

1. THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

*“Well, that’s Western art for you. A thousand years of crucifixions,
then stripes.”*

— A visitor to the National Gallery, London,
as reported on Twitter, 2017³

“A thousand years of crucifixions, then stripes.” As a summary of the history of Western art, it goes without saying that this statement is ridiculously reductionistic (did I mention this was on Twitter?). But still... have you been to the National Gallery? If you were to whizz through its Western Art section and then write a tweet-length summary, you might struggle to improve on this quote.

Behind the humour, the quip gets at something remarkable: Jesus Christ, and especially his gruesome death, has towered above Western civilization. The cross is the most globally recognised symbol, certainly of religion, but perhaps of anything.

This fact is remarkable not just for the scale of the impact but for the event that is being commemorated. An outsider

³ <https://twitter.com/sannevman/status/874624753092489216?s=20>. Accessed 2nd November 2021.

to Christianity and its art might expect depictions of Christ's birth to predominate, or his baptism, or anything really—anything other than his violent death. The idea of presenting a tortured man as art is subversive to say the least. To claim—as Christians do—that the man on the cross was *God* is the most revolutionary notion the world has ever entertained.

One of the signs that we are children of this particular revolution is the fact that we can stroll through the climate-controlled corridors of a gallery and, upon entering the religious wing, proceed to nod sagely at dozens of depictions of death by torture. “Ah, sacred art!” we sigh. For the most part this incongruity goes unnoticed. Yet this only proves the immense impact of the Jesus movement. The way we see the cross has been revolutionised because the cross has revolutionised the way we see.

To make my point, let me contrast the “sacred art” of the National Gallery with a much older portrayal of the cross. The earliest surviving depiction of Christ's crucifixion is a piece of graffiti mocking the strange new cult called Christianity. It was found scratched into the plaster of a wall on Rome's Palatine Hill. The graffiti shows a figure on a cross with the body of a man and the head of a donkey. Standing by the cross is a devotee with his hand raised in veneration. The caption says it all: “Alexamenos worships his god”.

Comedy doesn't always hold up over time, but the mockery here hits its mark today just as powerfully as it would have done 2,000 years ago. The message is clear:

a man on a cross is not a God; he's an ass. Anyone who venerates such a figure is a fool at best and probably perverse.

It's worth asking ourselves the question: who sees the cross more clearly—the Roman mocker or the sacred artist? As we press into this topic, we will consider that we are the weird ones. In this chapter we will step into the sandals of the Romans, to see the world as they saw it. No Roman would show a casual appreciation of crucifixion. Their reaction would be as different to ours as night is to day. If the coming of Christ has been a new dawn (Christians certainly think so), then this chapter explores the nighttime before that first Christmas.

THE SLAVE'S DEATH

“Wretched is the loss of one’s good name in the public courts, wretched, too, a monetary fine exacted from one’s property, and wretched is exile ... But the executioner, the veiling of heads, and the very word ‘cross,’ let them all be far removed from not only the bodies of Roman citizens but even from their thoughts, their eyes, and their ears ... the mere mention of them [is] unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.”⁴

So said Cicero (106–43 BC), one of history’s greatest orators. Notice here the concern for honour and the disdain of shame. Worthiness and wretchedness were

4 M. Tullius Cicero, *Speech before Roman Citizens on Behalf of Gaius Rabirius, Defendant Against the Charge of Treason*, ed. William Blake Tyrrell. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0023%3Achapter%3D5%3Asection%3D16>. Accessed 28th October 2021.

the heaven and hell of the ancient world. To Cicero and his peers, “one’s good name”, one’s citizenship, one’s free status were paramount. To lose them was to lose everything. No wonder, then, that the very mention of the cross was a horror to Cicero. Crucifixion was of course extremely painful. (We get our word “excruciating” from the Latin *ex crucis*: “from the cross”.) Yet, more than this, it was humiliating. To be impaled, naked, before the watching world was as undignified an end as the Romans could devise. And the shame was a large part of the point.

To us, the cross has become a sacred symbol and, as such, embodies the very opposite of its ancient meaning. Even if we’re not religious ourselves, we might understand the cross to be a symbol of redemption, salvation, God’s presence even among the lowly, and God’s peace even amid our pain. In the ancient world it meant the reverse. It symbolised degradation, worthlessness, unremitting torture and unredeemed loss—“the extreme penalty”, according to Roman historian Tacitus.⁵ Corpses cut down from the cross would routinely be cast into a ditch to be pecked at by birds and eaten by dogs. Those crucified were garbage.

The cross was “the slave’s punishment”.⁶ Roman society, as with every ancient culture, was arranged as a vertiginously steep hierarchy. That hierarchy was not simply one of rank or role; it was a hierarchy of *being*. The punishments of the state were an expression—and an

5 Tacitus, *Historiae* 4.11.

6 Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.

enforcement—of this hierarchy. Certain classes of people could not be crucified and certain classes could.

Cicero called crucifixion “the most miserable and most painful punishment, appropriate to slaves alone”.⁷ While it was proper to crucify slaves, Cicero went on to discuss the horrors of an incident when a Roman citizen had been mistakenly crucified. “It is a crime to bind a Roman citizen; to scourge him is a wickedness; to put him to death is almost parricide [killing a parent]. What shall I say of crucifying him? So guilty an action cannot by any possibility be adequately expressed by any name bad enough for it.”⁸ Crucifixion was either “appropriate” or an unspeakable evil, depending on who was on the cross.

