Chapter 13:
Antisemitism: From Paradox to BS

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1. Antiquity: the ungraspable paradox

It is problematic to speak of antisemitism in antiquity. The Jews’ adoption of monotheism does not appear to have impinged upon the discourse of the philosophers, who never remarked on the common reliance of both metaphysics and Judaism on the declarative sentence as a model for an objective, nonostensive relationship to (sacred) reality. In antiquity, the idea that the sacred was a universal human phenomenon that linked each specific community to a common origin was not so much denied as granted only secondary importance in comparison with the “ecumenical” necessity of accepting the sacred of other communities. That is, “polytheism” is less a matter of insisting on the essential plurality of gods than of showing deference to other communities and “their” gods. We may allege in its defense that it exemplifies a tolerance that modern ecumenism cannot equal; the polytheist does not claim that “his” god is superior, nor even that the gods themselves are fundamentally different, but rather that we all deal with the sacred in our own way and that no one need assert the superiority of his own, rooted as each set of rituals and customs is in a particular history. In this context, the Jews’ One God seems merely to be their god whom they churlishly claim to be transcendentally superior to everyone else’s, not the embodiment of a superior insight into the nature of divinity/humanity itself.

Judaism’s offense in antiquity was to “diplomacy.” The truth of the One God undiplomatically asserts Jewish firstness, we might say, in two ways: (1) we realize that there is only One God; you do not; (2) we worship the One God, who has chosen us, not you, as his focus of revelation among the communities of the world. The One God is not a particular God, but he can only be experienced in the particularity of being. Whence the sacrificial setting of the “burning
bush,” where God does not appear but where his human interlocutor must be present. To be present to God is an act of particularity whose exclusivity the Hebrews cannot but attribute to themselves as “God’s own people.” The Greeks could not proclaim Zeus the One God, not merely because worshipers of Poseidon and the others would protest, but because they could not conceive themselves as limited to the community in which Zeus was worshipped, as he presumably had been in the past at Dodona and elsewhere, if not as the One God, then as the Only God.

This hostility to the Hebrews is not quite “antisemitism,” since it cannot clearly see the Hebrew violation of protocol as a historical claim of firstness. The Jews were seen simply as intolerant, placing their tribal god over all others. A philosopher such as Xenophanes, author of the famous lines about horses and lions—as well as Scythians and Ethiopians—creating gods in their image, could conclude that there was one (greatest?) god inconceivable in anthropomorphic terms. For philosophers even today, such a god is more sophisticated than the One God of the Jews, whom they often call “Yahweh” (as Jews in principle never do) to suggest that he is “really” just the god of a local community. But the “unique god” of Xenophanes is a mere abstraction, cut off from ritual worship, a concept of god rather than the One God himself. Or to put it a bit differently, this god’s historical link to the origin has been severed because it does not reach back to the originary moment where there was indeed only “one god” at the center of the originary scene. What the Jews affirm on faith is that their God is the One God not because they can trace his history to the moment of human origin but because his and their very existence implies the existence of such a filiation. This is inconceivable to the Greeks, who could only “deduce” the Unique God from the generality of gods. To decide whether Xenophanes’ god was really unique or just greater than the other gods is unimportant, since in any case he would be an abstraction standing over the “real” gods worshiped by specific communities. In an ecumenical world, the only “supreme god” is one who usurps the role of the pantheon and takes all the godly roles for himself. He cannot be, like the God of the Jews, the unique god of a community discovered/revealed to be the One God not because he is “superior” to others but because the specific community realizes that it is a model of the entire human community and that the scene of worship is ontologically unique since it derives in each case from the unique originary scene.

Hence it is not accurate to oppose the Jews’ One God to the anthropomorphic gods mocked by Xenophanes. The One God’s “invisibility” is not necessitated by the need to avoid offering a particular image. Christianity could never have emerged within the Jewish orbit had anthropomorphism been a key issue. The point is not that God cannot look like any given human being but