

## PART 2

### AT THE BEGINNING

## Chapter Five

### PREPARATION FOR THE GOSPEL

'But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights as sons (Gal 4:4).'

What time? The time of preparation. The preparing of what or whom? Of Israel, primarily, 'those under the law' – so God's chosen people, or at least a representative minority of them ('a remnant'), might be ready for the appearing of his Son amongst them.

But there were more people to be prepared than just Israel. Simeon, when Jesus was presented as a baby in the Temple, prophesied of him that he would be 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' as well as 'for glory to [the Lord's] people Israel' (Luke 2:32). What time, then, had arrived, had 'fully come' for the Gentiles? The time when a Hellenistic world, Greek in culture and language, had been taken over by Rome, and Rome had just become an Empire. This Greek-and-Roman world was making its presence felt in the Jewish lands in which Jesus was born, grew up, and ministered – not least in Galilee.

#### **The preparing of Israel**

In Israel's account of mankind's earliest history, the judgement on the serpent, the spiritual force of evil, involves "enmity between you and the woman [Eve], and between your offspring [lit. 'seed', singular] and hers; he will crush your head, and you will crush his heel" (Gen 3:15). If it wasn't obvious what this meant

before the event, then, looking back, Satan's 'wounding' of Christ at the Crucifixion is clearly what had been referred to. 'The greatest own-goal in history', someone has called it: Satan's 'head crushed', his power broken – as a result of actions he himself had initiated.

In Genesis 12:7 the Lord speaks to Abraham (Abram) of 'your offspring' [again, 'seed', singular], who will be given the land, and in 17:19 of 'a son' his wife Sarah would bear him, with whom 'an everlasting covenant' would be established. These ideas will be picked up in Galatians 3:15-16, where Paul takes the primary references as having been to Christ, not Isaac (the child of promise).

"When Israel was a child, I loved him," the Lord says through the prophet Hosea (11:1), "and out of Egypt I called my son." Again, the primary reference isn't the obvious one. Matthew (2:15) will apply these words to Joseph's escape from Herod with Mary and the infant Jesus: 'And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son".' Something surprising is being implied here: Jesus isn't just the fulfilment of the promises to Israel, he is himself Israel, in his own person, in some way. Luke (9:30, 31) will understand Jesus in the same way. In Luke's account of the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about his 'exodus' [according to the original Greek – meaning 'departure', as in NIV], 'which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem'. The reference is to Jesus's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Clearly Israel's Exodus from Egypt – their rescue from slavery there – foreshadows what the Son of God would do much later to save lost humanity.

Matthew understands Jesus to be the Suffering Servant, as portrayed by Isaiah. In Matt 8:17 he quotes Is 53:3, 4, where 'a man of sorrows' 'took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows'. But a careful study of the servant theme in Isaiah shows that there are two other servants: Cyrus, the restorer of Israel in Isaiah's time (41:2; 45:1-7); and Israel / Jacob (44:1,2). Cyrus the Great, king of Persia (559-530 BC) prefigures Christ as a saviour figure, somewhat as

Melchizedek, king of Salem (Gen 14:18-20; cf Heb 5:6, 10; etc), prefigures Christ as a priest. Isaiah's references to the Servant can be grouped into two: those relating to Israel (the Jews, that is); and those to Israel's saviour-figure, principally Jesus. The Servant is Israel – and the Servant is Jesus. In other words, once again, Jesus is, in some way, Israel.

The saviour-servant is one who will have the Lord's Spirit upon him, and 'bring justice to the nations [Gentiles]' (Is 42:1-4). But, earlier in Isaiah (ch 9), in 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (v1) at some future time, people who live in darkness and death's shadow see 'a great light' (v2). 'For to us [Israel] a child is born ... a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne ...' (vv 6,7). Israel, that is, is going to be given a king in David's line. And of this individual, through whom the world experiences rescue and good government, things are said which can apply to God alone. The child, the New Testament will tell us, really is God: God's Son become a man (and no less God for that).

Indeed, all of Israel's experience down history, in fact all that's written in the Old Testament, is preparation for the coming of Christ and the gospel. Through Jeremiah (31: 31-33), the Lord had said: "The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers ... because they broke my covenant ... This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel ... : I will put my law in their minds and write in their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

Following the exodus from Egypt, Israel had been given a covenant, an associated code of law to live by, and a priesthood and sacrificial system to help them keep in right relationship with God. All this was far from having been a waste of time but, ultimately, it hadn't worked – and, for reasons we learn from

the NT, it never could have worked. But it did point up the crying need for the Son of God's intervention in history – and provided a framework for people to understand what exactly it was he'd achieved, and who precisely it was who'd been able to do it. The writer of Hebrews explains: 'The law [the Old Covenant way] is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves' (10:1). The shadow helped people understand the real thing. And if only a minority of Jews responded to Jesus and to the Kingdom which had come among them, that wasn't because the preparation hadn't been thorough. Rather, as Jesus understood, it resulted from Israel's chronic unbelief (e.g. Lk 4:23-29 – unbelief challenged being the root cause of the change of mood recorded here), and the legalism and wrong attitude of the religious establishment (e.g. Mk 3:1-6; 7:1-7). But a minority, who would form the basis of the earliest Church, did respond.

