



Last August Mary Kay Klein introduced us to the four-fold wisdoms that are available to guide us into the future: the wisdom of Indigenous people, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of the classical traditions, and the wisdom of science.

This presentation is digging deeper on the overview on The Wisdom of the Classical Traditions that Dave Damm-Luhr gave last month. It's also more narrow in scope.

When I started preparing this talk, I had no idea what the wisdom of the classical tradition was. This has been an exciting adventure! As we go along, please feel free to fill me in on things I've missed. To keep the topic manageable in one evening I've limited the timeframe to the Axial age. Thomas includes everything up to the beginning of the scientific age around the 15th century CE. And I've limited my scope to those traditions that have had the greatest impact on Western Christianity.

This is not the whole of Classical Wisdom. Missing is a connection to nature and the non-human subjects—one of the great failures of Western Christianity that the New Story is mending. I hope someone can inform us about the Eastern Classical traditions.



Berry writes that the wisdom of the urban classical literate traditions had its beginning some five thousand years ago, ...Science as a wisdom tradition is only in its beginning phase ...since the sixteenth century.

Thomas Berry. *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*. Bell Tower. Random House, New York, 1999. p 33.

The Axial age is more focused.

I will explore further monotheism in Israel and Zoroastrianism and rationality in Greece. As these form a cluster of beliefs found in Western Christianity.

I will be telling stories about these prophets to illustrate the wisdom of the classical age and pay attention to the role of conscious self awareness.

"I believe that we can learn a great deal from the insights and practices that developed during the Axial Age (c. 900 to 200 BCE), so called because it was pivotal to the spiritual and intellectual development of our species. At that time, in four distinct regions of the world, the great religious and philosophical traditions arose that have nourished humanity ever since: Confucianism and Daoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; and rationalism in Greece. Each of these traditions pioneered a new kind of spirituality."

► [Karen Armstrong, *Sacred Nature*]

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The Axial Age

Quote from Karen Armstrong. *Sacred Nature: Restoring Our Ancient Bond with the Natural World*. Vintage Books, New York, 2023.

The term "Axial Age" was coined by Karl Jaspers

- Stonehenge is circular, nature based (c. 2500 BCE)



The parthenon is rectangular, divorced from nature (447 BCE)

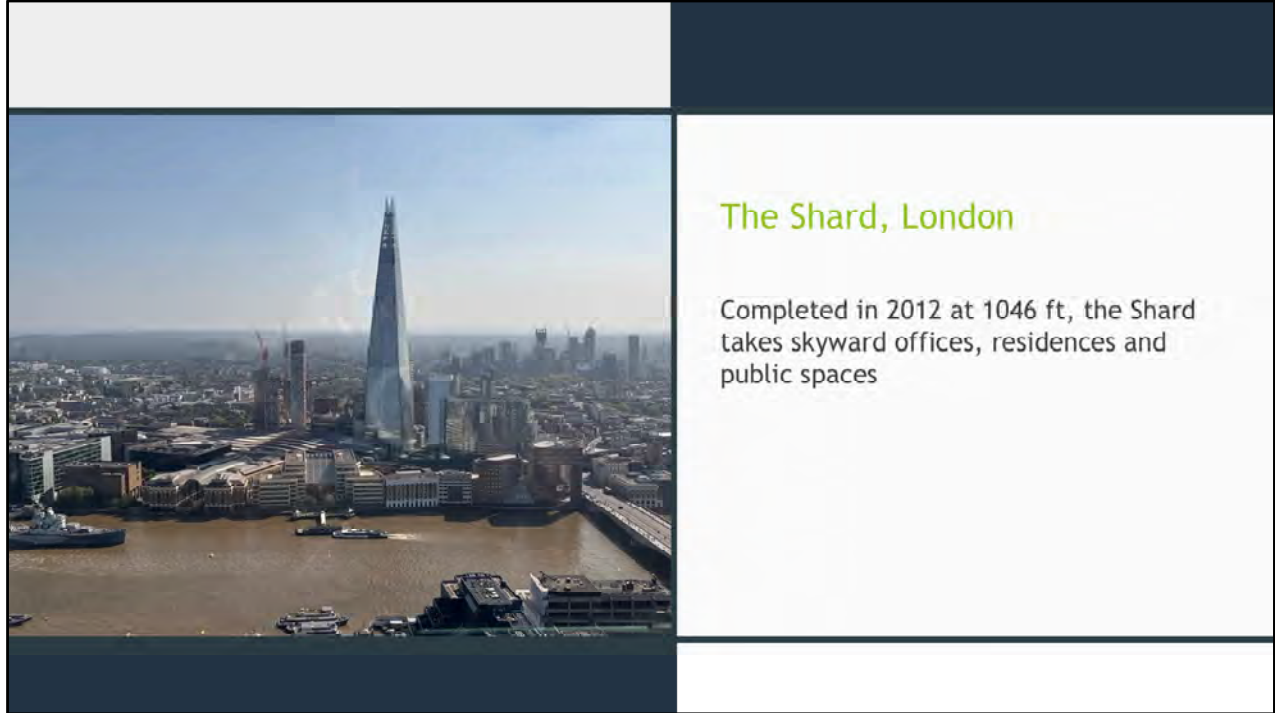


Beyond becoming more technologically adept, something happened in human consciousness between 2500BCE and 447BCE.

