Why Jews Don't Proselytize

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The ancestors of the biblical Israelites, like all the other communities of the ancient Near East, were idol worshippers. We know quite a bit about their religion from the great number of archaeological finds, including writings, that have been unearthed in what are today's Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq. It appears that all the peoples of the ancient Near East practiced essentially the same religion.

This religion functioned in a world believed to be populated by intangible powers (or deities) that ran nature and protected the tribal communities who lived there. Certain powers controlled important aspects of nature, such as the weather, the waters, fertility, moving celestial bodies, and so forth. In addition to these, there were tribal deities who were intimately connected with communities of humans who worshipped them.

None of these deities were considered all-powerful or all-knowing. In fact, it was believed that the gods lived in a symbiotic relationship with their people. In addition to those powers that ran nature, every human community needed its own divine protection from the dangers of nature and the predations of neighboring tribes, and the gods needed sustenance in the form of sacrificial offerings.[1] These tribal gods were intimately connected to their people. One could even say they lived in a covenantal relationship with their communities. The gods protected their people, and the people fed their gods. That is a form of covenant, or official agreement.

A telling scene in the "Epic of Gilgamesh" speaks volumes about the relationship between gods and humans in the ancient world. In this story, dated centuries before the earliest layers of the Hebrew Bible, the gods destroy humanity in a massive flood for making too much noise and disturbing them, but then realize, too late, that they have foolishly destroyed their source of sustenance. They soon become desperately hungry. A long time later, after the water has subsided, Utnapishtim, the Noah character, makes offerings to the gods in thanks: "I offered incense in front of the mountain-ziggurat. Seven and seven cult vessels I put in place…. The gods smelled the savor, the gods smelled the sweet savor, and collected like flies over a (sheep) sacrifice."[2]

The community gods were loyal to their human flocks, protecting and keeping them so they would provide them with sustenance. Every people had its deity, and we know the names of many of them from the Hebrew Bible, which has often been corroborated by ancient non-biblical sources. The people of Moab had a tribal deity named Kemosh (Numbers 21:29), the Ammonites' deity was called Milkom (1 Kings 11:5), the Philistines' god was Dagon (1 Samuel 5), and the goddess of Tyre was Ashtoret (2 Kings 23:13). The god of Shechem (today's Nablus) was even called Ba'al Berit, meaning "keeper of the covenant" (Judges 9:4, 46). And before the Israelites transitioned to monotheism, they also had a tribal god with a unique name, constructed from the four letters YHWH, that conveyed a meaning something like "existence" or "being." YHWH, along with the term Elohim,[3] is the most common name of God in the Hebrew Bible. We know the name's spelling, but its pronunciation has been lost to us because, like ancient Arabic, ancient Hebrew had no vowel signs but was accompanied by an oral tradition to ensure proper pronunciation. The oral tradition, however, did not preserve the pronunciation for YHWH. It may seem odd that Jews no longer know how to pronounce the name of their God, but the loss was purposeful.

YHWH is actually a personal name, and it apparently was necessary in a pre-monotheist world in order to distinguish that deity from all the others, each of whom had its own name.[4] When offerings were made to individual gods, the smoke of the offering always rose into the heavens, where many deities were presumed to live. It is likely that in liturgies, the name of the god to be worshipped was invoked in order to ensure that the offering went to the right place.

After the Israelites realized that one god alone was the God of creation and therefore the only real deity, they stopped referring to God by a personal name. It would have appeared absurd or blasphemous to refer to such a profoundly powerful essence in such a familiar way. So Jews stopped pronouncing the personal name of God and substituted “my Lord” (Adonai) for the four-letter name of God. This would explain why Jews refer to the God of all Creation also as the “God of Israel,”[5] since it was their own traditional tribal god that they naturally came to consider the God of all. This irony was not lost on the Jews, who expressed plenty of discomfort with that dual role.[6]

Like all the other gods of the ancient Near East, the pre-monotheist god of Israel was at first neither omnipotent nor omniscient, and some interesting vestiges of this pre-monotheist tradition remain in the Hebrew Bible, for that scripture contains snippets of very ancient Israelite and pre-Israelite thinking. For example, when God confronted Adam after he had eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree in the Garden, God had to ask where Adam was (Genesis 3:9). Later Jewish and Christian commentators, whose theology of monotheism presumed that God was all-powerful and all-knowing, felt it was impossible for God not to know where Adam was. They therefore argued that God was simply testing Adam to see whether he would admit to his transgression. So when God asked, “Where are you?”, He must have been providing Adam an opportunity to repent for his sin.

