

The Block and the Wheel

Why we feel time as a circle, and why it's held instead

A companion essay to *The Authored Block* (2026)

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Abstract

Nearly every people who ever tried to draw time drew a circle: the ouroboros, the Stoic conflagration, the nested wheels of Hindu cosmology, the eternal return that Eliade showed was very nearly the default setting of the human mind. This essay asks what the wheel got right and what it got wrong. It got right that beginning and end belong together. It got wrong the way they touch. Against the wheel I set a second picture, older than it looks: Boethius's definition of eternity as the complete and simultaneous possession of unbounded life, the block universe the physics of the last century backed into without meaning to, and the sealed scroll of Revelation 5, written within and without, unrolled in the reading and rolled up when the reading is done. The circuit that exhausted Solomon and crushed Nietzsche is real as a feeling and false as a map. The two ends of time touch not because the track loops back but because both are present at once to the one who holds them. A companion essay to the working paper *The Authored Block*.

Keywords: eternal return; ouroboros; cyclical time; eternalism; block universe; Boethius; Ecclesiastes; Revelation

You know the feeling. You have been here before. Not this room, not this exact morning, but the shape of it. The same arguments come back wearing new faces. The same griefs arrive on schedule. You work and the work undoes itself, you climb and the ground resets, and some quiet voice underneath the day says none of this is going anywhere, it only comes around again.

Solomon put words to it three thousand years ago and nobody has improved on them. The sun rises and hurries back to where it rises. The rivers run to the sea and the sea is never full. What has been will be again, and there is nothing new under the sun. Then he names the mood the whole picture produces, and it is not peace. It is weariness.

That picture has a name. It is the wheel. And almost every people who ever tried to draw time drew it.

1. The wheel

The oldest image of it is the serpent that eats its own tail. The Egyptians drew it more than three thousand years before us, coiled around the sun's nightly passage, a sign of time that dies at dusk and is born again at dawn. The Greeks named it, *ouroboros*, tail-devourer, and Plato used a self-consuming creature for the first living thing in the cosmos, complete and self-feeding, needing nothing outside itself. The Norse gave it teeth. Jörmungandr circles the whole world with its tail in its mouth, and when it lets go, the world ends.

It was never one culture's private symbol. Hindu cosmology runs time in nested wheels, four ages turning into dissolution and back to the golden age again, across spans so large they stop meaning anything. The Stoics taught that the cosmos burns and is reborn identical, and Chrysippus pressed it to the letter: after each fire the same Socrates drinks the same cup. The Babylonians had their Great Year, the Maya stacked their turning calendars, and the historian Mircea Eliade, cataloguing all of it, gave the worldview its plain modern name. He called it the myth of the eternal return, and he showed that it was very nearly the default setting of the human mind. Left to itself, looking at the sky and the seasons and the generations, the species reached for the circle almost every time.

Here is what the wheel got right, and it is not small. It felt that the beginning and the end belong together. That the two ends of things reach for each other and touch. That intuition is ancient and it is correct.

Here is what it got wrong. It read the touching as a mouth on a tail.

2. The wheel is not comfort

We tend to think the circle is the consoling picture and the straight line is the harsh one. It is the other way around.

Nietzsche is the tell. He revived the Stoic wheel in the nineteenth century and called it eternal recurrence, everything you have lived lived again without end, and he did not offer it as a balm. He offered it as the heaviest weight, a thought to test whether you could stand your own life. He was right about the weight. A wheel that turns forever cannot finish anything, and a thing that never finishes is never kept. Solomon reached the same floor from the other side. He looked at the endless circuit of the sun and felt tired unto death.

This is the part the circle can never give you. Rest. On the wheel there is motion without arrival, forever. It is not the peace of a thing completed. It is the refusal to let anything be completed.

So when a physicist tells you the modern picture of time can seem bleak, notice which picture the bleakness actually belongs to. It belongs to the wheel. And we hang it on the wrong thing, because we assume that beginning and end together must mean spinning. It doesn't. There is another way the two ends can touch.

3. The block held all at once

Fifteen hundred years ago a man named Boethius, waiting in prison to be executed, wrote the sentence I keep coming back to. He defined eternity as the complete, simultaneous, and perfect possession of unbounded life. Not life stretched out in a line you travel a step at a time, always losing the step behind you and reaching for the one ahead. Life held. The whole of it, at once, in one hand.

That is not a wheel. A wheel still moves, still chases its own tail, still has a next. What Boethius described has no next, because nothing in it is absent. Beginning and end are together there too, but not because the track loops back. They are together because they are both present at once to the one who holds them.

This is the picture the physics of the last century backed into without meaning to. Einstein's own equations describe reality as a single finished structure in which every moment is equally real, past and future not gone and not yet but simply there, and the mind that grasped it said as much in a letter of grief near the end of his life: for those who take the physics seriously, the division of past, present, and future is a stubborn illusion. He did not mean the moments spin. He meant they are held.

And listen to how the figure at the center of the New Testament talks. Asked about a man two thousand years in his grave, he does not say before Abraham was, I was. He says before Abraham was, I AM, reaching back to the name given at the burning bush, the name with no tense in it. In the last book he calls himself the beginning and the end, as though both were equally near his hand. Read that not as a sermon but as a description of where the speaker is standing, and it is the voice of the one who holds the whole, not the one running the track.

