

# Jaspers' *Achsenzeit* Hypothesis: A Critical Reappraisal

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**Abstract** Jaspers idea of a grand shift in the spiritual paradigm of unrelated civilizations, located rather generously somewhere around the middle of the first millennium BC, inspired only few historians, but a closer reading reveals that Jaspers was always more concerned with what we can learn for the situation of our own time from what is generally true about our perception of antiquity. Jaspers made this argument twice, namely, in 1931 and again in 1949. The post-modern situation, globalization, and the question of how we understand human existence under these conditions are still of obvious relevance. This essay also brings Jaspers' idea of an axial age to bear on an ongoing study of the millennial history of Jerusalem.

## Imagining Jerusalem

I imagine writing a book about Jerusalem. Proceeding in chronological order, this imaginary book tries to elucidate the relation between the histories and the meanings of a city shaped by the vicissitudes of monotheists and monotheism. I am in fact writing a book about Jerusalem, but it is not the one I imagine. When people ask me what kind of book I am writing (after all, Jerusalem is an ancient city, it has a long "history," many books have been written about it, and how close to the present was I planning to go), I tell them about my imaginary book as follows:

"I am trying to answer the question why we, that is, Jews, Muslims, and Christians, care about this city as we do," without specifying the differences and difficulties obscured by this "we." "The answer," I continue, "has something to do with scripture;" using "scripture" in a generic sense that might include the agglomeration of respective text and interpretive traditions sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims for whom revelation comes in the form of, or in interaction with, holy writ. "If it is the authority or experience of scripture that configures what we see in

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46 Jerusalem, then the history of Jerusalem may be divided into three major historical  
47 periods, namely: before scripture, since scripture, and ‘in’ scripture.”<sup>1</sup>

48 To be sure, the phrasing of the task is ironic. Aside from the *longue durée* of the  
49 history here envisaged, which forces the narrator to use chronistic tools, the irony  
50 of this project rests on the impossibility of delineating the entrance of scripture into  
51 history in the manner in which revelation enters scriptural narrative whose authority  
52 is, in turn, grounded in the revelation it historicizes. Our assumptions about there  
53 being something like history is always already grounded in an engagement with  
54 scriptural revelation, perhaps even with the plurality of such revelations. Hence a  
55 “before scripture” is not strictly speaking possible for us. *Qua* event, scripture is  
56 primordial, auratic (in Walter Benjamin’s sense), *unvordenklich*, and hence cannot  
57 be neatly coordinated with a political history of the city of Jerusalem that is not  
58 already caught up in its scripturality. The very idea that there ought to be a correlation  
59 between the major destructions and reconstructions that serve as demarcations  
60 in the chronology of the city’s history in time and space, and the history of the city  
61 as an emblem, sign, symbol, representation, or synecdoche of belief, is suggested  
62 by scripture itself (it may be its *raison d’être* and the reason why it has a hold on  
63 us), namely by the fact that the city appears in scripture (which *is* the connection  
64 of, at once, a sign and a signified). It is a scriptural idea. To separate what is united  
65 in scripture appears artificial or rather as a self-consciously applied sleight of hand,  
66 which serves to remind us of the artificiality of every historical critique. Far from  
67 transcending the perspective of scripture or breaking its hold on us, historical critique  
68 merely serves to emphasize and enhance this always present effect of scripture  
69 which we are not able to transcend or circumvent by means of a historical critique.  
70 Replacing biblical narrative with quasi-objective historical narration we replace one  
71 story by another. But the triangulation of before scripture, in scripture, and after  
72 scripture goes a step further. Only thus do we realize the degree to which we live  
73 and read in the shadow of such story even when we try to take a position on its out-  
74 side. It would require a more complete secularization or alienation from tradition  
75 than we can aspire to or wish for, a point at which the monotheistic traditions will  
76 have receded into the past to such a degree that they truly no longer matter for us to  
77 be able to know or understand the history of monotheism, its signs, or its manners  
78 of signifying. But then our lack of interest may prevent us from understanding what  
79 no longer concerns us.

80 My imaginary book is more of a thought experiment than an exercise in histo-  
81 riography, and it is quite possible that one cannot really carry out such a program  
82 in a concise, chronological, or chronistic fashion. It is history by allusion, a history  
83 organized by symbols or generalizations that are meant to point out certain charac-  
84 teristics about our attitudes toward and infatuations with something like the Holy  
85 City. The experiment is nevertheless warranted by our concern with “monotheism”  
86 and with the way in which Jerusalem is enmeshed in it (or vice versa).

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89 <sup>1</sup> See “Jerusalem in the Religious Studies Classroom: The City and Scripture,” in *Jerusalem Across*  
90 *the Disciplines*, eds. Miriam Elman and Madeleine Adelman (at the time of this writing, August 2010, this volume is under consideration with Syracuse University Press).

