

## ABSTRACT

God through the Book of Poetry: The Ancient Chinese and Their Loss of Theistic Faith

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Looking at modern-day China, it can be hard to comprehend that theistic faith was ever widespread among her people. Yet, it was once an integral part of Chinese culture, as evidenced by writings such as the Book of Poetry. In this paper, I seek to explain the ancient Chinese belief in God and why that same belief led to the decline of theistic faith. Selections from the Book of Poetry are translated and used to elaborate on the various aspects of early dynastic religion. The historical and social contexts are also discussed alongside the poems to reveal why belief in God had waned by the end of the Western Zhou dynasty.

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GOD THROUGH THE BOOK OF POETRY:  
THE ANCIENT CHINESE AND THEIR LOSS OF THEISTIC FAITH

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Baylor University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Honors Program

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Waco, Texas  
May 2018

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                   |     |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Preface.....                                      | iii |
| Acknowledgements.....                             | iv  |
| Dedication.....                                   | v   |
| Chapter One: The Origins of the Zhou Dynasty..... | 1   |
| Chapter Two: The Propagation of Faith.....        | 8   |
| Chapter Three: The Downfall of Belief.....        | 20  |
| Chapter Four: Conclusion.....                     | 45  |
| Bibliography.....                                 | 47  |

## PREFACE

To many Westerners, China appears to be a pagan nation, devoid of any religious belief of significance. My thesis proves that China was at one point not only a highly pious nation, but also possessing of a religious belief comparable to that of Christianity. A simple perusal of the works in the Shi Jing 詩經 (Book of Poetry) should convince the reader of the presence of such a religion.

The Book of Poetry is one of the earliest collections of Chinese poetry, having been written between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. During his lifetime, Confucius compiled into a textbook containing 305 works of varying lengths and topics, making it one of the Wu Jing 五經 (Five Classics).

Apart from studying the nature of theistic religion in ancient China, my thesis also explores the reasons for its fading into obscurity within the Chinese culture. In my analysis of selected Chinese poems from the Book of Poetry, parallels will be drawn between ancient Chinese thoughts and Judeo-Christian theology. Translations of the poems were done with the assistance of explanations by Chinese translators and inspiration from the work of James Legge and Arthur Waley.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my most heartfelt thanks to my thesis mentor, Dr. Vincent Yang, who taught me, inspired me, and went above and beyond to support me when I hit a huge stumbling block during the last stage of my thesis project. My defense committee members, Dr. Guillermo Garcia-Corales and Dr. Beth Willingham, were very willing to work with me and gave much good advice. Thanks to them, the formatting looks wonderful!

A special thank you to my mom, who introduced me to the world of Chinese poetry and thus set me on the path that led to this paper. To my dad, brother, and sister, whose prayers and encouragement were never far: thanks for always being there.

Finally, to the God Who loves me and saves me, I give any glory I might receive from this text, for without Him, nothing could have been written.

## DEDICATION

To my mom, without whom I never would have discovered my love for Chinese poetry

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Origins of the Zhou Dynasty

The dawning of the Zhou dynasty is in many ways similar to the mystical beginnings of Christianity. Just as Christianity began with the virgin conception and birth of Jesus, the Zhou dynasty originated through the supernatural conception and birth of Hou Ji (后稷). The following poem chronicles not only the mystical life of Hou Ji but also the contributions he made to the ancient Chinese religious practices.

|           |                                                              |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| <u>生民</u> | “The Origin of Our People”                                   |
| 厥初生民      | The origin <sup>1</sup> of our people                        |
| 時維姜嫄      | Was from Jiang Yuan.                                         |
| 生民如何      | How did our people come to be?                               |
| 克禋克祀      | She presented a proper sacrifice                             |
| 以弗無子      | To cure herself of childlessness.                            |
| 履帝武敏歆     | She was moved upon stepping in the print of God’s great toe; |
| 攸介攸止      | Through His protection and blessing,                         |
| 載震載夙      | She became pregnant and rested.                              |

---

<sup>1</sup> The word “生” here is translated, most literally, “birth.” As the poem is referring to the birth, or origin, of the Zhou people, “生” could also be interpreted as “origin.”

|       |                                      |
|-------|--------------------------------------|
| 載生載育  | Then she bore and nourished [a son]  |
| 時維后稷  | Who was Hou Ji. <sup>2</sup>         |
| 誕彌厥月  | When she fulfilled the months,       |
| 先生如達  | She smoothly bore her first-born     |
| 不坼不副  | Without ripping or tearing,          |
| 無菑無害  | Without injury or harm. <sup>3</sup> |
| 以赫厥靈  | She told the priest                  |
| 上帝不寧  | That God was not pleased;            |
| 不康禋祀  | She sacrificed no more,              |
| 居然生子  | Yet a son was born.                  |
| 誕寘之隘巷 | He was discarded in a narrow lane,   |
| 牛羊腓字之 | But oxen and sheep nurtured him;     |
| 誕寘之平林 | He was discarded in a wide forest,   |
| 會伐平林  | But the woodcutters found him;       |

---

<sup>2</sup> In many ways, the story of Jiang Yuan is similar to that of Hannah. Both were childless and prayed to God for an end to their barrenness; both were ultimately blessed with a son. However, Jiang Yuan became frightened because of Hou Ji's unusual birth and decided to abandon him, whereas Hannah delivered Samuel and joyfully gave him back to God.

<sup>3</sup> In Chinese mythology, an unusual conception, birth, or both often distinguish minor gods or those with God-like powers. Here, Hou Ji is described as having been supernaturally conceived when his mother stepped in God's footprint and being born without Jiang Yuan suffering from any pain or injury.

|       |                                                |
|-------|------------------------------------------------|
| 誕寘之寒冰 | He was discarded on the freezing ice,          |
| 鳥覆翼之  | But the birds spread their wings to cover him. |
| 鳥乃去矣  | When the birds flew away,                      |
| 后稷呱矣  | Hou Ji began to cry.                           |
| 實覃實訐  | He cried long and loud,                        |
| 厥聲載路  | Filling the whole road with sound.             |
| 誕實匍匐  | When he began to crawl,                        |
| 克岐克嶷  | He was smart and wise,                         |
| 以就口食  | Capable of feeding himself.                    |
| 蓺之荏菽  | He began planting soybeans                     |
| 荏菽旆旆  | And the beans flourished.                      |
| 禾役穰穰  | His millet produced much harvest;              |
| 麻麥幪幪  | His hemp and wheat grew lush and thick;        |
| 瓜瓞嗶嗶  | His gourds were abundant.                      |
| 誕后稷之穡 | The agricultural skills of Hou Ji              |
| 有相之道  | Proceeded in the best direction.               |
| 芟厥豐草  | After clearing away the weeds and grass,       |
| 種之黃茂  | He planted yellow grains                       |

|       |                                                           |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| 實方實苞  | And nourished them until they seeded.                     |
| 實種實稊  | He planted the seeds and they came up;                    |
| 實發實秀  | They grew and matured,                                    |
| 實堅實好  | They flourished strong and well,                          |
| 實穎實粟  | They ripened and were harvested,                          |
| 卽有郤家室 | And he wended to his home at Tai.                         |
|       |                                                           |
| 誕降嘉種  | He gave his people the excellent seeds:                   |
| 維秬維秠  | The black millet and the double-kernelled rice grain,     |
| 維糜維芑  | The red and white rice sprouts.                           |
|       | They extensively planted the black millet and the double- |
| 恆之秬秠  | kernelled rice grain,                                     |
| 是穫是畝  | Which they harvested and spread on the ground;            |
| 恆之糜芑  | They extensively planted the red and white rice sprouts,  |
| 是任是負  | Which they carefully carried on their backs               |
| 以歸肇祀  | Home to begin the sacrifices.                             |
|       |                                                           |
| 誕我祀如何 | How are our sacrifices?                                   |
| 或舂或揄  | Some pound the grain, some remove it from the mortar;     |
| 或簸或蹂  | Some winnow it, some trample it.                          |
| 釋之叟叟  | It is washed, rattling in the dishes;                     |