### **The role played by other religions**

**ISRAEL'S EXPERIENCE** Other religions aren't usually spoken about as forming the preparation for the gospel. But it seems clear that they were. There's ample evidence for this in the Old Testament. We aren't told about Abraham's religious background and experience in Ur and Haran. To judge from the objects from Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) held in the British Museum, though, the spiritual state of the area must have been disturbingly and powerfully evil<sup>1</sup>. Even so, the Lord had revealed himself to Abraham (or Abram, as he originally was) in the midst of all this, and called and commissioned him. When, having been told to leave Haran and make for a land the Lord would show him (Gen 12:1), he arrived there, the Lord appeared to him. He didn't need to be told how to respond: he knew. 'So he built an altar there [at the great tree of Moreh at Shechem – which was quite likely a Canaanite shrine] to the Lord, who had appeared to him.' He did what other people did – but he did it to worship the true God, not demon-infested idols.

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<sup>1</sup> It still radiates from many of the items today, and in a most disconcerting way.

Some time later, after Abraham had rescued Lot, who'd been taken captive, 'Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram ... Then Abram gave him a tithe of everything' (Gen 14:18-20). Astonishing! This 'God Most High', El Elyon, was the supreme deity worshipped by the Canaanites, whom they honoured as father and creator. And Canaanite religion was nasty in the extreme. But Abraham had understood intuitively that the reality he related to, the God he himself had been led to worship, on the one hand, and the deity Melchizedek related to and worshipped, on the other, were actually one and the same. The king of Salem's name, *malki-sedek*, means 'Sedek is my king' – or 'righteousness is my king'. Somehow this man had entered into the life signified by the most fundamental meaning of his name. So someone who was, supposedly, a pagan king-priest wasn't a pagan after all.

Moses was given a name that meant as much in Egyptian as in Hebrew – though the meanings were different. But his education in Pharaoh's household would have been purely pagan and Egyptian – though doubtless to the highest of standards. Not the kind of training the Lord would arrange for the man to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, be their lawgiver, and train them up in godliness, one might think. It seemed to do the job well enough, though – that supplemented by Moses' years in the desert. But in the desert he got mixed up with the priest of Midian, Jethro. Like Joseph before him – who was given as his wife the daughter of a priest who probably served one of the sun gods Re or Atum (Gen 41:45) – Moses also married into what was seemingly a pagan priestly family (Ex 2:21). Some time later, when he led his people out of Egypt, Moses received a visit from his father-in-law. Jethro was thrilled with the news Moses had to tell him. "Praise to the Lord who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh," he said, "and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly." Then Jethro ... brought a

burnt offering and other sacrifices to God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread in the presence of God' (Ex 18:9-12). Jethro was a man on a journey towards the Lord. His heart was right, and Moses' testimony served to convince him that the Lord really is God over all. There is no suggestion here, as there was no suggestion in the previous examples, that the Lord's work or his people were being remotely compromised by these surprising relationships. Indeed, in the remainder of Exodus 18, the Lord lets Jethro act as management consultant to Moses, concerning the way he leads the people! (There are some things better learned 'in the desert' than at university ...).

How did Rahab, the Jericho prostitute, have prophetic insight into what the Lord was doing for Israel? Her confession (Josh 2:11), "the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below", suggests that he wasn't entirely a stranger to her. Anyway, the writer of Hebrews (11:31) thought of her as an example of Old Testament faith in God. She'd become the mother of Boaz, who'd marry Ruth – and so part of the line from which Jesus would be descended (Matt 1:5). Indeed, Ruth herself was of the pagan Moabite people. But when she and her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi were both widowed, and Naomi was set on returning to her own people, Ruth insisted on going with her: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth's affinity to Naomi was more than just a personal tie – not being in thrall to the gods of her own people, she wanted to commit to Naomi's God as her God too.

The fact of being brought up pagan, or in a pagan environment, in the cases above didn't seem decisive. If an individual had a heart for the true and living God, their religious experience simply came to be oriented in a different – and life-giving – direction. There would have been some things to forsake and forget, other things to learn and to do as basic to Israel's faith; but most of the fundamental concepts – of sacrifice, say, or covenant – continued to be relevant.

Sadly, this was true the other way – when Jews deserted their own faith and embraced paganism: they knew only too well how to practice pagan idolatry.

**GENTILE PAGANISM** What was true for Abraham and those who followed him was true also for the other people-groups on the planet. The religious practices of, say, the pre-Celtic populations and of the Celtic tribes who overran them, constituted a ‘spiritual vocabulary’ which allowed people to understand what was being said when the gospel was brought to them – whether they were open to the Christian message, or hostile to it. As in the Near East, sacrifice and covenant would be ideas they had some feel for – and they’d know what worship was, and understand the difference between good and bad in the spiritual world (even if ‘good’ and ‘bad’ they’d define in ways which conflicted with a Judeo-Christian value system). Christian preachers, when they appeared, would have their audience’s pagan pre-understanding of life to appeal to – and challenge. Opposition to the gospel didn’t come because people didn’t understand what they were talking about – it came because, often, they understood only too well.