91 Treating the history of Jerusalem in relation to the Abrahamic monotheisms as  
 92 religious worldviews grounded in a particular history of prophetic revelation and  
 93 having this history rotate around the axis of scripture rather than around a particular  
 94 moment in the history of the actual city allows me to coordinate the three major  
 95 book-religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam without prioritizing one over the  
 96 other. I believe this is not just a matter dictated by liberal guilt but recommended  
 97 by methodical circumspection. That there were Jews before there were Christians,  
 98 and that there were Jews and Christians before there were Muslims, may be mere  
 99 truism or possibly a fallacy. We know Jews, Christians, and Muslims only as co-  
 100 existent and always already laboring under mutual influence and in competition  
 101 with one another. To attribute higher dignity in the life of the spirit or culture to the  
 102 first or earliest form of a cultural formation is a mere prejudice that is furthermore  
 103 contradicted by the very biblical critique of the prevailing of the human laws of  
 104 primogeniture in the economy of divine election. At least, it may be said that our  
 105 scriptures display references to both exclusiveness of election (and hence a scarcity  
 106 of resources) and the promise or prospect of universal inclusion. Not just in poli-  
 107 tics (more precisely: in the question of just rule) but also in the realms of culture  
 108 and religion the later formation may well be the most accomplished and hence, in  
 109 a transcendental sense, the original one from which the earlier ones receive their  
 110 ultimate meaning and belated legitimacy. I happen to like the early Muslim idea that  
 111 casts Islam as a restoration of the original and uncontested religion of Abraham,  
 112 attributes equal value to all prophetic scriptures, and elevates Jewish, Christian, and  
 113 Zoroastrian communities to “people of the book”—a legal fiction that allows Islam  
 114 to tolerate them as God-pleasing, though in error, and thus care for their continued  
 115 existence within the House of Islam. It is an eminently wise and exemplary arrange-  
 116 ment that allows for peaceful coexistence between alternative though clearly related  
 117 cultural formations.

118 Applying this insight to the history of Jerusalem, the first advantage of this  
 119 approach is that it allows me to applaud and recognize the great achievements of  
 120 Islamic civilization as not just commensurate with the spirit of biblical prophecy  
 121 and Christian love but as an indication that our scriptural religions are in fact  
 122 capable of extending themselves toward the possibility of a harmonization of their  
 123 particularities. The importance of this possibility is obvious.

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## 126 **The Axial Age Hypothesis: First Impressions**

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128 I became interested in Jaspers' notion of an axial age before I read his book on *The*  
 129 *Origin and Goal of History*, where it makes its first appearance.<sup>2</sup> I read this book  
 130 with the suspicion that the notion of an axial age was a mere *deus ex machina*, a  
 131 suspicion, I found later, that occurred to Jaspers himself. To be sure, Jaspers' ideas  
 132 about history may have been misrepresented by those who picked up the axial age  
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<sup>2</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, Munich: Piper, 1949. [Henceforth cited as *UZG*, all translations by the author]

hypothesis most vigorously, among them biblical scholar Benjamin Uffenheimer<sup>3</sup> as well the popular religion author Karen Armstrong.<sup>4</sup> Uffenheimer turned to Jaspers in support of Yehezkel Kaufmann's claim that the notion of ethical monotheism stood at the beginning rather than then the end of a long development that, according to Uffenheimer, may well have begun at the time of the biblical patriarchs. Karen Armstrong whose retellings of the history of the Abrahamic religions revolve around the notion of God's preferential option for the poor sees the axial age formation of biblical prophecy as on the one hand alive in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and on the other hand perpetually threatened by political theologians exploiting the claim of divine favoritism.

I came across the axial age hypothesis in form of derivative adaptations. My impression was that it served apologetic purposes and shed no distinct light on the actual complexities of the history of culture and religion. I felt particularly disconcerted by the notion that the appearance of ethical monotheism or something akin to it should be considered a turning point in human history. To me this seemed both unsettling and somehow unhistorical. After one reads Jaspers himself, however, one will almost certainly conclude that his thesis has been employed by careless readers to whom it appealed for the wrong reasons. This is not to say that Jaspers' philosophy of history is entirely satisfactory, and I say this with chagrin since I cannot help noticing that my own approach to the (imaginary) history of Jerusalem as a symbol or a cipher has much in common with Jaspers' philosophy of history.

## Jaspers' Theory of History: Review and Critique

Let me introduce the axial age hypothesis in its context, Jaspers' aforementioned book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*. The book is divided into three parts, dealing respectively with World History, Present and Future, and the Meaning of History. Here, as in another related work first published in 1931,<sup>5</sup> the existentialist philosopher is most concerned with the present, but in contrast to the earlier work

<sup>3</sup> See Benjamin Uffenheimer, *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, ed. S.N. Eisenstadt, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986. Uffenheimer represents the Yehezkel Kaufmann school, which is still prominent in Hebrew University biblical scholarship (M. Weinberg et al.) and popular among many American biblical studies scholars. Kaufmann presented his theory in an elaborate multi-volume work on the "History of Israel's faith" (*Toldot Ha-Emunah Ha-Yisra'elit*) on the basis of Hermann Cohen's philosophy of religion and in polemic against the Wellhausen school. By Uffenheimer see further *Nevu'ah Ha-Kedumah Be-Yisra'el [Early Prophecy in Israel]* Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> See K. Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*, New York, NY: Knopf, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*, Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1931, appeared as volume 1000 in the popular *Sammlung Göschen* of "brief and generally accessible" introductions to the latest state of knowledge in all fields, a series akin to the ongoing "Very Short Introductions" published by Oxford University Press. Jaspers' book appeared in several further printings and is referred to as a companion piece in the 1949 *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der*

