

no intention of telling you the Name of the Avatar I am describing. Rama and Krishna I have mentioned. These are Avatars of the Vishnu aspect of Godhead, the aspect of fostering, preserving. The Shiva aspect of Godhead, the aspect of destruction and consummation, is right now incarnate in Human Flesh and carrying out the Mission on which He has come. You will have to find out His Name, for yourself.

The one clear fact is that Jesus of Nazareth is not an Avatar of the Lord. He does not behave as one. He does not identify Himself as one. He is not called one. He is not one. He is something else. But, What? Who? Are you ready?

MONASTICISM

Let us examine the parallel sources, beginning with the Prophets of Israel. In most cases, the accounts of the lives of these men and women is hardly more specific than the account of Jesus' life. In fact, with a few exceptions, such as Elijah, Elisha, Moses, Jeremiah, the record of their lives is about as terse as a classical Hebrew couplet, than which nothing is terser, save, perhaps, the Tetragrammaton. Even what is told of those about whose lives the text is a little more than reticent is so intensely paradigmatic, so little discursive, that a Lives of the Prophets must end up as, roughly, 10% evidence, 20% inference and 70% speculation. Which is to say, it is

an historian's headache. Furthermore, barring the unlikely discovery of some authentic mid-First Millenium, B.C., equivalent of St. Jerome's DE VIRIS ILLUSTRIBUS, but focused on the Hebrew Prophets, this headache and its antecedent causes seem destined for veneration as Unconditional Conditions.

In other words, the same sort of perplexities that afflict our study of the historicity of Jesus afflict equally our inquiry regarding the historicity of His Biblical predecessors and prototypes.

Now, I think it is right here that modern Biblical scholarship has made one of its most valuable contributions to the historian's art. It was perceived earlier in this century that the Bible is concerned with history insofar as incidents thereof serve a hortatory purpose. The intent of the narratives is didactic in the broadest sense of that term and not expository as our modern historical writing tries to be. That Mrs. H's laundry, drying on the line, served to inspire Mr. Q, Master Cellist to the Berlinda Philharmonic, to new heights of lyric fancy -- a perfectly important matter for the modern historian -- will likely be overlooked by the writers of sacred canon in favor of incidents which more fully exemplify the primal and primary modes of gaining salvation, of making life holy. The Bible tells stories with a tendentious intent, one that is teleological and soteriological. The Bible is bumptious literature, par excellence.

History is not just what happened. It is what happened that positively and unequivocally shows the purpose of life and its real consummation.

(Elsewhere I have stated that history is the lives of saints and sages and their contemporaries. Period.) The word used by scholars to indicate this type of writing was Kerygmatic. By this is meant that Biblical historiography is a few terse stories relating a few terse incidents that, in themselves, are types and models of the great matters of fundamental importance for mankind, namely, matters of morality and salvation. Each story has an inner spiritual or moral significance. Names and events are important only insofar as they illustrate the moral of the story, making that clear and understandable. The heuristic intent is paramount throughout the Bible -- we may say, throughout all sacred literature. The perception of this fact, which, in practice, draws a line of demarcation between Biblical and modern historiography, making the former seem arcane and remote to the latter, was a major contribution of modern Biblical scholarship.

Not long after this heuristic nature of the Bible was appreciated, the appreciation itself became wildly abstracted, so much so that it was being whispered jocularly that the Kerygma or stories (about Jesus, Moses, Elijah, etc.) might stand on their own without any historical personality supporting them at all -- and that, in fact, this may well be the circumstance of their genesis. In other words, the stories -- the Bible -- are the luxurious foliage of ancient man's creativity in the realm of myth-production. Fortunately, in this view, the myths, the Kerygma, have some value for illumining the perplexities of modern existence, so that while they are ancient, they are not entirely antiquated, or at least, not all of them. Presumably, the stories we like are not beneath the pall whereas the stories we do not like are.

It is no use disputing with this reverie. Its error consists not in its foliage but in its root, even its seed. It is an abstraction of a truth, which is that Biblical historiography is heuristic historiography. Its error is of the same logical type as saying that a man skiing down a slope is, obviously, going to be doing that indefinitely. Quite obviously, he is not. Abstracting simple facts clean out of the bounds of reality is a disease of scholars the whimsy and vagary of whose minds is not yet curbed. Unhappily, it is a common infirmity, and not just among scholars.

So let us take the valuable insight that Biblical historiography is heuristic (one is amused to wonder with what picked phrases St. Jerome might accost those scholars of modernity who proclaimed this "novel discovery"), leaving aside its whimsical abstraction, and use it to examine the lives of some Prophets. For example, Elijah.