## **Ancient Greece**

**THE LEGACY OF ANCIENT GREECE** The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher A N Whitehead in *Process and Reality* describes the whole Western philosophical tradition as a series of footnotes to the work of Plato of Athens<sup>2</sup> - an exaggeration perhaps, but suitably thought-provoking nevertheless. J M Roberts in *A History of Europe* comments that ‘Greek philosophy devised many of the structures in which issues are still discussed’<sup>3</sup>. ‘Politics’, ‘physics’, ‘geography’, ‘music’ and ‘history’, are just a few of the Greek-derived words we use to name important areas of study and activity today. No civilisation in history has come remotely close to that of ancient Greece in setting the agenda for the rest of the world.

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<sup>2</sup> 1929; Cambridge; p 53.

<sup>3</sup> 1996; Oxford; Helicon Publishing; ISBN 1-85986-178-4; p 23.

GREEK SPECULATIVE THOUGHT      Whitehead's judgement is somewhat misleading, though, because amongst the ancient Greeks an important debate began to be conducted about how to understand the world – and this debate, which has continued up to the present day, is of more importance than any particular theory or worldview thrown up by it, even Plato's.

The debate, from the beginning, involved what we would call both scientific and religious questions. In giving some idea of how it developed, and so of the kind of debate it was, I'll tend to follow an excellent book, studied by many students over the years, on the development of ancient Western thought: A H Armstrong, *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy*<sup>4</sup>. Greek thought constitutes a bit of a challenge – but, like me, you might appreciate getting the flavour of it.

Around 500 BC, Heraclitus of Ephesus taught that everything is in a constant state of change, nothing is stable. "The permanence of things," he said, "is only apparent." He asserted, famously, that "You cannot step twice into the same river" – because a river is never for a single moment the same. (A later follower of his, using the same logic, asserted that you can't step into the same river even once ... !). For Heraclitus, life depends on the clash of opposites: good and evil, hot and cold, wet and dry. "War is the father of all things" was another of his sayings; though he didn't understand war to be simply chaos: he was referring to the dynamics it unleashed.

Heraclitus, as a scientist, was opposing the thinking of a religious – even monastic – group of Greeks, the Pythagoreans, based in southern Italy (where there were many Greek colonies). The Pythagoreans, wanting to escape from the perpetual cycle of change, were searching for what was stable and unchanging – for that which was eternal. In the pairs of opposites, they chose good over evil, light over dark, male over female, and so on. But, for Heraclitus,

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<sup>4</sup> 1947 / 1981; London; Methuen & Co Ltd; ISBN 0-416-69310-5.

both members of each pair were vital – such as male and female – and there is an orderly organising principle hidden within the universe. Before Heraclitus, thinkers had concentrated on what exists ('being', in the jargon) – their picture of the world was static. His was dynamic – he focussed on things coming-into-being ('becoming'); through the union of opposites. In his mythological scheme of things, 'Justice' and her subordinates the Furies keep the opposites within their proper limits. The name for his internal organising principle? *Logos*. And he thought of this as having both life-force and reason united within it. This term *Logos* would come to have a long and interesting history; but, in due course, when John came to adopt it for the Prologue, or introduction, to his gospel, the meaning he took and modified was essentially that of Heraclitus. John was inspired to accept that there is indeed a *Logos* that governs the universe – but that the *Logos* is none other than Jesus, the Eternal Son of God, through whom the universe was created. (The Greeks had no concept of Creation – for them, what existed had always existed). Here is a classic example of Greek speculative thinking serving as a preparation for the gospel.

Let me digress for a moment. 'Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age?' Paul will ask (1 Cor 1:20, 21). 'Has God not made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.' Paul knew as well as anyone that a head full of knowledge, even about the Law (Torah) the Lord had given his people, wasn't sufficient to save someone. That had to come by humble openness to the truth about Jesus, revealed to a person by the Holy Spirit, through preaching or whatever. Paul came to faith in childlike simplicity (Acts 9:1-19) – but his phenomenal understanding of the implications of who Jesus was and what he had done were greatly aided by his intellectual ability and trained mind, and the pre-understanding he'd come by in his top-flight rabbinical training. When Paul was contemptuous of 'philosophy', what he held in contempt was the arrogance of that fallen mind which wants to establish its own authority

(against God's) – or substitute speculation for revealed truth. For him, as for Jesus, there was nothing wrong with the mind in itself – it was just that it was designed for serving and worshipping God, not rebelliously doing its own thing.