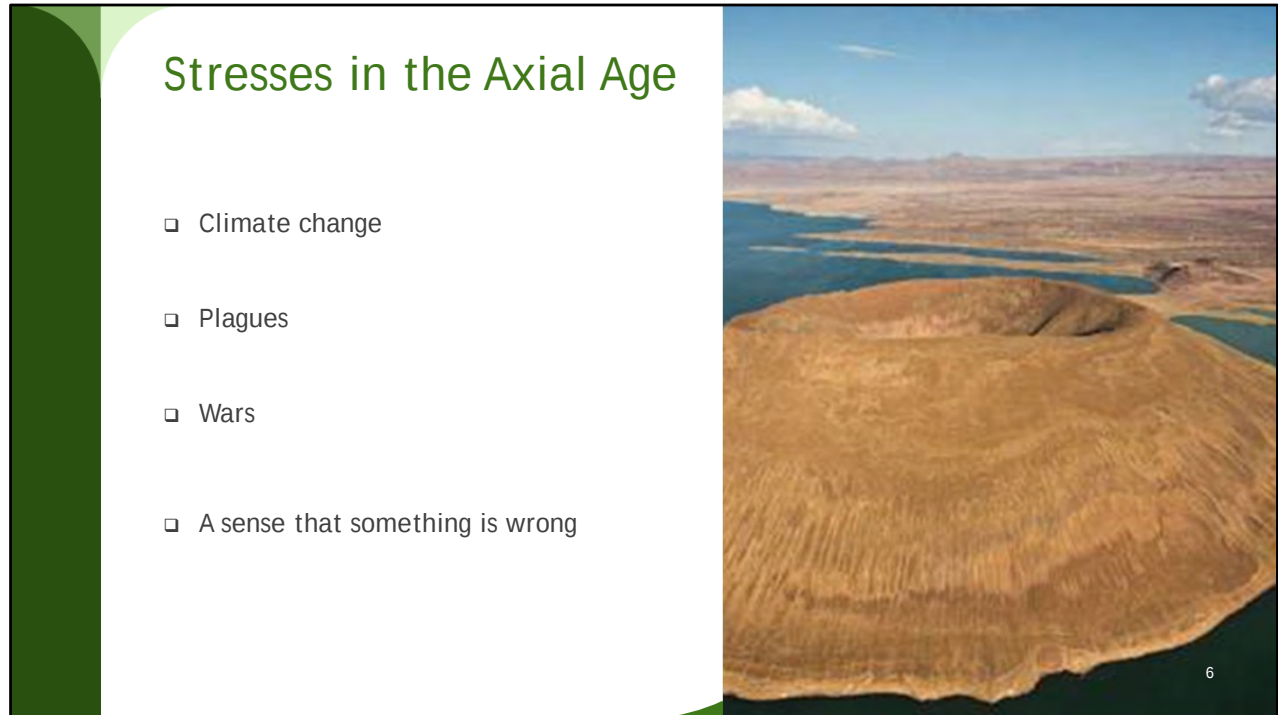
Stonehenge was built to celebrate a cosmological god. The cyclic recurrence of the sun rising and setting and the winter and summer solstices were accurately mapped and celebrated.

I imagine the worshipping crowds gather in the ring of stones waiting for the sun's rays to strike the keystone and their joy of experiencing that all was right in the world of their god. This reliable repetition undoubtedly gave the worshippers a sense of security that we do not always find because of our separation from nature.

The Parthenon comes from a time when this security started weakening.



The human technical competence has continued to develop, but what does the Shard says about the consciousness of the modern world?



Climate: A drying climate in East Africa reduced the amount of water in **Kenya's Lake Turkana** over thousands of years, which unleashed earthquakes and volcanoes from underneath it. Between 4000 and 6000 years ago the climate became drier and the water level

Plagues: By using new methods for analyzing the DNA in tooth enamel disease archeologists have been able to trace the spread of plagues across Europe from east to west starting about 5000 years ago. Crucially, there is previously no evidence of plagues. This date contradicts the current understanding which places the origin of diseases transmitted from animals to around 12,000 years ago at the beginning of the agricultural period. [New Scientist, November 2025] 522 BCE until his death in 486 BCE

Wars: In the Peloponesian war 431 to 404 BC. Sparta defeated Athens, The empire of Darius the Great in Persia was a constant threat (522 to 486 BCE). Constant threats and internal conflicts in Israel in this period of the Second Temple.

A profound sense that something was wrong with this world began to dominate the spiritual landscape—whether it was understood as fallenness and sin in the West or suffering and samsara in the East. Something was wrong, and the ultimate goal was to get out of here—to attain the heavenly prize or to escape the cycle of death and rebirth. This sense of exile has been a deep undercurrent in human spirituality.

[The Second Axial Emergence](#). In Center for Christogenesis. 9/ 26/2016 Matthew Wright

The Story of Job (Sixth Century BCE)

Why am I, an innocent man, suffering?

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The story of Job is an anomaly in the list of Bible stories. We don't know when it dates from.

You are probably familiar with the story. Job was a well to do man who lost everything, his family, his property, and suffered in poverty with his skin covered in boils. The story claims that God had sent these misfortunes to test his faith.

His friends assume that God orders the world by a principle of retributive justice—if you're wise and honor God, he will reward you with good outcomes, but if you are foolish and dishonor God, he will punish you with harsh circumstances. But Job insists on his innocence.

“ Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:
 “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without
 knowledge?
 Gird up your loins like a man,
 I will question you, and you shall declare to me.”
 [Job 38:1-3]

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When Job confronts God, this is what God says.