|      |                                                   |
|------|---------------------------------------------------|
| 烝之浮浮 | It is cooked, steam gently floating.              |
| 載謀載惟 | We plan the sacrifice:                            |
| 取蕭祭脂 | We obtain <i>Artemisia</i> to offer with the fat, |
| 取羝以載 | We obtain a male goat for its pelt, <sup>4</sup>  |
| 載燔載烈 | We roast and broil its flesh,                     |
| 以興嗣歲 | Thus to pray for a prosperous year.               |
| 印盛于豆 | I fill the vessels <sup>5</sup> with offerings,   |
| 于豆于登 | The vessels of wood and earthenware.              |
| 其香始升 | The fragrance begins to rise;                     |
| 上帝居歆 | Shangdi <sup>6</sup> is pleased by it:            |
| 胡臭亶時 | How fragrant <sup>7</sup> it is!                  |
| 后稷肇祀 | Hou Ji was the founder of sacrifices,             |
| 庶無罪悔 | Regarding which there has been no blame or regret |

---

<sup>4</sup> There is a play on sounds here: 載 is a character used when speaking of sacrifice, but here it is also used in the sense of 拔, which has a meaning of removing a pelt; in other words, the pelt of the male goat is used for the sacrifice. Both characters have the same phonetic sound and tone in Mandarin.

<sup>5</sup> In modern-day language, the character 豆 most commonly translates as “bean.” Here, however, it refers to a traditional vessel used during ancient sacrificial ceremonies.

<sup>6</sup> The name of the “king of gods” in Shang dynasty religion. See footnote 4 in chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> Although the character 臭 in modern Chinese usually refers to an unpleasant smell, here in the ancient text it means the complete opposite, as the aroma of the sacrificed offerings is pleasant to God.

以迄于今      Even to the present day.

In traditional Chinese legend, Hou Ji is considered the founder of the Zhou people. Said to have lived during the Xia dynasty, Hou Ji, whose name is actually a title meaning “Lord of Agriculture” due to his development of agriculture into a cornerstone of ancient Chinese culture, was initially raised with the name Qi (棄) because of what happened after his birth.

The circumstances surrounding Hou Ji’s conception and birth seem nothing short of miraculous: Jiang Yuan 姜嫫 became pregnant after stepping in the large toe of a giant footprint and, upon fulfilling her months, birthed a son without any pain or tearing of the birth canal. Yet because of these bizarre happenings, Jiang Yuan felt disturbed and tried to rid herself of the child. However, as recorded in the poem, each of her attempts to discard him failed due to some form of divine intercession. Upon seeing this, she decided that the birth of the infant must be the result of divine will; as a result, she decided to take him back and raise him. Since she initially abandoned him, Jiang Yuan named her son Qi, meaning “abandoned.”

As a grown man, Qi achieved renown for his acumen in farming, leading the ruler to enfeoff him at Tai (台) and not only give him the title of Hou Ji but also grant him the family name of Ji (姬). During his work as the Lord of Agriculture, Hou Ji established the practice of giving sacrifices to Shangdi 上帝 (Lord on High)<sup>8</sup>, or God<sup>9</sup>, to please him:

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<sup>8</sup> “The Lord on High” is the literal translation of the term Shangdi.

<sup>9</sup> The Lord on High bears many similarities to the Almighty God of Judeo-Christian tradition. For further analysis, see Michael Vincent Yang, “A Critique of Confucius’

“Hou Ji was the founder of sacrifices/Regarding which there has been no blame or regret/Even to the present day 后稷肇祀/庶無罪悔/以迄于今.” This piety, alongside the agricultural skill, is what set Hou Ji up as a figure to be venerated in the eyes of the Zhou people.

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Philosophy,” in *Asian Philosophy: An International Journal of the Philosophical Traditions of the East* 26.4 (2016) 354-374

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Propagation of Faith

The accomplishments of Hou Ji in the eyes of the Zhou people could never be over-exaggerated. His knowledge of and expertise in agriculture not only provided his people with an enduring source of food but also transformed the Chinese community into an agricultural society. The Zhou people celebrated his name for his laying the foundations of Zhou dynasty yet to come and, more importantly, for his securing of the blessings of God for the people yet to be born. As indicated in Exodus 20:6, God shows “love to a thousand generations of those who love [Him] and keep [His] commandments.” Likewise, God’s love for Hou Ji lasted for more than a thousand years and found a climactic expression in the establishment of the longest dynasty in Chinese history. It is no wonder, then, that Hou Ji was greatly venerated by the Zhou people. The following poem Si Wen 思文 abounds with the kind of reverence that they held for him.

|      |                                  |
|------|----------------------------------|
| 思文   | “The Accomplished One”           |
| 思文后稷 | The accomplished Hou Ji          |
| 克配彼天 | Can stand alongside Heaven.      |
| 立我烝民 | He nourished our people;         |
| 莫匪爾極 | This was his unparalleled merit. |
| 貽我來牟 | He gave us wheat and barley,     |

|       |                                                  |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 帝命率育  | Which God commanded to be used for all           |
| 無此疆爾界 | Without regard for boundaries or territories.    |
| 陳常于時夏 | Agriculture thus spread throughout all of China. |

This poem, an ode of praise, could be translated as being directly spoken to Hou Ji or as being recited during a sacrificial ceremony. As described in Chapter One, Hou Ji, the ancestral founder of the Zhou people, is known as an agricultural genius and is accredited with making agriculture into one of the foundation blocks of Chinese society. He also established the practice of sacrificing to God. In ancient Chinese thinking, living a life of good deeds and worthy character elevated a person to the realm of the gods after death: Hou Ji obviously fits in this category, and therefore he “can stand alongside Heaven 克配彼天.”

His virtue was also passed down to his descendants, as seen in Wei Tian Zhi Ming 維天之命:

|             |                                          |
|-------------|------------------------------------------|
| <u>維天之命</u> | “The Commandments of Heaven”             |
| 維天之命        | The commandments of Heaven <sup>10</sup> |
| 於穆不已        | Are profound and unceasing.              |
| 於乎不顯        | Oh, how luminous                         |

---

<sup>10</sup> The being of Tian 天 (Heaven) is the same as that of God discussed in Chapter 1. When the Zhou dynasty came into power, they conflated Shangdi with Heaven, their highest god; centuries later, the Romans would do the same thing after their capture of Greece. As with Jupiter and Zeus, Shangdi and Heaven were essentially the same being in ancient Chinese religion; hence, He is the same being as God. For identification purposes, however, Tian will be translated as “Heaven” within the poem but referred to as God without.

|        |                                                                                          |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 文王之德之純 | Is King Wen's virtue and purity!                                                         |
| 假以溢我   | His virtue overflows to us;                                                              |
| 我其收之   | We humbly receive it.                                                                    |
| 駿惠我文王  | <i>Submit to our wise King Wen;</i>                                                      |
| 曾孫篤之   | <i>May his farthest descendants be whole-heartedly like</i><br><i>him.</i> <sup>11</sup> |

This poem, along with the following Wo Jiang 我將, speaks of one of the great rulers of the Zhou: Ji Chang 姬昌, more commonly known as Zhou Wen Wang 周文王 (King Wen of Zhou), born in 1152 BC. Although a king of the Zhou people, King Wen did not rule during the Zhou dynasty, as the Western Zhou began in 1046 BC and King Wen died in 1056 BC. However, he was instrumental in the downfall of the previous Shang dynasty by forming alliances with the neighboring Shi 士, or chiefs, during his tenure as Xi Bai 西伯 (Lord of the West). This helped to build up the military strength necessary to overthrow the Shang dynasty, an act accomplished by King Wen's son.

