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UNTHINK GOD

I have some friends who haven't had an original thought in their lives. On the other hand, I have some friends who are very profound thinkers. One of them, named Alicia, recently came up with this gem.

"You cannot explain away God's beauty, because your thoughts belong to Him. Explain your thoughts away, and you may be able to explain God away."

This may or may not be up there with Descartes' "cogito, ergo sum," but it expresses an even more profound thought. Where Descartes says, "I think, therefore I am," Alicia says, "I think, therefore God is."

We live in a world that seems to be bent on pitting science against the Bible, knowledge against faith. Some of us believe that such dichotomies are purely artificial. Faith does not do away with knowledge, nor knowledge faith. Science and the Bible are two independent disciplines; the Bible is not a science textbook, nor does science deal with metaphysics. Yet this quotation sums up the union between science and religion, philosophy and physics.

What is beauty? More importantly, whence beauty? Keats said, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." That is insufficient, though. I may look on the truth that is Sandia Peak in Albuquerque and see beauty, while others see it as just another big mountain. The science of aesthetics tries to explain why one person sees beauty and another doesn't, but is no closer to explaining beauty, or the origins of beauty, than any other science. Beauty exists, and beauty exists in creation.

If there is beauty, there is beauty in the creator. Some might look at Henri Toulouse-Lautrec and argue that his prints may be beautiful but his shortened legs are grotesque. Others would argue that the physical body does not always reflect the beauty within. There is beauty in the works of the deaf Beethoven or the blind Homer. In the same way, a recognition of beauty in nature implies a beautiful mind behind it. Blind Milton can create beauty, but blind creation cannot explain the concept of beauty.

God created man in his image. I will not argue that man is the only creature that has a concept of beauty, but man is able to express his appreciation of beauty better than any other beast. Elephants can paint, but is the abstraction they put on canvas an expression of their

concept of beauty, or is it merely random strokes of a paintbrush? We cannot know for certain. But we can know what we consider beautiful, and so often it coincides with what others consider beauty to be. God could have created a world in shades of grey, like the paintings of J. M. Whistler. After all, most animals appear to be without the ability to distinguish color. And yet God gave man the ability to see color, and to think it beautiful.

Our thoughts belong to God. In five different passages, Jesus is said to have known the thoughts of the people around him. Even the Holy Spirit, the word of God, knows our thoughts.

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

It is through those thoughts, known to God, that we express to Him and to others the beauty of God. It is in those thoughts that we even identify beauty. Without thought, there is no beauty. And so the only way we can explain away God is to explain away thought. When we think of God, he exists.

And yet we cannot explain away our thoughts. Someone supposedly told an old alchemist that the secret to changing lead to gold was to melt it and stir it for half an hour without thinking the word "rhinoceros." The poor man was doomed to failure, because thereafter when he stirred lead, he thought, "I have to do this without thinking rhinoceros." Thereby he thought the word, and failed the alchemy. In like manner, to think that there is no God requires thinking about God. Alicia is right. Explain your thoughts away and maybe, but probably not, you can explain God away. And even then, he will continue to exist.

Contents

Unthink God	1
Spiritual Israel	2
Female Servants	4

SPIRITUAL ISRAEL

I was raised listening to dispensational doctrine. As a matter of definition, dispensationalism says that God has dealt with people differently in three major time periods or dispensations. First he dealt with families through the patriarchs, to whom he communicated directly and who made sacrifices for their own families. Next came the Mosaic dispensation, in which he dealt with the Israelites through the Law of Moses, and only the Levitical priests could offer sacrifices. Finally came the Christian dispensation, in which God deals with the church, and Jesus is the only sacrifice necessary. A part of this doctrine is the idea that the church is “spiritual Israel,” a phrase that is still often used in churches.

Naturally, there are some exceptions in each dispensation. Under the Law of Moses, God did speak also through prophets, many of whom were not priests. If in the current dispensation the church is “spiritual Israel,” what was the physical Israel in relation to the Patriarchal age? Dispensationalism leaves some questions unanswered. Especially, there are issues with the concept of “spiritual Israel.”

Consequences

Before even considering whether or not the scripture teaches dispensational doctrine, it might be worth looking at some of the consequences that follow from that doctrine. Some are very valid, and others have created problems for the church for a number of years.