In AD 61 a Roman senator was killed by one of his slaves. Custom dictated that every slave in the household—all four hundred of them—must be crucified. Some in Rome objected, said Tacitus, and “shrank from extreme rigour” in carrying out the sentence. But the majority in the Senate agreed with Cassius Caius, who spoke powerfully in favour of the mass execution. Quite obviously, to Caius, tradition was to trump any feelings of pity. He asked, “Is it your pleasure to search for arguments in a matter already weighed in the deliberations of wiser men than ourselves?” The ancients had spoken; who were moderns to object? (You will notice this is the very

7 M. Tullius Cicero, *Against Verres*, ed. C.D. Yonge. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0018%3Atext%3DVer.%3AActio%3D2%3Abook%3D5%3Asection%3D169>. Accessed 29th October 2021.

8 As above. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0018%3Atext%3DVer.%3AActio%3D2%3Abook%3D5%3Asection%3D170>. Accessed 2nd November 2021.

opposite of today's belief in progress.) Against those who worried that some innocents may die, Caius argued, "There is some injustice in every great precedent, which, though injurious to individuals, has its compensation in the public advantage". Here is an argument for "the greater good", where individuals are sacrificed to the public advantage. Why? To set a precedent. To make an example. "It is only by terror you can hold in such a motley rabble." It was only terror that maintained the caste system of Rome. Only by terror could the few nobles "live singly amid numbers, safe among a trembling throng".⁹

Such arguments carried the day and 400 men, women and children, were dragged to 400 crosses. Thus was upheld the wisdom of the ancients, the greater good of the empire, and the terrorising of the masses. Deterrence was the goal and crucifixion a major tool. Sometimes the injustice of it all was the very point being made. To see "the slaves' punishment" inflicted publicly on, sometimes, hundreds of the unwashed masses—even innocents—was to see their worthlessness in the starkest terms. The powers that be killed *those people* because they could. And the more they butchered them, the more they felt able to butcher them. As one victim of Roman brutality said, "[our torturers were commanded] to think and act as if we no longer existed".¹⁰ To see someone crucified was to

9 Tacitus, "The Murder of Pedanius Secundus". <https://faculty.tnstate.edu/tcorse/H1210revised/tacitus.html>. Accessed 27th October 2021.

10 "The Writings of Phileas the Martyr describing the Occurrences at Alexandria." <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.xiii.xi.html?scrBook=Phil&scrCh=2&scrV=6#highlight>. Accessed 27th October 2021.

watch their un-person-ing and to hear the message, *Do not go the way of this wretch*.

This is not to say that the onlookers disliked watching. On the contrary, executions were wildly popular. Crucifixions were always public and would sometimes form part of the gladiatorial games. In Rome vast crowds would watch exquisite horrors, including crucifixions as half-time entertainment. Slaves fighting to the death was the meat and potatoes, but the spice was often provided by wild animals devouring prisoners, or perhaps even raping them and then eating them. It was even boasted at the time that the *bestiarii* (the wild-animal tamers) could train a bull to rape its victim first—or at least simulate the attack. All this was to the delight of the crowd and the honour of the gods, who took the form of beasts to rape women. These bloody re-enactments of ancient scenes—whether divine, military or bestial—were a particular favourite of the crowds.

Such inventive and grotesque brutality valued spectacle dear and life cheap. In Caligula's reign (AD 37–41), there was a time of scarcity when meat needed to feed the games' beasts became too expensive. The emperor's solution was to order all the city's prisoners, whether they'd received a trial or not, to be fed to the starving animals. In Rome some kinds of people could be pet food. In truth, these victims weren't even "people"—certainly not in a way that would be recognisable to our modern sensibilities.

Yet far from this hierarchy of value being lamented, it was lauded. It was just. This is what "Nature herself" taught.

WHAT NATURE TEACHES

“Nature herself intimates that it is just for the better to have more than the worse, the more powerful than the weaker... Justice consists in the superior ruling over and having more than the inferior.”

(Plato, 428–438 BC)

“For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.” (Aristotle, 384–322 BC)

The Greek philosopher Plato, together with his teacher Socrates (470–399 BC) and his student, Aristotle, are considered the fathers of Western philosophy. It’s often said that the history of thought following Plato consists, basically, of footnotes to his teaching. Even the mighty Romans had to admit that when it came to *intellectual* firepower, the Greeks led the way. No Roman—indeed, no ancient—would have quibbled with the views expressed above. And yet they are the very reverse of our modern thinking. We consider “justice” to mean the equalising of persons. The classical world considered justice as the enforcement of inequality; that was what nature intended.

To Plato and Aristotle it was obvious that certain humans were born to be “living tools”: machines to be used by others. The other name for this is slaves.

Often, classical writers such as Plato or Aristotle are cited as having “defended slavery”. In truth, they did no such thing—because no one was attacking it. No one

thought to. It wasn't just that the entire economy was built on slavery; politics and religion were too. In fact, the very fabric of being, as understood by the ancients, had slavery woven into it. As Larry Siedentop comments, "At the core of ancient thinking [was] the assumption of natural inequality".¹¹

Ancient philosophers did not think of themselves as defenders or even teachers of such inequality. "Nature herself" taught that some were fitter, stronger, smarter, and, frankly, better than others. There were superior races (Greeks over barbarians), superior sexes (men over women), and superior classes (free men over slaves). The deformity and inferiority of barbarians, women and slaves was clear from their very nature. How could anyone deny that some people can govern well, while others need governing?