I want to be careful here, the same way the longer paper behind this post is careful. None of this proves the physics. An ancient serpent does not establish anything about spacetime, and a line of scripture is not a measurement. The symbols and the texts state the intuition in their own voice. They do not confirm it. What they show is that the intuition is old, insistent, and shared, and that the argument is about which shape it really has.

4. Why we assume the wheel

If time is really held, why does almost everyone feel the wheel?

Because of where we are standing. Picture the whole of time as a scroll, rolled and complete, every line already written. Now picture yourself as one line of text partway down it. You cannot see the roll. You can see the words near you, the little stretch of the page around your own place, and from that short arc you do the only thing you can. You guess at the shape. And a short arc, seen up close, looks like the start of a circle. Bend a small piece of any line far enough in your imagination and the ends come around to meet. That is the wheel. It is not a truth about the scroll. It is what the scroll looks like to something too small to see past its own paragraph.

And notice what we actually have of the parts we cannot see. A few references at the edges. Genesis hands us the near edge of the beginning, in the beginning, the first words of the roll. Revelation hands us the near edge of the end, the beginning and the end, the last. We do not experience those edges. We are given them, the way a note in the margin tells you what stands on a page you cannot turn to. Strip the margins away and all you have left is your own paragraph and the strong, wrong feeling that it curves back on itself.

5. The scroll

The scroll is not my metaphor. It is sitting in the fifth chapter of Revelation, and it has been waiting there the whole time.

John sees a scroll in the right hand of the one on the throne, sealed with seven seals, written on the front and the back, which is the ancient way of saying complete, nothing left to add. It is God's will in the legal sense, the deed, the settled plan of everything, and it is closed. A voice asks who is worthy to open it, and no one is, and John weeps, until the Lamb who was slain steps forward and takes it. Only he can break the seals. Only the one who stands outside the sequence is worthy to unroll it.

Hold the picture exactly. Rolled, the scroll is the whole held at once, beginning and end in the same shape, present together, at rest. Reading is what unrolls it. The succession we call time, one thing after another, is the scroll being read. Held is its natural state. The reading is the exception, and it is done by the one worthy to do it.

Then watch the other end. When the last things come, the sky itself is rolled up like a scroll, the same image Isaiah reached for centuries earlier. And here is the hinge, so hold it with me, because this is exactly where the wheel tries to sneak back in. A scroll rolling up looks like a return to the beginning. It looks like the circle closing. It is not. The wheel returns to the start in order to run the whole thing again. The scroll rolls up because the reading is finished. Same shape, opposite meaning. One says do it over. The other says it is done, and kept.

That is the seventh day of the older paper. The one day in the creation account with no evening and no morning, no closing line, because it does not end and it does not turn again. Not exhaustion. Not the wheel's tired forever. Rest, which is the one thing motion can never reach, because rest is what you get only when there is nothing left to read.

One correction, so I stay honest. The scroll does not change at the end. It was held the whole time, written and complete from the first. What changes is not the paper. It is your seat. Right now you are a line on the page, embedded, and from there the arc looks like a wheel. Then you stand up beside the Reader and see the roll for what it always was. The difference between now and then is not that time starts behaving differently on some datable afternoon. It is that you move from being read to seeing.

6. The unrepeatable thing

There is a reason the wheel cannot hold the Christian story, and Augustine named it sixteen hundred years ago, which means I am not saying anything new here, only pointing at old ground.

In *The City of God* he took the pagan cycles head on, the whole learned machinery of the ages that come around again, and he broke it with one sentence from Paul. Christ died once, and rising from the dead he dies no more. That is all it takes. A wheel needs everything to come around again, every death re-died on the next turn. But if the death that saves happened once, unrepeatable, never run a second time, the wheel is already broken. It cannot turn past that point without grinding on the one event that refuses to recur. The once-for-all does not fit on a circle. It only fits on a line that is read through a single time and then rolled up and kept.

7. A second reader

I should say plainly that the straight line was not one people's private discovery, and the honest fact is worth naming rather than hiding.

Zoroaster broke the wheel too. Long before the details settled, Persia was already telling time as a line: a bounded war of light and dark that ends not in another turn but in a making-wonderful, when the dead rise, the world is set right, and it does not rot again. The resemblance to what comes later is close, and some will want to make it a debt, as if the whole hope were just borrowed from further east.

I am not claiming Israel invented the line. I am not claiming Israel borrowed it. Both claims miss the thing that matters. The wheel is what nearly every people reached for on its own. The line is the rare exception, and a rare thing that surfaces in more than one place is usually not minted in either. It is noticed. If the scroll is real, you would expect more than one reader to catch its edge, and it is at least interesting that where the line does appear, it tends to end the same way, not in another lap but in a world made new and kept.

8. Held, not spinning

So here is the whole of it, small enough to carry.

The ancient intuition was right. Beginning and end belong together. Everyone who ever drew the serpent felt something true. They only drew it moving, because from inside a paragraph you cannot tell a held thing from a turning one, and the turning one is easier to picture.

But it is held. The weariness you feel, the sense that it all comes around again and nothing lands, is not the last word about time. It is the view from one line of a scroll you cannot yet see rolled. The circuit that exhausted Solomon and crushed Nietzsche is real as a feeling and false as a map. You are not on a wheel. You are on a page, in a book, in the hand of the one who says I AM, and the day is coming when the reading is finished and the whole is rolled up and kept, and you stand where he stands and see that it never once curved back.

Not evacuated. Renovated. Not spun. Read, and then held.