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<sup>11</sup> The italicized lines also have an alternative translation depending on the placement of the characters in the phrase “駿惠我文王”:

*Our King Wen is most virtuous;*  
*May our descendants be ever like him.*

This is because the phrase can be broken down into two parts: “駿惠,” meaning “wise and virtuous” or “reverent”, and “我文王,” meaning “our King Wen.” When translating with “我文王” at the back of the phrase, the result is the first interpretation. However, the flexibility of character position in Chinese poetry means that the phrase could also be rearranged to read “我文王駿惠” instead, which would result in the second translation. In either case, the poet expresses the praiseworthiness of King Wen and exhorts all to emulate him.

Among the Chinese, King Wen is most known for his wisdom and benevolence, as revealed by his title: Wen means “cultured.” He was humble and respectful in his dealings with people: he would forgo the midday meal in order to receive various chiefs.<sup>12</sup> So venerated was he that the poet raised him up to Heaven in his afterlife, where his virtue continues to spill over. This refers to a common belief among the ancient Chinese: those who lived well were taken to live with the gods after death. King Wen was one of those so venerated, and so this poem both praises this fact and prays that he would continue to bless his people with his virtue.

|         |                                           |
|---------|-------------------------------------------|
| 我將      | “My Presentation”                         |
| 我將我享    | I present my offerings,                   |
| 維羊維牛    | Both sheep and cattle;                    |
| 維天其右之   | May Heaven bless us!                      |
| 儀式刑文王之典 | I seek to follow the model of King Wen,   |
| 日靖四方    | Working daily to secure the kingdom.      |
| 伊嘏文王    | The great King Wen:                       |
| 既右享之    | Please bless us and accept the offerings. |
| 我其夙夜    | I, day and night,                         |
| 畏天之威    | Fear the might of Heaven;                 |
| 于時保之    | Thus, I am able to keep the land.         |

Like the one before it, this poem seeks to exalt the person of King Wen. In doing so, it reveals another aspect of ancient Chinese religion: not only do the virtuous dead dwell

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<sup>12</sup> Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, p. 57.

among the gods; they also act as an intermediary between the people and Heaven, or God. Sacrificing to ancestors and great legends was necessary, as God was never directly approached; instead, the virtuous dead either handled the appeals of the people themselves or presented the matter before God.

The transactional view of the deity-human relationship is also present in the beginning and ending lines of the poem: “I present my offerings.../May Heaven bless us.../I, day and night/Fear the might of Heaven/Thus, I am able to keep the land 我將我享.../維天其右之.../我其夙夜/畏天之威/于時保之.” When a request was made, a sacrifice was offered; in return, the request was granted. There was also an underlying understanding that as long as God was properly respected, there would be peace and the poet would be able to keep his land.

That type of thinking was what led to the Tian Ming 天命 (Mandate of Heaven), an ideology that is expressed in the poem Huan 桓.

|      |                                          |
|------|------------------------------------------|
| 桓    | “Mighty”                                 |
| 綏萬邦  | Ten thousand states thrive on peace;     |
| 婁豐年  | Great harvests continue year after year. |
| 天命匪解 | He who ever heeds the Mandate of Heaven, |
| 桓桓武王 | Mighty King Wu:                          |
| 保有厥土 | He preserves his land                    |
| 于以四方 | All the way to the four corners,         |
| 克定厥家 | Thus securing his house.                 |

於昭于天

Oh, how luminous is he before Heaven!

皇以聞之

Heaven appoints him the new ruler.

This poem depicts the previously mentioned son of King Wen, Zhou Wu Wang 周武王 (King Wu of Zhou), the first king of the Western Zhou dynasty. Born with the name Ji Fa 姬發, he later received the title Wu, meaning “martial,” for his conquests in battle. In 1046 BC, he led an army of 50,000 against the Shang army of 700,000 at the Battle of Muye. Although heavily outnumbered, he received little resistance and sometimes outright aid from the Shang troops, who were unhappy with their king, Di Xin 帝辛, and welcomed the coming of the Zhou army. Upon the Zhou victory, Di Xin immolated himself inside his palace; King Wu then established himself as ruler and the Zhou dynasty was established.

Aside from exalting the greatness of King Wu, this poem alludes to the Mandate of Heaven, a concept that began with King Wen and continued to be passed down through dynastic China. Under the Mandate of Heaven, the right to rule was a divine authority, and the chosen king was the representative of Heaven. With this authority also came the moral obligation to rule well; should the king fail to uphold his responsibilities to Heaven and the people, he would lose the right to govern. Di Xin had been lecherous and cruel, the worst in a series of terrible kings. King Wu claimed that, due to this behavior, Di Xin had forfeited his mandate and was unfit to rule. Wu’s actions were therefore justified, as he was merely carrying out the will of Heaven in establishing a better, more virtuous line of rulers.

This had implications for the descendants of Wen and Wu, as revealed by Hao Tian You Cheng Ming 昊天有成命.

|        |                                                    |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------|
| 昊天有成命  | “High Heaven Made a Command”                       |
| 昊天有成命  | High Heaven made a command, <sup>13</sup>          |
| 二后受之   | The two kings <sup>14</sup> received it.           |
| 成王不敢康  | King Cheng did not dare to stay idle,              |
| 夙夜基命宥密 | Day and night working diligently and benevolently. |
| 於緝熙    | Oh, how glorious,                                  |
| 單厥心    | Doing his utmost,                                  |
| 肆其靖之   | Consolidating and giving stability to the world.   |

Upon the sudden death of King Wu in 1043 BC, three years after he ascended the throne, kingship passed to his son Ji Song 姬誦, later known as Zhou Cheng Wang 周成王 (King Cheng of Zhou). As Cheng (1060 – 1021 BC) was still young at the time, his uncle Ji Dan 姬旦, the Zhou Gong 周公 (Duke of Zhou), acted as regent for seven years, after which he ceded power to Cheng. Under the rule of King Cheng, the Zhou dynasty consolidated its power and became a stable power in Northern China.

Here again, the influence of the Mandate of Heaven is present. The “command” of Heaven was given to Kings Wen and Wu and implied to be passed on to King Cheng. The following line then says, “King Cheng did not dare to stay idle 成王不敢康,” followed by a recounting of his diligence and hard work. According to his father Wu,

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<sup>13</sup> The character I translated as “command” is the same one for “mandate.” This is a reference to the Mandate of Heaven.

<sup>14</sup> The phrase “二后” is literally translated “[the] two kings.” In the social and historical context, the poet is most likely referring to Kings Wen and Wu, the predecessors of King Cheng.

Heaven had given the Zhou people the right to rule because of the lack of virtue in the prior Shang dynasty; conversely, this meant that if any of the succeeding kings in the Zhou line strayed from Heaven's directives, someone more deserving would also overthrow them. Thus Cheng, as king, had an obligation of moral goodness. He and his son, mentioned in the following poem, both carried out this duty so well that there was no need for corporal punishment for forty years.