181 he now attempts to anchor our situation within the broad sweep of human history.  
 182 Jaspers invokes a structure of history that can be compelling only because it is also  
 183 grounded in indisputable empirical facts and observations. Thus, for example, there  
 184 is an obvious divide between the vast stretches of prehistory, the hundreds of thou-  
 185 sands, even millions of years during which the *genus homo* acquired the traits that  
 186 set us apart from other animals and connect us beyond all cultural and genetic dif-  
 187 ferences. Prehistory is not yet history but it structures human history. The natural  
 188 evolution of our species is not at hand but it is in that Promethean age that our  
 189 common human traits were shaped. This generates a fundamental uncertainty with  
 190 regard to any assertion about the difference between natural and acquired traits,  
 191 between cultural values and natural behavior. Any assertion about human nature  
 192 is therefore profoundly doubtful. As something beyond our grasp but essential in  
 193 having shaped the entire human species, prehistory is in fact the token or the his-  
 194 torical expression of our awareness of a common origin.<sup>6</sup> In the symbolic terms  
 195 employed by Jaspers, and—to anticipate—in an expression shaped in one of the  
 196 axial age moments of lucidity, when we look at ourselves in historical terms, we see  
 197 ourselves as descended from a single origin and hence, as it were, descended from  
 198 Adam.

199 History, as distinct from prehistory, is limited to the past six millennia for which  
 200 we have access to written records. In other words, history begins when we per-  
 201 ceive humans to emerge from silence and to begin speaking to us. Our ability to  
 202 listen to the voices of the literate members of ancient societies was only recently  
 203 extended beyond the previously available Greek, Latin, and Hebrew sources from  
 204 which the West nourished its great Humanistic revivals since the fifteenth century.  
 205 In and through the modern spirit of exploration, generated in part by this retrieval  
 206 of ancient rational and religious traditions from which the West had already been  
 207 nourished, albeit in the attenuated forms of late antiquity, the moderns eventually  
 208 extended the limits of knowledge in methodological, geographical, and historical  
 209 terms to the point at which they were compelled to relativize and question their own  
 210 place in the larger historical and geographical world that we now inhabit. The great  
 211 question of Jaspers' historical meditation is, in fact, what we mean by this "we" that  
 212 inhabits the globe, and whether and how this "we" can shape a common humanity.

213 This philosophy of history has its center of gravity in the question of history  
 214 itself, or rather in the question of whether it is possible to speak of history in the  
 215 singular, that is, in the emphatic philosophical sense in which we have become used  
 216 to referring to this thing called history and that is really limited to a blip of six  
 217 millennia, compared to which natural history, including the natural history of the  
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219 *Geschichte*. The theme raised in 1931 is technology and its implications for the human spirit. This  
 220 remained a central concern for existentialist philosophy and was taken up by Heidegger as well.

221 <sup>6</sup> In his review of Peter E. Gordon's book on Rosenzweig and Heidegger, Charles Bambach offers  
 222 a significant meditation on the problem of origin and the crisis of historicism in twentieth century  
 223 German thought. Though Bambach does not touch on Jaspers, the latter clearly speaks to and out  
 224 of this very crisis. See Charles Bambach, "Athens and Jerusalem: Rosenzweig, Heidegger, and the  
 225 Search for an Origin," *History and Theory*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (May, 2005), pp. 271–288.

226 *genus homo*, is an unfathomable abyss of time and of unknown and unknowable  
 227 facts and factors that determine what we are as a species in decisive but perhaps  
 228 irretrievable ways. The notion of an axial age was Jaspers' attempt to move beyond  
 229 the myth of a common origin of the West that is still implicit in the title of the  
 230 1931 work, which speaks of a "spiritual situation of the present" in the singular and  
 231 without any consideration of a non-Western situation or present. The 1949 book  
 232 is Jaspers' attempt at retaining the possibility of speaking of the origin and goal of  
 233 history in the singular while recognizing a plurality of points of departure for human  
 234 orientations toward this unified conception of history.

235 The idea of the axial age represents a point of orientation in a historical horizon  
 236 that is on the verge of a world historic turn in a more acute sense, namely, a future  
 237 determined by what today we would call globalization. Jaspers' book is really a  
 238 statement on whether the past offers us any help in orienting ourselves toward this  
 239 uncharted future. Significantly, Jaspers now recognizes, at least in principle, a plu-  
 240 rality of such points of orientation. Here are some of the things Jaspers says about  
 241 the axial age and its role as a structural moment in history.