But God also went out to find Adam in the cool evening of the day in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8). Why would God wait until it cooled down, if God were all-powerful? And most telling, in the biblical flood story, God regretted that He had created humanity altogether (Genesis 6:6). What kind of omniscient God would regret anything?

This may be one of the aspects of the Hebrew Bible that the Qur’an critiques when it occasionally accuses Jews (and Christians) of having corrupted their scripture, for it seems inconceivable that God would have revealed a text that portrays the divinity in such a fashion. The Hebrew Bible, however, is an ancient anthology of literature: some parts are assumed by Jews to have been revealed directly by God, but other parts include historical material and stories, ancient legends and moralistic tales, and even love poetry (the Song of Songs). It is assumed by modern academic scholars of the Bible that these passages, which may seem so problematic today, actually reflect very old traditions that predate the ancient Israelite transition to monotheism.[7] As noted, these texts also puzzled Jewish and Christian religious thinkers throughout the ages.

What is important about all this for the purpose of this discussion is that one’s relationship with the transcendent in the ancient Near East was tribal. One’s personal god was also the god of everyone else in the extended family, clan, tribe, and sometimes even tribal federation. At the same time, everyone recognized that other tribes had their own tribal gods, and each was limited. One could not simply leave the family god and take on a different one, because each god was associated with a different tribal community. Therefore, the idea of conversion simply did not exist in the ancient Near East. It did not make sense in such a context. One could no more convert out of a deity relationship than one could convert out of a family relationship. Family is family (including the family deity), and nobody could change that.[8]

Transition to Monotheism

Then, for some reason that has not been understood by historians of religion or historians of the ancient world, the Israelites transitioned from polytheism to monotheism. The Bible itself seems to recognize this in a famous passage in the Book of Joshua (24:2–3). Just before leading the Israelites across the Jordan River to the Promised Land, “Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus said the Lord (YHWH), the God of Israel: In olden times, your forefathers—Terah, father of Abraham and father of Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and worshipped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan and multiplied his offspring.”[9] The transition from polytheism to monotheism took generations and even centuries, and it was a very difficult changeover. The Hebrew Bible is full of references to Israelites backsliding; being “stiff-necked”; and failing to be entirely loyal to the One Great God of the universe, who demands absolute and unfailing loyalty.{10} Some of these references seem quite bizarre, but they reflect the difficulty of moving from the worship of many gods to only one. This is something that the Qur’an and hadith also acknowledge was a difficult transition for some Arabs during the time of the Prophet.

When someone is new to monotheism and has learned from childhood that the world is full of divine powers that can punish you for not remaining loyal and paying your dues through sacrificial offerings, it might seem prudent to “hedge your bets” by making small offerings to other gods as well as the One Great God—even if the other gods are not supposed to really exist. Recall that in the ancient Near East, people made offerings to their tribal gods along with the deities who powered nature (e.g., the weather, fertility). That is exactly what some Israelites stubbornly continued to do. During the early period of monotheism, when the entire world outside their small community worshipped differently, it must have felt risky to many—even frightening—to remain absolutely loyal to the one God, when everybody else was loyal to many gods.