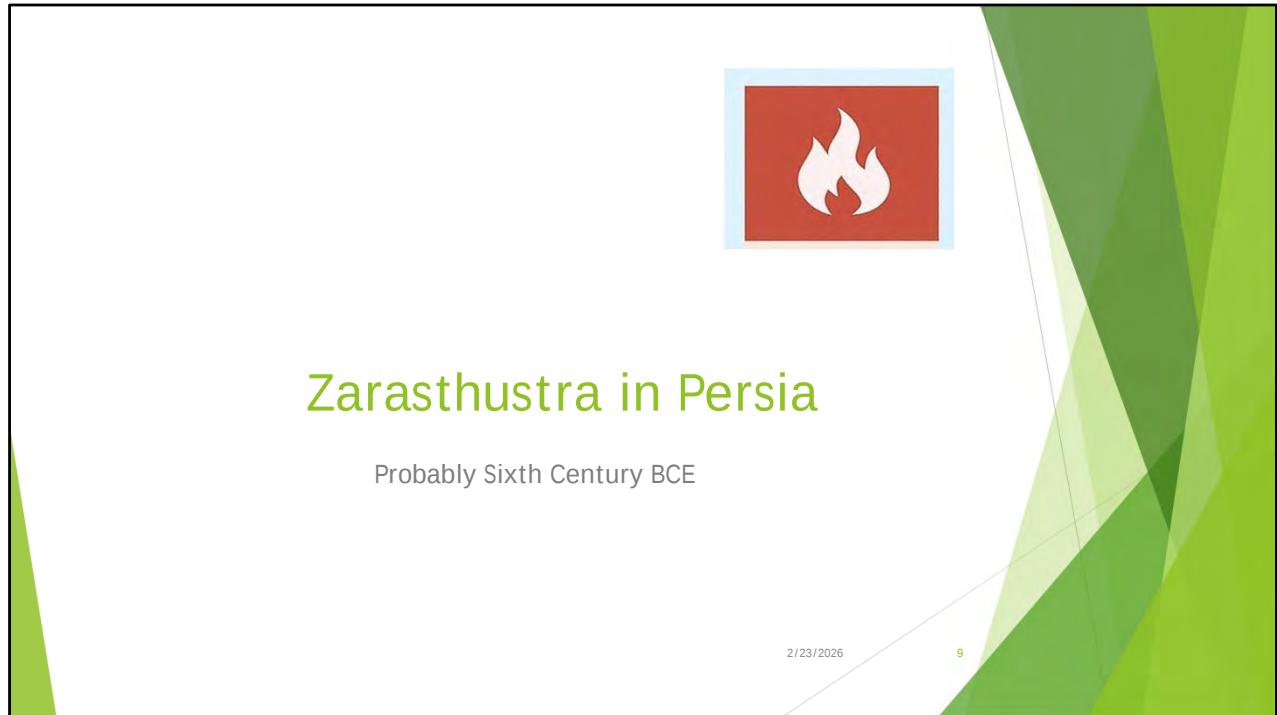
Several things stand out in this story.

The God that Job encounters is not the Yahweh of the old testament, but the God of nature and the cosmos, the ancient creator God.

Second, Job knows who he is—he is innocent. This is evidence of personal awareness.

Third, when Job knows this creator God, he is healed and his possessions are returned to him.

I wonder. Has the story of cosmogenesis reconnected us with the creator God and has that become a source of healing?



Zorasthustra is the spiritual founder of Zoroastrainism

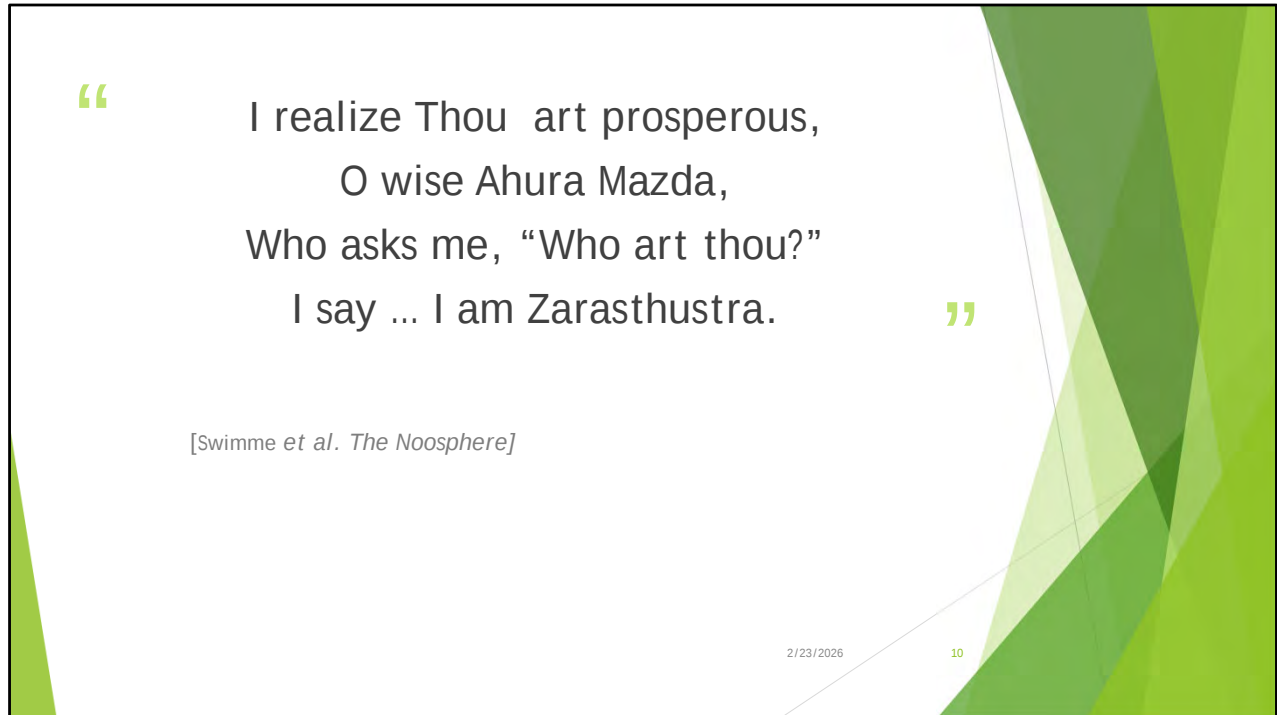
He lived about 7th and 6th centuries BC, but linguistic evidence point to a much earlier date for his writings.