The first consequence to look at is the correspondence between the New Testament congregation and the congregation of Israel. If the church is “spiritual Israel,” then there should be a one-on-one agreement between the essentials of the physical and the spiritual. We do find some correspondence, just because the church has a strong foundation in the Israel of the Law of Moses. For instance, there is some agreement with certain aspects of the church and the Jewish holidays. (For convenience, I will consider Israel and the Jewish people to be equivalent, although some might disagree.) The Jewish people consider Pentecost to be a celebration of the giving of the Law of Moses on Sinai. Although not all Christians celebrate Pentecost as a holiday, there is a direct connection, as the events of Acts 2 (the account of the beginning of Christ’s church) took place on Pentecost. Because the death and resurrection of Jesus occurred on or around Passover, there is also a clear correspondence. “For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.” (1 Cor 5:7)

It is interesting to some that the day of our atonement is more closely associated with Passover than with *Yom Kippur*. There is the connection, in that we have

experienced atonement, but Jesus is called the Lamb of God, not our scapegoat. Nor do Christians generally celebrate any holiday similar to *Yom Kippur*. Our celebration of atonement comes in the weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper, which is directly tied to Passover.

There is a less direct correspondence, however, between the Feast of Booths and Christianity. Although we could celebrate the holiday as a remembrance of our journey from sin to salvation, Christians have no holiday to correspond with *Succoth*.

The author of Hebrews draws some definite spiritual equivalences between the physical types of the Law of Moses and the spiritual antitypes. Most notably, in Hebrews 9 he/she sees a correspondence between the priesthood, the Tabernacle and the spiritual economy. Continuing in chapters 9 and 10, the author equates Jesus with the High Priest and the atoning sacrifice.

But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. (Heb 9:11-12)

Hebrews 10 goes on to show the superiority of the High Priest and sacrifice of the New Covenant. But just the mention of a new covenant shows that the author does not consider it to be a spiritual equivalent of Israel.

Besides the holidays and priesthood, is there any correspondence that would demonstrate a physical and a spiritual Israel in correspondence? There is a difference between the legalism of Israel and the freedom of the church. “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.” (Rom 8:2) There is also a fundamental difference between the inheritance of promise.

Just that difference brings up one of the other consequences of Dispensationalism. That is Dispensational Premillennialism. This is the idea that Jesus has or will return to establish a kingdom on earth. Some variations of this doctrine include a rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, and a reestablishment of the Kingdom of Israel. This doctrine counts on the land promise to Israel being unconditional and still unfulfilled. This doctrine depends strongly on the symbolism of the Revelation being literal, which would also necessitate a return of the Roman Empire. I don’t have space to go into greater detail, other than to point out that the doctrine of Dispensational Premillennialism did not exist before the middle 1800s. As a result of this quite recent doctrine, many people support the current, secular government of Israel, even though it bears no resemblance to either the

Israel of the Old Testament or even an anticipated righteous Israel yet to come.

One more consequence of the doctrine that the church is “spiritual Israel” must be mentioned. Just the phrase “spiritual Israel” implies that the Israel of the Law of Moses was unspiritual. There is a whole class of words that have come up recently, called retronyms. These are words or phrases for things that are necessitated by a new technology. Thus on a keyboard there is a forward slash and a backslash. Better known would be e-mail and its retronym, “snail mail.” People talk of making a video now, rather than taping a show. In the same way, calling the church “spiritual” Israel implies that its predecessor was either purely physical or was unspiritual. But is that the case? The giving of the Law of Moses was a spiritual event. It must have been, because God spoke. In addition, Moses was told to “sanctify” the people. (Ex 19:10-11) When they received the Law it was spiritual, from the Holy Spirit to their spirits. Throughout their history we see many times when they were devoted to following God, which is a spiritual act. The Law itself dealt with spiritual things. Jesus said the two greatest commands were

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. (Lk 10:27)

Is it scriptural?

Having looked at some consequences that logically show that the church is not “spiritual Israel,” now we should see if the scriptures teach it, in spite of logic. I believe they do not. There is not a single passage that uses that phrase. Beyond that, there are passages that seem to negate the concept.

Paul was the apostle to the nations (gentiles). He was a Pharisee and a scholar of the scriptures. If anyone would have adopted such a doctrine, it seems it would be Paul; but throughout his writings he argues against such a concept.