The religious leaders of Israel and those who had transitioned successfully to monotheism were not concerned about the religious practices of neighboring tribes, except when those practices became dangerously enticing to their own people. They were concerned, rather, about remaining loyal to what seemed (to everyone who was not Israelite) the strange and perilous practice of worshipping only one god. Under such conditions, they had no incentive to convince others to take on their unpopular religious practice. On the contrary, they were intent on creating a safe space where they could worship their One Great God without the temptation to “hedge bets” and be disloyal. The Hebrew Bible is full of exhortations to the Israelites to restrict their worship to the One Great God precisely because many were doing otherwise,{11} and it calls repeatedly for establishing a safe haven for monotheism.{12}

It is certainly true that the Hebrew Bible calls for the destruction of temples and high places dedicated to polytheistic worship, but only within the borders of the Holy Land. This does not suggest that Israel was commanded by God to eradicate idolatry from the earth but only to remove it from the “safe haven” of what Jews refer to as the Land of Israel. Outside that land, Israel is not commanded to eradicate idolatry among non-Israelites, presumably because outside the land it would have no significant influence on Israelite practice.

This history helps to explain two seemingly odd aspects of Judaism. The first is the tribal nature of Jewish identity and practice. As noted, all religion was tribal in the ancient world, and “religion” was as much a mark of cultural and tribal identity as it was of spiritual identity. But all the tribal religions of the ancient Near East became extinct, with the exception of the religion of Israel, and that was probably because the Israelite community as a whole eventually succeeded in transitioning to a truly monotheistic worldview. For true monotheist believers, even conquest by a more powerful army (with what that army believed was a more powerful god) did not weaken faith in the One Great God. God was not defeated by the gods of the enemy, as would be expected by polytheists. On the contrary, the Hebrew Bible teaches that God actually brought the enemy for the purpose of punishing His beloved believers, who had sinned greatly and therefore deserved chastisement. In the biblical Book of Ezra, that famous scribe cited the Israelite elders (calling them

“our fathers”) when they began to rebuild the ancient Temple in Jerusalem that had been destroyed by the Babylonian armies: “Because our fathers angered the God of Heaven, He handed them over to Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon” (Ezra 5:12). This theology of monotheism sustained Israel even during thousands of years of exile.

Changing Religion in the Ancient World

In the ancient polytheistic world, the only way individuals could transfer their loyalties to a new god was if they were assimilated into a foreign community with a different deity. After decades or generations of separation from one’s family and family deity, one would eventually adapt to the new tribal religion. This could happen individually when one was captured in war. It happened also with large groups after they were defeated in conquest by imperial powers driven by a super-powerful god, such as Marduk, the god of the Babylonians, or Jupiter, the god of Rome. If one’s tribal god could not protect against a more powerful god of a great empire, it made sense to switch loyalties and make offerings to the god who really could protect. So with the growth of the great empires, the smaller communities eventually became absorbed and lost their traditional tribal religious identities.

That process occurred for all the ancient Near Eastern peoples except the Israelites: though conquered by the Babylonians and the Romans, they did not give up their religion or abandon their God (remember that the ancient “God of Israel” was perceived by Israel as also the One Great God of all). Unlike the other tribal communities, which worshipped limited tribal deities, the Israelites, who by now believed the One Great God was responsible for all of history, understood their suffering at the hands of the great empires as divine punishment for their sins. It was not the god of Rome who conquered them but rather the God of Israel/God of the universe who used the Romans as a tool of punishment to chastise His beloved people—the only community that remained loyal to monotheism despite their many human errors and transgressions.{13}

The second curious trait of Judaism this history explains is the apparent lack of concern for the religious practices of non-Jews. It is not that ancient Jews were unconcerned about polytheism. They were in fact very concerned: throughout the Hebrew Bible, one finds condemnation of polytheism. But polytheism was everywhere. The community of Israel was the only monotheist community in the world, and it was tiny in comparison with the rest of humanity. (This is quite different from the period of Islamic emergence, during which most of the world was monotheistic, and it seemed that only the local Arabs retained the worship of multiple gods.) It must have been literally inconceivable to the Israelites that they could or should try to convince others to abandon their gods and follow Jewish practice. Their goal was not conversion of others (still a conceptual impossibility in the ancient world) but rather the creation of a safe haven for monotheism. The fear of outsiders weakening the tiny community’s practice of monotheism was an overwhelming deterrent to reaching out, and the notion of conversion was as yet unthinkable.