Zoroastrainism was adopted by Darius the great as the official religion of his empire. Thus the belief about a cosmic struggle between good and evil was transferred to earthly battles and the concept of a holy war.

Zoroastrainism's beliefs in monotheism and personal morality were shared by the Hebrew prophets.

Core beliefs

- ☐ good thoughts
- ☐ good words
- ☐ good deeds



According to Swimme*, Zarasthustra was aware and was aware of himself as being aware. This is an early evidence of self- consciousness in the context of religion..

It is a break from the belief that all knowledge comes from God not human experience.

Because he based his awareness on his own experience, he was able to share this experience with others. He developed a method for teaching awareness to others.

*Swimme and DeRaspe-Bolles *The Story of the Noosphere* p 101-102

Zarathustra's Method



How to awaken self-consciousness in others:



Examine yourself daily to reflect on your thoughts, your words, and your actions, and to ask yourself the simple question, "Am I on the side of truth? Or falsehood?"

He is introducing the habit of contemplation for gaining self knowledge.

The Practice of Introspection Today

“Our own moment includes the possibility for a leap in being of comparable significance. Four and a half centuries of modern science have led to the discovery of the evolutionary nature of the universe. Now, when we turn our attention back on ourselves, we come to realize we are not only moral, responsible agents, we are in fact, the latest development of the universe itself.”

[Swimme *et al*, *The Noosphere*]

Swimme and DeRaspe-Bolles *The Story of the Noosphere* p 106

Early Hebrew Prophets: Amos, Micah, and Isaiah

Seventh Century BCE

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Source: *Serving up Scripture: How to interpret the Bible for Yourself and Others* by Jennifer Garcia Bashaw and Aaron Higashi. Broadleaf Books, Minneapolis, 2026. pp 86-87

So it's impossible to cover the wisdom of the Hebrew scriptures that so many scholars have studies and restudies. I can only do a brief overview of three influential prophets of the axial period. Besides, I'm no bible scholar.

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Let justice roll down like water and
righteousness like an ever-flowing stream
[Amos 5:25]

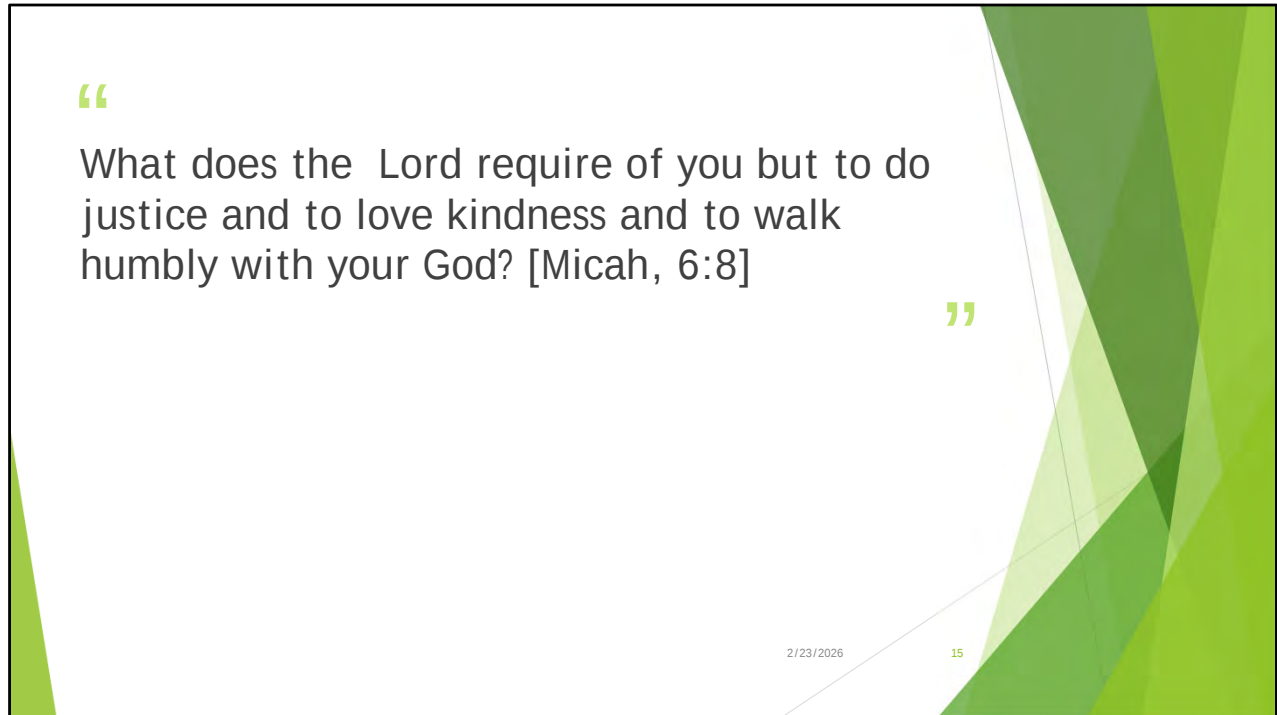
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Amos is perhaps best known for his calls to social justice, which include castigating wealthy women for their excesses, elites for their exploitation of the poor, and the powerful for their complacency.