Parmenides, some 25 years younger than Heraclitus, who came from the Greek colony of Elea in South Italy, was the first thinker we know of who reasoned logically (as that would be understood today). His worldview seems the exact opposite to that of Heraclitus. For him, the constant change in things is only apparent, not real. He had to deny the world as it reveals itself to our senses. If earlier thinkers saw the world in terms of diversity (different kinds of things) and multiplicity (many of them), Parmenides' One Reality, which included all that exists, was a simple, unalterable unity. It had no beginning or end, and didn't increase, decrease, divide or move. Nothing could come out of it. It was in the form of a sphere (understood to be the perfect shape), occupying the whole of space. And it was all it could be. This Reality was a product of remorseless reasoning – mathematical and logical. It bore no relation to experience or common sense. Like a lot of modern pure mathematics, it may seem far removed from any reality we ordinary folk can conceive of, but it wasn't. Parmenides' speculations provided the thinking that Plato would later seek to correct. 'Parmenides presented the problem of the One and the Many in its sharpest and clearest form to succeeding generations of philosophers' (Armstrong p 14) – a key theoretical problem for scientists as much as much a theologians and religious thinkers.

Empedocles of Acragas (Agrigento in southern Sicily), who lived c 495 – c 435 BC, argued for ceaseless, but cyclical, change. The basic structure of the world arises from the breaking down by Strife of a total blending of the four elements, earth air, fire, and water, until a perfect state of separation exists. These are then brought together again by the other fundamental causal principle, Love (or Aphrodite). 'The cosmic process is an ever-recurring cycle in which each [causal principle] prevails in turn.' 'Only in the intermediate stages, when there is neither

complete separation nor complete fusion of the elements can individual entities and the universe as we know it exist. With this cosmology Empedocles combined the full traditional Orphic<sup>5</sup> doctrine of the soul, its divine origin, its fall, its successive reincarnations, and its final return to the company of the gods' (Armstrong pp 15, 16).

Anaxagoras, who came from a place between Smyrna and Ephesus but taught in Athens, seems to have argued that the world was composed of a considerable number of different basic materials. These unchanging elements are indestructible, and are found in varying mixtures in different things. In addition to the elements there is a Mind or Intelligence (*Nous*), which organises them. This mind is like the finest mist, which pervades all the elements. Like the elements, it is a material substance, but remains pure and unaffected by them. There is, at this stage, no concept of a non-material spirit existence. Anaxagoras envisages an initial chaos – rather like the 'primordial soup' envisaged in recent times. Mind starts a whirling process which acts to separate out the elements and order them into the world we experience. When Socrates appeared on the scene, his criticism of Anaxagoras was that he had presented a purely mechanical scheme, without explaining the purpose behind what he'd described. But the (Ionian) thinkers who originated from the eastern side of the Aegean tended to be sceptical, with little interest in religion – and this non-religious frame of mind led them to a more scientific approach to basic questions than was commonly the case in the Greek world.

Another Ionian thinker, Leucippus of Miletus (teaching around 420 BC), who has had more influence in our day than he did in his own, held that matter consists of very small lumps, which are impossible to divide physically. They are *atomoi*, i.e.

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<sup>5</sup> If Pythagoreanism, the school of thought founded by Pythagoras and his followers, was as mathematical and scientific in its interests as religious, Orphism (also based in southern Italy and Sicily) was essentially religious, and had the legendary singer Orpheus as its prophet. Initiation into Orphism supposedly freed a person's soul from the cycle of birth and death. Salvation, they taught, was by ritual purification, and asceticism (satisfying the body's wants and needs to the barest minimum) the appropriate way of life – because, in their understanding, matter is evil, a prison for the soul. Plato, later, would be influenced by this thinking.

you can't cut them; hence 'atoms'<sup>6</sup>. Hard substances like metals are made of atoms which hook together, whereas fine substances like air, fire or the soul have smooth, round atoms. For Leucippus, atoms represented 'being' (something like 'what exists'), but he also believed in a void, 'not-being' (a sort of 'non-existence'). Other thinkers had tended to reject the possibility of there being any void.

All this, and much more, was pure speculation – though the exploration of such a range of possibilities constituted an achievement as useful for the future as it was impressive. The true scientific investigation of this period (400s BC) was carried out by the Greek medical profession. The best-known name is that of Hippocrates of Cos, born around 450, who gave his name to the 'Hippocratic' oath doctors used to take. Being doctors, these men were interested in 'accurate diagnosis, precise observation of the available facts, and treatment which has been proved by experience' (Armstrong p 19); for them, speculation about the overall structure of the universe was of little relevance.

After the Greek defeat of their great enemies, the Persians, in 479/8 BC, Athens entered upon a golden age lasting 50 years, during which it was the greatest power in Greece. It was a time of material prosperity and artistic achievement, but also 'a period when the traditional foundations of Greek society were disintegrating rapidly' (Armstrong p 21). Traditional Greek religion had myth and tradition, but no theology, as such. This made it highly vulnerable to the sceptical attitudes of the Ionian thinkers and the positive intellectual criticism of religion by others.

Xenophanes (c 570 – c 478), a poet-philosopher, from Elea, had asserted that the old stories about the gods were unacceptable:

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<sup>6</sup> A group of Pythagoreans, about whom little is known, taught a sort of 'mathematical atomism', according to which the universe is constructed of indivisible mathematical units – numerical atoms.

Homer and Hesiod<sup>7</sup> have ascribed to the gods every deed that is shameful and dishonourable among men: stealing and adultery and deceiving each other ... The Ethiopians make their gods snub-nosed, and the Thracians theirs grey-eyed and red-haired. ... If animals could paint and make things, like men, then horses and oxen too would fashion the gods in their own image.