Much of this changed when the Greeks colonized the Middle East. They brought their own polytheism, but they brought their schools of philosophy as well. Educated, curious Greeks, who desired to improve their spiritual and philosophical condition, would visit and learn from various schools and then choose which one they felt most accurately explained nature and the human condition. The early Greeks who came to the Holy Land considered the Jews there to be a nation of philosophers, based on their assessment of Jewish scriptures and beliefs.{14} Some of them wanted to join the “Jewish school” of thought and practice.

There was no conversion in those days, so those Greeks (and later Romans as well) who wanted to be like the Jews “Judaized.” That term describes a kind of acculturation via adoption of Jewish practices and beliefs.{15} With Judaizing, there could be no moment when someone could declare, “Now I am a Jew!” It was a gradual process and less a statement of pure faith than an

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acculturation of spiritual practice and outlook. Some men went so far as to circumcise themselves and take on all of Jewish ethno-religious practice, eventually losing their foreign identity and becoming part of the Jewish people through integration and assimilation. Many others went part way; they would not circumcise or follow all the religious-ethical practices that marked Jewish identity. The mixing of Greek and Roman with old Semitic Jewish ideas and practices resulted in the emergence of several sectarian Jewish movements that challenged some of the ancient Israelite practices and beliefs.

This trend became significant during the last centuries of the Second Temple Period (approximately 160 BCE to 70 CE). During this period, formal conversion began to develop, officially marking a sense of belonging to one or another of these Jewish movements. This happened before the birth of Jesus, but his arrival marked the beginning of a final split between Jewish movements that eventually led to the characterization of two different religions—that of Jews on the one hand and those who would soon be known as Christians on the other. Each side argued that it best represented the divine will and the meaning of the Hebrew Bible, and each condemned the beliefs and practices of the other, competing against the other to attract the growing number of Judaizers who were expressing an interest in monotheism.

Some Jews actively sought converts at the time, but proselytizing was a new idea and was not a basic or core part of the ancient Jewish tradition. Christians, on the other hand, considered it their mission—and a divine imperative—to teach their faith, and the redemption and salvation they believed it brought, to all the peoples of the world. This aspect was canonized in their scripture, the New Testament, which valorized this mission in the Acts of the Apostles and other New Testament books.{16}

Not surprisingly, given the different emphasis on proselytizing in each tradition (as well as a number of other factors that would take us beyond the margins of this essay), the Christian version of monotheism triumphed over the Jewish version and won the prize of the Roman Empire when Christianity first became legal under Constantine in 313 and then became the official religion under Emperor Theodosius in 380 CE.{17} The anger, resentment, and sense of competition that remained between Jews and Christians encouraged Christians to argue that the conversion of the empire was a divine miracle with a message: “history proved theology”; that is, God had given a sign of the truth of Christianity (and the falsity of Judaism) by enabling Christians to win over the great and mighty Roman Empire.

The Jews, however, stubbornly refused to agree with this conclusion. While some Jews left their people and religion to convert to Christianity, the overwhelming majority of Jews remained Jewish, and this became a theological stumbling block to the Christian position that God proved Christianity’s truth through acts of history. If God desired all humanity to become Christian, why did the Jews not join up? Not long after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Jewish proselytism was outlawed. It soon became a capital crime to convert to Judaism, and punishment could easily extend to the entire Jewish community.{18}

The conclusion that history proves theology would come to haunt Christians a few centuries later when Islam emerged and became so remarkably successful. Muslims naturally argued the same basic position, based on their own huge temporal achievements during the early centuries of the caliphate. If history proved theology, then with the ascendance of Islam, Christianity could no longer claim its truth based on worldly success.

The Impact of Religious Polemics and Hostility

During the period of Jewish-Christian separation there were only two significant expressions of monotheism. As a result, the competition between Christianity and Judaism manifested as a zero-

sum relationship: only one expression was correct; the other was therefore incorrect. One was all right, the other all wrong. Only one represented the truth of God; the other therefore was false. By the time of Islamic emergence, however, not only were there already two different and competing expressions of monotheism, but those two had themselves divided into various competing and disagreeing communities. The existence of a variety of monotheist expressions may help explain why the Qur'an does not entirely invalidate prior monotheism. The Qur'an does not articulate a zero-sum relationship with earlier expressions of monotheism. It argues, on the contrary, that although many Jews and Christians were mistaken in their beliefs and practices, the core of their religions remains valid. Jews and Christians who believe in God and practice good works should therefore not fear for the future of their souls (2:62, 5:69).

