

**On the Biblical God:
A Brief ‘Transreligious’ Reflection**

Richard Oxenberg

Let me begin with a simple observation: The God of the Bible – or, better, God as he is literally depicted in the Bible (and here the use of the masculine pronoun ‘he’ is entirely appropriate) – does not exist.

The evidence for this is overwhelming. Perhaps the most telling is, simply, that if such an entity existed he would make it clear to us. The Bible tells us, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Dt. 6:5). It tells us “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3). It presents us with command after command to be followed on the authority of this God. Clearly, this is a God who wants human beings to know that he exists and to trust him and obey him.

So, then, why would such a God hide himself from us? Why would he allow us to flounder about in confusion? Why would he allow us to wonder whether Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or atheism has it right? Why would he not make his existence as clear to us as the sun’s existence, or the moon’s existence, or the existence of anything whose existence we do not question?

Theologians twist and turn trying to answer this question, but the bottom line is that there is no good answer. The reason this God does not make his existence clear to us is because he does not, in fact, exist – at least not *as* he is literally depicted in the Bible and in Western religion in general.

This forces upon us the following conclusion: Either the depiction of God as presented in the Bible is entirely bogus, or it points beyond itself to something true and real that somehow lies *behind* the literal portrait.

Why might someone embrace the latter conclusion as opposed to the former? Because, while recognizing that God, as literally portrayed in the Bible, does not exist, he or she nevertheless feels or intuits something eminently meaningful in the biblical text, and, more generally, in the religious urge itself, to which the Bible speaks.

Just *what* that something is, now, becomes a matter of inquiry and investigation. For such a person the Bible becomes, not an unquestionable body of divine revelation, but a work that opens one up to question upon question concerning the nature, meaning, and purpose of human life. It is a book with which to wrangle, wrestle, debate, agree and disagree. It is a book *demanding* interpretation, qualification, speculation, criticism, even suspicion. Such a person's religious convictions, never altogether fixed, are formed as much from *self*-inquiry as from a reading of the text; they are formed from a dialogical interchange between text and self, a creative engagement in which self-understanding is used to illuminate the text, and the text itself is used to point toward new possibilities of self-understanding.

Such a person will recognize that her own engagement with the text will, of necessity, differ from others' engagements with the text, and will understand, therefore, that there can be no absolute, definitive, unqualified, unalterable, infallible, engagement with the text. For her, in other words, the dogmatic principle of biblical infallibility will be reversed; she will adopt a principle of biblical *fallibility*, recognizing that the *process* of reading the Bible, first of all, *is* a process (of creative engagement), and second of all, that it is, therefore and necessarily, a fallible process – as fallible as we ourselves.

So, then, what *are* we to understand by the biblical God?

Here, anyway, is a brief account of what I have arrived at through my own creative engagement with the text:

I see the Bible as pointing to a fundamental Oneness of reality as a whole, underlying the diversity of ordinary, worldly, experience – a Oneness that we are to recognize, commune with, devote ourselves to, and, finally, rest in. Such Oneness serves as a counter to, and resolution of, our basic human experience of separateness, division, exclusion, isolation, death. Association with the Oneness that transcends our separateness can bring us to a state of peace within ourselves and among ourselves: “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death [separateness, division, discord, destruction],” says the psalm, “I fear no evil, for Thou art with me.”

This Oneness the Bible names ‘God,’ and represents as if it were a distinct person acting in the world for the sake of fostering an awareness of itself, and of the moral and spiritual dispositions it infuses.

But this Oneness is not really a separate person standing apart from us, making demands on us for its own idiosyncratic purposes. It is, rather, the very ground of our being (to use a phrase popularized by Paul Tillich). *Its* calling to us is *our* calling to us; a call to pass beyond our experience of isolated separateness (ego) to an experience of the Unity that underlies all separateness – a sacred Unity that joins us to reality as a whole, to other sentient beings in general, and to other human beings in particular. Such an experience has both an existential and an ethical dimension. Existentially, we come to experience our rootedness in that which is fundamental to being, an experience that lifts us out of our sense of lonely isolation. Ethically, we come to recognize our essential commonality with others, which fosters compassion for them and a demand for justice. Spiritual life is the life of growing toward this experience of Unity.

As one comes to see that *this* is what the Bible points to, one also comes to see the Bible’s essential affinity with *all* the great religious traditions of the earth, both Western and

Eastern, for one sees that this is the central message of all of them. Thus it becomes impossible to affirm Judaism *over* Christianity, or Judeo-Christianity *over* Buddhism or Hinduism. One comes to see that all the world's religions are 'fingers pointing to the moon,' each imperfectly pointing to a perfection no one of them perfectly embodies, each to be appreciated for what is good and right and true in it, and to be scrutinized, criticized, challenged, and, hopefully, corrected, for the ways it misses the mark.

Thus one comes to see – ironically – that one must transcend the Bible to be true to it; that 'to love God with all one's heart, mind, and soul,' requires that one *not* cling to one particular religious form and condemn all others; that to do so, indeed, is to violate the spirit of the second of the Ten Commandments; it is to turn the Bible itself into a 'graven image' of God.

And this is a message the Bible itself delivers to us. The prophet Jeremiah writes: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord'" (Jr. 7:3-4).

'Temple' here refers to the particular institutional form of ancient Israelite religion. We are not to put our final trust in such religious forms, says Jeremiah. Rather we are to "amend our ways and our doings" – ourselves – so as to learn to dwell in peace, in harmony and joy, with one another, and with the One who lies beyond all forms, and upon whom all forms rest.