And he asserts the existence of one supreme God:

Greatest among gods and men; not like mortals either in body or mind ... He is all sight and all mind and all hearing ... and he remains in one place, not moving at all ... It is not appropriate that he should be here at one moment and there the next ... And he sways all things without effort, by his thought.

Apparently Xenophanes didn't attract persecution for his views – surprising, because 'atheism' (rejection of the traditional gods), as the Greeks came to call it, was taken very seriously.

**SOCRATES** Socrates (470 - 399) was born in Athens just at the beginning of that city-state's golden age. He arrived on the scene just as the old, traditional Greek worldview (way of seeing things) was ready to give way to another one. 'There is no one in the whole history of European philosophy who has changed the direction of thought so completely simply by what he was; for Socrates' thought springs directly and inevitably ... from the whole character and make-up of the man' (Armstrong p 25). What he was, was an honest and committed seeker after truth – whatever the cost, and wherever the search would take him. The cost was, in the first place, a degree of hostility – he was an uncompromising teacher, with little or no pastoral sensitivity – and, ultimately, his life, following a travesty of a trial (where the formal charges were those of 'introducing new gods', and 'corrupting young men' – but where the real issue was that he had supported the previous regime, wouldn't support the new one, and by his fame and integrity constituted a threat to the authorities). He possessed astonishing powers of concentration, was tough as old boots – as he demonstrated on the battlefield

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<sup>7</sup> The early writers who gave the Greeks their foundation myths.

(he never seemed aware of even intense cold) or when the necessity of drinking his friends under the table arose (alcohol didn't seem to affect him) – and died bravely, without complaint. 'Socrates was perhaps the first man in Europe who had a clear and coherent conception of the soul as we understand it, that is, as the intellectual and moral personality, the responsible agent in knowing and acting rightly. Before his time *psyche* (the Greek for "soul") had meant to the average Greek "life-breath", a vaporous substance which was necessary for physical life but was not the seat of consciousness and source of action ... The *psyche* without the body was the shadowiest sort of ghost.' 'After Socrates the conception of the soul as personality and of the care of the soul as the most important thing in life becomes pretty well universal among thinking Greeks. It is one of the most decisive changes in the whole history of human thought, and it did more than any other development in Greek philosophy to prepare the way for Christianity' (Armstrong p 29). Despite the accusation made at his trial, Socrates was conventional and traditional in his (pagan) religious practice. But – and this was new – he regarded the divine powers as good and intelligent, who arrange everything for the best. This is as radical a departure as that of Xenophanes had been, but without the same revolutionary nature. Plato, Socrates' pupil, inherited his teacher's positive understanding of the divine powers. It has to be understood that fear governed the lives of average Greeks, as of average Romans, to a degree that's hard for us to understand. Socrates was regarded in the early Church, for his commitment to the search for truth, and his readiness to die for it, as almost 'a Christian before Christ' – even as a Gentile who foreshadowed Christ.

One of his pupils, apparently, went to ask the Oracle at Delphi "Is any man wiser than Socrates?" "No", came the answer. Socrates' reaction, when he heard this was, in all sincerity, "But I know nothing." From this sprang what is perhaps his most helpful contribution to human wisdom: in effect, 'If I, Socrates, who know nothing, and know I know nothing, am the wisest man, then wisdom for anyone lies in recognising that he or she knows nothing.' This, of course, is the way of

humility and reality. Helpful, too was his understanding of the ethical basis of true knowledge: “Virtue is knowledge, vice is ignorance”. But a conclusion he drew from this, that if a person knows what is right and good they will choose to do it, wasn’t helpful. Somehow able to live consistently to high moral standards himself, he didn’t understand, as Paul would, the war between our higher and lower natures.

For Socrates to produce a pupil of the stature of Plato, and then for Plato, in turn, to produce a pupil such as Aristotle, is astonishing. Between them, they set the Western world a comprehensive agenda that, after 2,300 years we’re still working through. Doubtless Plato and Aristotle – both, at best, being seekers after the truth – would never have made the impact they did had they not been the self-confident teachers they were. Even the former, though, for whom Socrates was a hero, can hardly be said to have followed to any significant degree his teacher’s way of humility.

PLATO For Plato, the real world was not here but some heavenly realm which contains a supreme Reality, which he called the Good, and, subordinate to that, many Forms. The Forms were like blueprints or patterns. The things we find here on earth are just imperfect copies of these. Taking on from where Socrates had left off (it would seem), he asked what, if there were such things as ‘goodness’ or ‘beauty’, they might really be. His conclusion was this: in the heavenly realm, there is the Form of ideal beauty and the Form of ideal moral goodness, and so on. Any goodness or beauty we see here are imperfect reflections of those perfect Forms. There are mathematical Forms too – e.g. for a circle or a line. And Forms for common objects, such as tables and chairs. Plato wasn’t a systematic thinker, and he never explained how the things of this world relate to the relevant Forms – except that, in some undefined way, they ‘participate’ in them. He thought in terms of a hierarchy of Forms, at the head of which was the Form of the Good; of which he spoke with great reverence (God, in some sense? It’s not very clear). This world and Plato’s heavenly realm are connected by a World-

Soul, which rules and orders the universe. This is depicted by Plato as a Craftsman, who works on already existing material in the universe (and so not a Creator).