This much was obvious to every member of the classical world, wherever they found themselves in the hierarchy of being. Certainly, there were those who sought a change to the status quo. A revolt of the slaves was something always to be guarded against—hence the need for violent deterrents like crucifixion. But when inferiors reached for greater status, power, freedom or goods, they were seeking for advantages, not rights—for privilege, not justice. As Plato states above, justice *was* your superiors ruling over you. That was what nature decreed, and those most in tune with reason could see that. The position which fate had assigned you was simply your just deserts.

11 Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual* (Penguin, 2015), p 51.

The wisdom of the people, distilled in teaching like Aesop's fables (7th century BC), reinforced this message. One of Aesop's tales told of a lizard who wished to be a stag, but when he saw the stag hunted and killed, he ceased from his foolish ambition. He ends the fable glad of his own ignominious spot in the food chain. Likewise, there was the lizard who wished to be long like a snake. He stretched himself out beyond his proper bounds and—stupid lizard!—burst.

These stories teach the opposite lesson to our modern tales. Nowadays the hero casts off the shackles of tradition and hierarchy to release their awesome inner potential. Perhaps that's a better lesson, perhaps not—what is undeniable is the difference. Ancient people were taught in a thousand ways to “know their place”. And their place was not just their rank in society; it was their position in the cosmos—their position in the great hierarchy of being. Religion was, therefore, an integral part of their lives.

WHAT RELIGION TEACHES

In a sense, there is no need for this as a distinct section. As we discuss ancient religion, we're not really moving to another subject, at least, not as far as ancient peoples were concerned. As we'll see when we get to chapter 5, it is only as a result of the Christian revolution that we now tend to distinguish between a secular and a sacred realm. As modern people, we think of the public, tangible, everyday operations of the world—the realm of science, commerce, politics, and so on. We then contrast this with the personal, inward realm of “religion”. When I think of

“the secular sphere”, I imagine a 1980s corporate video with upbeat synth pop music and shots of business-suited New Yorkers bustling to work. When I think “religious”, I think of soft-focused church scenes, a lone choirboy singing, a lone candle, a lone pray-er. The latter is a peculiar hobby of the few; the former is what makes the world go round.

But this divide would have been alien to the ancient world. They would never have thought, for instance, to separate politics and religion. Politics concerned the affairs of the *polis*, the Greek word for city. Yet the city was an aggregation *not* of individuals, as we might understand them, but of families. At the head of each family was the father of the household (the *paterfamilias*). He was the oldest male, who held life-or-death power over every other family member. His most vital role was as priest of the family cult, to maintain worship to the family’s gods, to keep the fires of the hearth burning as proper honour to their ancestors, and to hand over such sacred duties to the eldest son. When these families united into larger clans and cities, the gods were a crucial aspect of such associations. Agreements—whether commercial, military or political—were ratified by the gods and by sacred acts. To be a citizen was to share in the worship of the city’s gods.

Even when Athens experimented with what it called “democracy”, it was a thoroughly religious enterprise. Instead of a mon-archy (rule by one), or olig-archy (rule by a few), demo-cracy was the “power of the people”. The crucial question is, of course, whom did the Greeks consider to be “the people”? When we consider “the

people”, we might think of a group of individuals who stand equally under the same law. But that’s our Christianity coming through. Instead, the fundamental unit for the ancient world (and for much of the non-Christian world today) was the family. When these family units united, it was the “fathers” who came together. Under “democracy” these priestly heads of households were able to vote on a range of matters or candidates, but their options had already been limited by casting lots or consulting, say, the Delphic Oracle. It was divination more than democracy that ruled Athens. So while, at points, a minority of elite males may have had the vote, it was the gods who called the shots. Everything—from the rule of the city to the outcome of wars, to the success of the crops, to the study of the heavenly spheres—was “religious” to the core.

Therefore, to understand ancient people, we need to understand their religious thinking. Let’s do that now by outlining some of their origins stories. The creation myths of old give a vivid impression of the way people saw the gods, themselves and the world around them.

BORN TO SLAVE

In the beginning there was chaos. Then rebellion. Then war. Then slavery. Then us. So said the myths of the ancient Near East.

The Babylonian creation story serves as a typical tale. In the *Enuma Elish*, most of the story concerns the battles of the gods prior to creation. Eventually it is Marduk who slays Tiamat, whose body is split into sky and land (heaven and earth). 300 of the gods are assigned to the

sky and 600 to the land, and humanity is made by the sacrifice of a god so that “the toil of the gods will be laid” on humans. “From [Kingu’s] blood [Ea] created mankind, on whom he imposed the service of the gods, [to] set the gods free.”¹²

This is a recurring theme in the ancient myths. Humanity is made from bloodshed and formed for slavery. Compare the Mesopotamian *Atrahasis* myth, where it says, “Create primeval man, that he may bear the yoke! Let him bear the yoke ... Let man bear the load of the gods!”¹³ Yet again humanity is made by sacrificing a god (this time the unfortunate deity is Geshtu-E), and yet again humanity is pressed into hard labour.

According to the Greek myths, our origins involve chaos, warfare and slavery—yes—but also plenty of jealousy and sex too. The Greeks spoke of Gaia (earth), Ouranos (heaven/sky), and Tartaros (the underworld). Gaia and Ouranos have children: Titans. But Gaia also gives birth to monsters—cyclops—who disgust Ouranos. He hurls them into Tartaros. Gaia decides to take revenge by getting one of her sons, Kronos, to chop off Ouranos’s genitals. In an unexpected silver lining to this marital feud, the blood of his genitals creates Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty. Just when you thought romance was dead.

Kronos marries his sister Rhea but then fears that his children will cut him up, so, in a pre-emptive strike,

12 Enuma Elish, 29-34. <http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ANE/lectures/10.1.pdf>. Accessed 29th October 2021.