Here is a man who, for all the world, appears from nowhere as the Voice of Doom. He apparently leads a somewhat uncomfortable existence, on the qui vive. He is far removed from the gorgeous tables of Samaria. He is as well-known as he is feared. But he is feared in unequal measure by different people. Ahab and his Consort fear him most, the priests of baal least and the people en masse somewhat. His antecedents and station in life are, apparently, better known to his contemporaries, who take them for granted, than they are to us, who wonder. What are those antecedents, what is his station in life? Why this profound fear of a Man of God? To answer these questions we cannot avoid making some inferences from the scratchy record that is before us.

The man has a very intimate communion with God. He hears the Divine Voice. He banters the Godhead for resolving his doubts. He is able to use -- and so must be assumed to be in possession of -- several powers usually associated with God alone. He raises a person from death on his own authority. His prayer to God produces rain or draught -- as he wishes. His curses bear fruit almost instantly. He can command the masses to slaughter wicked persons wholesale. Just his authority in the physical realm is enough to incite panic in the palace. He is one of but two people in the Bible who, apparently, do not taste death -- the other being Melchizedek, by inference. Finally, he inspires a disciple, Elisha, to a sort of apostleship in his prophetic milieu, or what is today called "school."

Well, to speak of him as associated with or even founding a prophetic school is probably a rather tepid, if not fatuous, description of what is going on here. The word "school," in the sense of a number of like-motivated (God-ward) individuals, conveys some tidbit of what is here. But the word to us means, basically, a congeries of disputants, a gaggle of scholars, and we can safely predict that it is not such an insipid, ill-disciplined congregation which will expire the likes of Elijah, Elisha and Jeremiah.

No. If there is a "school" of Prophets in ancient Israel of which Elijah and others are representatives or members or both, it is probably more like a monastic movement in the ancient sense meant by Sts. Anthony and Benedict than an academic one in the sense meant by our word "school." It is a conceit of some professors that they are Prophets. Furthermore, it is probable that, if there is a monastic movement in ancient Israel, it is pluralistic in expression: anchorites, coenobites, married, celibate,

etc. And, in this sense, terms like "Prophet," "Sons of the Prophets" and "Man of God" can probably be taken as having the flavor of what the Christian tradition has meant by terms like "Monk," "Abbot" and "Saint" (prior to canonization). In other words, we can say, very broadly, that ancient Israel was infiltrated with monasticism in much the same way that Western civilization -- and Eastern civilization -- has been all along, even, in spots, prior to its Christianization. Qumran did hardly drop from nowhere into a vacuum.

It is out of this monastic background that the Prophets -- probably all of them, but with the possible exception of Amos -- emerge on the stage of Middle-Eastern History. Monasticism, already as pluralistic as we know it by the 13th Century, A.D., is probably well-established in the ancient Middle-East by the time of the Prophets of Israel. And it is probably experiencing all the vicissitudes known to afflict that special calling and occupation.

In this sense do I say that the contemporaries of the Prophets are more familiar with their antecedents and station in life -- taking them for granted, in fact -- than we are. Monasticism in ancient Israel is a known fact. Nor would it be far-fetched to surmise that this very familiarity with the monastic antecedents of the Prophetic Presence accounts, at least in part, for the absence of textual evidence confirming their details. Tell a modern man that some scurvy doom-sayer is a Benedictine Monk or a Franciscan Friar and the effect on him, the information this will convey to him concerning the identity of the one making these obnoxious noises, might be very like the effect of telling some ancient Middle-Eastern townsman

or farmer that his assailant is a Prophet. He will have a reasonably accurate picture of the man's antecedents and station in life, that he has "come out of the desert" where folk of his type and calling usually stay, thankfully. The term Prophet, probably, means to an ancient Middle-Easterner pretty much what the term Monk, or, for the more educated, Mendicant, means to us. (Historically, the line between a Monk and a Mendicant is not always so sharp as the dictionary indicates, a fact (spent some ungraceful moments learning.) Franciscans . . . Actually, it has to do with the inner spiritual needs of the aspirant.)

All of this is admittedly inferential guess-work which some may declare downright speculation. Personally, I am sure it is inferential, and I should not object if it be called speculative. But, I would feel comfortable insisting that, inasmuch as there is no evidence to the contrary and much evidence to encourage these inferences, if I have strayed into speculation, there are good grounds for believing that no prejorative connotation can be attached to that transgression because what the supposedly speculative aspect of my reconstruction pictures is not more or other than what any historian of man's religious meanderings will affirm occurs in practically every time and clime. If there is one religious form that is common to every major religion and familiar to every historian of religion, it is monasticism -- in some form or other. Who can say with certainty that this same phenomenon, in all of its pluralism, is not the background for the Prophets of Israel, at least for most of them? I do not believe anyone can. And I do believe that the inferential -- even the speculative -- evidence for saying that it probably is their background is too strong to be gainsaid. I will, accordingly, proceed to take it as a fact.