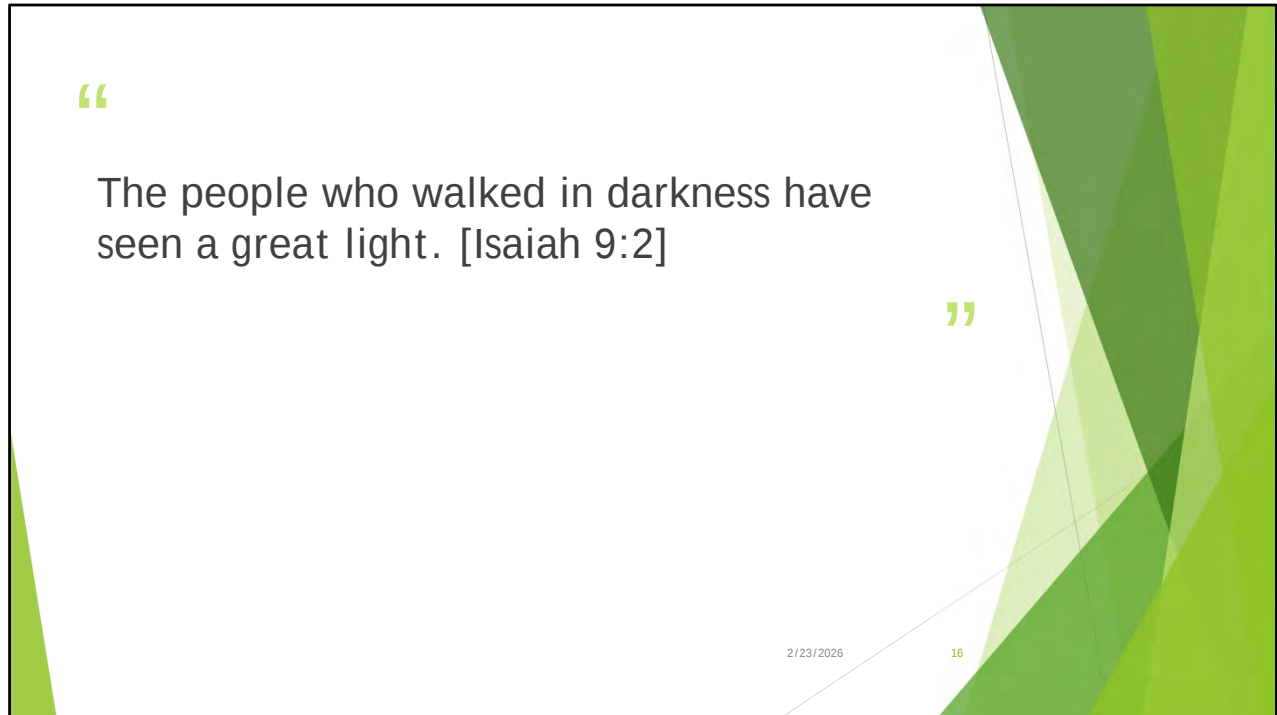
Reading Amos is a delight. His passion for justice is as deep as that of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Or I should say it the other way. You can hear Amos in King's speeches.



ritual religious observance is worthless: moral action is what's needed.

Through prophets like Micah, we can see the messages of the New Testament developing. Much of the message of Jesus is in the old testament.

I find myself saying today as I read the news or am dismayed by the conflict at Friends Meeting at Cambridge, “If only we could be more kind to each other.”



Isaiah like Amos and Micah preached social justice and care for the oppressed. The book of Isaiah is full of many voices and prophecies. But the prophet Isaiah is mostly remembered for his prophecies about the coming of a savior.

The core belief that sometime in the future all will be well.

Seeing a great light is a good description of an awakening to self awareness.

The Wisdom of the Hebrew Prophets

PRE-CLASSICAL WISDOM

- Priests repeat songs and mythology.
- God is the source of knowledge and action.
- Time is cyclical based on cosmological events.

CLASSICAL WISDOM

- Prophets speak about their own experience.
- They exhibit self-agency and self-awareness.
- Time is measured in terms of historical events—linear.

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The belief that God is the source of knowledge is still with us. The difference is whether God is outside or within us. In the Axial age self-awareness knowledge is within us and God is outside.

Self agency is seen as both god and evil. We'll get to that later.

Thinking in linear time has consequences. What happens next is uncertain. There may be an end of time as well as a future time of perfection.

Circular time is complete. The sun rises every morning. The solstice happens when expected. There is certainty and connection to nature.

In these prophesies there is no connection with nature or non-human subjects.

Self agency is seen as both god and evil. We'll get to that later.

Today: Cosmogogenesis is like spiral time, combines elements of both.

The Legacy of the Hebrew Tradition

God is not part of nature

Patriarchy

Suffering is a path to transformation

Relief from suffering comes after death

God is judgmental, demands faithfulness

God is above nature (transcendent) and can override natural laws -- miracles

God is transcendent, a disembodied spirit.

