

REVIEW ARTICLE

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RADICAL HUMANISM AND THE BIBLE

"The interpretation of the Bible," says Erich Fromm,* "given in this book is that of radical humanism. By radical humanism I refer to a global philosophy which emphasizes the oneness of the human race, the capacity of man to develop his own powers and to arrive at an inner harmony and at the establishment of a peaceful world" (p. 13). It is true that if the commandments to love one's neighbor as thyself (Leviticus 19:18) and to worship G-d** with all one's heart and soul (Deuteronomy 6:5) were obeyed, there would be world peace and man, no doubt, would attain inner harmony. It also follows that since every human can trace his lineage back (ultimately) to one father and mother that all men are in some sense one. However, where does one find this expressed as a "main idea" or "central thought" of the Bible?

Fromm, of course, knows that his "global philosophy" cannot be found fully-grown in the Bible, but he believes the seeds are present. And these seeds are its real value. Though the seeds grow a little in the Bible itself, they don't mature until much later. How does one recognize the seed? Only after one knows the flower, says Fromm. "The earlier phase is often interpreted by the later phase" (p. 14). Fromm's method is to approach the Bible, radical humanism in hand, and try to find its origin. Since there is no *prima facie* evidence of radical humanism in the Bible, Fromm must discover some slow kind of growth or development of ideas that can be seen clearly moving towards radical humanism. Such a discovery is the only way of saving Fromm's thesis from being purely *ad hoc*. The substance of Fromm's argument lies

* *You Shall Be As Gods*, by Erich Fromm, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

** This spelling will be followed throughout the essay at the request of the author. —Ed.

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in his attempt to trace such a development. The most important concepts that he treats in this regard are the Divinity and Man. This review confines its attention to Fromm's discussion of these ideas, though the book is wider in its treatment and discusses other concepts as history, sin and repentance and Halakhah.

Before Fromm opens up his Bible he tells, in a personal aside, what he himself believes about G-d. In the first place, just to set the record straight, there is no Divine Being. He is ". . . a historically conditioned expression of an inner experience . . . a poetic expression of the highest value in humanism, not a reality in itself" (p. 18-19). We use the term for a Divine Being, but the concept changes as the experience in which the concept is grounded changes. At this point we are given a short one-page (p. 21) resumé of the development of religious concepts over the space of a thousand years covering the whole known world which can best be summarized as "progress" towards love and reason away from "nature."

Now Fromm concentrates on explaining the evolution of the Divinity. According to Fromm, G-d starts off by being an absolute, unchallenged ruler. However, He has created a potential rival in man who can rebel against Him. He therefore has to take steps to protect Himself from man. He banishes man from the Garden, disperses him at the Tower of Babel and finally is forced to make a "peace treaty" with Noach and later another treaty with Abraham.

As G-d's rule over man decreases, man's freedom increases until man becomes entirely free of Him. This represents the highest point in the "development" of man's notion about a Divine Being.

The first genuine limitation of the Divinity occurs when G-d makes a covenant with Noach. This contract, in which both sides have equal rights, "prepares the way to the concept of complete freedom of man, even freedom from G-d" (p. 25). G-d is no longer an absolute ruler, but He becomes a "constitutional monarch." He binds Himself to "respect for all life" which "precedes all specific promises to one particular tribe or nation" (p. 25). Next comes the contract with Abraham and his descendants in which, says Fromm, G-d promises to bless Abraham and through him the whole world. Abraham, however, challenges G-d's plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Abraham can demand that the Divine Being obey simple justice and the Divinity "has no right to refuse." This is the culmination of the second stage of the development of G-d, where man (Abraham) has attained a relationship with Him — a kind of fifty-fifty partner, each having an equal demand on the other.

The third stage is represented by G-d's revelation to Moses at the burning bush. Moses asks G-d's name and is told that His name is "*Eheveh asher Eheveh*" which Fromm takes to mean "My name is *Nameless*." This, says Fromm, is the ancient forerunner of "negative theology" of which Maimonides

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is the father. That is, the Divine Being cannot be described by any attributes. No names are applicable and He can be worshipped only in silence. Such a G-d, says Fromm, has ceased to be authoritarian and the end of the road of this "development" is complete freedom from G-d. Fromm describes this last stage as accompanied by an experience which is the ultimate fulfillment of man and the highest stage of his development. Exactly what Fromm means by this or whether this last stage has been attained by radical humanism and the modern embodiment of it, i.e., Marx and Schweitzer is unclear. In any event, what concerns us here is the validity of his views *as an interpretation of the Bible* and to this we now turn.

What is puzzling about Fromm's exegesis is his selectivity: he selects some things from the Bible to illustrate his view, but ignores others that do not fall in line. Or if he does not ignore them he calls them "archaic" — arguing that the final editor, an ancient humanist, who left the archaic passages in the text for some reason or other (p. 89). Fromm appears to assume the following: Since humanism is good and authoritarianism is bad, and all admit the Bible to be essentially good, therefore the Bible must be essentially humanistic and all traces of authoritarianism must be due to earlier "bad" influences (archaic). This kind of reasoning needs no comment.

