“Man Proposes, God Disposes,” Part 1

A bust of Virgil from his tomb at Naples, Italy. PHOTO: A. Hunter Wright

Late in the year 40 BCE, the young Roman poet Virgil composed a poem to celebrate his patron Pollios on the latter’s ascension to consulship. The poem has come down to us as Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue. In it the poet praises Pollios in his praise of the blossoming promise of a divine child to come, a child expected to be born within the year, the first year of his patron’s consulship. The poem sings of the Roman consul, speaks of a crime committed by the Roman people and a mysterious act of primeval treachery, and announces the impending birth of a divine boy-child, “the Light of Ages,” whose coming is to be the sign of the beginning of a new Golden Age. Virgil, a poet and not a prophet, attributed the inspiration of his poem to the Cumaean Sibyl in order to call to mind in his Roman readers the renowned *Libri Fatales*, or *Books of Fate,* which we know, in the form we have them, as *The Sibylline Oracles*. Romans had often imagined a Golden Age that

belonged to the infancy of the world. In his poem, however, Virgil gave to Rome images of a Golden Age of the future, announced by the birth of a wondrous child of divine nature, the firstborn of a new race to which nature itself would respond by bringing forth fruit in abundance, by making rough places smooth, and by bringing to the world a universal peace in which even the animals would share. When Virgil incorporated these prophetic images of the Golden Age to come into his poem, he knew their oracular power would resonate with the rulers and populace of Rome. What Virgil did not know is that his copy of the Sibyl's book had been grafted, three centuries before, with Hebrew prophecy translated into Greek and that the passages from *The Book of Fates* that he had borrowed for his poem were part of this prophecy.

The original purpose of the Hebrew words had been to reveal how God's purpose in the world would be fulfilled. When Virgil embedded these words into his poem, he used them for a Roman purpose: to announce and illuminate the birth of a hoped-for boy-child who would restore the Roman world to a place of glory in the cosmos. As fate would have it, the wondrous boy-child whom Virgil expected did not appear.

The void in Virgil's prophecy remained to be fulfilled in a future century. In 339 CE Emperor Constantine's bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius—under the mistaken impression that he was living in the fourth century of the prophesied millennial Golden Age—proposed to fill that void when he identified the Divine Child of Virgil's poem with Christ Jesus (*Oration in Praise of Constantine*, chapters 19–20), thus making Virgil into the gentile prophet of Christ for Christians of the Middle Ages and beyond.

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Another such act of fabrication was committed in Egypt centuries before Virgil: In the early fourteenth century BCE, in the semicircle of the Amarna Plain, generations of

villagers picked out adobe bricks from the walls of uninhabited houses and palaces in a broken, antique city, whose name they probably did not know, to build for themselves new homes along the rim of the plain. The mud bricks that the villagers did not bother to remove, in time, were reduced to ruin and ultimately into deposits of nitrogen-rich soil—that is, all but the foundational ones, which were preserved by the clean, dry sands blown in by desert winds over the ages that followed.

Unknowingly, these villagers had violated an image devoted to God. The convenient-sized mud bricks they took for themselves had once been used to construct the ephemeral holy city Akhetaten, the political capital dedicated to The One and Universal God. The city had been constructed on a sacred tract of land centuries before them by a king who had been raised from childhood to inherit the throne of Egypt: Amenhotep IV, who, once he was consecrated as chief priest and prophet to The One God, Aten, called himself Akhenaten.

Detail from a statue of Horemheb with the god Horus. PHOTO: Captmondo on wikipedia.com

The dismemberment of the walls by the villagers was the last act in the erasure of the city and its founder from memory, an act of forgetfulness first undertaken and encouraged by the general Horemheb, who usurped Akhenaten's throne for himself and made himself king. In the first years of his illegitimate reign, Horemheb proposed to destroy the memory of the One God and his heretical prophet and to restore the country of Egypt to the stability of religious convention: He forbade the worship of The One God and ordered all standing monuments in the city of Akhetaten to be pulled down and thoroughly smashed. The kings who succeeded Horemheb systematically demolished the stonework of the city's palaces and temples. Ramses II alone shipped thousands of limestone blocks from the temples of Akhetaten across the Nile to rebuild the temple at Hermopolis. The usurper king also attempted to erase from history the kings of the holy city Akhetaten. He ordered their names expunged from the walls of temples and palaces and monuments throughout Egypt, just as king Akhenaten decades before him had ordered the names of all deities other than The One God to be expunged from the kingdom. After Horemheb, the names of the kings of the holy city were ignored in all Egyptian records and omitted from the ancestral king-lists: the name *Horemheb* followed the name of Akhenaten's father in the records and not the name *Akhenaten*. And just as Akhenaten had proscribed in his reign the utterance of the plural word for the gods, *netaru*, so did Horemheb in his reign decree it a crime punishable by death to utter the name *Akhenaten*. The two opponents, Horemheb and Akhenaten, both followed the same Egyptian creed: so long as an inscription exists in the wrong form, the wrong beliefs live. Only one of them followed that cultural creed to good purpose.

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