Men are dominant, women and slaves are oppressed.

The benefit of suffering as a way to know God justifies oppression.

We can escape from this world of suffering only after death, if we earn it.

God will punish sinners. The greatest sin is to disobey the first commandment is “You shall have no other gods before [a](#) me.”

God is supernatural—above nature—and can override natural laws. The proof is in the miracles (the rivers dry up, virgin birth).

These miracles are not the same as “miracles” of healing. Because it is the nature of life to heal, to seek wholeness.

A new story does not replace an old story; they coexist. Each culture and each individual is a combination of stories.

Stories within Stories

“ In making this periodization of history, he [Vico] departed from a sense of history in which the emerging period shatters the preceding era. Rather history involves nested stages in which dimensions of former period endure and interact with the dominant age.”

[Thomas Berry, A Biography]



Thomas Berry: A Biography p 188

Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) The subject of Thomas Berry's dissertation.

The Greeks (Fifth Century BCE)

Plato (c. **428 B.C. to 348 BCE**) in Athens.

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Enough of God talk. The classical Greeks were all about humanism and reason.

Plato had many predecessors

The Eye of Reason

“One of the first things discovered by reason was the insight that human experience is the principal source of knowledge. With this the monopoly of divine inspiration for knowledge ended, as did the exclusive validity of myth.”

[Leidhold, *History of Experience*]

Wolfgang Leidhold *The history of Experience: A Study in Experiential Turns and Cultural Dynamics from the Paleolithic to the Present Day* Routledge, New York, NY 2023

The Eye of Reason

- ▶ Plato's allegory of the cave
- ▶ The story
- ▶ The interpretation

[Leidhold, *History of Experience*]



The Story: The prisoners are chained so that they cannot turn around. Their truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things. A guide drags one of the cave dwellers out of his seat, and compels him to turn his neck to look at the scene in the cave. This is not enough, so the guide then drags the prisoner out of the cave and into open daylight. He slowly begins to see the new reality. If he were to return to the cave his fellow cave mates would laugh at him and argue that leaving the cave is not worth the effort.

The interpretation:

An allegory the objects in the world represent the state of the mind. The change in spatial direction is a change in experience from looking with our bodily eyes to looking with the mind's eye, the eye of reason, which is a different mode of consciousness that Plato calls contemplation. Reason opens us to different experiences and to change. The ability to reason is present in every person's mind, but it needs extensive training to develop. We need some special method to teach us how to turn around and activate our capacity for reason. Hence the emphasis on education and the Socratic method to draw out the innate capacity for reason.

Greek Classical Age (600 to 300 BC)

Beliefs

- ▶ The source of knowledge is in the human (NOT the gods).
- ▶ Human experience and reason are the bases for knowledge.
- ▶ They asked, "What is reality?"

[Leidhold, *History of Experience*]

Examples

- ✓ Reality is an illusion for most people. Plato's analogy of the cave.
- ✓ Pythagoras taught that numbers and harmony were the fundamental reality.
- ✓ Reason must be taught. Socratic method and the Academy.

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Summary of Wisdoms from the Classical Age

- ❑ Job was healed by his encounter with God
- ❑ Zarasthustra gave us a method for awakening self-consciousness in others
- ❑ Amos gave us a passion for social justice
- ❑ Micah called us to love mercy
- ❑ Isaiah prophesized an awakening
- ❑ Plato brought us reason
- ❑ All exhibited a new level of self-awareness

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There is still something missing.

For that I want to turn to an examination of consciousness and conscious self-awareness.

Consciousness (My Take)

- ❑ Consciousness is **awareness**, a connection with reality
- ❑ Consciousness has evolved as life (plants and animals) have evolved their organs of perception.
- ❑ Unconsciousness is a disconnection with organs of perception
- ❑ Conscious **self awareness** distinguishes humans from other plants and animals. (maybe)
- ❑ Conscious self awareness has evolved.
- ❑ Unconscious self awareness is lack of self knowledge
- ❑ Lack of self awareness is the root of suffering and evil.

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Brian Swimme teaches that Cosmogenetic experience is the direct awareness that it is the universe, as us, experiencing reality,

Consciousness for Swimme is what I'm calling conscious self-awareness, a capacity for bperceiving one's own inner states. For me both consciousness and conscious self-awareness are embodied in the brain. With conscious self-awareness humans gained the ability to tell stories.

What we have seen in the Classical wisdom is a shared awareness of the self as a source of knowledge and action.

The hidden assumption is that when we know ourselves we will know goodness.

Self Awareness

- ▶ The Lord called to the man and said to him, "Where are You?"
- ▶ And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."
- ▶ [Genesis 3:9-10]



The knowledge that Adam and Eve experienced is conscious self-awareness. It is self-awareness that supposedly distinguishes the human from other animals. (maybe) we are still trying to find that out.

But why is it called the knowledge of good and evil?

It came to me during a forum at FMC when I got in touch with my 7 year old self. I remembered the last tatum. I wasn't getting what I wanted and I wasn't letting go. My adult self looking at the scene saw my parents trying to teach me that I couldn't have what I wanted.

Some people have found a way to get what they want despite the needs of others or their own self interest. Having one's own way causes suffering of others. I would say that most human suffering is caused by other humans.

Self awareness evolves as humanity evolves.