Let me illustrate this from a particular passage. The creation account according to Fromm is supposed to represent the Divinity as

an absolute ruler over heaven and earth who is jealous of His power. If so, why is He represented as consulting with others (angels according to Rashi) in the creation of man. One reason, says Rashi, is that He wanted to teach man humility and this is why He is represented as saying "Let us make a man in *our* image." This passage, says Fromm, is archaic. That may be, but Fromm presents no reason. On the contrary, the moral lesson of humility that Rashi says is trying to be conveyed seems to belong to the "later development."

The second stage where the Divinity is supposed to make a fifty-fifty covenant with Noach and Abraham is inconsistent with the Binding of Isaac. The Binding of Isaac occurred much later than the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Why doesn't Abraham challenge the Divinity there? He certainly had more cause to do so. Abraham could have accused G-d of a breach of contract. A few years earlier, G-d had made a covenant with him that his inheritance would pass through Isaac and that he should banish Ishmael and Hagar altogether. Now he was being commanded to slaughter Isaac. Nevertheless Abraham unquestioningly obeys without so much as a second thought. Such absolute subjection to an authoritarian ruler does not fit the picture of Abraham that Fromm paints for us in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Furthermore, it is, the Binding of Isaac which becomes a foundation stone of Judaism, recited every morning by the religious Jew and one of the basic themes of Rosh

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Hashanah, and not the pleading of Abraham for Sodom and Gomorrah.

There is something seriously wrong with Fromm's picture why Abraham challenges the Divinity. Abraham and the Hasidic Rebbes, whom Fromm quotes as challenging the Divinity, can do so only because they have accepted Him absolutely. Here there are no compromises or "deals." One either accepts G-d absolutely or rejects Him before a dialogue is possible. There might be a middle ground of hesitation but this is temporary and must ultimately lead to acceptance or rejection. For this reason Abraham, Moses or Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev do not challenge G-d on behalf of themselves but for the sake of others: Abraham for the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah; Moses for the children of Israel ("If not wipe me out from Thy Book"); the Spoler Zeidie for Jews starving from one of the many Ukrainian famines (p. 79); and the Zlotzover Maggid for a poor Jew seeking help from his son (p. 80). The reason why Abraham can carry on his dialogue with the Divinity is that he is completely subservient to Him as evidenced by his excusing his pleading with G-d because he is mere "dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27), and his unquestioning obedience in the Binding of Isaac some 38 years later. Similarly, the Hasidic masters whom Fromm quotes with such pleasure are precisely men who are completely given over to serving G-d without the slightest tincture of hesitation or question. They are paragons of absolute abnegation before the Di-

vine. Again, it is because of this, that only they can "challenge" G-d, complain to Him and so on. Only an Abraham or a Levi Yitzchok from Berdichev could carry on such a conversation, not a Moses Mendelssohn or a Hermann Cohen or someone whose acceptance of G-d is conditional upon Him being "moral," a just keeper of contracts, a good philosopher or even a radical humanist. True, "The Holy One blessed be He decrees and the righteous annul" (*Moed Katan* 16b). However, it is only the *righteous*, the subservient, who can annul.

Further, there is something psychologically (or logically) incoherent in Fromm's conception of the development of the Divinity. First, according to Fromm, G-d is accepted as an absolute ruler. Then His power is diminished when he becomes party to a contract and finally He disappears (almost) altogether in the "negative theology" of Maimonides and its modern advocates. With regard to the Divinity, the absolute Creator of heaven and earth, it makes no sense whatsoever to say that one accepts Him but only as a kind of half-partner on a limited basis. This is not a half-way house between acceptance of the Divinity and complete rejection. It is as a matter of fact complete rejection. The G-d of Israel can be accepted only totally — there is no other kind of acceptance. This is why partial or limited acceptance is considered idolatrous by Elijah on Mount Carmel. He does not upbraid the Baal-worshipping Jews of his day for rejecting the G-d of Israel alto-

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gether. Rather he says: "How long will you stand on two stones" (I Kings 18:21). How long will you hesitate between G-d and Baal — half-accepting G-d as if He could in some sense be a partner in your homage to Baal. This is not partial acceptance of G-d and partial acceptance of Baal — this is 100 percent idolatry, and the rejection of G-d, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Fromm's "development of G-d," does not transform Abraham into an earnest searcher for moral justice, demanding justice from everyone including G-d, but into an idolator, G-d forbid, who demands that G-d subscribe to human principles of moral justice. Can man, who is nothing but "dust and ashes" demand this of the Holy (Inscrutable) One Blessed be He? Can a man pass moral judgment on G-d as he does on his next-door neighbor? This is egotism in the highest degree. Of course, if the Divinity is not the Creator of heaven and earth, but a "... poetic expression of the highest value in humanism, not a reality in itself," then it is immoral to write a poem, story or what-have-you about a Divine Being that does not keep a contract. However, Fromm's conception is that we start off with the Creator of heaven and earth and wind up with radical humanism and in the middle there is a "development." There cannot be any such development, as Fromm suggests, for when one limits the Creator in *any* sense one rejects Him completely, and if one rejects Him, one ceases to hold any meaningful dialogue with Him.