The peace that existed during this time is portrayed in Zhi Jing 執競.

|      |                                                |
|------|------------------------------------------------|
| 執競   | “Fierce and Strong”                            |
| 執競武王 | Fierce and strong was King Wu;                 |
| 無競維烈 | None could match his accomplishments.          |
| 不顯成康 | Greatly luminous were Cheng and Kang;          |
| 上帝是皇 | God made them powerful.                        |
| 自彼成康 | From the era of Cheng and Kang,                |
| 奄有四方 | All the earth was theirs;                      |
| 斤斤其明 | Clear was their brilliance.                    |
| 鐘鼓喤喤 | Bells and drums sounded loudly,                |
| 磬筦將將 | Musical stones and flutes played to the skies. |
| 降福穰穰 | Abundant blessings came down;                  |
| 降福簡簡 | Blessings came down richly.                    |
| 威儀反反 | We have comported ourselves properly;          |
| 既醉既飽 | We have eaten and drunk our fill.              |

福祿來反

Blessing and good fortune will be ours.

Zhou Kang Wang 周康王 (King Kang of Zhou), born Ji Zhao 姬釗, was the son of King Cheng. Like his father before him, Kang sought to maintain stability and peace throughout the land. He succeeded, as the first half of the poem depicts: “From the era of Cheng and Kang/All the earth was theirs/Clear was their brilliance 自彼成康/奄有四方/斤斤其明.” Proceeding into the latter half of the poem, the poet portrays the musical celebration of peace and reveals that God was the giver of the numerous blessings: “Bells and drums sounded loudly/Musical stones and flutes played to the skies/Abundant blessings came down/Blessings came down richly 鐘鼓喤喤/磬筦將將/降福穰穰/降福簡簡.” This showed that the Zhou people clearly saw God as a benevolent being, similar to how the Judeo-Christian God is benevolent.

The following ceremonial poem, entitled Chen Gong 臣工, further reveals this belief in the goodness of God.

臣工

“Minister Officials”

嗟嗟臣工

Hey, hey, minister officials,

敬爾在公

Diligently perform your public duties.

王釐爾成

The king has given you laws;

來咨來茹

Discuss and consider them.

嗟嗟保介

Hey, hey, deputy officers,

|      |                                                           |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| 維莫之春 | It is now the end of spring; <sup>15</sup>                |
| 亦又何求 | What do you still have to ask?                            |
| 如何新畷 | How to manage the fields in their second and third years. |
| 於皇來牟 | Oh, how beautiful are the wheat and barley!               |
| 將受厥明 | We shall receive a bountiful harvest.                     |
| 明昭上帝 | The wise and powerful God:                                |
| 迄用康年 | May He give us a year of plenty!                          |
| 命我眾人 | Command all our farmers                                   |
| 庠乃錢鎛 | To take up their shovels and hoes;                        |
| 奄觀銍艾 | We will inspect them at work harvesting.                  |

This poem focuses on the widespread impact of agriculture in the Western Zhou dynasty. It is also unique in that it comes from the perspective of the king, who, along with his officials, will join the farmers in agricultural work at the end of spring. In his exhortation to the officials, the king urged them to be diligent in accomplishing their goals. More importantly, he sought again the blessings of God: “The wise and powerful God/May He give us a year of plenty 明昭上帝/迄用康年.”

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<sup>15</sup> The character “莫,” especially in poetry, traditionally refers to the end or lack of something, so “莫之春” is literally translated as “end of spring.” In the context of this poem, which is heavily based on ancient Chinese agricultural practices, it also holds a deeper meaning: the end of spring is the time for the barley and wheat harvests. This explains the setting of the entire second half of the poem, where the king and his officials make plans to give thanks for and celebrate the harvest.

Traditionally viewed as a work by King Cheng,<sup>16</sup> *Jing Zhi* 敬之 focuses on God as its subject from the beginning until the end. The poem opens with a profound reverence for Him.

|         |                                                          |
|---------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| 敬之      | “Be Reverent”                                            |
| 敬之敬之    | Be reverent, be reverent [in duty];                      |
| 天維顯思    | Heaven knows all.                                        |
| 命不易哉    | The commandments [of Heaven] are permanent;              |
| 無曰高高在上  | Do not say that they are high above me.                  |
| 陟降厥士    | His angels descend and ascend,                           |
| 日監在茲    | And daily inspect us.                                    |
| 維予小子    | I am a young child,                                      |
| 不聰敬止    | Unwise, yet eager to learn;                              |
| 日就月將    | As days and months pass,                                 |
| 學有緝熙于光明 | I learn to accumulate brilliance until I achieve wisdom. |
| 佛時仔肩    | Assist in bearing my responsibilities,                   |
| 示我顯德行   | So that I may display virtue.                            |

This poem reveals a more active side of Heaven. Lines three through six indicate the guardian role that God assumes in the lives of the Zhou people: “The commandments [of Heaven] are permanent/Do not say that they are high above me/His angels descend and ascend/And daily inspect us 命不易哉/無曰高高在上/陟降厥士/日監在茲.” They are

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<sup>16</sup> Gao Heng 高亨 *Shi Jing Jin Zhu* 诗经今注 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe 1982), p. 500

then followed by a description of the humility of the king before God: “I am a young child/Unwise, yet eager to learn/As days and months pass/I learn to accumulate brilliance until I achieve wisdom 維予小子/不聰敬止/日就月將/學有緝熙于光明.” The concluding lines have traditionally been read as remarks addressed to the minister officials;<sup>17</sup> in light of the context, however, I believe that they can be better interpreted as a prayerful request to God. In the same way that a young Solomon asked God for wisdom to rule the nation of Israel, King Cheng is beseeching God for help in carrying out his duties in a virtuous manner. The deep sentiment of reverence exhibited in the poem corroborates the view that this was a work of King Cheng for, as explained earlier, he had a great sense of duty and undertook the Mandate of Heaven seriously.

Due to the great piety of its founding rulers, the Western Zhou dynasty had a culture permeated with belief in a benevolent, loving God, sustained by the knowledge that the Mandate of Heaven would keep a virtuous ruler on the throne. This view would continue for many centuries; as will be demonstrated in the next chapter, however, it was ultimately lost with the fall of the Western Zhou.

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<sup>17</sup> Gao Heng, p. 500

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Downfall of Belief

The end of the Western Zhou dynasty saw a monumental change in the political situation, which seriously undermined the foundations of religious belief in the hearts of the people. This unprecedented change in the history of the Zhou dynasty originated from the corruption within the king of Zhou and his court. Zhou You Wang 周幽王 (King You), the last ruler of the Western Zhou was enamored of his concubine Bao Si 褒姒, denuding the queen and crown prince of their titles in favor of Bao Si and her son. This drastic event led to the rebellion of Shen Hou 申侯 (Marquess of Shen), the father of the queen, his collaboration with nomads in Western China, and the attack upon the Zhou dynasty.<sup>18</sup> The invasion put an end to both the life of King You and the Western Zhou, initiating the turmoil in not only ancient Chinese politics but also religious belief. As a result, people began to cast doubt on God, as witnessed in the following poems.

|      |                             |
|------|-----------------------------|
| 節南山  | “The Lofty Southern Hill”   |
| 節彼南山 | Lofty is the southern hill, |
| 維石巖巖 | With its masses of rocks.   |
| 赫赫師尹 | Grand is Master Yin,        |
| 民具爾瞻 | People all look to you.     |

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<sup>18</sup> Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shi Ji* 史記 (Xi'an: Sanqin chubanshe, 1990), v. 1, pp 68-70.

|      |                                                        |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| 憂心如惔 | Their hearts grieve like a burning fire; <sup>19</sup> |
| 不敢戲談 | They dare not speak in jest.                           |
| 國既卒斬 | The nation has perished;                               |
| 何用不監 | Why do you not watch?                                  |
| 節彼南山 | The southern mountain is breathtaking                  |
| 有實其猗 | With its lush vegetation.                              |
| 赫赫師尹 | Awe-inspiring are you, (Grand) Master Yin,             |
| 不平謂何 | Yet why are you unjust?                                |
| 天方薦瘥 | Heaven increases its affliction;                       |
| 喪亂弘多 | Death and unrest are everywhere.                       |
| 民言無嘉 | The people have nothing good to say,                   |
| 僭莫懲嗟 | Yet you still do not watch and repent.                 |
| 尹氏大師 | Grand Master Yin                                       |
| 維周之氏 | Is the pillar of Zhou.                                 |
| 秉國之均 | He maintains the state of the nation;                  |