Now we can get somewhere because we are speaking in familiar terms. Now the record of key Biblical personalities, right down to and including Jesus of Nazareth, can be read with some sense of satisfaction, born of acquaintance. The Prophets of Israel are not wierd apparitions, holographic images projected ^{into} the Abyss of Darkness. Take Elijah, again. Ahab considered his body subject to puncture by arrow and spear. He was afflicted with the desire to eat food. He sought shelter from the elements. He was at least minimally garbed. One does not need to ascend into a frenzy to suggest that he shaved or trimmed his beard and that he had to relieve nature. He had emotions of warm tenderness and unsurpassed wrath. He enjoyed a wide reputation for holiness and great power. The King knew him very well and also what his presence meant. He was in every way an ordinary man except as regards his attention and mission. The focus of these aspects of his person had been planted by God and nourished in the existing monastic milieu of Ninth Century Palestine. About the details of this milieu the Bible is reticent, but that does not mean it exists not. Far from it. In the Elisha Cycle we see it referred to with something like precision, though without elucidation.

By themselves, the experiences of the Prophets stand out in stark contrast to our normal religiosity. "The Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah" How? Where? We ask with some legitimate curiosity. The Bible is reticent. Should we doubt it, then? Not likely. Too much has happened from it for it to be regarded as creative mythos -- say instead, what some scholars believe, bathos. Hop east a little, or south a millenium or so later, and observe similar things being said and done by similar people. Keep in mind that it is monasticism as a cultural reality that is producing these scurvey

prophets (Rabbi Heschel *would* get a twinkle in his eye and a grin under his beard as he declared, solemnly, that the world's most anti-Semitic literature is the Bible) and instantly they become not stark figures of apparently wild, rootless origin but plain, simple figures of the type that every major religion has been producing for millenia because every major religion inspires and fosters monasticism in one form or other or more. The Prophets are the exhalation of monasticism, pure and simple.

Men and women (Deborah? Miriam?) gathered in communities of more and less structural regularity for pursuing the religious life, or, what is called piety, spiritual exercise. The details of their monastic life can only be speculated about, and I have no stomach for that, but it is safe to say that monasticism in ancient Israel was pluralistic in form. Most of all can we say that Men of God and Women of God were well-known phenomena, at least in principle.

In fact, it may be asserted that these men and women, and the monastic reality that nurtured them, were the driving force, the embodiment, of that ancient religion we may call Hebraism. It is often thought that Hebraism rather dropped from the sky or that it depended, for succor and renewal, on the periodic excrescence of great souls who reinstalled and reinvigorated the ancient principles and ways. It is further thought that, gradually at least, the locus and focus of the vitality of Hebraism became the Temple worship at Jerusalem. I am not inclined to discount any of these factors in the preservation and propagation of Hebraism. A ship is built by many craftsmen using divers tools and materials. But I do not see any harm and do see much merit in insisting point-blank that behind the drop

from the sky, behind the great souls, behind the Liturgy at Jerusalem was a viable and vital -- though, for us at least, not too visible -- monastic reality that served to uphold and inspire all the rest. The shipwrights were members, more or less, of a Guild, monks and nuns. They were the point, the shock troops of God's Army. It has ever been thus in religious affairs. Catholics tend to appreciate the seminal power of monasticism more than Protestants do.

I use the term "monastic reality" deliberately. I do not mean to suggest that ancient Israel was settled with cloisters, a Rule (even several Rules) and monks in habits. The morphology and demography of monasticism during the Middle Ages of Europe is not what I have in mind. We do not know that ancient Israel was or was not so settled, at least not until the Third Century, B.C., when we know that it definitely was. Nor do we know that there were anchorites, coenobites, etc. We do know that there were bands of disciples of various prophets and it is reasonable to presume that these bands had some form of organization and shared community, but of details we can only speculate. However, using the principle of redundancy -- one known thing always has ten or more like it unseen in the background -- we can safely predict that monasticism in ancient Israel was a fairly well-generalized phenomenon with some proper monks, some improper ones and some indifferent. In other words, the probability is high that ancient Israel has a monastic reality which, in broad terms, closely approximates in diversity of forms and sincerity of espousal those monastic realities we meet at other times and climes, including a few centuries later in Palestine itself.

The point I want to make here is that monasticism in ancient Israel served the same purpose it does elsewhere: it is the foundation of, the generator of and the incubator for religion in general. And since religion is the source of civilization itself, we should say that monasticism is the foundation of, the generator of and the incubator for civilization. From the monastic reality come the great souls, the great writings, the great declarations, the great injunctions, probably even the great Liturgies. These fundamentals of civilization come from those from whom they always come: those engaged in monastic existence. This is a universal phenomenon, common to every religion and every civilization worthy of the name.

