



*The Gifts of the Jews*¹

A Book Review

Author

“Thomas Cahill (born 1940 in New York City) is an American scholar and writer. He is best known for The Hinges of History series . . . , in which the author recounts formative moments in Western civilization.”² The second book in this series is *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*.³

Introduction

“Without the Jews, we would see the world through different eyes, hear with different ears, even feel with different feelings . . . [W]e would think with a different mind, interpret all our experience differently, draw different conclusions from the things that befall us. And we would set a different course for our lives.”⁴ How, then, did this tribe of desert nomads change the way everyone thinks and feels?

“Without the Jews, we would see the world through different eyes, hear with different ears, even feel with different feelings.”

Monotheism

The Hebrews — eventually called Jews — believed that there was only one God. They were the first monotheists. To them God was One. For them the unutterable name of God was *YHWH*. Strangely, the term *YHWH* is not a

noun or an adjective. *YHWH* is a verb form. God is the One who acts! Furthermore, this One God acts as a Person, an Individual, rather than as some unapproachable, immovable, impassible essence or energy. The One God also is the Creator. He is the One who made all things, so that “without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3).

Democracy

“Democracy . . . grows directly out of the Israelite vision of individuals, subjects of value because they are images of God, each with a unique and personal destiny.”⁵

Relationality

But to the Jews the Creator-God not only had made all mankind in his own image as individuals. This same God repeatedly entered into covenantal relationship with mankind. Thus, God enters into relational existence with mankind. The “God-human relationship has at last made possible a genuine human-human relationship.”⁶

The “God-human relationship has at last made possible a genuine human-human relationship.”

Freedom and Responsibility

The One God of the Hebrews did not create human beings as robots. He made them to be free and responsible. In Hebrew Scripture, when God and two of his companions appeared to Abraham in the wilderness, they sat and ate with Abraham by his tent, conversed with him, and engaged in a verbal tug of war (Genesis 18). This was the beginning of ultimate freedom and responsibility. Like Jacob, Abraham and his descendants freely and responsibly prevailed with God (Genesis 32:24-32).

Historicity

For the archaic cultures of the world, there was no sense of linear time. Everything was cyclical. But to Abraham and his descendants, the world was not a wheel or circle. “Avram went’ — really went.”⁷ “Since time is no longer cyclical but one-way and irreversible, personal history is now possible and an individual life can have value. . . . And without the individual, neither time nor history is possible.”⁸

Innovation

“The Israelites, by becoming the first people to live — psychologically — in real time, also became the first people to value the New and to welcome Surprise.”⁹

“The Israelites, by becoming the first people to live — psychologically — in real time, also became the first people to value the New and to welcome Surprise.”

Education

“Israel . . . [was] the first human society to so value education and the first to envision it as a universal pursuit — and a democratic obligation that those in power must safeguard on behalf of those in their employ.”¹⁰

Justice

From the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13), came “Israel’s interpretation of the murder prohibition as including an obligation in justice to have-nots.”¹¹

Compassionate Selfhood

“ . . . [A]fter many catastrophes, the people who became the Jews could begin to go from the *I* of David to the *I* of the spirit, to the *I* of the individual, to the *I* of compassion-for-the-*I*-of-others.”¹²

*“ . . . [A]fter many catastrophes, the people who became the Jews could begin to go from the *I* of David to the *I* of the spirit, to the *I* of the individual, to the *I* of compassion-for-the-*I*-of-others.”*

Conclusion

“‘The Jews gave us the Outside and the Inside — our outlook and our inner life,’ he [Thomas Cahill] concludes. ‘We dream Jewish dreams and hope Jewish hopes. Most of our best words, in fact — new adventure, surprise; unique, individual, person, vocation; time, history, future; freedom, progress, spirit; faith, hope, justice — are gifts of the Jews.’

“And so is Cahill’s book a gift.”¹³

Endnotes

1. Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1998).
2. *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, “Thomas Cahill,” at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Cahill.
3. See note 1.
4. Cahill, *Gifts of the Jews*, p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 94, 95.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
13. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, *The New York Times on the Web*, at www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/15/daily/jews-book-review.html.

Copyright © 2009 Worldview Publications