Self Awareness

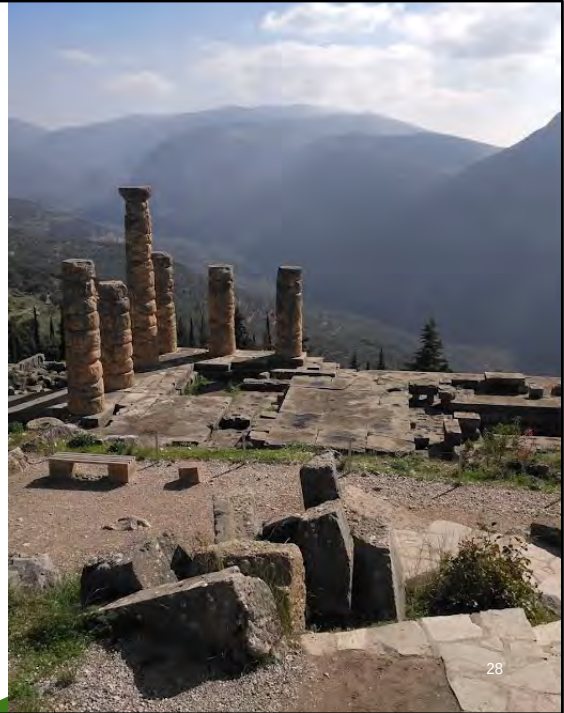
- ▶ Handprints on cave walls in a largely unexplored area of Indonesia may be the oldest rock art studied so far, dating back to at least 67,800 years ago.
- ▶ The prints may have been made by women.



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Self Awareness

- ▶ Know thyself!
- ▶ Oracle at Delphi -- 8th century BCE (though some estimates date the shrine to as early as 1400 BC)

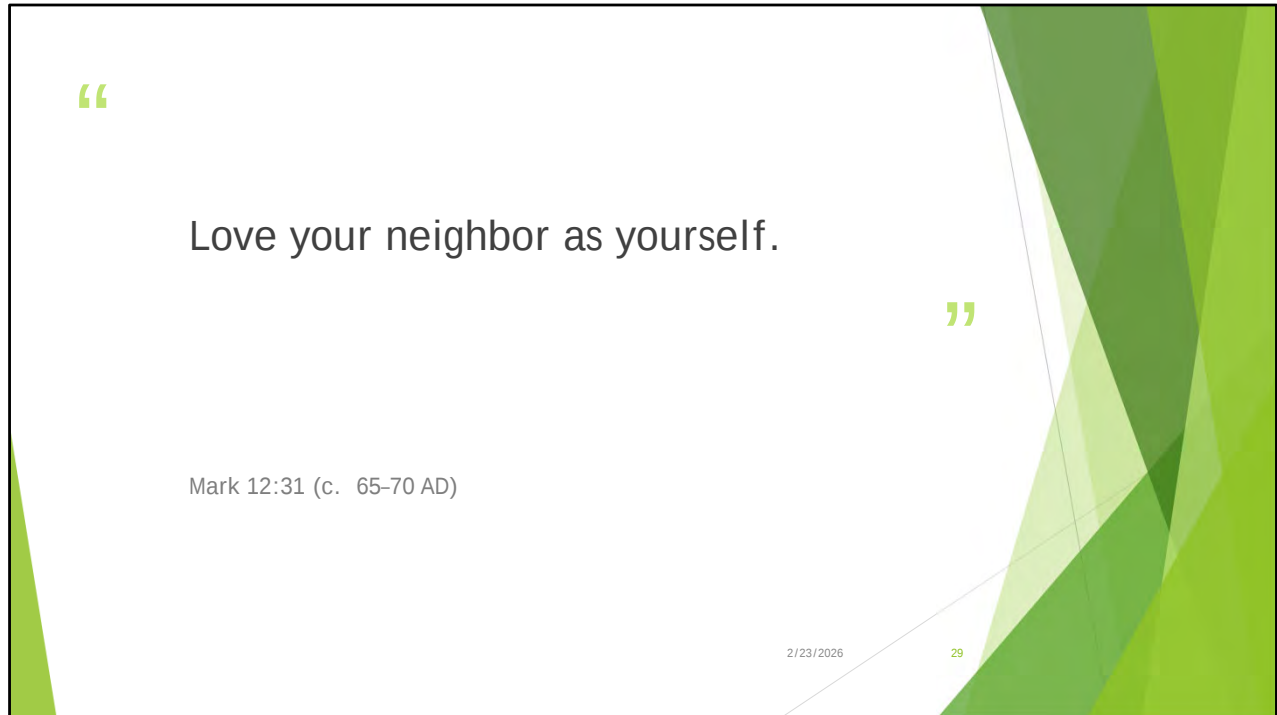


The assumption is that as we increase in self-knowledge we become aware of others.

Another quote from Thomas Berry:

"Our fulfillment is not in our isolated human grandeur, but in our intimacy with the larger earth community, for this is also the larger dimension of our being. Our human destiny is integral with the destiny of the earth."

Thomas Berry, Introduction (page xiv) to *The Dream of the Earth*, 1988.



This is the missing piece.

The teaching of Jesus is not included in the dates of the Axial age, but Thomas Berry definitely included it in his definition of the Classical Traditions.

“ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. [1John 4:18]. ”

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WHAT IS NEW TODAY

- ▶ What is new about this mode of consciousness is that the universe is now experienced as an irreversible time-developmental process, not simply as an eternal, seasonally renewing universe. We are focused not so much on cosmos as on cosmogenesis. Now our knowledge of the universe comes through our empirical, observational sciences rather than through intuitive or deductive reasoning processes.
- ▶
- ▶ (Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, 117)

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This mode of consciousness refers to the Classical age.

