

The Symmetry Of History (Part One)

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To believe the old adage, “History repeats itself,” is to confess finding in history a certain symmetry, much like the iconic rooster on a kitchen tablecloth. As one surveys broad swaths of history, does he find patterns—recurring structures—appearing, like those colorful roosters—surely all siblings—on his tablecloth, standing proudly here and there, again and again?¹

Members of the Body of Christ are inclined to answer, “Yes.” Together, the unchanging nature of mankind and the dogged commitment to wickedness of the prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2:2) work to create reduplicate events over a period of time. Today, as in olden time, mankind remains “desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9), and Satan is the same old worldwide deceiver (Revelation 12:9). This prevailing incorrigibility of man and demonic prince spawns historical symmetry.

Of Pivots, Axes, Fulcrums, and Tipping Points

The historian and existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers seemingly denied the concept of reduplication in history in his assertion that one particular era was uniquely and discretely pivotal. A pivot is a point on which a larger structure turns. Think of a teeter-totter or seesaw; the support bar on which the board rests is a pivot. The pivot is the fulcrum on which the seesaw operates. By extension, a pivot is any vitally important thing on which other things are based or their proper function depends.

One good way to think of the extended meaning of pivot is to think of a tipping point, a point in time when (often uncontrollable) events begin to happen that dramatically change the outcome of a situation.² In modern parlance, we might use the adjective “crossover” to refer to the notion of a pivot point, as in the sentence, “A station wagon is a crossover vehicle, somewhere between a truck and a sedan.”

So, a pivotal time in history is a unique and an essential one, a time that is definitive to successive epochs. Jaspers conceived of the 600 years roughly from 800 BC to 200 BC as a pivotal period in history, using the German noun *Achsenzeit*, which literally means “axis time.” The thrust of the German term, however, is “pivot.” Jaspers’ English translators used the term “Axial Period” or “Axial Age” to refer to this 600-year period.

The actual pivot point, he argues, was around 500 BC, about halfway into this period.³ Jaspers writes in *The Origin and Goal of History*:⁴

It would seem that the axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 BC [sic], in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 BC. It is there (about 500 BC) that we meet with the most deep-cut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today (mankind and his present civilizations) came into being. For short, we may style this the Axial Period. (Emphasis ours.)

Jaspers argues that the ancient world underwent major changes during this Axial Period. For example, ten-tribed Israel fell to the Assyrians near the beginning of the Period, and Judah fell to the Babylonians about midway through. Empires that got their start soon after the Flood, as those in Mesopotamia and Egypt, vanished as significant power structures. The Persian as well as the Assyrian Empires went the way of all flesh, as did any number of other empires, including long-standing ones in India and the Far East. Replacing these empires were the ones that became seminal in the development of modern history, such as the Greek and later the Roman Empires,⁵ both of which were essentially inconsequential before 800 BC.

The Change of Zeitgeists

The significance of the Axial Period, however, goes far beyond political and military matters, as Jaspers hints in his use of the term “spiritual process.” To Jaspers, the defining characteristic of the Axial Period was the crossover in ideas that it witnessed. Ideas, which have their source in the mind, in the spirit in man, are spiritual in essence. Jaspers saw the Axial Period as hosting different⁶ ideas in philosophy (as with the Greek thinkers) and law (as with Roman law).

The Axial Period also saw the rise of different views in the area of religion. For example, Jaspers believed that “transcendent” ideas replaced the earthy, salacious ones that we associate with ancient Babylon and Egypt. Jaspers argued (rightly or wrongly) that the idea of monotheism grabbed traction during this period, while concomitantly the idea of polytheism lost ground.

The rise of Judaism illustrates the change in religious ideas that this period witnessed. While the rabbis are quick to assert that Judaism has its roots in the most ancient of times, it in fact is a more recent construct, dating from the period of the Babylonian Exile. While in Babylon, the Jewish people slowly undertook a process of syncretism whereby they adopted many of the cultural traits of their captors.

The deadly infection of syncretism spread even to those Jews who separated geographically from Babylon and returned to Judah. These folk were the re-constructors of Jerusalem and the Temple. Sadly, their children were ultimately unable or unwilling to restore the worship of the true God. After the death of Ezra and Nehemiah, lesser leaders, reacting to the cultural forces of the Greeks, slowly built a religion—Judaism—that was far different from that of the Patriarchs⁷. Highly prescriptive, replete with rigid dos and don'ts, Judaism was a religion of ritual form without godly power (compare II Timothy 3:5.) This was the self-righteous, parochial religion to which Christ reacted repeatedly. Mark 7:6-8 records typical comments about Judaism by Christ:

Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written:

This people honors Me with their lips,
But their heart is far from Me.
And in vain they worship Me,
Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.

For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.

Another Axial Period?

The rise of Judaism, the destruction of Jerusalem, along with Solomon's Temple, the deportation of Israel: All these—changes in ideas, ideology, and governments—transpired during the period Jaspers termed the Axial Period. Werner Keller writes of the pivot year, 500 BC:

. . . The nations in the “Fertile Crescent” and on the Nile have grown old, their creative impulse is exhausted, they have fulfilled their task, and the time is drawing near for them to step off the stage of history.