From the Pythagoreans Plato took the idea of the pre-existence of the soul. It provided the foundation of his theory of knowledge. 'The soul has known the Forms in its divine existence before incarnation in a body, and is "reminded" of them by perceiving through the senses those particular things in this world which "participate" in them' (Armstrong p 41). Plato understood the soul to have three parts. First there was reason, located in the head, which was designed to govern the person's whole life – and education was meant to bring individuals to a place where this is what happened. Then, in the breast, were located the higher emotions – such as the love of fame or righteous anger. Finally, the lower nature, home to the physical appetites, a 'savage, many-headed monster', was located in the belly. This part of the soul, troublesome and rebellious, could only be brought under reason's control through a hard struggle to tame them. Plato didn't follow the Orphics and Pythagoreans in regarding the physical world as evil<sup>8</sup>. Rather, he saw it as something of an obstacle to the true life of the soul: matter, for him, is irrational, disorderly, and obstinate. Nor did he follow them in teaching about the 'fall' of the soul. He never, unlike them, explained why souls were in bodies.

It is reason, for Plato, which has an affinity with the heavenly world of Forms. Philosophy is a training which begins to allow the mind to think in pure concepts which correspond to the Forms. Life is a preparation for death. The reasoning part of a person's soul needs to transcend this physical world in this life, so that it ascends through the hierarchy of Forms, until it reaches the pinnacle, the Form of the Good – this being possible only for brief moments, at best, during our worldly existence. Complete disembodiment is the best state for the soul. Even

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<sup>8</sup> Although people often think he did.

so, the physical universe that can be seen and touched is, in its own way, good, beautiful and necessary.

This was speculation of the highest order – and has captured the imagination of thinkers down the ages since then. But the most important thing to say about it is that, despite its helpful suggestiveness as to what ultimate reality might look like, it's only speculation. Even so, it constitutes a serious hazard to the Christian faith in a variety of ways, particularly in that: Platonism is entirely without consciousness of sin – as such - and the fallen state of the human race; Plato's divine being is a complete abstraction, not the author of creation, and utterly different from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and reason has been substituted for the human spirit, World-Soul for the Holy Spirit.

Yet Plato's description of reality inspired the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews, whoever he was<sup>9</sup>, to approach his subject the way he did. John Owen, the great English Puritan theologian, thought Hebrews summed up the whole message of Scripture – which, more than any other part of the Bible, it does. The somewhat platonic way of looking at things the writer of Hebrews employed doesn't distort the biblical themes he wants to weave together. Rather, it enables him to paint the most vivid picture of who Christ is, what he's done for us, and why this matters so much. Platonism as preparation for the presentation of the gospel ...

**ARISTOTLE** After Plato's death (348 BC), his brilliant pupil Aristotle began to see things increasingly differently from the way his teacher had done – though just how much he came to diverge from Plato's worldview is debated. If the generally accepted reconstruction of his writings is to be trusted, Aristotle's thought moved from the fairly religious view of life he shared with Plato early on to a scientific view of the universe which leaves 'God' far away from immediate

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<sup>9</sup> Luther's suggestion that it was Apollos is as credible as any – but nobody actually knows.

interest. 'God' is still there in Aristotle's developed understanding of things, but even more different from the God of the Bible than Plato's 'God'.

If Plato's interests can be summarised as theology and mathematics, Aristotle's was science. The son of a doctor, his specialist interest was biology. Although his – highly original – work in this area involved observation and classification of data rather than experimentation, he was in many ways the first great scientist of the Western world. One wouldn't expect him to have understood correctly everything he examined and reflected on – and he didn't. Nor was his science helped by the degree to which commonly-held fallacies influenced his assessment of his data. Even so, according to D J O'Connor in his chapter on Aristotle in *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*: 'In biology ... he is one of the great figures in the history of science. His work in this field was greatly admired by Darwin.'<sup>10</sup> (It's worth observing, in passing, that Charles Darwin's basic scheme was pretty-much that implied by Aristotle in his description of the universe). But Aristotle was given to speculation – and this would cause endless trouble to European civilisation in the area of science, once it struggled to emerge from the rather-less-than-scientific Middle Ages. Compelling as his speculations tended to be, they were anything but infallible. Known to medieval academics simply as 'The Philosopher', his magisterial authority, insulating as it tended to his erroneous ideas from criticism, often presented an immense barrier to progress. 'Aristotle is one of the two or three most influential philosophers in the history of Western thought. He is also one of the most difficult.' (O'Connor, p37).

But Aristotle was, despite this, the one to give Europe the key to the successful pursuit of science. For Plato, true reality lay with the Forms far away in the heavenly realms. Aristotle, though, reckoned that the 'form' of a thing lay within it (like DNA). This meant that individual objects have value, and are worth studying in their own right. For Plato, to discover the 'form' of a sheep, say, involved some abstract theological or spiritual procedure – one needed to discern the perfect

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<sup>10</sup> 1964; New York; The Free Press of Glencoe (Macmillan); ISBN 0-02-923840-4; p42.