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<sup>19</sup> The character 惔 has the same meaning as 炎, which indicates a burning flame. The addition of the heart radical on the left may be a deliberate addition as this line refers to the hearts of the Chinese people.

|       |                                                   |
|-------|---------------------------------------------------|
| 四方是維  | He holds together its four corners; <sup>20</sup> |
| 天子是毗  | He assists the Son of Heaven                      |
| 俾民不迷  | To keep the people from going astray.             |
| 不弔昊天  | Oh, uncaring high Heaven—                         |
| 不宜空我師 | He should not empty us of our vitality!           |
| 弗躬弗親  | He resolves nothing personally,                   |
| 庶民弗信  | The citizens have no trust in him.                |
| 弗問弗仕  | He makes no inquiry or inspection;                |
| 勿罔君子  | He should not deceive superior men.               |
| 式夷式已  | If he led by example of justice,                  |
| 無小人殆  | There would be no threat of villains;             |
| 瑣瑣姻亞  | His immoral relatives                             |
| 則無臚仕  | Would not be in positions of importance.          |
| 昊天不傭  | High Heaven is blind                              |
| 降此鞠訥  | To send down this turmoil.                        |

---

<sup>20</sup> Literally, 四方 means “four directions,” referring to the four cardinal directions. I have translated it “four corners” because of context: Grand Master Yin is supposed to be watching over the whole of a nation, which has boundaries. The term “corners” seemed apropos, as “directions” have no limits. For a situation in which the latter is used, see footnote 4.

|      |                                                |
|------|------------------------------------------------|
| 昊天不惠 | High Heaven is cruel                           |
| 降此大戾 | To send down this calamity.                    |
| 君子如屆 | Should superior men come [into office],        |
| 俾民心闕 | The people's hearts would be assured;          |
| 君子如夷 | Should superior men act justly,                |
| 惡怒是違 | Hatred and anger would disappear.              |
| 不弔昊天 | Oh, uncaring high Heaven!                      |
| 亂靡有定 | The unrest has no end,                         |
| 式月斯生 | It grows with every passing month.             |
| 俾民不寧 | The people have no peace;                      |
| 憂心如醒 | Their hearts grieve as if drunk.               |
| 誰秉國成 | Who upholds the law of the nation?             |
| 不自為政 | He does not apply himself to matters of state; |
| 卒勞百姓 | The people suffer distress and toil.           |
| 駕彼四牡 | I harness my four steeds, <sup>21</sup>        |
| 四牡項領 | The four steeds with their thick necks.        |

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<sup>21</sup> The character 牡 simply means “male,” or a male farm animal. In context, the author is specifically referring to male horses; I have translated the character as “steeds” for smoother reading.

|       |                                              |
|-------|----------------------------------------------|
| 我瞻四方  | I look in all directions; <sup>22</sup>      |
| 蹙蹙靡所騁 | There is no space for me to run to.          |
| 方茂爾惡  | Your evil runs rampant,                      |
| 相爾矛矣  | Your spears are raised.                      |
| 既夷既懌  | Now you are at peace and friendly,           |
| 如相疇矣  | As if pledging one another.                  |
| 昊天不平  | High Heaven sends injustice,                 |
| 我王不寧  | Our king has no peace.                       |
| 不懲其心  | He will not repent his heart,                |
| 覆怨其正  | And he resents all endeavors to correct him. |
| 家父作誦  | Jia Fu <sup>23</sup> wrote this poem         |
| 以究王誼  | To explain the king's turmoil.               |
| 式訛爾心  | You should change your heart,                |
| 以畜萬邦  | And nurture all states.                      |

---

<sup>22</sup> As explained in footnote 2, the “方” in 四方 translates as either “corner” or “direction.” Here, the author is looking for a way of escape, which involves directionality, hence the choice of “direction.”

<sup>23</sup> Literally translated, Jia Fu 家父 means “the father of the house,” which is a title.

The last stanza of the poem reveals its purpose: “Jia Fu wrote this poem/To explain the king’s turmoil 家父作誦/以究王誦;” in other words, to trace the responsibility of the perpetrator of all the evils plaguing the Zhou dynasty. While complaining against the king and his ministers, the poet also expresses some negative ideas about God. At the close of the third stanza, for example, the lines “Oh, uncaring high Heaven/He should not empty us of our vitality 不弔昊天/不宜空我師” can be found. Arriving at the beginning of the fifth stanza, the poet indicates once again, “High Heaven is blind/To send down this turmoil/High Heaven is cruel/To send down this calamity 昊天不備/降此鞠誦/昊天不惠/降此大戾.” The start of the sixth stanza continues the complaint: “Oh, uncaring high Heaven/The unrest has no end 不弔昊天/亂靡有定,” while the ninth stanza reiterates that “High Heaven sends injustice/Our king has no peace 昊天不平/我王不寧.” All those lines clearly indicate a profound distrust in the benevolence of God due to the corruption of the king and his officials.

Not all ministers within the failing Zhou dynasty were corrupt; there were those who saw what the kingdom was falling to and grieved for its decay. The following poem is written by one such individual and describes the evil running rampant through the king’s courts.

|      |                                  |
|------|----------------------------------|
| 雨無正  | “Rain Without End” <sup>24</sup> |
| 浩浩昊天 | Great and vast Heaven,           |

---

<sup>24</sup> The title of this poem is an allusion to the unending afflictions that the people are undergoing. Rain that never ceases to fall is a common literary metaphor for suffering; it makes for an appropriate title.

|       |                                                        |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| 不駿其德  | Your kindness is never long-lasting.                   |
| 降喪飢饉  | You send down death and famine,                        |
| 斬伐四國  | Decimating all throughout the land. <sup>25</sup>      |
| 昊天疾威  | Great Heaven is cruel,                                 |
| 弗慮弗圖  | Having no foresight or planning.                       |
| 舍彼有罪  | Put aside the criminals,                               |
| 既伏其辜  | Conceal all their crimes,                              |
| 若此無罪  | But those who are innocent                             |
| 淪胥以鋪  | Fall into ruin. <sup>26</sup>                          |
| 周宗既滅  | The house of Zhou is extinguished;                     |
| 靡所止戾  | There is no place to rest.                             |
| 正大夫離居 | The head officials have left their positions;          |
| 莫知我勩  | No one knows my toil.                                  |
| 三事大夫  | The three high ministers                               |
| 莫肯夙夜  | Are unwilling [to carry out their work] day and night; |
| 邦君諸侯  | The vassal lords of the various states                 |

---

<sup>25</sup> Although the phrase 四國 is literally translated “four kingdoms,” here, the poet is using it to mean “all four directions under heaven,” so I chose to translate it as “all the land.”