13 Atrahasis, Tablet 1. <https://geha.paginas.ufsc.br/files/2017/04/Atrahasis.pdf>. Accessed 29th October 2021.

he swallows them as soon as they're each born. Rhea manages to save her sixth-born, Zeus, who grows up, nurtured by a goat in a Cretan cave. He returns to trick Kronos into vomiting up his other children. Zeus then forges an alliance with his regurgitated sibling gods. They are the Olympians, and they fight the Titans. Long story short, the Olympians win, and Zeus cuts up Kronos (just as Kronos had feared), throwing the pieces into Tartaros. Zeus becomes king of the gods with Poseidon ruling over the seas and Hades ruling the underworld.

Where does humanity fit in? For our existence, we have Prometheus to thank. Prometheus was a Titan, but he was not thrown into Tartaros with his fellow Titans because he had not fought in the war. Together with others, Prometheus is tasked with making humans. He forges man from the dust; Athena breathes life into him, but, for the crowning touch, Prometheus, against Zeus's wishes, steals fire from the sun and gives it to man. (Titans love humans more than Olympians do.) For this rebellious act, Prometheus is chained to a rock and has his liver eaten by an eagle, and then regrown, and then eaten again, and then regrown. And then... You get the idea.

These are our origins: chaos, violence, and death. And this is the case wherever we turn in the ancient world. The Romans adopted much of the Greek mythology, performing more of a rebrand than a rewrite. Zeus was now "Jupiter", Aphrodite was "Venus", Poseidon was "Neptune"; but the stories contained the same themes of jealousies, intrigues and brutality. One significant update was the Roman take on Ares, the Greek god of war. Where the Greeks considered Ares to be a destructive and

contemptible force, the Romans loved their version, Mars. He was the very picture of virility, second only to Jupiter in the pantheon. He fathered the founders of Rome—Romulus and Remus—by his rape of the unsuspecting mortal Rhea Silvia. When considering the origins stories of Roman mythology, it's fair to say that the city itself was the focus. The Romans' vision for the cosmos was very much centred on Rome, the "Eternal City". And that city was born of war and rape.

PROPPING UP THE COSMOS

In this chapter we have been attempting to stand in the sandals of a Roman. In particular we want to see the cross in the way they saw it. It's nearly impossible to do this since our WEIRD values get in the way. As we hear of rape and violence, inequality and brutality, slavery and death-by-torture, our modern sensibilities kick in. We find it hard to accept these as "the way things are". We certainly find it difficult to consider them as "the way things *should* be". But a Roman took all of this in their stride. And as they stood at the foot of a cross, they had a gutter-level view of the whole terrifying structure of reality that towered above. The cross came down from violent powers on high to crush the contemptible and maintain the "just" order of the empire—in fact, of the cosmos. To look upon a victim of crucifixion was to see a man at rock bottom.

And then Christians came along and said, "We see something else". Their claim was the most revolutionary imaginable: that God himself had hung on a cross. Not Mars, obviously. When Mars came in peace, he sheathed his spear as a sign of his magnanimity. The Christian

God did not sheath his spear. Quite the opposite: he had one plunged into his heart by a Roman soldier as he died the death of a slave. And the first people to call this figure “God” were the last people you would expect. Christianity began as a Jewish movement. All Christ’s earliest followers were Jews. And they all called him God. When a Jew said “God”, they did not mean a member of the Greek or Roman pantheon, and they did not mean a squabbling deity from the Babylonian myths. They meant “the Maker of heaven and earth, the Source of life and being”. And yet, in the first instance, it was Jews who became Christians, and they did so by looking to a crucified man and declaring, “Behold our God”!

What would a Roman—breathing Roman air, kept in check by Roman brutalities, raised on Roman myths—make of the Christian claim? They would, of course, consider Christ an ass, his worshippers fools and his religion a perversity. If Roman citizens could not bear to have the name of the cross on their lips, what sort of God would show up as its victim?

“The message of the cross is foolishness,” admitted Paul, a 1st-century Jew-turned-Christian who spent decades preaching this message around the Mediterranean. “But,” he added, “to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).¹⁴ Paul went on to write half the New Testament, and he summarised his basic message as an obsession with “Christ and him crucified” (2:2). He presented the crucifixion of Jesus as a stark

14 That is, the Bible book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 18. Subsequent references to the Bible follow this same format.

dividing line, with some deriding it and some devoted to it. Naturally speaking, a 1st-century hearer could only find it stupid, and a particularly shameful kind of stupid too. “God on a cross” was painfully imbecilic as an idea. And yet for Christians, something about it made sense—it made sense of their lives and their world. They felt themselves to have been met by the God of heaven, who had deigned to stoop. For them, rock bottom became ground zero. The cross was the epicentre of an earthquake whose reverberations shook every earthly certainty. The Highest had plumbed the lowest depths and begun a radical movement to upend the world.

Paul and his other 1st-century contemporaries persisted with their foolish preaching, and, remarkably, they gained a hearing. Over time their belief that Christ crucified was also “the power of God” began to look less and less ridiculous because a power seemed to be at work. A movement was beginning. First minds changed, then lives, then communities, then cultures, then everything. Eventually this foolish message became the most influential in human history.

Now the idea of humble sacrifice has gone from shameful to glorious. Now we consider equality, compassion, freedom and all the WEIRD values this book explores as obvious. Now we wander blithely through galleries to gaze upon “a thousand years of crucifixions”. Whatever moral earthquake occurred, its impact has been seismic. The rest of this book will examine it.

2. EQUALITY

“I don’t accept that all lives are of equal value.”

