

PSALM 14: “The fool says in his heart / ‘There is no God’”

Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) an influential German Jewish existentialist thinker, author of *The Star of Redemption* was as a young man about to convert to Christianity. This was just what *Das Man, They, the Crowd*, wanted of assimilated German Jews – before Hitler came to power. For the *Crowd*, God was more accessible through his son (Yeshua ben Josef v’ Miryam although to Christians His Son) than through YHVH taken literally as the Hebrew tribal Biblical God-of-vengeance as well as a God (especially for his Chosen People) of love. Today for Liberal Jews God-as-ethical-being-in-the-world is accessible through all his righteous sons and daughters who live up to *b’tselem*, the image of God who in my opinion is a sign or symbol for Aristotle’s *nous* (ethical intuition) *phronesis* (practical intelligence) and *sophia* (interpretative wisdom) or Rabbi Akiva’s and later Rabbinical adjurations: the God of free-will and the God of the Neighbour-is-Yourself, the Other who does not and would not kill me in Levinas and the Thou in Buber. These descriptions are essentially ethical or ontological rather than metaphysical.

To continue the story of Rosenzweig: he went to an Orthodox congregation in Berlin on Yom Kippur to become a proper Jew before, as he saw it then, moving from a lower to a higher form of religious belief. Rosenzweig was so impressed by the congregants’ devotion to the symbolic Ethical Father that he realised that Judaism was right for Jews and Christianity was right for the others, leaving Islam and the other religions out of the equation – wrong but understandable in an age of European imperialism and colonialism.

Moreover even when, as the psalmist puts it, the atheist reacting as a fool to the literally fabulous portrayal of a weird and wonderful God who can make the universe in six days about five and a half thousand years ago, Rosenzweig entered into this fabulous mythology and makes it sacred within the context of the synagogue service. Here the mythology of the immanent God, the *Shekhina*, becomes a felt presence. Even when we know that a Redactor living in 6th century BCE Babylon probably edited the Torah and other Redactors went on editing the Tanakh till it was declared Holy Writ by the rabbis in Hellenistic and Roman Palestine. Meanwhile the Mishna was being written and collated in Yavneh by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi in the second century CE.

What, or who, exactly, are the fools who says “There is no God” actually? Richard Dawkins is not a fool. The real fool is the one who cannot de-code, who cannot, tragically, learn from his or her mistakes. Everyone makes terrible mistakes in their lives, or if they don’t, others make mistakes which impact on them to the extent that they suffer, sometimes irreparably. Maimonides (1135-1204) perhaps the wisest Jewish thinker of all time and his father, also a wise judge (a *dayan*) did not wait in 12th century Cordova to be murdered by the Almohades invaders of the Spanish Caliphate but migrated to North Africa and then to Fostat near Cairo where Moshe ben Maimon became physician to the vizier of Saladin the Caliph. Tragically not every Jewish community wakes up in time as to the fatal threat of particular anti-Semitism. Until I went back to the New South Africa and actually met people including children, living (and dying) with greater dignity and courage than under apartheid, and maintaining their religious belief in the face of terrible hardship from which the

new ANC government (which was not prepared for power) could not deliver them, I really did not understand the symbolic significance of the final verse of this psalm:

O that deliverance for Israel would come out of Zion.