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- 243 • The axial age followed a period of decline of the ancient high urban civilizations  
 244 that stretched from North-Africa and the eastern Mediterranean via Mesopotamia  
 245 to Persia, India, and China in a narrow band of geographical regions nourished by  
 246 rivers, reliable precipitation, arable land, and favorable climates. It also preceded  
 247 the rise of new vast empires that tended to base themselves on elements of axial  
 248 age insights that they used to legitimize their hold on power.
- 249 • Wedged between these imperial ages we find personalities that expressed pro-  
 250 found insights into the human condition. Their forms of human self-expression  
 251 still speak to us immediately, whereas we are less profoundly touched by ear-  
 252 lier sources, some of which appear no less intricate but ultimately leave us cold  
 253 and, in any case, have not been part of a continuous cultural memory. It is rather  
 254 from the axial age expressions of humanity that later civilizations have repeatedly  
 255 renewed themselves.
- 256 • Expressions of axial age insights into what Jaspers calls *Menschsein* (being  
 257 human), include, among others, the Hebrew prophets, the great poets and philoso-  
 258 phers among the Greeks, Zoroaster in Persia, the Buddha in India, and Confucius  
 259 in China.
- 260 • A defining characteristic of the axial age moments is their occurring at roughly  
 261 the same time, without any evidence of mutual influence. Lasting discoveries of  
 262 this sort were made around 800–200 BCE, or the middle of the millennium before  
 263 Christ, though separated from one another across vast geographic distances. This  
 264 rules out mutual influence and suggests more of a coincidence that is, however,  
 265 not entirely without structural parallels. In all cases, axial age movements fol-  
 266 lowed a decline or collapse of preceding empires that had dominated vast but  
 267 relatively self-enclosed regions.
- 268 • Jaspers does not claim to be the first to have observed this parallel phenomenon.  
 269 In contrast to Hegel, who tried to bring India, China, and the West (including  
 270 Persia) into a dialectic relation that culminated in the development of western

271 civilization, Jaspers emphasizes that the great axial age personalities emerged  
 272 independently from one another.

- 273 ● Jaspers emphasizes the spontaneity of the axial age discoveries. It is important to  
 274 him that it is difficult and perhaps impossible to explain the rise of certain ideas,  
 275 such as prophetic monotheism. It is a hallmark of their authenticity that they  
 276 cannot be causally derived from what preceded. Instead the fact and phenomenon  
 277 of the axial age in its undeniable factuality evokes amazement and hence points  
 278 to a kind of immanent transcendence, a token of the human spirit and the heights  
 279 to which it attained in several places almost at once. Jaspers describes the axial  
 280 age appearance of the human being with whom we continue to be concerned as a  
 281 kind of anthropophany. Echoing Kant who referred to freedom as “the miracle in  
 282 the phenomenal world” (*das Wunder in der Erscheinungswelt*), Jaspers describes  
 283 the idea of humanity as a miracle in the world of historical causality.
- 284 ● Jaspers’ description of the contrast between the ancient high urban civilizations  
 285 and the axial age personalities that gave us the idea of freedom in the face of limit  
 286 situations (*Grenzsituationen*) anticipates the central concern of his book, which  
 287 is the struggle for freedom and liberty in an age characterized by the ubiquitous  
 288 trappings of technology and the virtually complete attenuation of all traditions  
 289 rooted in the axial age. In other words, Jaspers’ real concern is with the question  
 290 of whether the notions of humanity that had hitherto guided us, and that first  
 291 appeared in the first pre-Christian millennium, can still guide us in a situation  
 292 characterized by global war and mass murder.
- 293 ● Jaspers does not stipulate that the ancient personalities and their ideas have  
 294 eternal and unalterable meaning that merely needs to be retrieved in our new  
 295 situation. In fact, as Jaspers says (p. 42), even the axial age was ultimately a fail-  
 296 ure. In a remark toward the end of the book, Jaspers rules out the possibility of  
 297 repristination:

298 Our sketch of world history attempted to derive the unity of history [*geschichtliche*  
 299 *Einheit*] from an axial age that was common to humanity as a whole.

300 What we meant by axis was not the hidden interior around which the foreground of  
 301 the appearances always revolves, while itself remains timelessly stretched through all  
 302 ages, wrapped in the dust-clouds of the merely present. Rather, what we called axis was  
 303 an age around the middle of the last millennium before Christ, for which everything  
 304 that preceded may seem like preparation and to which everything that followed relates  
 305 in fact and often in bright consciousness. From here, the world-history of being human  
 306 [*Weltgeschichte des Menschseins*] receives its structure. It is not an axis for which we  
 307 may claim an absoluteness and uniqueness that lasts forever. Rather, it has been the  
 308 axis of the brief world history until now, that which, in the consciousness of all peo-  
 309 ple, could serve as the ground of their historical oneness, recognized in solidarity. Then  
 310 this real axial age would be the incarnation of an ideal axis around which being-human  
 [*Menschsein*] aggregates in its movement. (*UZG* 324)

- 311 ● To simply rely on axial age statements therefore misses the point, which is, after  
 312 all, to take history seriously. The ancient positions as such are no longer tenable  
 313 or compelling in their literal sense, though their symbolism may continue to serve  
 314 us as orientation. But the core of the humanity that first appeared in form of axial  
 315 age personalities is the humanity itself that appears in those personalities rather

316 than its doctrinal residue that became the basis of philosophical and theological  
317 schools.