It is well-known that Benedictine Monasticism served to generate, incubate and preserve Western Civilization during the "Dark Ages" (a misnomer). What is perhaps not so well-known is that monasticism serves this same purpose all over the globe and always has, regardless of the "religion" it is named for. Monasticism, in one form or another, underlies every major religion (and every civilization) and is the live battery for all of them. Monasticism is not just a Christian or a Buddhist, etc., phenomenon but a human one, for, it answers a basic need, which is, to be free.

Regarding the reality of monasticism among Semites, T. E. Lawrence has written feelingly and from direct experience. He observes that Semitic monasticism is the basis of the great Semitic religions, Hebraism, Christianity and Islam. The Founders, the Apostles, the Prophets, the Holy Men -- that is, all the types that go to make a religion, which is what makes a civilization -- all have gone into the vast, arid recesses of the desert, there to commune with the primordial Silence, to contemplate

the absolute Is-ness of the Eternal One. Then, soaked in devotion, *wrung* dry of every worldly attachment and fired with zeal for Truth, they descend upon the towns and villages of ordinary humanity to rekindle faith, to instill courage, to shake awake the complacent from their cups and to scorn the perfidious purveyors of irreligion, whoever they may be and however placed. The scene recurs over and over in Semitic history. Lawrence, among the Bedouin, observed it first-hand and caught its essential savor: renunciation -- stark, tight, grim -- detachment -- bold, absolute, unyielding -- producing joy, gaiety, Bliss unspeakable.

This essential truth of Life -- renunciation -- is the core and cause of every religion espoused by humankind. It is kept alive not in the cities, where glitter and glamor litter the minds of men, enticing them into paths of ruin, but in the countryside, among the towns and villages, and especially, among the monastic communities. The monastic reality or ideal, which is the pattern observed by Lawrence in Arabia, was most assuredly represented and practiced in Palestine throughout the tenure there of the Sons of Abraham and probably even preceded their tenure as much as it did follow it. This is the point I want most to make. The monastic reality -- Men of God and Women of God -- was well known in ancient Israel, at least in principle.

What makes a man or a woman a monk or a nun is not a robe and not a rosary and not a cloister and not a choir and not a Rule and not a rationale but an inward repentance, a turning away from attachment to the world, that is, to the body, to the senses and their cravings, and a turning toward attachment to God, to Truth, to Reality. It matters not that ^{one is} a

king or a menial, a businessman or a professor, married or celibate, wealthy or poor, educated or uneducated, black or white, Christian or Mohammedan or whatever. If the inward disposition, the deepest urge, the fondest emotion, the central attitude is that of renunciation, ^{one} is a ^{monastic,} pure and simple. ← The walk of life, the style of dress, the social prominence mean nothing. The inner feeling of renunciation makes one a monk or a nun. That is all it takes. The rest is incidental and transitory. God looks at the heart and its yearning. No amount of vestments or ornaments can fool Him.

So, when I say that a monastic reality permeates ancient Israel, I do not mean that it is all cloisters and the Sacred Office. These recognizable signs of monasticism probably were there. Certainly there is no reason to doubt that they were. But I am wanting to indicate that monasticism is a far deeper reality than buildings and rites and that it is inside this inner, spiritual monasticism that we have to peer to find the actual resources the Semites possessed for producing Prophets, writings and even whole religions -- three of man's eleven, from a fraction of his population, in fact. Some record! The Semites, as Lawrence pointed out, are very good at detachment from everything worldly and that detachment is the true source of all their power and all of their religious prolixity. This Semitic genius for renunciation, primarily, but not excluding organized communities of some sort, is what I want to indicate as the monastic reality permeating and supporting the Prophets of Israel. I submit that if we will keep this genius in mind -- better yet, practice it -- we can have no trouble recognizing the historicity of the prominent personalities of Semitic Religion, Hebrew, Christian and Islamic. They are all, uniformly,

products of the fundamental monastic reality -- renunciation -- which was then, is now and ever shall be the foundation of Life, world without end. Amen.

ONE GOD

Now, there is another observation regarding the Prophets that needs to be made. It is that the communion certain of them -- and probably more than we know of -- enjoy with God is of like quality and quantity with that enjoyed by certain Christian saints. One gets the feeling that Elijah did very nicely in his piety without contemplating the Creator through a Crucifix. This has always been an embarrassing possibility for Christian theologians and is rather vividly suggested by the picture of St. Jerome *going* to a Rabbi at night for learning his Hebrew. It is an endless embarrassment for Calvin and many of the Fathers, who somewhat united in proclaiming that the ancients knew God, that is, Christ, in "shadow" form but that we know Him clearly in the Incarnation.

Now, while I am disinclined to throw my puny weight against the daunting witness of the Fathers and Reformers, who pretty much supported the Fathers in this particular, I do feel justified in making some delicate remarks to the general effect that, while I can understand and do heartily appreciate the urge of the Fathers to insist upon the uniqueness of the Incarnation