<sup>26</sup> The character 鋪 in modern Chinese usually refers to either the action of spreading out something large and flat or a store or bed. In this poem, it has the same meaning as 痲, which means sick and disabled. In context, “ruin” is a smoother translation.

|      |                                                                        |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 莫肯朝夕 | Are unwilling [to carry out their work] day and night.                 |
| 庶曰式臧 | People wish they would turn to good,                                   |
| 覆出為惡 | But instead they produce [greater] evil.                               |
| 如何昊天 | Why is it, Great Heaven,                                               |
| 辟言不信 | That he will not heed good words?                                      |
| 如彼行邁 | He is like one gone astray,                                            |
| 則靡所臻 | Who knows where he is going.                                           |
| 凡百君子 | All you officials, <sup>27</sup>                                       |
| 各敬爾身 | Let everyone reverently attend to your duties.                         |
| 胡不相畏 | Why do you not revere one another?                                     |
| 不畏于天 | You do not revere Heaven.                                              |
| 戎成不退 | War has accomplished its task but he does not retreat;                 |
| 飢成不遂 | Famine has accomplished its task but does not disappear. <sup>28</sup> |
| 曾我慙御 | Why am I, a humble official,                                           |
| 慙慙日瘁 | Daily distressed and in pain?                                          |

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<sup>27</sup> In modern Chinese, 君子 would directly translate to “gentlemen.” Traditionally and often seen in ancient Chinese poetry, it is also a polite form of the masculine “you.” The political context of this poem reveals that the poet is specifically addressing the government officials.

<sup>28</sup> The character 遂, to proceed or materialize, has the same meaning here as 墜, which has the opposite meaning.

|       |                                             |
|-------|---------------------------------------------|
| 凡百君子  | All you officials                           |
| 莫肯用訊  | Refuse to speak out.                        |
| 聽言則答  | When you hear praise, you reply;            |
| 譖言則退  | When you hear criticism, you withdraw.      |
| 哀哉不能言 | Alas, that [just words] cannot be spoken    |
| 匪舌是出  | From my clumsy tongue. <sup>29</sup>        |
| 維躬是瘁  | While I do the hard work,                   |
| 哿矣能言  | Happy are those who can speak,              |
| 巧言如流  | Whose clever words flow like a stream;      |
| 俾躬處休  | They live in prosperity.                    |
| 維曰于仕  | It could be said of becoming an official    |
| 孔棘且殆  | That there is much danger and peril:        |
| 云不可使  | By saying that a thing cannot be,           |
| 得罪于天子 | You offend the Son of Heaven; <sup>30</sup> |
| 亦云可使  | By saying that a thing can be,              |
| 怨及朋友  | You are resented by friends.                |

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<sup>29</sup> The character 出 reads as 拙, which means “clumsy.”

<sup>30</sup> 天子 is a title for the emperor that was adopted by the Zhou dynasty meaning “Son of Heaven.”

|        |                                                                                  |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 謂爾遷于王都 | I tell you <sup>31</sup> to remove yourselves to the capital city, <sup>32</sup> |
| 曰予未有室家 | And you say that you have no dwellings there.                                    |
| 鼠思泣血   | My sad thoughts <sup>33</sup> pain me and I weep blood;                          |
| 無言不疾   | Every word I say incurs hatred. <sup>34</sup>                                    |
| 昔爾出居   | But formerly when you left your previous dwellings,                              |
| 誰從作爾室  | Who constructed new housing for you?                                             |

When things do not go as wished, the natural human response is to seek out the one to blame. Even an upright minister who is critical of the corruption in the court also reveals doubt about God, as evidenced by the first stanza: “Great and vast Heaven/Your kindness is never long-lasting/You send down death and famine/Decimating all throughout the land/Great Heaven is cruel/Having no foresight or planning 浩浩昊天/不駿其德/降喪飢饉/斬伐四國/昊天疾威/弗慮弗圖.”

The decline in faith is apparently prevalent, affecting not only the wicked, who act without care for Heaven’s morals; but also the upright, who care for the well-being of

---

<sup>31</sup> The “you” is in the plural form, referring to the officials mentioned previously, including the Zheng Da Fu 正大夫 (head officials) and San Shi Da Fu 三事大夫 (three high ministers).

<sup>32</sup> The character 都 is a split meaning character: in its more commonly seen form, it means “all” in the inclusive sense, such as in the phrase “you all.” Here, however, it means a large city; placing the character for “king” (王) in front of it indicates that the poet is talking about the capital city.

<sup>33</sup> Here the character 鼠, or “rat,” holds the same meaning as 癡, which means “sad.”

<sup>34</sup> While the character 疾 usually means “sickness,” the poet is using it in place of 嫉, which means “hatred.”

the state and its people. Similar doubt about the benevolence of God is present within  
Xiao Min 小旻.

|      |                                                                   |
|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 小旻   | “Little Heaven”                                                   |
| 旻天疾威 | The cruelty of Heaven                                             |
| 敷于下土 | Spreads throughout this world.                                    |
| 謀猶回譴 | The plans are wrong;                                              |
| 何日斯沮 | When will he stop in this course?                                 |
| 謀臧不從 | He heeds not good counsel                                         |
| 不臧覆用 | But employs evil counsel instead.                                 |
| 我視謀猶 | I see his plans                                                   |
| 亦孔之邛 | And am greatly troubled.                                          |
| 滄滄訛訛 | They <sup>35</sup> alternatively ally with and attack one another |
| 亦孔之哀 | And cause grief.                                                  |
| 謀之其臧 | If counsel is good,                                               |
| 則具是違 | They are all in opposition.                                       |
| 謀之不臧 | If counsel is bad,                                                |
| 則具是依 | They are all in accordance.                                       |
| 我視謀猶 | I see their plans                                                 |

---

<sup>35</sup> Referring to the government officials

|         |                                                 |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 伊于胡底    | And wonder: what will be their end?             |
| 我龜既厭    | Our tortoises <sup>36</sup> are already wearied |
| 不我告猶    | And tell us no more of plans.                   |
| 謀夫孔多    | The counsellors are many,                       |
| 是用不集    | Yet nothing is accomplished.                    |
| 發言盈庭    | The speakers fill the court,                    |
| 誰敢執其咎   | But who dares to point out his mistake?         |
| 如匪行邁謀   | It is like planning for a long journey          |
| 是用不得于道  | But not taking a single step.                   |
| 哀哉為猶    | Alas! Those who plan                            |
| 匪先民是程   | Neither follow the ancients                     |
| 匪大猶是經   | Nor take their regulations as scripture.        |
| 維邇言是聽   | They listen only to superficial words           |
| 維邇言是爭   | And debate only about superficial words.        |
| 如彼築室于道謀 | It is like constructing a house on the road;    |
| 是用不潰于成  | Of course, it will not succeed.                 |

---

<sup>36</sup> In ancient China, practitioners would use tortoise shells for divination. The implication here is that the diviners received no more revelations from Heaven.

|       |                                                  |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 國雖靡止  | Although the nation knows not where to stop,     |
| 或聖或否  | Some are wise and some foolish.                  |
| 民雖靡旃  | Although the people are few,                     |
| 或哲或謀  | There are the knowledgeable and the counsellors, |
| 或肅或艾  | The grave and the leaders.                       |
| 如彼泉流  | They are like a flowing stream,                  |
| 無淪胥以敗 | Refusing to admit defeat and perish.             |
|       |                                                  |
| 不敢暴虎  | They dare not attack a tiger bare-handed;        |
| 不敢馮河  | They dare not ford a river without a boat.       |
| 人知其一  | The people know only one thing;                  |
| 莫知其他  | They know not of others.                         |
| 戰戰兢兢  | We should be cautious and careful,               |
| 如臨深淵  | As if standing by a deep abyss,                  |
| 如履薄冰  | As if treading on thin ice.                      |

This poem is one of the most blatant in its disregard for Heaven with its opening “The cruelty of Heaven/Spreads throughout this world 旻天疾威/敷于下土.” The following lines reveal why Heaven is pronounced cruel: the ruler and his court are corrupt and will not listen to wise counsel. As a result, all their work came to naught. The beginning of the third stanza indicates that God had by now completely forsaken the rulers of the Zhou dynasty: “Our tortoises are already wearied/And tell us no more of plans 我龜既厭/不我

告猶。” The silence of God here is similar to the Biblical cases of Eli and Saul, in which God kept silent in response to the rebellion of His people.

