

## The Axial Revolution

1. Welcome to another video lecture on the co-evolution of religion and technology. In this lecture we shall look at what some scholars have called the “Axial Revolution” in religious and philosophical thought. I will be arguing that the revolution represents literacy’s coming of age when literacy while still scribal shifts from a mere enhancement of orality to a medium of thought and communication in its own right, with its own logic.
2. As we saw in my earlier video lecture on scribal literacy, writing originated as a means for enhancing memory and the dissemination of speech beyond earshot. It began with trade and commerce. (1) Clerks could now track stores of grains and goods, and write down orally agreed upon commercial contracts. (2) Temple scribes would transcribe oral myth and mimetic ritual to recite, choreograph and preserve sacred traditions. (3) And scribal secretaries and bureaucrats would transcribe and archive royal legislation and diplomatic correspondence .
3. But while preserved in written form, scribal content remained oral, transcriptions of oral storytellers and dictation taken from kings and traders to be read back or recited aloud to their intended similarly oral audience. (1) For literacy itself was restricted to this small elite of clerks and clerics. Literacy was itself then a profession and way of life. Without an alphabetic script, learning to read and write took many years of sustained study, begun while still a child. Traders and monarchs, let alone the general population had neither the time nor the access to texts to learn reading and writing themselves. In fact much of scribal education involved memorizing myth and story for later recitation. So too, working in the centers of power, (2) top scribes could themselves become powerful religious and governmental officials. Egyptian mythology for example has (3) Thoth, the scribe of the gods, at the side of the high god Ra writing down his orders for creation, and Book of the Dead has (4) Thoth recording into the Book of Life the names of the dead who merit immortality.
4. As literacy began to spread beyond temple and court literacy could come into its own. Literate intellectuals independent of court and temple, began to write down the products of their own reflection. No longer burdened by the need to recall, and no longer beholden to institutional authorities, literate intellectuals could generate (1) second-order abstract, systematic and theoretical reflection as well as prophetic social critique. Thus

whereas the content of early scribal literacy was justified on the authority of its oral source, (2) in the axial revolution literate content was increasingly to be justified on its own terms, that is in terms of literate logic and impartial records of empirical evidence.

5. Thus, while early scribal thought was a hybrid of (1) oral content in a written medium, literacy came fully into its own as literacy spread beyond temple, court and commerce. This maturation has been called an (2) “axial” revolution in thought. Allow me to elaborate and delve deeply into the stages and elements of this cultural watershed.
6. First of all, the dissemination of literacy was enhanced by the evolution of script from (1) pictographic hieroglyphs to (2) semiotic and syllabic cuneiform to (3) a phonetic Aramaic and Hebrew script, reaching full completion in (4) the Greek alphabet which had letters for vowels as well as consonants. This evolution enabled greater ease reading, writing and learning. Hieroglyphs and cuneiform involved hundreds of characters many with multiple unrelated meanings that needed to be decoded in context. Greek texts could be sounded out on the fly. Interestingly they still needed to be sounded out as papyrus was apparently too expensive to have spacing between words. Even Augustine could be stunned when he spotted Bishop Ambrose of Milan reading without moving his lips.
7. Literacy externalizes thought. It creates an external memory device, that can free up attention to think about thought, not only what one has been taught but also what one feels and desires. It enables not just the preservation of thought but the ability to critique it.
8. Also significant, whereas speech is an event, texts are objects. Literacy transforms oral performance, before an audience or between speakers, into textual objects that are ordinarily composed in solitude without its intended readers present and read in solitude without the presence of its author. Thus with writing, any questions and objections have to be anticipated in the text’s composition. So too, the intention of the author would have to be divined by its readers, creating the possibility, indeed the probability of individual interpretation. Furthermore whereas speech enhances mimetic communication, or perhaps better put, mimetic bodily gesture and tone of voice can enhance speech, literacy abstracts from mimetic communication altogether. (1) Thus writing would privilege clear and distinct prose over (2) evocative speech replete with metaphor and illustrations. (3)

So too reading would call for the reader to think for themselves and by themselves in reconstructing the author's intended message.

9. The separation of writer from reader ultimately results in a radical (1) differentiation of oral dialogue (2) into a radical objectivity and a radical subjectivity with an equally radical differentiation (3) of communal identity into (4) separate individuals who would think and feel, desire and act on their own. The (5) modern autonomous interior self and (6) a "disenchanted" secular world (7) set over and often against each other, would be the axial revolution's logical culmination with the invention of the printing press and the broader dissemination of literacy beyond the intelligentsia first to the urban classes and then with industrial printing, to the masses.
10. In religious terms the axial revolution shifted the locus of the sacred from (1) without to within, from (2) personifications of elemental forces immanent in nature such as fire and water, earth and sky, (3) to a single transcendent divine beyond word and image. Jon Assman has argued that pre-axial religion is best described not as animism or polytheism-- after all there was often a single God at the head of the pantheon and often as the Father or Mother of a family of other gods-- but rather as (4) cosmotheism, that is, religious belief and ritual that in personifying and deifying elemental forces immanent in nature held the cosmos sacred. The Axial Revolution was shift from such a cosmotheism (5) to a transcendent monotheism that condemned traditional gods as demons, and their worship as idolatry. Axial prophets would call for a (6) personal awakening or conversion from (7) illusion to truth, (8) from sin to righteousness, (9) from suffering to salvation, in short from (10) a disenchanted if not positively demonic natural world to a supernatural sacred beyond this world into which we have been exiled. (11) Axial religious would be universal creeds transcending tribe and culture to address all humanity.
11. So too the locus of the sacred shifts from (1) Neolithic fertility and civil order in this material world to (2) individual immortality. Axial religion will teach that (3) our true self is our interior private self, now (4) imprisoned or at least exiled into this fleeting, twilight world of suffering, temptation and injustice. (5) Life becomes a spiritual and intellectual battle for control of nature of which we are no longer a part. The fully literate, axial self is in the world but not of it, an exile longing for salvation. (6) The term

“salvation” comes from the Latin word for health (*salus*). Salvation is found in (7) transcending this passing world of sin and (8) returning to our true divine home.

12. In all these characteristics axial religion mirrors axial philosophy. Plato, for example, will use abstract, principled argument to demonstrate (1) that truth does not lie in the material world of experience either, but rather (2) in immaterial intelligence (*nous*) and in the transcendent eternal realm of immutable paradigmatic ideals of Forms (*eidei*), to which access can again only be gained, by turning inward. (3) Intelligence (*nous*) will be identified with what axial religion (4) refers to as spirit (*pneuma*). And both will also be identified with our (5) true self, more akin to the (6) transcendent divine than to the material world of nature in which we are currently exiled, imprisoned, even entombed.
13. Like axial monotheism, axial philosophy (1) will also claim its truths to be universal, transcending all peoples and cultures. And like axial monotheism it (2) will claim its truths to be necessary beliefs, in that all other ways of understanding the world are not merely different but false, mimetic illusions and oral myths that only trap us in oral culture’s half-real fleeting shadow world of passion and ignorance. And so like axial monotheism, axial philosophy will also call (3) for a conversion, an intellectual conversion, to (4) question the traditional wisdom of one’s culture and how reality appears one’s own senses, (5) to seek true knowledge (6) demonstrated through universal and necessary rational principles and (7) documented impartial empirical evidence, all again, (8) only accessible to literate thinkers thinking for themselves.
14. In the videos that follow we will explore a couple of the pioneers of this axial revolution, Socrates and Jesus. Neither wrote down anything themselves, but they began the axial critique of scribal culture and their disciples will write down, critique and systematize their thought into Greek philosophy and Christian theology.