— Lord Sumption, January 2021

The outrage provoked by these words was immediate, visceral, and very Christian.

The statement belongs to Lord Sumption, former UK Supreme Court Justice. He was on TV, debating whether the government-mandated lockdown was a proportionate response to the pandemic.¹⁵ He reasoned that, while the elderly were more affected by COVID, the young were more affected by lockdown. Therefore lockdown had been “punishing too many for the greater good”.

This of course prompted the question: *if you do not lock down, are the elderly to be sacrificed for the good of the young?*

Speaking as a retiree, Sumption seemed prepared to make that sacrifice. “My children’s and my grandchildren’s lives are worth much more than mine because they’ve got a lot more of it ahead.” This was the context in which he said, “I don’t accept that all lives are of equal value.”

In speaking of human “value” and “worth” as unequal, Sumption triggered an outrage that filled the column

¹⁵ *The Big Questions*, BBC1, Series 14, Episode 1. Aired 17th January 2021.

inches of the newspapers and the daytime TV slots for the next week. It did not help his cause that, within minutes of questioning our equal human value, Sumption was confronted on-air by Deborah James, a woman vulnerable to COVID due to her cancer. She protested, "With all due respect, I am the person who you say their life is not valuable". Sumption interrupted her with a clarification that injected a cubic ton of cortisol into the news cycle for the next seven days: "I didn't say your life was not valuable; I said it was less valuable".

Not worthless. Just worth less. To the surprise of no one, this clarification did not pour oil on troubled waters. It's difficult to think of a statement more likely to offend our deepest moral sensibilities. The idea that the young are more valuable than the old or that the healthy are more valuable than the sick stirs in us an indignation that is, well, religious. No other kind of language seems fit for purpose. Sumption, we feel, is blaspheming. Or something close to it. Deborah James spoke for many in her comeback to the retired judge:

"Who are you to put a value on life? In my view, and I think in many others', life is sacred, and I don't think we should make those judgment calls. All life is worth saving regardless of what life it is people are living."

Notice the instinctive revulsion at the idea of inequality. Those who might never use the word "sacred" in any other setting begin reaching for it. When we fear that the value of equal human worth is under threat, we can't help but move our language to a religious register. To deny it is sacrilegious. It is a transgression. It's blasphemy.

“EQUALITY” AND “GOD”: MATTERS OF FAITH

Imagine there's another guest on the TV show. Plato is brought in, blinking at the studio lights and baffled by the technology. He's asked whether he agrees with the claim: "Some lives are worth more than others". The ancient thinker frowns: *what is the debate exactly?*

It is trivially obvious to the father of Western philosophy that lives are of unequal value. Some are men, and some are women; some are Greeks, and some are barbarians; some are free, and some are slaves. There are rich and poor, wise and foolish, strong and weak. All that we see in nature is difference. Compare any two people concerning any one attribute and what will you conclude? This one has more than that one. This, of course, is the definition of unequal. To insist that two people are equal really, when every human trait betrays inequality, raises the question: *Equal how? Where is this magical realm where their "equality" exists? Can you show it to me?* If Plato was being polite, he might say, "Your faith in 'equality' fascinates me, and I'd like to be able to see what you see. Clearly 'equality' is very important to you. You live your life in the light of this belief, and I can respect that. But to me it looks as if you've just decided to believe in something with no reason or evidence. I'm afraid I'm not convinced."

This is how Plato might view our modern belief in "equality". Interestingly, it's exactly how my atheist friends consider God: a nice idea with no reason to believe in it. We'll press into the similarities between belief in "equality" and belief in "God" shortly. But let's return to Sumption for a minute.

THE VERTICAL AND THE HORIZONTAL

Later in the week, Sumption tried again to explain himself, this time on a different TV channel.¹⁶ It began much better for him:

“I was making a perfectly simple point. Every policy-maker has got to make difficult choices. Sometimes that involves putting a value on human life. It’s a standard concept in health economics: quality-adjusted life years. That’s what I was talking about. Policy-makers have to do that; otherwise they cannot weigh up the consequences of different policy choices.”

This is true. In a world of scarce resources we simply cannot afford every life-saving measure. Spending money on one treatment takes money away from others, and we do not have infinite money. Therefore, in the interests of valuing life—valuing as much of it as we can—policy-makers will sometimes consider the amount of life a patient or a population has ahead of them. If we have a 9-year-old and a 99-year-old and we can only afford one life-saving treatment, Sumption says *we know what to do*. But crucially, at this point, he added a perspective which he did not articulate earlier:

“It doesn’t mean that people are morally worth less; it doesn’t mean they’re worth less in the eyes of God or in the eyes of their fellow citizens...”

Here is the vital dimension missing from Sumption’s earlier comments: the vertical. There is a moral equality

16 *Good Morning Britain*, ITV1, Aired 18th January 2021. <https://www.itv.com/goodmorningbritain/articles/lord-sumption-expands-on-his-cancer-patients-lives-are-less-valuable>. Accessed 1st November 2021.

of all people—they are equal before God, equal as citizens before the same law, regardless of age, health or wealth, with no one left out. This is the kind of sentiment which resonates with us (though many would be happier if we kept the “God” bit out of it). Yet immediately Sumption returned to the horizontal dimension and to his earlier phrasing:

“But sometimes policy-makers have to say, ‘Some lives are worth more than others...’”

With the mention of “lives ... worth more”, the studio erupted as before. This was heresy, and Sumption’s careful explanations—whatever their merits—were lost in the howls.

My interest is not in Sumption’s reasoning. His arguments, when taken in context and with caveats, were far better than his articulation of them. But given our modern beliefs and instincts, his words could only ever trigger an instinctual horror. And so they did.