- 318 • In contrast to the age of mythology and ritual that gave the appearance of per-  
319 manence to the first urban civilizations, the axial age prophets and philosophers  
320 articulated the fragility of humanity, the infinite value of freedom, the uncertain-  
321 ties and ambiguities of human nature, and the limitations of reason. In regard to  
322 such insights we have not made any progress.

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324 This is almost all Jaspers has to say about the axial age as a historical period. The  
325 real center of gravity of the 1949 book is not the axial age as such but the future  
326 of those Western values that are rooted in the texts and traditions that first appeared  
327 in the middle of the millennium before Christ and from which Western civiliza-  
328 tion renewed itself until the modern technological age destroyed the plausibility of  
329 every and all tradition. In 1931, Jaspers makes many similar points about the cri-  
330 sis of modernity as in 1949 but there he pays no attention to non-Western sources.  
331 In 1949, with greater emphasis on globalization as the new challenge, attention to  
332 non-Western sources is still more modest than one might expect. Jaspers sees the  
333 modern process of globalization as the result of a Western development and links  
334 it with the age that dawned around 1500, the age of discovery that was enhanced  
335 by the Western renewal and transformation of its own axial age sources. Nothing  
336 comparable happened in the east, which was in decline when the Western nations  
337 began to expand and conquer.

338 Taken as a claim about a historical phenomenon rather than a structural device  
339 in a historiosophical contemplation, the axial age hypothesis is open to a number of  
340 critical objections. I will list these in the order in which they occurred to me as I was  
341 reading *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*.

342 Jaspers considers the place of primitive people in the unity of world history.  
343 Where they are not absorbed into historical nations and empires he regards them as  
344 the mere rudimentary organs of prehistory. Either they were annihilated or they are  
345 gradually integrated. So far so good; but what about the rudimentary organs of the  
346 axial age? What about people or nations that brought forth axial age personalities  
347 but then failed to transform themselves any more into axial age civilizations than the  
348 post-axial age empires that oppressed them? Of course I am thinking in particular of  
349 the Jews. How does Jaspers explain the cultural conflict and religious wars between  
350 axial age civilizations? How are conflicts to be resolved and what is their place in  
351 Jaspers' schema of world history? Is the progression toward unity possible with-  
352 out reducing and homogenizing those nations and civilizations that fail to behave  
353 according to the general theory of cultural decline and religious attenuation?

354 According to Jaspers world history moves from the ancient geographic parataxis,  
355 where all history is local or regional, toward global unity via exploration, conquest,  
356 colonization, and the technological shrinking of the globe into a single intercon-  
357 nected unit. He does not consider the many ways in which this schema may be  
358 questioned. Pre-modern interactions between originally separate regions were not  
359 limited to equestrian hordes but included trade along the silk road, which Jaspers  
360 does not mention at all. In general, Jaspers is not informed about the role of



361 Islamic civilizations in the early medieval world. Another indication that the pre-  
 362 modern world was more hypotactic than Jaspers thought are the nomadic nations  
 363 that crossed borders and boundaries all the time, including the Jews and the Gypsies.

364 The core of the axial age hypothesis is the great personality who appears in a cer-  
 365 tain place and, without obvious connection to any predecessors, articulates a great  
 366 and lasting insight into our humanity. One of the great individuals of the ancient  
 367 world who might fit this classification, the Egyptian pharaoh Amenophis IV, also  
 368 known as Akhenaten, is never mentioned since he falls outside the time frame of  
 369 the axial age by almost a millennium.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Jaspers' views on the biblical  
 370 prophets appears dated since biblical scholarship no longer considers either Ezekiel  
 371 or Daniel as personalities at all but emphasizes the composite nature and late date  
 372 of composition of the books that merely bear the names of these prophets. (Moses,  
 373 by the way, is not considered at all by Jaspers, presumably because the historicity of  
 374 that personage was already doubtful when he went to school.) Similar concerns have  
 375 arisen with respect to the historical Zoroaster and the formation of the Zoroastrian  
 376 corpus of scriptures on which we rely when speaking of this prophetic figure of the  
 377 Persian religion.<sup>8</sup> By the same token, one must ask why Jesus and Muhammad, both  
 378 undoubtedly historical founders of great movements, are never considered as axial  
 379 age breakthrough personalities. It is because of such historical problems that the  
 380 axial age hypothesis appears to me as a *deus ex machina* within a larger historical  
 381 schema rather than a truly persuasive statement of fact. It seems to allow Jaspers  
 382 to be rather vague about the common, though accidental, emergence of notions of  
 383 humanity that are still with us.

384 There is a streak of elitism in Jaspers' understanding of humanity to the detriment  
 385 of far more pervasive aspects of humanity that are likewise embedded in literary  
 386 texts such as the Bible, such as the value of hospitality. If any value may advance us  
 387 toward a global ethic, why not the ancient and inviolable virtue of hospitality?