Nevertheless, plenty of resentment, anger, and strife remained among these three major expressions of scriptural monotheism, and wherever one was politically and militarily dominant, it restricted and degraded the religious practice of its competitors. As a dispersed minority, Jews were nowhere politically or militarily dominant, so they always suffered second-class status under the rule of Christians and Muslims. The rule of survival in each context required that Jews not proselytize, upon pain of death. Their status under Christianity extended for nearly two thousand years, and under Islam for nearly a millennium and a half. Such a length of time can deeply acculturate an aversion to engaging in an act that could easily bring death and destruction to the community. So proselytism, while not forbidden anywhere in Judaism, came to feel foreign and strange.

In modern times, and in places where government largely separates religion and state, no obstacles to Jewish proselytizing remain. But Jews simply feel uncomfortable doing it. Not only has it never been a normal practice among Jews, but Jews today are often targets of Christian evangelists in the West. This is really upsetting to most Jews, who have absorbed, over the centuries of persecution and occasional forced conversions, a visceral fear of and resentment towards all acts of proselytism directed against them. As a logical result, they find it objectionable to engage in it as well. This is in large part a response to centuries of virulent and hateful anti-Semitism in the West, which denigrates Jews to the level of objects of scorn and targets for conversion. The problem has spread in the last century to the Muslim world as well. In my frequent travels in the Muslim world, Muslims often cannot fathom why I would want to be Jewish, especially after I have studied the Qur'an and Islamic law and tradition. Jews are so denigrated currently in the Muslim world, it seems to me, that most Muslims find it inconceivable that anybody could feel good about being one.

This negativity seems not to derive from any essential anti-Semitism that is native to Islam. The Qur'an and Islamic tradition in s?rah and hadith include resentful and occasionally hateful comments about Jews, certainly, but this is a response to the natural tension between members of established religions and followers of new religions.{19} The Hebrew Bible and New Testament contain similar sentiments toward individuals and communities that opposed the new religious movements they represent as well. While Islam is not inherently anti-Semitic or hateful to Jews, the Muslim world has proven extremely receptive in the last century to some of the worst anti-Semitism. This is due to a combination of factors that would take us beyond the limits of this essay. Suffice it to say here that vectors of influence include general exasperation over the intractability of the Israel-Palestine conflict, intentional government scapegoating as a means to deflect criticism away from incompetence and corruption, and deflection deriving from an overwhelming frustration for so many at the grass-roots level over the seeming impossibility of improving their own political and socio-economic status. These factors have led much of the Muslim world to vent dissatisfaction through virulent anti-Semitic means.

But even without prejudice, Jews are often perceived by non-Jews as being aloof, sticking exclusively with their own community, and not caring for the welfare of others. If Jews truly loved Gentiles, wouldn't they wish to convert them to Judaism so they would also merit salvation

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according to Jewish beliefs? But Jews have never considered non-Jews to be automatically destined to damnation. In the ancient world, Jews condemned idolatry, but the Hebrew Bible has virtually nothing to say about reward and punishment in a world to come. God rewards and punishes communities according to the deeds of their members. So plagues, droughts, floods, and subjugation are all divine punishments in this world for the sins of communities, and prosperity and security are rewards for observing God's laws and being loyal to the divine will. That position was very effective in mobilizing the ancient tribal community of Israel to do good and avoid evil, and it provided a very strong sense of community responsibility, because the entire community could be punished for the misbehavior of a few.