In this chapter I want us to listen to that horror. Such horror rises up within us from particularly Christian places.

MODERN ORIGIN STORIES

Yuval Noah Harari has written a number of runaway bestsellers, most notably *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*. As a historian, he is convinced that we cannot properly face the future if we do not understand our past. Yet our past, as he is at pains to point out, is a terrifying world of struggle. Just as the ancients saw our world emerging from warfare and death, Harari places us in an evolutionary story that

is no less disturbing. *Homo sapiens* has come to dominate the planet through a violence, greed and pride that could equal that of any Olympian. We are by no means the fastest, nor strongest, nor toughest species on the planet, yet somehow we have become its undisputed rulers.

So what has been the secret of our success? Harari says we dominate because we co-operate—flexibly and at scale. Put one of us on a desert island and it's unlikely we'll survive. Put a family or a clan of us there and we will soon make it our own. Why do we co-operate so well? Because we tell stories. Such storytelling is not a hobby for us—it's where we find meaning. We put ourselves into these stories, identifying with certain characters and goals, and these stories can unite us across the tribal and physical barriers that would otherwise divide us.

Some of these stories are about God or the gods. Religion has played a crucial role in our species' development. It has united us, policed our behaviour, oriented our goals and provided comfort and hope in the face of life's unceasing trials and tragedies. But the "God story" is not the only story that has united us. Another much more recent tale is the story of human rights. Here's how Harari puts it:

"Most legal systems in the world today are based on a belief in human rights. But what are human rights? Human rights ... like God and heaven, are just a story that we've invented. They are not an objective reality. They're not a biological fact about Homo sapiens. Take a human being, cut him open, look inside; you will find the heart, the kidneys, neurons, hormones, DNA. But you won't find any rights. The only place you find rights

*is in the stories that we have invented and spread ... over the last few centuries. They may be very positive stories, very good stories. But they are still just fictional stories that we've invented."*¹⁷

What do you make of this argument? I think it gets a number of things right. First, it draws attention to the power of narrative. Undeniably our lives are given meaning and perspective by the stories we tell ourselves. Such stories build community, give a shared sense of value and orient us to a common horizon. Second, Harari is right to point to the similarities between the "God story" and the "human rights story". As we'll see shortly, God and human rights are inseparably linked (a point Harari agrees with). Third, Harari is correct to say that rights are not obvious or demonstrable scientifically. Our human worth cannot be discovered via scientific experiments. We share 40% of our DNA with bananas. This fact reveals very little about the value of humans, or of bananas. DNA does not and cannot confer moral worth. Someone with Down's syndrome has an extra chromosome, but they are no more or no less valuable for that.

Science tells us nothing about our equal status in relation to one another. In fact, the more testing you do on a population, the more you find differences between people. Some are taller, some less so; some are smarter, some less so; some are stronger, some less so. What we *see* are differences. What we *seek* is equality. But we won't

17 Yuval Noah Harari, *What Explains the Rise of Humans*, Ted Talks, London 2015. https://www.ted.com/talks/yuval_noah_harari_what_explains_the_rise_of_humans/transcript. Accessed 27th October 2021.

find it—not anything morally significant—by mapping genomes, or running tests, or charting bell curves.

Harari is correct: human rights are found in the *stories* we tell. So what kind of story will suffice to establish our sense of human worth?

ELTON'S GLASS OF WATER

In 2018 Sam Harris and Jordan Peterson held a series of public debates which thousands attended and millions viewed online. Harris is a neuroscientist and best-selling author who has been dubbed one of the “four horsemen of the atheist apocalypse” (together with Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and the late Christopher Hitchens). Peterson is a psychology professor, writer and popular YouTuber to whom we will return in chapter 10. In the second debate they discussed values and how we establish them. Harris put forward a memorable analogy. He picked up the glass of water next to him and said:

*“What if I tell you this isn’t just any glass. This is the glass Elton John drank from [when he was at this arena] at his last concert. How much do you want to pay me for it?”*¹⁸

This is a good example of how we value things. The glass by itself is worth very little—maybe a dollar. The glass *in connection with cultural icon Elton John* might be worth a thousand times as much. If the buyer values Elton John, then the buyer will also value the glass. But, asks Peterson,

18 “Sam Harris & Jordan Peterson in Vancouver - Part 2”. Discussion held 24th June 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEf6X-FueMo>. Accessed 29th October 2021.

“where is the value located?” The material contents of the glass are virtually worthless. But there’s a story to be told about the glass. And in connection with that story—and with its hero, Elton John—the glass has a meaning far beyond its component parts.

During the debate, Harris takes the glass illustration in an interesting direction. He goes on to say that the glass is like a piece of land. In particular, he likens the glass to the strip of land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean—the land fought over by Jews and Palestinians alike. One group calls it “Israel” and another calls it “Palestine”, but their conflict is motivated by stories—religious stories—told about the land. Harris despairs because he sees those stories as A) false and B) dangerous. They’re dangerous because they cause people to assign to that piece of real estate a value far in excess of its worth.

“The reason why the parties involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict can’t resolve their problems as though it were a real-estate transaction is because they are making irrational and irreconcilable claims [about the land].”

So in Harris’s telling, the glass is Israel/Palestine, and Elton John is “God”—a character in a story whose attachment to “the holy land” is inflating its value. The “God story” is to blame for the troubles. To finish off the analogy, Harris says:

“But while we’re arguing over the value of the glass, Elton John was never here.”