388 Given the weakness of the axial age hypothesis as a thesis about actual historical  
 389 phenomena it is not surprising that it had little impact on serious historians of the  
 390 ancient world and that its popularity has been limited to semi-scholarly works on  
 391 biblical religion, such as Karen Armstrong's book on the axial age, that took the  
 392 authority of Jaspers' thesis for granted and used it to enhance a theologizing view  
 393 of biblical prophecy and its ultimately inexplicable appearance in ancient Israel.  
 394 Ultimately it is the god of monotheism, himself, who appears on the historical scene  
 395 as somewhat of a *deus ex machina*, as an unexplained historical or inexplicable  
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 399 <sup>7</sup> Jan Assmann's prolific *oeuvre* may be said to be devoted to the project of having Egypt con-  
 400 sidered as an "axial age" civilization. See, among others, J. Assmann, *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und*  
 401 *Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten*, Munich: Beck, 1995.

402 <sup>8</sup> On Persian religion see Carsten Colpe, *Iranier–Aramäer–Hebräer–Hellenen. Iranische*  
 403 *Religionen und ihre Westbeziehungen. Einzelstudien und Versuch einer Zusammenschau*,  
 404 Tübingen: Mohr, 2003. On Persian history see Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia: From 550 BC*  
 405 *to 650 AD*, trans. Azizeh Asodi, London and New York, NY: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1996. The  
 book includes excellent bibliographic essays.

meta-historical phenomenon. Jaspers was aware of this situation and considered the objection that his entire thesis might appear as a *deus ex machina* (UZG 39f).

## In Defense of Jaspers

Here is how I read Jaspers. Those who take him too literal and think they can rely on the axial age hypothesis as a positive insight into an otherwise enigmatic set of phenomena are misreading Jaspers. Although Jaspers probably thought that he was describing the phenomena he discussed accurately, he would not have to object to my objections to defend the larger point he was trying to make. What is decisive to Jaspers is what Jan and Aleida Assmann call “cultural memory.”<sup>9</sup> There is no doubt that Jaspers is right when he speaks of expressions of humanity that have been with us since antiquity and in whose light we have repeatedly sought guidance on the origin and goal of history. The very elements of history and existence in light of history, the notion of decision and of freedom in light of limit situations, etc. are indeed the legacy of what we might locate somewhere in the second half of the pre-Christian millennium when the major textual bodies we have since drawn on seem to have originated. Likewise, Jaspers’ diagnosis of the problems of our time, whether in the formulation of 1931 or in that of 1949, is as sharp as any diagnosis of the crisis of modern civilization. Like others Jaspers accepted the critique of modern culture that had been decisively expressed by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche; like others he felt that philosophy was compelled to go beyond cultural pessimism; and like others he sought to retrieve what could be retrieved from the ancient sources, including the biblical sources, without compromising the modern standard of absolute truthfulness that he felt, as others did, derived from no other source than the prophetic ethos of the Bible itself. At that bizarre moment of loss of tradition, the tradition began to speak anew, and Jaspers’ attempt of opening a space for a renewed engagement with the demands of history by means of a strong reading of our ancient sources appears as fresh and engaging today as it did in 1949. None of this depends on the historical accuracy of the axial age hypothesis as Jaspers presented it. What matters is not what actually happened or when, but what is present to us. “True is what connects between us” (*Denn wahr ist, was uns verbindet*, UZG 30). What interests Jaspers in his axial age personalities is that, in his perception, they were the ones who articulated human freedom in contrast to the “peculiar dullness [*Dumpfheit*] combined with extraordinary style in the achievements of art, esp. in architecture and sculpture” (UZG 33) that was typical of the great empires.

In Jaspers’ mind, the fact that the axial age occurred (or that axial age formations exist and have enduring value) carries the promise or holds out the possibility of a new axial age that might arise in the future and carry us beyond the menace of a tyrannical world order or a sinking back into a prehistoric form of existence.

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<sup>9</sup> See Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, 6th edition, Munich: Beck, 2007.

451 The center of gravity of Jaspers' historical contemplation is really the future. In  
 452 the face of the technological ability to destroy the globe and mindful of the nihilistic  
 453 alternative, Jaspers reaches for global sources as models by which we might  
 454 bestir ourselves in the pursuit of the "eternal tasks" of freedom and humanity. What  
 455 necessitates the historical detour is the realization that these eternal tasks themselves  
 456 first made their appearance in history and that their authority is fragile.<sup>10</sup> To articulate  
 457 what is needed requires the use of symbols that continue to speak to us, and  
 458 indeed are indispensable, even though their original meanings have long since been  
 459 abandoned.

## 462 The Relevance of Jaspers

464 Here I break off this all-too-brief and fragmentary discussion of Jaspers' lucid prose,  
 465 but hope I did not mangle it too badly. I conclude with a few comments on the echoes  
 466 I found in Jaspers that reverberated with my imaginary project of writing the history  
 467 of Jerusalem as a symbol.