This grievance against God repeats itself in another poem, entitled Xiao Bian 小弁.

|      |                                    |
|------|------------------------------------|
| 小弁   | “Flying Low”                       |
| 弁彼鸞斯 | The lively crows <sup>37</sup>     |
| 歸飛提提 | Fly leisurely back to their nest.  |
| 民莫不穀 | The people are happy,              |
| 我獨于罹 | Yet I alone am miserable.          |
| 何辜于天 | What is my crime against Heaven?   |
| 我罪伊何 | What is my sin?                    |
| 心之憂矣 | The sorrow in my heart—            |
| 云如之何 | What can be done about it?         |
| 踳踳周道 | The level road to Zhou             |
| 鞠為茂草 | Is overgrown with wild grass.      |
| 我心憂傷 | My heart is wounded with sorrow,   |
| 惄焉如擣 | I grieve as if severely beaten.    |
| 假寐永嘆 | I lie still and sigh continuously, |

---

<sup>37</sup> The crow is a metaphor for the ruling family. See footnote 27 for more details.

|      |                                                 |
|------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 維憂用老 | My grief ages me.                               |
| 心之憂矣 | The sorrow in my heart                          |
| 疢如疾首 | Pains me like a headache.                       |
| 維桑與梓 | The mulberry and catalpa trees <sup>38</sup>    |
| 必恭敬止 | Must be revered;                                |
| 靡瞻匪父 | Yet none are respected like a father,           |
| 靡依匪母 | None are depended on like a mother.             |
| 不屬於毛 | Am I not connected to the hairs [of my father]? |
| 不離于裏 | Did I not dwell within [the womb of my mother]? |
| 天之生我 | The Heaven that birthed me:                     |
| 我辰安在 | Why was it at such an unfortunate time?         |
| 菀彼柳斯 | The willows grow luxuriantly,                   |
| 鳴蜩嘒嘒 | And the cicadas sing loudly;                    |
| 有漙者淵 | The pool is deep,                               |
| 萑葦淠淠 | And the reeds and rushes grow abundantly.       |
| 譬彼舟流 | [But] I am like a drifting boat,                |

---

<sup>38</sup> In ancient China, the mulberry and catalpa (specifically Chinese catalpa, or *Catalpa ovata*) were trees often planted near personal dwellings; thus, they became associated with hometowns. When referenced in literature, they evoke thoughts of home and sometimes homesickness.

|      |                                            |
|------|--------------------------------------------|
| 不知所屆 | Not knowing its destination.               |
| 心之憂矣 | The sorrow in my heart                     |
| 不遑假寐 | Gives me no leisure to sleep.              |
| 鹿斯之奔 | The deer bounds away,                      |
| 維足伎伎 | Moving so lightly;                         |
| 雉之朝雊 | The pheasant crows in the morning          |
| 尚求其雌 | Seeking a mate.                            |
| 譬彼壞木 | [But] I am like a diseased tree,           |
| 疾用無枝 | Unable to produce branches due to illness. |
| 心之憂矣 | The sorrow in my heart—                    |
| 寧莫之知 | Does no one know of it?                    |
| 相彼投兔 | See the rabbit caught in a trap,           |
| 尚或先之 | Someone will come and release it;          |
| 行有死人 | A dead man lies in the road,               |
| 尚或瑾之 | Someone will come and bury him.            |
| 君子秉心 | [But] the heart of our ruler—              |
| 維其忍之 | Why is it so cruel?                        |
| 心之憂矣 | The sorrow in my heart                     |
| 涕既隕之 | Causes me to shed tears.                   |

|        |                                           |
|--------|-------------------------------------------|
| 君子信讒   | Our ruler believes slander                |
| 如或酬之   | As one who drinks celebratory wine.       |
| 君子不惠   | Our ruler is unkind,                      |
| 不舒究之   | And does not take time to consider.       |
| 伐木掎矣   | Felled trees are carefully lowered,       |
| 析薪柅矣   | And firewood is split along the grain.    |
| 舍彼有罪   | He ignores the guilty,                    |
| 予之佗矣   | But imputes their sin to me.              |
| 莫高匪山   | It is not a mountain without height,      |
| 莫浚匪泉   | It is not a spring without depth.         |
| 君子無易由言 | Our ruler should not speak words lightly, |
| 耳屬于垣   | For the walls may have ears.              |
| 無逝我梁   | Do not break my dam, <sup>39</sup>        |
| 無發我筥   | Do not remove my basket. <sup>40</sup>    |
| 我躬不閱   | My person is not accepted—                |

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<sup>39</sup> The character 梁 refers to a beam used by anglers to dam up the water in fishing. I translated it as “dam” for ease of reading.

<sup>40</sup> In keeping with the previous line, this is a basket used to hold fresh-caught fish when fishing.

遑恤我後

What do I care what comes after?

Commonly viewed as a poem by Prince Yi Jiu 宜臼, who was disinherited by King You,<sup>41</sup> the lamentations expressed in this poem actually apply to nearly all the people who had suffered similar wrongs during his time.<sup>42</sup> Though the third and fourth lines indicate that the poet alone suffered (The people are happy/Yet I alone am miserable 民莫不穀/我獨于罹), the verses at issue should be taken as hyperbole indicating the intensity of his woe.

Therefore, when the poet faults God with his grievances, which appear unjust in his own eyes, he is actually expressing a sentiment shared by many of his contemporaries. This can be corroborated by the poem Zheng Yue 正月.

正月

“Fourth Month”

正月繁霜

In the fourth month, there is much frost.

我心憂傷

My heart is grieved.

民之訛言

The false words of the people

亦孔之將

Also grows more intense.

念我獨兮

I think how I stand alone<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Yi Jiu was the prince disinherited because of the concubine Bao Si.

<sup>42</sup> Gao Heng p. 293

<sup>43</sup> The phrase 念我獨兮 appears later in the poem, but in slightly different context (see footnote 31). In both cases, the poet is alone: here he is alone amidst his troubles and false rumors; later, he is alone without receiving any due praise and thanks. The difference in solitude is why I chose to translate them in different ways.

|      |                                 |
|------|---------------------------------|
| 憂心京京 | My grief knows no bounds.       |
| 哀我小心 | Alas, my worries                |
| 癡憂以痒 | And griefs make me ill.         |
| 父母生我 | My parents who gave me birth--  |
| 胡俾我痛 | Why was I made to suffer?       |
| 不自我先 | It happened not before me;      |
| 不自我後 | It happened not after me.       |
| 好言自口 | Good words come from the mouth; |
| 莠言自口 | Bad words come from the mouth.  |
| 憂心愈愈 | My heart grieves much           |
| 是以有侮 | Because of insults.             |
| 憂心惻惻 | My heart grieves deeply;        |
| 念我無祿 | I see no blessings.             |
| 民之無辜 | The innocent people             |
| 并其臣僕 | Will become slaves, too.        |
| 哀我人斯 | Mourn for us;                   |
| 于何從祿 | Where shall we get support?     |
| 瞻烏爰止 | I see a crow about to rest;     |

|      |                                             |
|------|---------------------------------------------|
| 于誰之屋 | On whose house shall it land? <sup>44</sup> |
| 瞻彼中林 | Look into the middle of the forest;         |
| 侯薪侯蒸 | There are just branches and weeds.          |
| 民今方殆 | The people are in the midst of danger;      |
| 視天夢夢 | They find Heaven dreaming.                  |
| 既克有定 | Things are predestined;                     |
| 靡人弗勝 | None can prevail.                           |
| 有皇上帝 | There is the Great God                      |
| 伊誰云憎 | Whom does He hate? <sup>45</sup>            |
| 謂山蓋卑 | One says that the hill is low;              |
| 為岡為陵 | Yet it has peaks and heights.               |
| 民之訛言 | The false words of the people—              |
| 寧莫之懲 | Why do you not condemn them?                |

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<sup>44</sup> The crow was a sign of the right to rule. As long as the crow rested on the house of the Zhou emperor, he was the rightful ruler. The depiction of a crow searching for a new place to rest was the poet's way of portraying an upcoming change in power. Since there was no way of predicting where the crow would land, the future would be one of uncertainty as one could not tell who the rightful ruler should be. Indeed, the succeeding Spring Autumn and Warring States periods would cause several centuries of ongoing political unrest before the establishment of the short-lived Qin dynasty in the last years of 200 B.C.