The sun of the ancient orient is setting and its peoples are vaguely conscious of the approaching night.

About 500 BC darkness fell, imperceptibly but irresistibly, over the lands and the people who had within them the seed of all that would come after them—but in other lands.⁸

Was the Axial Period unique, a one-time event? Or was it only a pattern for another such period to follow later? Is it fair to speak of a Second Axial Period? And if so, what are its particular characteristics and ramifications? In Part Two, we will look to see if we can find one, and with it, evidence of some meaningful symmetry in history.

Endnotes

¹An alternative metaphor is cycles. If history repeats, then it is fair to say it is cyclical, maybe in predictable frequencies. Some view history as linear, headed in one direction, where any cycles are inconsequential, more apparent than real. Others conceive of history as cyclical. Or is it both? Is the flow of history best compared to a bicycle tire, cycling around and around as it moves ever forward over new ground, headed for a stopping point, a destination?

The search for historical patterns, reduplicative events, can lead to some strange conclusions. For instance, some believe in the notion of “successor cities,” that is, that cities in antiquity have “successors” or counterparts in the modern world, often located on different continents. Babylon's successor city becomes Rome—or is it New York? Some hold that London is the successor city of Jerusalem. Los Angeles was once supposed to be the successor city of Florence, Italy. In pop culture, this notion of successor cities manifests itself in sister-cityhood.

²This definition of tipping point is general. It is not related to specific (and sometimes vague) definitions of the term in physics, climatology, and sociology.

³ Frankly, Jaspers' model of a Pivotal Period is troublesome because he never, as far as the author can ascertain, posits a pivotal event or even a closely related series of events that form the actual axis of history. He speaks only of the year 500 BC, without explaining what it is about that specific year that makes it pivotal. So, Jaspers really gives us a Pivotal Period with no defined pivot point, an intellectually unsatisfying proposition.

Since a structure with two pivots does not metaphorically make much sense, the metaphor of a tipping point is preferred over that of a pivot point. Within Jaspers' 800-year-long Pivotal Period appear two clear, biblically-based tipping points, both of which manifestly changed history. One tipping point is God's imposition of a 2,520-year period of punishment on the ten-tribed House of Israel, around 722 BC. The other tipping point is His imposition of a 2,520-year period of punishment on Judah, taking place midway through the Pivotal Age. The "tipping point" model seems more meaningful than the pivot-point model with its lack of a single, defined pivot point.

⁴Jaspers was a German. He entered tertiary school to study law, but soon moved to medicine, where he took a degree in psychiatry. He spent only a short time as a practicing clinical psychiatrist, however, preferring history and philosophy. He published *The Origin and Goal of History* in 1949, which was translated into English in 1953. He first used the term "Axial Period" in this book.

At least one active academic group today serves as a forum for Jaspers' ideas, and interestingly, it is centered in America: The Karl Jaspers Society of North America, which publishes a scholarly journal called *Existenz*. Of most interest is an article entitled "Jaspers' Axial Age Hypothesis: A Brief Restatement" (Spring 2010). The author, Michael Zank, makes some interesting comments about Jerusalem. He mentions Professor Joseph Margolis, whose commentary regarding Jaspers appears in the same issue: "Remarks on Zank, Monotheism and Its Discontents: Achsenzeit or Deus ex Machina?"

⁵ It may be worthy of note that both Greece and Italy (wherein is Rome) are west of the older empires, such as those in Egypt and Mesopotamia. God gradually moved the locus of history geographically away from the Levant. Later on, with the fall of Rome, God again relocated the locus of history, this time northward. In the tenth century AD, cities like Berlin, Paris, and London began to thrive as commercial and cultural centers, while Babylon, Jerusalem, and Memphis languished. The great cities of Western Civilization were taking shape.

⁶ Let us be clear: While Jaspers may have conceived these ideas as new, they were in fact only different. For there is actually nothing new under the sun, as Solomon avers at Ecclesiastes 1:9. Somewhere, sometime in the kingdom of man—perhaps before the Flood—the ideas that grew up in Jaspers' Axial Period had already been posited, discussed, bled over, and finally espoused or rejected.

⁷ I Maccabees 1:12-16 describes the extent to which some Jews went in adopting Greek culture, their actions flying in the face of God's laws. Money was found to build a stadium near the Temple (it was later destroyed as Herod enlarged the Temple precincts), where the young men participated naked in Greek games, even though nakedness was an effrontery to their fathers. More than that, they "made themselves prepuces" (verse 16), which they caused to be surgically affixed to themselves in an attempt to show themselves uncircumcised, that is, to demonstrate how much they were like their Greek opponents. Hence, "they departed from the holy covenant" (verse 16) of circumcision. In so doing, they rejected both the concept of, as well as the struggle for, holiness. (See Werner Keller's *The Bible As History*, Bantam Books, pp. 345-346.) It

may be said that the popular rush to “gay marriage” today is no greater abrogation of traditional values than the actions of these young Jewish athletes.

⁸ *The Bible As History*; Bantam Books; 1980; pp 320, 322.