In the book of Romans, Paul compares Israel and the gentiles. In chapter 3 he points out that both have sinned. He goes on, throughout the book, to plead to the Jewish people to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. He has a heart for Israel, but he never says that the gentile believers have replaced his people.

For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural *branches*, be grafted into their own olive tree? (Rom 11:24)

Note that Paul does not say that the church, or the gentile believers in the church, are a spiritual version of Israel, not that they are spiritual descendants of the Jews. He makes it clear that Israel and the gentiles are both branches of an even older rootstock.

Paul wrote the book of Galatians to gentile believers who were being influenced by Jewish teachers to live like Jews. This would have been a perfect time for his to say, “Oh, you are spiritual Israel, so go ahead and adopt Jewish ways,” or, “You are spiritual Israel so you should not become physical Israel.” He says neither of those things. Instead he points both to an even older covenant. Rather than being spiritual Israel, he says they are the spiritual descendants of Abraham.

For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. ... Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. (Gal 4:22-23; 28)

To the Galatians, Paul compares the church not to Israel, but to Israel’s father Isaac. He says that Jew and gentile in the church are both descendants of Abraham.

Calling the church “spiritual” Israel implies that its predecessor was unspiritual.

“For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.” (Rom 4:3) Paul goes on to say,

Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised. (Rom 4:9-12)

The church is spiritually descended from Abraham. Not through Israel, for the promise came before the covenant through which Israel came. Rather we are spiritually children of the faith of Abraham. Instead of being spiritual Israel, the church is from another, earlier branch of the tree.

Not only does the concept of the church as spiritual Israel go against the scriptures, it has some consequences that lead to spiritual decay. If both God’s word and logic are against the concept, should we not stop using the phrase?

FEMALE SERVANTS

Back in the 1950s, many Christians loudly objected to the translations of certain verses in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Today some of those translations seem tame compared to the more-popular New International Version, but at the time they were revolutionary. Some would even use the word heretical. One of the most hated verses was Romans 16:1. The RSV was the first major English translation to fail to translate the word used to describe Phoebe in this verse. That version read, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae,” Since then, the New Living Translation (which is really a paraphrase, rather than a translation), and the New International Version have used the gender-neutral “deacon” in this verse. Most other English versions use the words servant or minister.

Before going further, it must be pointed out that women have a vital role to play in the congregation of the Lord. Without the women, much would not get done that is done. Women seem to be more adept at planning and executing social events. Women do much of the teaching in Bible classes. Most church secretaries (an office not found in the Bible but vital to the modern church) are women.

Obviously women held important positions in the church of the first century. Besides Phoebe, who was singled out in the verse in question, one could also mention Priscilla who had a seemingly equal part in teaching the lost as her husband. (Acts 18:6) She is also mentioned in the verse after the ones about Phoebe, being called Paul’s coworker. In addition, some of the older widows seem to have been given jobs by the church. (1 Tim 5:3-13) Phoebe herself may have been one such widow.

Some might say that Phoebe could not be a deacon (or deaconess)—as in the office of deacon mentioned in 1 Timothy 3—because women are not to take a leadership role over men in the church. The word itself means a servant or one who ministers to another. By its nature, then, a deacon is not a leadership role. The objection that the office of deacon cannot be filled by a woman because it would put her in a position of authority over a man is, therefore, extremely weak.

The strongest argument that Phoebe could not be a deacon in the traditional sense comes from 1 Timothy 3. Among the requirements of a deacon is one that would disqualify women: “Let the deacon be a one-woman man.” (1 Tim 3:12) Some have accurately pointed out that in the previous verse, the word often translated as “let their wives be ...” is literally “even so women should be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things.” Taken by itself it would seem to be a qualification for a female deacon. Taken with the following verse, however, the “their wives” translation, though weak, may be accurate.

On the other hand, the passage about widows in 1 Timothy 5 sounds suspiciously like the deacon passage in chapter 3. They must be 60 years old, a one-man woman (the exact phrasing of chapter 3, but reversed in gender), and having been reported of (compare “first be proved” in chapter 3) good works. The role and qualifications of a widow “on the payroll,” so to speak, make it sound like Paul is defining another “office” in the church; one that could easily be described, like Phoebe, as deaconess.

All this is not to propose such an office in the modern church. There is, after all, that 60+, widowed and destitute rule. It might be of value, however, to look at this particular role of women in this different light.

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