468 Like Jaspers I am not a historian but a philosopher writing about history. My writing  
 469 about Jerusalem is an exercise on the history and historiography of something  
 470 like Jerusalem, or a contemplation on the past, present, and future of our monotheistic  
 471 formations. Jaspers' 1931 predecessor to *Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* was  
 472 less of a meditation on history but it was more openly Christian or based on Christian  
 473 symbols than *Ursprung und Ziel*, but even in 1949 Jaspers does not hide the fact that  
 474 he believes we have no better or more significant way of structuring history than the  
 475 one we inherit from the Christian or Judeo-Christian tradition. As I have mentioned  
 476 earlier, the three parts of *Ursprung und Ziel* address the past or common origin of  
 477 humanity, the present situation of humanity, and its future. The question of origin  
 478 and goal concerns the pursuit of a unity for which the globe is merely the external  
 479 symbol and foundation in space or empirical reality. The real unity is an elusive  
 480 goal, but that it is what we must strive toward is expressed in the form of an immanent  
 481 eschatology. Origin and goal of history are transcendent, what is at hand are the  
 482 present and the short moment of world history. What moves us are care and responsibility  
 483 not just for ourselves but for others. The task is to move from individual and  
 484 subjective insights into the character of history to a commonality based on a new  
 485 and extended range of communication reaching for universality.

486 Similarly, my project also rotates around an axis—namely scripture—that is  
 487 both historically empirical and symbolic. Like Jaspers' axial age, scripture is both  
 488 anchored in historical processes and linked to its moments of origin and linked to  
 489 later ages as their perpetual source of renewal. Scripture has its history of reception  
 490 and interpretation. It has remained present; it determines how we see the past and  
 491 what we look for in the past; and it impacts on what people are taught to expect of

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494 <sup>10</sup> I cannot resist pointing out that, when speaking of *ewige Aufgaben*, Jaspers consciously or  
 495 unconsciously echoes a phrase prominently used by Hermann Cohen.

496 the future. Scripture's influence is not just beneficial; much of it must be considered  
 497 untenable and rubs against the critical spirit that it helped to spawn. All of this is also  
 498 present in Jaspers but I would argue that by presenting a claim that is more limited  
 499 and specific, I am closer to the historical specificity that Jaspers envisions, namely,  
 500 a phenomenon pertaining to our scriptural religions, the religions of the people of  
 501 the book.

502 Like Jaspers I look at the variety of scriptural religions as parallel phenomena,  
 503 even though in the case of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, to use the conventional  
 504 and broad qualifiers, there is an evident element of influence and historical pri-  
 505 ority. But, in contrast to our biblical sources, the Judaism that is still with us is  
 506 not the Jewish environment that spawned the Christian movement. In fact, just as  
 507 Jaspers reminds us that the appearance of the great breakthrough personality in his  
 508 axial age cannot be linearly derived from its antecedents, there is much to be gained  
 509 from resisting the common and pseudo-historical platitudes about Christianity hav-  
 510 ing grown from Judaism and Islam having grown from both of its antecedents, as if  
 511 these movements were a kind of organism. Like Jaspers in 1949 I find it refreshing to  
 512 think of our monotheistic formations as parallel phenomena rather than look at them  
 513 in terms of filiation because that is how they have been present. Rabbinic Judaism,  
 514 the Christian denominations and political formations, and the Islamic *umma* all  
 515 emerged around the middle of the first millennium after Christ and thus it is just  
 516 as reasonable, or more so, to treat them as a common axis as it was for Jaspers to  
 517 speak of the widely distributed and disconnected formations of the middle of the  
 518 first millennium before Christ as a common axis.

519 I agree with Jaspers where he speaks of the problem of romantic views of history.  
 520 Romanticism was a movement that attempted to locate its view of communitarian  
 521 perfection and the wholeness of faith in an actual past, namely, in the Middle Ages  
 522 as conceived by the romantics. Jaspers' own impulse is somewhat similar in that  
 523 he locates what makes us human in an actual historical moment, the axial age. He  
 524 foregrounds the axial age because its expressions of humanity are more fragile, and  
 525 formulated in an age between empires. Unlike the romantics, he approves of the  
 526 freedom and individualism of renaissance and enlightenment but he wishes to bind  
 527 these back to the ethos of the biblical prophets. Jaspers explicitly rejects Catholicity  
 528 as the radical alternative to reason (*UZG* 349 fn). Jaspers dismisses the romantic  
 529 attempt to use modern scientific means to locate their mythological ideal of the past  
 530 in actual history:

531 Where empirical research finds the remnants of this primordial age [*Vorzeit*] it finds no con-  
 532 firmation of such dreams. Those primordial ages were rough, the human being infinitely  
 533 dependent and exposed. We can grasp what it means to be human only through what  
 534 becomes spirit and can be communicated. (*UZG* 303)

535  
 536 Since 1967, Israeli archeologists have had greater access to what is generally  
 537 believed to be the location of first and second temple Jerusalem. This has boosted the  
 538 previously existing but marginal Jewish religious nationalistic movement which has  
 539 usurped crucial archeological work in Jerusalem. Right now, attempts are underway  
 540 to produce evidence of the City of David in the village of Silwan. The archeological