The audience applaud loudly. In fact, modern people almost *have* to applaud this point. We shouldn’t prize

land over lives. It's not worth sacrificing people for Palestine/Israel. These are the kinds of slogans we can all get behind. But why can we get behind them? Because of another story we've told ourselves—a story about human value. That's the thing we value more than everything else: more than land, more than ideologies, more than made-up stories. We value people.

But this raises some bigger questions: *Why* do we value people? And how? Let's revisit the glass analogy and see what happens if the glass refers not to a piece of land but to the human person. Here's where an audience applauding Harris might find reason to think again.

Consider a human person. Consider their material contents. "What do you want to pay me for it?" Boil me down to my chemical makeup and I'm worth about 30 bucks. Or put me to work and maybe I'll earn you more. But is that my worth? And what about *your* value? Are you more or less worthwhile than me? Some bottles contain Perrier and some contain ditch water. Some glasses are crystal; some are paper cups. But is that how we want to value *people*?

The answer for most is no. We want to recognise a value in people that goes well beyond their material makeup or their economic utility. So what is it that stands outside the human person—something greater than humans but connected to them—which elevates their worth? Paging a cosmic Elton John: humanity needs you!

Perhaps it's becoming clear why the God story and the human-rights story are connected. Without a God story (and without a very particular God story), humans

remain adrift in the world, fending for themselves and valued for their properties only—some valued more and some much less. But if there is an “Elton John figure”, someone of supreme value, and if this source of value shares a vital connection to humanity, then another possibility is opened up. By association with God, we can see humans as worth far more than the flesh-and-blood material of each of us, and far more than our blood-and-sweat toil.

Of course the *kind* of God story we consult is all-important. None of the creation myths alluded to in the last chapter would be of much help in elevating the dignity of humanity. In those stories we are the products of violence and intended for slavery. But there exists a different story, with a different God and a very different outcome for the valuation of humans. The Bible’s creation narrative may not strike us today as remarkable or revolutionary. But that can only be because we’re unfamiliar with its ancient competitors or over-familiar with its modern consequences. Many of its assumptions have become the air we breathe. So let’s give the ancient text a fresh look.

IN THE BEGINNING

“In the beginning, *Elohim*...” (Genesis 1:1). So starts the Bible. The grammar in the ancient Hebrew (the language in which the Old Testament was written) is unusual. *Elohim*, the Hebrew word for “God”, is a plural noun, but it always goes with a singular verb. It would be a little like saying in English, “The dogs is barking”. There’s a strange interplay of plural and singular. And when it

comes to God, the Bible continually brings this to our attention; there's something multiple about this God and something singular.

The biblical story is not about disparate deities—numerous gods at war with one another. Nor is it about a single tyrant—a divine dictator who stands alone, imposing his or her will. Nor is it about an impersonal force—a “thing” or an “it”. Instead, the Bible is about a personal God who is a three-unity—in other words, a “tri-unity”, or “Trinity”. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one in the most profound sense. This is a unity across distinctions—a God who is love, as the Bible will later put it. Here is a unique conception of God and from this God comes a unique conception of creation.

According to the Hebrew Bible, it is this God, and this God alone, who “created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). Here is another example of unity across difference. Ancient Hebrew, like modern languages such as French and German, uses grammatical genders. In this instance, the word for “heavens” is masculine and the word for “earth” is feminine. Upon hearing such a set-up, an ancient myth-lover may have anticipated a tale of sexual congress (or conquest) among the gods. Instead, heaven and earth—sky and land—face one another and await a different kind of love story. It's not the gods who will personify creation's romance; it's humanity. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Soon we'll consider the romance; first we must explore the set-up.

In verse 2, we read of the “void”, “darkness”, and “the deep”:

“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”

If we read this from the perspective of ancient peoples, we might here expect a battle. Perhaps the waters will writhe in rebellion. Perhaps the dark forces will conspire against one another. Perhaps war will break out and the victor gods will hurl their enemies into the deep. Yet in the biblical story there may be a primordial void, “formless and empty”, but what fills it are not ambitious deities but a brooding “Spirit of God”, patiently waiting. Waiting for what?

“And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

This story stands apart from the crowd, as does its God. In another tale the blank void would be a battleground; here it is a stage awaiting its actors. Then, like a spotlight, God’s word enters the breach—unopposed and unwavering—and darkness flees. Light is victorious. Life is spoken.

And so it goes on in the verses that follow: day after day emptiness is filled, potential is formed, chaos is ordered. The heavens, the earth and the waters are commanded and, in obedience to the word of God, they shine, they sprout and they teem. There are no wars, no jealousies, no rebellion. There is a process—from simple to complex. There is progress—from dark emptiness to radiant abundance. Step by careful step, something is unfolding under the guidance of one creative Voice. In time the land and seas themselves bring forth life. Creation creates. Life gives life.

In the Bible the cosmos is not a machine, grinding along according to grim necessity. Nor is it a war zone, boiling with intrigue and violence. Nor is there a “click of the fingers” from a Magician on high. This is artistry, intended and loved. And at every turn the verdict is pronounced: “And God saw that it was good.”

At the end of the process, we hear the emphatic declaration: “It was very good” (v 31). Why? Because the culmination of creation has arrived: humanity. The stage was being set all along. A space was being cleared: under heaven, upon the earth, and between the waters. Here comes the pinnacle of it all:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’

*“So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.” (v 26-27)*

On the first page of the Bible we might expect to hear how it is God who rules over the world. Yet this is humanity’s role. Mankind is made not to slave but to reign. Male and female together are kings and queens of the cosmos and are stamped with the image and likeness of God.

