to have living space, food, community, and articulate means of communicating with one another. All these rights emanate from the special distinction of being created "in the image of God."

When one combines these stories of creation with the many prophecies in the Hebrew Bible concerning God's kingdom to come, the intentions of God for creation become even more clear. The new heaven and the new earth will be such that people will dwell together peacefully, where workers will enjoy the fruit of their labors, where people will live in their homes, and where even humans and animals will experience creation's harmony.

In the meantime, America is much like every other country. It is a land full of promise and

opportunity, but one tainted with all the effects of a sinful citizenry. Yet, in its midst are persons who are committed to justice, equality, and fairness, people who express righteous indignation when some continue to experience manipulation and oppression at the hand of others, citizens who share a vision of what America can be. Among those people is the church, living out its calling to face life with a transformed mind, seeking along with others the way of justice in the midst of claim and counterclaim, and serving the needy of this society with all that it has to offer.

Perhaps this view of God's creation would serve America better than the myths of the chosen people and of the free individualist. Perhaps too the church would serve America better if its commitment to justice and equality were more obvious. Such a contribution to an insecure society would be fitting for a people of a transformed mind. And if such use of the Bible could enable this society to establish a more responsible basis for making moral decisions, then we lament, along with Allan Bloom, the biblical illiteracy of today's youth.