<sup>45</sup> To the poet, God "hates" the people of Zhou: they are in danger and yet He does nothing, though great as He is, He should be able to do something.

|        |                                                               |
|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 召彼故老   | Summon the elders;                                            |
| 訊之占夢   | Tell them to divine dreams.                                   |
| 具曰予聖   | They all say, “We are wise.”                                  |
| 誰知烏之雌雄 | But who can tell the male from the female crow? <sup>46</sup> |
|        |                                                               |
| 謂天蓋高   | One says that Heaven is high;                                 |
| 不敢不局   | Yet I dare not but bend over.                                 |
| 謂地蓋厚   | One says that the earth is thick;                             |
| 不敢不躋   | Yet I dare not but to step lightly.                           |
| 維號斯言   | Only when I am shouted at will I speak,                       |
| 有倫有脊   | For I have good reason and grounds to do so.                  |
| 哀今之人   | Alas for the people of this age;                              |
| 胡為虺蜴   | Why are they all poisonous snakes and lizards?                |
|        |                                                               |
| 瞻彼阪田   | Look at the hillside field:                                   |
| 有苑其特   | There is a black bull.                                        |
| 天之玃我   | Heaven seeks to harm me                                       |
| 如不我克   | As if He could not overcome me.                               |
| 彼求我則   | They try to subjugate me,                                     |

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<sup>46</sup> Meaning that none can tell a true from a false prophet

|      |                                     |
|------|-------------------------------------|
| 如不我得 | As if they could not obtain me.     |
| 執我仇仇 | They treat me with great animosity, |
| 亦不我力 | As if I am no good.                 |
| 心之憂矣 | The sorrow in my heart              |
| 如或結之 | Is like a binding cord.             |
| 今茲之正 | Today's government—                 |
| 胡然厲矣 | Why is it so oppressive?            |
| 燎之方揚 | When the fire is blazing,           |
| 寧或滅之 | Is there someone to put it out?     |
| 赫赫宗周 | The lofty house of Zhou             |
| 褒姒滅之 | Is wiped out by Bao Si.             |
| 終其永懷 | I grieve deeply,                    |
| 又窘陰雨 | Embarrassed by cloud and rain.      |
| 其車既載 | The carriage is loaded,             |
| 乃棄爾輔 | Yet you discard the wheel baffle.   |
| 載輸爾載 | You lose your cargo                 |
| 將伯助予 | Then you cry, "Help me, sir!"       |
| 無棄爾輔 | Discard not the wheel baffle;       |

|       |                                                 |
|-------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 員于爾輻  | Strengthen the wheel spokes.                    |
| 屢顧爾僕  | Check the parts often;                          |
| 不輸爾載  | And you will not lose the cargo.                |
| 終踰絕險  | Thus, you will pass through difficult places;   |
| 曾是不意  | Yet you never keep this in mind. <sup>47</sup>  |
| 魚在于沼  | The fish are in the pond.                       |
| 亦匪克樂  | Yet are unable to be happy.                     |
| 潛雖伏矣  | Even if they dive to the bottom,                |
| 亦孔之炤  | They are still clearly seen.                    |
| 憂心慘慘  | My grief is deep,                               |
| 念國之為虐 | Thinking of the oppression in the nation.       |
| 彼有旨酒  | They have fine wines,                           |
| 又有嘉殽  | As well as good viands.                         |
| 洽比其鄰  | They consort with their neighbors with delight. |

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<sup>47</sup> At first glance, the preceding two sections seem out of place, as the poet changes from lamenting over the state of the nation to a short parable about a carriage. It is actually an analogy: the carriage represents the kingdom, while the wheel baffle is most likely referring to the poet. Previously, the poet grieved that he had little influence and, although the government initially sought him out, they no longer relied on him. He is implying that, had the higher officials listened to him and other, lesser members of the government, the nation might not have come to ruin.



Yi Jiu ascended the throne as Zhou Ping Wang 周平王 (King Ping of Zhou), the first ruler of the Eastern Zhou dynasty.

Throughout the course of the poem, the writer laments over the fall of his nation, such as in the eleventh stanza, where he pronounces, “my grief is deep/thinking of the oppression in the nation 憂心慘慘/念國之為虐.” He largely blames the corruption in the government for the turmoil, but he also accuses God by stating that He is directly responsible for bringing trouble upon the people: “Heaven batters [the people] with calamity 天天是椽”. The prevailing nature of this doubt in the goodness of God comes from the concept of the Mandate of Heaven.

As explained in Chapter Two, the Mandate of Heaven provided the king with his authority, but he would only hold that mandate if he remained virtuous. Should the king become corrupt, God would remove him from power and replace him with another. This explains why the prevalence of evil in the government changed the public’s perception of God: since the officials were obviously corrupt, God should have punished and removed them, but they persisted in their positions. Thus, God was, in many people’s eyes, either blind or unfairly oppressive. He was no longer the benevolent God who established the Zhou dynasty through His faithful servants; He had become a harsh, cruel being who sought to bring suffering to the ancient Chinese. Such a God was not worth believing in, and by the time the Western Zhou finally fell, belief in God had all but disappeared.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

Through the study of the earlier odes in the *Book of Poetry*, my thesis demonstrates the presence of belief in God comparable in a number of ways to the faith of Judeo-Christian tradition. The analysis of the miraculous birth of Hou Ji in the first chapter shows that it bears a remarkable resemblance to the birth of Christ. Furthermore, as Christ became the intermediary between God and His people, so too did Hou Ji help his people to relate themselves to God. Just like God blessed the Jewish people through Christ, He blessed the Zhou people in a similar way through Hou Ji. The heritage Hou Ji left for the Chinese people proved most profound and enduring because of the tremendous influence exerted by the Zhou dynasty upon Chinese culture. The sacrifices to God that Hou Ji began, the description of which appears in the first chapter, had become an inspiration for later emperors who would regularly sacrifice to God in the Tian Ta 天壇 (Heavenly Temple)<sup>49</sup> until the establishment of the republic.

As faith declined toward the end of the kingdom of Judah, the ancient Chinese also turned away from God near the end of the Western Zhou dynasty. The monumental change in the political situation at the close of the Western Zhou dynasty, as my thesis shows, ushered in a period of turmoil in both politics and religion. Beginning with the criticism of the corruption in court, the people extended their chagrin from the Son of

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<sup>49</sup> The Heavenly Temple is the building constructed specifically in the capital for the sacrifices that the Son of Heaven, or emperor, would perform.

Heaven, who ruled the kingdom, to God. The Mandate of Heaven had inextricably linked the two together, and as a result, they began to cast doubt on the benevolence of God. Although the Chinese faith in God has long faded into the background of Chinese culture, this century seems to witness its revival in the rapid spread of Christianity in contemporary China. A knowledge of the religious history in ancient China may perhaps help the various evangelical movements better orient themselves to carry out their mission.

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