Form of which it was only an imperfect copy. Whereas for Aristotle the way sheep are constituted – their fundamental nature – we discover by examining sheep ... scientifically. Again, in Plato's understanding, we need theologians or spiritual gurus to tell us how the world works: the elite, in top-down fashion, reveal to us the general truths we need to know about reality. Aristotle's method is the exact opposite. To discover the truth about any object, many examples of that object need to be examined, and then generalisations deductions made from what's been observed – which anyone who's scientifically-minded, and has had an appropriate education, can do. Ironically, when Galileo was suppressed, the Catholic Church was attempting to defend the top-down methods which were both native to the Roman system of authority it espoused and implicit (for entirely different reasons) in Plato's worldview – when what Galileo was doing was using Aristotle's methods of observation to undermine Aristotle's understanding of the universe (which the Church had wrongly convinced itself was identical to the Bible's). The modern inductive method of scientific discovery – of observation, hypothesis, and experimentation – when it came to be properly established, simply took Aristotle's method to its logical conclusion; and seems more-or-less consistent with a biblical worldview.

Aristotle, like Plato, believed that all things exist for a good purpose; and, for him, they have a purposefulness within themselves – though one that is ultimately oriented on something outside this world. Within each thing there is a drive to realise the 'form' within it as perfectly as possible, seeking both to take its proper place in the universe and to imitate the perfection of 'God'. In a way he never explains, growth and behaviour also respond to something like an electrical or magnetic field outside them – which is, ultimately, the influence of divine perfection on everything else.

Aristotle believed that time must be everlasting, because it would be nonsensical to say that there was a time before time existed, and would be a time after time

ended<sup>11</sup>. But time implies change for Aristotle. 'Now the only kind of absolutely continuous change, the only kind therefore which can be everlasting, is circular motion (motion being change of place)' (Armstrong p 87). Aristotle's view of the workings of the heavens he derived from the contemporary astronomers Eudoxus and Callipus. 'These, by a most brilliant piece of mathematical ingenuity, had succeeded in expressing the observed and apparently irregular motions of the sun, moon and planets as compound motions made up of the regular rotations of series of concentric spheres, rotating at different speeds and in different directions, each with its poles fixed in the surface of the larger one immediately outside it. On the basis of these calculations Aristotle built up a most elaborate mechanical explanation of the observed movements of all the heavenly bodies, which supposes them to be carried round by a nest of concentric spheres in contact, moving in different directions and at varying speeds' (Armstrong p 85).

He believed that the circular motion of the spheres must be everlasting, without beginning or end. The smallest, innermost sphere is the moon's sphere that encloses the earth's atmosphere. The largest, outermost one is the sphere of the fixed stars, which provides the driving force for the whole universe. 'The first heaven, the sphere of the fixed stars, which seems to be thought of as itself alive and intelligent, desires the absolute perfection of the Unmoved Mover, and by reason of its desire imitates that perfection as best it can by moving everlastingly with the most perfect of motions, that in a circle. And in so far as all movements and changes in the universe depend on this first movement, they are all ultimately caused by the desire inspired by the pure and perfect actuality [existence] of the Unmoved Mover, the Divine Mind or God ...' (Armstrong p 89). This amazing system of Aristotle's always reminds me of the end of the song *The Windmills of Your Mind*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Christian thought about 'eternity' and 'time' constitutes more of a debate than an agreement, and the subject is notoriously difficult. But Christian thinkers normally reject or modify what Greek thought had to say on the matter.

<sup>12</sup> From the film *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Lyrics: Alan Bergman and Marilyn Bergman. Music: Michel Legrand.

Like a circle in a spiral  
Like a wheel within a wheel  
Never ending or beginning  
On an ever-spinning reel  
As the images unwind  
Like the circles that you find  
In the windmills of your mind

How does Aristotle see the Unmoved Mover – ‘the Divine Mind or God’ – which drives the system? Armstrong describes for us Aristotle’s concept of it even as he criticises it: ‘... Aristotle’s conception of God must seem to us highly unsatisfactory and inadequate. This Eternal Mind enclosed in a sterile self-sufficiency, everlastingly contemplating its own thinking, neither knowing nor willing the universe and only affecting it through the ceaseless rotation which desire for its unattainable perfection inspires in the First Heaven, is not at all like anything we mean by the word “God”. It is simply the logical culmination of the hierarchy of [what exists] and the ultimate explanation of motion and change. But it is not a person or power exercising providence, ordering all things by its will. Still less is it a Creator or the inexpressible Absolute. Aristotle’s thought is not really God-centred but [Universe]-centred. It is the everlasting universe which is for him ... the Ultimate Reality’ (p 90).

The last area of Aristotle’s thought I want to mention is his analysis of logic and language. He developed tools for philosophy – in the modern sense of ‘philosophy’ – that are still as basic to our Western education system generally as to professional philosophers and other academics: we virtually take them for granted.