This, I think, is the basic weakness of the book but there are a lot of attitudes about traditional Jewish literature and some misinterpretation of texts which lead Fromm off on his tangent. Most important is from the tractate *Baba Metzia* 59b of the debate between the Rabbis and Rabbi Eliezer the Great concerning the ritual purity of a special kind of oven (pp. 77-79). The Rabbis said the oven was impure and Rabbi Eliezer said it was pure. Rabbi Eliezer brought every proof imaginable and even called upon miracles to support him but the Rabbis refused to accept them. Rabbi Yehoshua said that since the Torah was given on Mt. Sinai from G-d Himself and in the Torah it is stated that one must incline after the majority there could be no other basis for deciding the law. It was reported later by Elijah the Prophet that G-d was pleased with this outcome and said "My sons have defeated me, my sons have defeated me."

On a very superficial level this might be taken the way Fromm interprets it, i.e., as "indicative of a trend that is to make man completely autonomous even to the point where he will be free from G-d or, at least, where he can deal with G-d on terms of equality" (p. 77). Though Fromm does not say clearly what he means here, I interpret him as follows: Though the Talmud is mostly authoritarian, leaving little room for the free-play of human reason that has been so essential in the rise of science and humanism, nevertheless there are signs in the Talmud where the free-play of human reason has tri-

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umphed over its authoritarianism and the passage from *Baba Metzia* is the most striking one.

It is difficult to understand how this passage from *Baba Metzia* sustains Fromm's viewpoint. On the contrary, the passage is grounded in the concept of Torah as G-d given on Mt. Sinai and, therefore, something which not even miracles, much less human reason, can abrogate. This is very similar to the command in the Bible not to follow false prophets even though their prophecies prove true. They are false not because they are not prophetic, but because they abrogate the Divine authority of the Torah. How Fromm understands this as a trend towards the autonomy of reason, i.e., reason free from G-d or from the imposition of authoritarianism from on high, is hard to understand.

Interestingly enough, there is an interpretation by the M'haral M'prag (*Pirushei al Agadat Hashas*, vol. 1, Jerusalem, 1958, pp. 126-130; see also *Baer Hagolah*, Tel Aviv, 1955, pp. 50-52), of this passage which upholds "authoritarianism." In fact, the M'haral writes in his *Baer Hagolah* (p. 52) that many people have a false understanding of this passage which is the opposite of the truth. The M'haral no doubt had in mind just such an interpretation as Fromm proposes.

According to Fromm, Rashi's interpretation of the Bible (expressing what the Bible really means) cannot be taken seriously since Rashi was essentially a medievalist and his interpretation is, therefore, influenced by medieval feudalism.

This, says Fromm, is evidenced by Rashi's comment on why the Bible begins with the creation of the world (instead of with the first commandment given to the Jewish people) is so that the Jews can have a reply to the nations when they accuse the Jews of having stolen Canaan (Israel) from others. Since G-d made the world, He has the right to give land to whomever He wishes. Instead of seeing the universal character of creation, says Fromm, Rashi can only understand this passage ". . . along the lines of feudal custom" (p. 6), and thinks of the Divinity as a kind of feudal lord that can give gifts of land to whomever he pleases.

In the first place, Fromm does not seem to realize that this passage from Rashi is a quotation from the *Medrash Tanchuma*, written some thousand years before feudalism was ever heard of. Secondly, as we mentioned earlier, Rashi interprets Genesis 1:26 when G-d is reported to say "Let us make a man in our image," as teaching man humility — that even the Creator of heaven and earth is humble enough to consult with others (angels) in making man. Such humility is not characteristic of feudal lords.

Had Fromm known that the first comment of Rashi was a quotation from *Medrash*, I have no doubt he would argue that the first century *Midrashim* were the "seeds" of medieval feudalism. It is very easy, especially for Fromm. The best way of seeing through Fromm's presentation is to appreciate the tenuousness of the whole approach. For example, Fromm says that the Sforino's interpretation of the

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Bible “. . . is an example of the spirit of the Renaissance” (p. 95). Why? Because it was written in 16th century Italy. This is as far-fetched as arguing that Rashi's commentary is medieval because it was written in 11th century France. It could be only on the basis of historical dating that one would suspect Rashi of being a medievalist or the Sforno of being a humanist. There are as many “authoritarian” passages in the Sforno as there are “humanistic” ones in Rashi.

Yet there are some good features

of the book. Fromm's discussion of idolatry is the best and, I think, the finest description of the Jewish notion of idolatry in English.

The philosophy of radical humanism is interesting and may even be the source of the vague kind of utopia which inspires our present rebellious students. However, to utilize it as a tool in interpreting and understanding the Torah and Judaism is as clear an example of *elbonoh she Torah* — the wilful misuse of Torah — that one might find.