541 park established in this area south of the Haram ash-Sharif or Noble Sanctuary is  
 542 run by a settler organization supported by Irving Moskowitz, an American Jewish  
 543 millionaire, and the scientists excavating are supported by the Shalem Center, a  
 544 right-wing think tank, supported by the same source. I propose that,

545 to say, there was no Jewish temple in Jerusalem is a historical lie (in the interest of de-  
 546 legitimizing legitimate Jewish claims to their history in the city); to say Palestinians are  
 547 not a people with distinct roots and attachments to the Holy Land is also a lie, used to  
 548 de-legitimize the Palestinian sense of history and belonging.

549 To say, we don't have evidence of a united Jewish kingdom at the beginning of Israelite  
 550 history, i.e., to deny the veracity of the biblical stories about David and Solomon is not  
 551 a betrayal of the Jewish nation of today but based on the belief that authentic nationhood  
 552 cannot be based on unverified and unverifiable myths of origin at the expense of scientific  
 553 veracity. To say that some biblical stories are contrived is not to declare the entire corpus of  
 554 ancient Judahite historiography a literary contrivance. It matters, especially in connection  
 555 with the repeated international calls among academics for a boycott of Israeli institutions  
 556 of higher education, whether Israeli and Jewish scholarship elsewhere meet the highest  
 557 standards of excellence. It is therefore of utmost importance that archeological explorations  
 558 of sensitive places, such as those conducted in Silwan, the so-called "City of David," are  
 559 conducted under the auspices of internationally recognized bodies such as UNESCO.<sup>11</sup>

558 What I formulate here is based on Jaspers' consideration of the conditions for a  
 559 common future.

560 There are other ways in which I find myself stimulated by Jaspers. I find his char-  
 561 acterization of the post-Christian empires interesting and helpful in exploring the  
 562 difference between Catholic and Protestant perspectives of Christian history. From  
 563 a Protestant perspective, early Christianity was what the Protestants made of it, what  
 564 they wrested away from Church hierarchy, and what eventually emancipated itself  
 565 even from its Protestant ecclesiastic forms, namely, the discovery of the existential  
 566 challenge of faith, the freedom of the human being who stands before God directly  
 567 and without the mediation of a cult or a priesthood. But this is historically prob-  
 568 lematic. The forms in which the Christian experience became institutionalized and  
 569 historically efficient were ecclesiastical, cultic, and ultimately political. The strange  
 570 though tense affinity between prophetic faith and political authority is an important  
 571 theme in Jaspers and it is important for me in trying to understand the invention of  
 572 Jerusalem as a Christian Holy City in the fourth century under the imperial guidance  
 573 of Constantine and his successors.

574 Further important in both historical and philosophical or symbolic terms is the  
 575 question of political freedom. Jaspers attends to the distinction between spiritual  
 576 freedom and political freedom. Jaspers does not believe that the Western form of  
 577 political liberty, democracy, and the rule of law are necessary conditions for the  
 578 attainment or preservation of one's humanity, which does not mean that he would not  
 579 stand up for human rights in China, for example. But he declines to commit to any  
 580 one-size-fits-all-solution to our global political problems. In my own project I found  
 581 that biblical prophecy is misrepresented if we only look at its most universalistic  
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583  
 584 <sup>11</sup> Source: URL <http://unholycity.blogspot.com/2009/12/bad-science.html>. Accessed August 9,  
 585 2010.

586 formulations, anticipating a reign of peace on earth. When it comes to Jerusalem-  
587 related prophecy before the Babylonian exile, the prophetic project is concerned  
588 with the freedom of a land-owning class from the tribute imposed by foreign powers,  
589 represented by their “foreign” gods. It seems to me that Jaspers does not distinguish  
590 within the religious traditions between political and spiritual impulses. This lack of  
591 perception derives from a conflation of Jewish and Christian traditions, as in general  
592 he does not see the enduring power of distinct religious formations.

593 In conclusion, Jaspers’ anamnesis of the present situation in the historical past is  
594 not without problems but it is nevertheless profound. His diagnosis of the present sit-  
595 uation is subtle, insightful, and moving. His prognosis is powerful in a neo-Kantian  
596 and normative way, indicating where we ought to go, but it is not so powerful as fore-  
597 cast or prophetic speech. He emphasizes, of course, that prognosis is not prophecy.  
598 Jaspers did not see the possibility that the religious formations of the past might  
599 endure and, in fact, return in force to determine, for better or worse, our bumpy  
600 path toward some end of history. Although Jaspers extended his horizon to consider  
601 China and India as independent and parallel sources of axial age insights, he might  
602 have perceived a global future through his own cultural lens. Otherwise he would  
603 have noticed that the phenomenon of an attenuation of religion he saw in his own  
604 culture was not at all a global phenomenon. To be sure, such perception that the  
605 European model applies to other places is not unique to Jaspers.

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## Chapter 17

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