Moving from the deductive reasoning of the Greeks to inductive data driven logic is the wisdom of science.

QUESTIONS

- Are we entering a new axial age?

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Q: It seems to be coming back always to religious language and that's certainly an important part of it, but I don't know how to articulate what is being left out which seems to me important.

A: Well, in reading that chapter that you are talking about, I felt that Thomas Berry left a lot out that I didn't understand, because he would simply refer to "the Greeks" and I had no idea what the Greeks were or to the "prophets" and I had not idea who the prophets were. So I went to find the answers to the questions that were raised for me when I read that chapter.

Q: For me this was huge. There are so many directions and so many things that I learned and it gave me context but one specific thing that struck me was when you talked about a time-developmental process I was thinking back to those prophets, Amos and Isaiah, each of those people were responding to their certain time and situation in which they were placed. And it had to do with justice and so forth, but without those situations would those concepts of justice and mercy have emerged? So I was kind of making a connection between the necessity of something that is time developmental, that the context matters and that it was in a period of time. This is one of the many things that I drew. There is just so much information, so much good stuff to think about .

QUESTIONS

- Are we entering a new axial age?

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Q: Thank you for going upstream of Thomas Berry on this to explore further. I appreciate your curiosity. That increases our opportunity as a group. And I'm finding the intersection between what Jane just said and what I had wanted to share that self-knowledge in the context of life and suffering and story is something that can really draw us out to know ourself more deeply and particularly I was struck by what you said about knowledge of ourself as being innately good. And would add that we are therefore we are capable of empathy and justice. So thk you!

Q: I've been thinking about the Axial age. What it means to me must be something about a turning point. Like turning on an axis, 2.500 years ago. Religion and culture were so much more woven together. So are we entering a new Axial age? I think we might be. I think it's just beginning. Why are we looking at things from so many different angles? Because so much is changing. We are in a pretty intense stage right now. It's kind of exciting to be part of it.

Q: I wonder if you could repeat the quote that you didn't have time to make a slide for? It was wonderful and I needed to hear it again.

A: This is about self-awareness and not knowing oneself.

QUESTIONS

- Are we entering a new axial age?

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A: This is about self-awareness and not knowing oneself.

"Our fulfillment is not in our isolated human grandeur, but in our intimacy with the larger earth community, for this is also the larger dimension of our being. Our human destiny is integral with the destiny of the earth."

Q: This makes me think of Who are we really? And makes me think of the expansion of identity. And I'm specifically talking about the version that I saw decades ago of "Beyond War" and it was called the expansion of identity. The theory behind it as I understand it was that as humans mature they go through these expanded levels of what they identify with. When babies are born they have no distinction between self and their mother. That's who we first identify with. As we start maturing we start identifying with our immediate family and then beyond our immediate family with our community and our city, state, and so on. And whatever is outside of that circle we think of as the other because it doesn't feel like us. It's unknown. We ultimately get to identifying with the whole of humanity and then with the whole earth and beyond that the universe. The idea of the maturity of the human seems to follow that pattern. And when we get stuck in the identification of the other that is not reality and the individual would not be fully mature. And that seems to be the cause of our problems: our sense of who we are is limited.

A: We are at the end of our time.

References

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- Bashaw, Jennifer Garcia and Aaron Higashi. *Serving up Scripture: How to interpret the Bible for Yourself and Others*. Broadleaf Books, Minneapolis, 2026. pp 86-87
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- Tucker, Mary Evelyn and .*Thomas Berry: A Biography* p **188**

Science: The Fourth Wisdom Tradition	• In the Greek Classical Tradition science was based on reason, intuition, and logic. • NOT on the experimental method, data, and community consensus • Today science is beyond reason—inductive not just deductive. • Symmetry • Relational • Artificial Intelligence STAY TUNED FOR OUR NEXT PRESENTATION!!
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SPIRITUALITY AND THE NATURAL WORLD

....the ultimate basis of our ecological difficulties lay in our spirituality itself, as it has come down through the centuries, a situation that could be remedied only by a more intimate human association of the natural world in its evolutionary unfolding."

(Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 116)

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Pythagorus

“With respect to a Greek lyre, its tonality depended on the ratios of the string lengths. If the ratios were made with whole numbers, the sound coming forth was music. If the ratio was irrational, only noise was produced. The Pythagoreans lept from this discovery to the idea that the harmonious movements of the stars and planets came from their being constructed with rational mathematical ratios. This wild speculation, that mathematics was the foundation of the world launched the investigation we now call mathematical physics.

Swimme and DeRaspe-Bolles *The Story of the Noosphere* p
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WHAT IS NEW....

- ▶ Auto-cosmology
- ▶ A method for developing self knowledge
- ▶ Conscious self-awareness based on cosmogenesis



SPIRITUALITY AND THE NATURAL WORLD

“The identification of the divine as transcendent to the natural world makes direct human-divine relationship possible, but also we negate the natural world as the locus for the meeting of the divine and the human.”

(Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 113)

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CREATIVITY

This myth of progress supplanted the earlier myths of personal presences manifested throughout the natural world. At this same time we lost the world of meaning in an evolutionary world governed by chance without direction or higher significance, a world of emergent process that would eventually come to be spoken of as the work of a “blind watchmaker,” ...Yet a different interpretation of the data of evolution is available. We need merely understand that the evolutionary process is neither random nor determined but **creative**. It follows the general pattern of all **creativity**.

(Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 169)



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