I’ve included an account of some of Aristotle’s thought here partly for convenience (it fits here). It isn’t immediately obvious that anything he says is a preparation for the gospel. But his insistence that true reality is located in this world, and not just somewhere else, has been important for orthodox Christian

belief – it does justice to the createdness of the world. The analytical tools he provided for clear thinking have always been invaluable to the Christian intellectual enterprise – because, for those who commit themselves in faith to Christ-the-Logos, logic is basic to obeying the injunction to worship God with the mind; and Aristotle was the great logician. When Aristotle’s ideas penetrated Western thought at the beginning of the last millennium, they released, as we’ve seen, the tools in ‘Christian’ Europe for science and technology to flourish, greatly strengthening civilisation here. One thing that, in turn, enabled – amongst much else – was the large-scale export of the gospel to nations across the world that didn’t have it.

Perhaps the last thing to say here about Aristotle’s influence is that his thought became important as an antidote to Platonism. Because Plato’s thinking – in a later, much-modified form called neoplatonism – had so penetrated what was supposed to be a Christian worldview, a rival system was needed to undermine this alien influence. It would be Abelard (1079–1142), the brilliant French scholar-monk, who’d launch the first – and devastatingly successful – Aristotelian onslaught against the prevailing Christian Platonism.

## **Rome**

The most obvious way in which Rome prepared the way for the gospel was Pilate’s declaring of Jesus, having investigated his case, that he was innocent of the charges laid against him – yet ordering him to be executed, anyway, because of the threats of the crowd. Roman crucifixion, it turned out, neatly served to fulfil prophecy.

St Paul, Jew though he was, didn’t hesitate to make use of his Roman citizenship – and, when justice seemed to be denied him, he appealed to Caesar (and Rome). If one accepts what is implied at the end of Acts as representing the true state of affairs at the time, his arrival in Rome took witness to the gospel in the

Imperial capital to a completely new level – inevitably giving it a strategic advantage on the global scene it had never had before.

There never was, at any time, a uniform state of peace across the Empire. But the *Pax Romana* generated an enormous expanse of territory where there was comparative security, reasonable prosperity, and a degree of commonality in language, culture, custom and currency. This allowed a new influence in the life of the Empire, such as the gospel, a maximum of freedom to spread and a minimum of hindrance. Even persecution – because the blood of the martyrs proved to be the seed of the Church – served, ultimately, to help the Christian cause. Although no one could envisage this at the time, the Empire was in the process of creating what would become Europe, and, in due course, the West – and Christianity was growing to be the most powerful force within it.

Roman religious practice clearly inspired the development of Christian liturgical worship. The Roman gift management and organisation provided models the Church could modify for its leadership patterns and structures – as did the Roman genius for making and codifying law, which gave rise to ‘canon’ or church law. And, thirdly, the Roman army opened up a geographical space for ‘civilisation’ (as they understood it); and, all unintentionally, for the gospel too. You might, like me, regard these three as distinctly mixed blessings – or worse. But they served the spread of ‘the Christian religion’ – let’s put it no more strongly than that – even if they didn’t much serve the true gospel. But it was the Roman Empire, created by its army, that brought a fairly pure form of Christianity to my own nation. And liturgical worship and canon law provided an orderly framework for that monastic, and other church, life which generated a more-Christian-than-pagan substructure for the world I inhabit. I may often disapprove of the means Rome and its church employed – but I can’t deny the good that resulted, and wouldn’t want to.

**Christian testimony to being prepared for the gospel**

Two Christian leaders in the early Church made particularly clear the debt they owed to non-Christian thinkers as they came to Christian faith, and became established in it. The first was Justin Martyr (c100 – c165). A Greek from Samaria, he went as a young man to Ephesus to study philosophy. After starting with a Stoic tutor, he moved on to an Aristotelian teacher – whose concern about money disillusioned him. Then he went to a Pythagorean, and finally to a Platonist. Most of Plato's thought he found deeply satisfying. And what Plato had to say about the vision of God positively inspired him. But then, whilst meditating by himself on the seashore, he met an old man who both refuted for him Plato's teaching about the human soul and told him about how Christ fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. Justin was soon converted to Christianity. But that didn't mean he now rejected philosophy. Rather, he'd become convinced that Christianity was the true philosophy – and continued to see himself as a philosopher. Justin not only began to answer the pagan critics of Christianity, he significantly assisted the increase in the Church's own understanding of what the Christian message was, and what it implied. His thought, coloured though it was by Platonism, was substantially orthodox.

The other example was Augustine of Hippo, the great theologian of early Christendom. During his ('classical', as we would call it) education in Carthage, Augustine was introduced to the pagan Roman writer Cicero's *Hortensius*, an exhortation to turn to philosophy. In his *Confessions* (a kind of autobiography written in the form of a prayer), Augustine, now a bishop, recalled: "The book changed my feelings. It altered my prayers, Lord, to be towards you yourself. It gave me different values and priorities. Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart. I began to rise up to return to you."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Translation with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Chadwick; 1991;Oxford; Oxford University Press; ISBN 0-19-281779-5; p39.