Moderns may yawn at the idea, but ancients would choke on it. Male and female equally in God’s image? Equally reigning over God’s world? Unheard of! In other creation stories the *king* might be said to be an image of a god.

After all, tyrants portray well the kind of rule exercised by the gods. But in Genesis we have a very different picture of God and therefore of humanity. As another Hebrew Scripture would put it, “The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to the human race” (Psalm 115:16). We have here the sense of blessing flowing from above: from heaven to earth *through* mankind. Dominion, not subjection, is our lot. And our *kind* of dominion is meant to be a picture God’s. In other words, it is meant to be power wielded for the benefit of those without it.

ASCENDING APES AND FALLEN ANGELS

Novelist Terry Pratchett summarised well two competing visions for humanity. Some consider us “ascending apes”; for others we are “fallen angels”. Which is it?

Before picking a side, it’s worth knowing that the Bible speaks to both visions. We are certainly frail, earth-bound, physical creatures, coming at the end of the creative process. In the poetic vision of Genesis 2, mankind is formed from the dust. Materially speaking we are base and brittle, and our lives are brief. But we are also breathed upon by God. There is bottom-up-ness to us and top-down-ness to us. We are dirt-bags kissed by heaven. Beloved dust. In ourselves we are like that one-dollar water glass. But we are touched by the divine too, and in connection with God we are precious beyond all earthly valuation. Precious, but profoundly flawed. That’s the meaning of the next chapter of the story.

Genesis 3 describes what is often called “the fall”. It’s a fall from the light and life of the Bible’s opening chapters into

darkness and death. Everything had been harmonious, responding in obedience to the voice of God. Then Adam and Eve, the first humans, rebel against that voice—the command of God—and chaos ensues.

Notice how different this is from the other ancient stories. In those tales, mishaps and mayhem precede creation and pervade it necessarily. We could sing, along with Billy Joel, “we didn’t start the fire”. But Genesis sings a different song: humanity really did start the fire. We are not victims of the world; the world is a victim of us. Humanity was put at the helm of the good ship Earth, and it is we who ran it aground.

I admit this is a lot to swallow. My point here is not to convince you of the Genesis story but merely to show you the unparalleled role which humanity plays within it. Even when things fall apart, the Bible pays us the immense compliment of blaming us. Heaven and earth were made for a properly functioning humanity. Faulty humanity means a faulty world. In response to Adam and Eve’s fall, the Lord details the consequences: toil at work, troubles at home, the battle of the sexes, the frustration of the earth, and our own mortality (Genesis 3:14-24). These are all laid at our door. Whatever you think of the plausibility or the proportionality of this, the scale of the disaster is a testament to the significance of the cause—the significance of *us*. There is profound importance attached to human dignity in the Bible, not merely as regards our dominion but also as regards our culpability. As rulers, as divine image-bearers, *and* as cosmic fire starters, humanity has the kind of significance reserved, in other religions, for the gods.

THE RADICAL ERROR

Late in the 2nd century, Celsus, one of Christianity's fiercest critics, said, "The radical error in Jewish and Christian thinking is that it is anthropocentric [human centred]. They say that God made all things for man, but this is not at all evident."¹⁹ What was evident to Celsus was that "in no way is man better in God's sight than ants and bees". In this, Celsus was following in the footsteps of Plato. The notion that humans were different in kind from nature and from animals (a view sometimes called "human exceptionalism") was an affront to reason and nature. Therefore, Christians and Jews shared a root problem. Their radical error was that they were much, much too humanistic.

Of course, Christians only compounded the problem by insisting that the divine Son of God—described in the New Testament as "the Word" who made the world—became man (John 1:1-14). Celsus notes with horror that the Christian God "forsakes the whole universe and the course of the heavenly spheres to dwell with us alone".²⁰ If it was pride to think God specially blesses man, what kind of lunacy imagines that he *becomes* man? For Celsus this was nonsense. For a Christian, though, this is precisely what *makes* sense—of everything. If you believe that "man" (in the universal sense of the word) has been established to have "dominion", then of course the true King would show up as man. Of course he enters history, centre stage, in

19 Quoted in T.R. Glover, *The Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire*. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/39092/39092-h/39092-h.htm> (para. 244). Accessed 29th October 2021.

20 Quoted in Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual* (Penguin, 2015), p 71.

this way. Humanity is the location he prepared for himself right back “in the beginning”. To become human is exactly the sort of thing *this* God would do. And he did it so as to take the wheel of his own world and guide creation home.

The view which Celsus called an error would go on to win the day. The inherent value of each human, made “in the image of God”, is right at the root of our modern view of the world. From the time of Celsus onwards, history has witnessed the overturning of his assumptions and the establishment of Christian ones. Now human equality, human rights and *humanism* can trace their sources back to this biblical root.

This of course raises the question: without such a belief, what might remain of human rights and equality?

If you consult Celsus, he will answer from the perspective of the classical world: *Quit your human-centredness! The gods are indifferent, and nature is unequal.*

If you consult Harari, he will answer from our modern understanding: *The struggle for survival is indifferent and viciously unequal. Human rights are as fictional as the God who underwrites them.*

Both men though, ancient and modern, are correct in this: the God story and the equality story stand or fall together. If we feel that life is sacred, that every human possesses an inviolable dignity and equality, and that no one deserves to be trampled down simply because they are smaller or weaker or poorer, then we are standing on particularly biblical foundations. There is a thread running from Genesis through the New Testament to

our 21st-century humanist convictions. In the coming chapters we will trace out the developments in more detail, but for now it's enough to know that the thread is strong. It needs to be—the modern world hangs by it.