But that view was also problematic, since if God rewards and punishes in this world, it would appear to suggest that those who are wealthy must all be righteous, while those who are poor must all be transgressors. Partly in response to this theological-ethical problem, the notion that reward and punishment could occur in an afterlife came into ancient Judaism around the closing of the biblical canon (completed sometime around the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE). Only the last book to be included in the canon, the Book of Daniel, has an obvious reference to reward and punishment in an afterlife (12:2). The notion therefore did enter Judaism, but it was never such a core doctrine as it has become in Christianity and Islam, probably because it is virtually nonexistent in Jewish scripture. The notion becomes prominent later in the Talmud and related Jewish religious literature.

All Humans Have a Shot at Salvation

Also prominent in the Talmud and other authoritative Jewish sources is the view that non-Jews merit reward in the world to come if they are true to the divine will, as shown by their following seven basic commandments associated with Noah.{20} These are called the Noahide laws, and they apply to all, Jews and non-Jews alike: the prohibitions against idolatry, violence, adultery, thievery, blasphemy, and eating parts of a living animal, and the requirement to establish courts of justice. Since most Christians and Muslims certainly observe these basic moral-ethical rules, they are presumed to merit a place in the world to come. As a result, there is no reason to convert them in order to save their souls, for it is presumed that Christians and Muslims observe the seven Noahide laws.

Jews have also tended to hold themselves apart from the larger societies in which they live in order to preserve their religious culture in the face of social as well as conversionary pressure to assimilate. It is hard to imagine how tiny the Jewish communities were in so many parts of the world. It has become clear from the recurrent genetic diseases that haunt Ashkenazi Jews, and more recently from genetic testing, that the largest Jewish community of the world today, the Ashkenazi Jews, derives almost entirely from a handful of families living in northern Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries. From Lithuania to Russia, Central Asia, Iraq, Yemen, Morocco, and elsewhere, these Jews made up very small communities within much larger communities of non-Jews. Understanding the pressures of living and trying to preserve one's identity as a reviled minority is difficult unless you have had that experience.

But to the larger, non-Jewish community, such communal protective behavior is easily viewed as conceit and arrogance, and it invites a negativity toward the minority that, not surprisingly, increases its aloofness for survival. Historically, most scorned minorities either die out through assimilation or eventually form their own majority culture somewhere else. The Jews did neither for thousands of years, so these patterns became embedded in a kind of universal Jewish worldview.

Whenever the larger world has welcomed the Jews living among them to participate without fear of violence or conversion, Jews have engaged fully in the life of the larger community and have contributed in a multitude of ways. This was the case in parts of the Muslim world during the Middle

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Ages and is true in parts of the modern world today. One of the reasons for positive Jewish contributions to the larger community is that Jews, like Christians and Muslims, consider life to have purpose and think that we are all responsible to make the world a better place for everybody. A popular expression for this in the Jewish world currently is Tikkun ‘Olam, meaning “repairing the world.” Jews are commanded to strive as hard as they are able to repair the brokenness that is so rampant in the world. But as anyone knows who is familiar with the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and with rabbinic literature, Jews have always struggled with the tension between preserving themselves and their unique identity in a big world that has little interest in them, and working in and with that larger world to realize God’s demands to live a life of good works, in awe of God. The more we can all work together in good faith to realize these aims, the more we will be able to succeed in doing God’s will.

[1] Glenn Holland, Gods in the Desert: Religions of the Ancient Near East(Lanham, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), especially 191–218; Michael Coogan, Stories from Ancient Canaan (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

[2] The Epic of Gilgamesh, trans. Maureen Gallery Kovacs (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 102.

[3] Elohim (pronounced ‘el?h?m) is a plural form for ‘?l (or its variant, ‘eloh), meaning “god” or “deity.” Elohim is not a name but rather a title (similar to All?h, the God), and the plural form is the “plural of majesty” (pluralis maiestatis), meant to convey that God is great and powerful.

[4] Paleographers have found ancient prayers directed to various deities who are identified by name. For example, the following is the beginning of an ancient Sumerian prayer to Ninurta, god of vegetation, from the third millennium BCE: “Live-giving semen, life-giving seed, king whose name was pronounced by Enlil, life-given semen, life-giving seed, Ninurta whose name was pronounced by Enlil. My king, I will pronounce your name again and again, Ninurta, I your man, your man, I will pronounce your name again and again.” James B. Pritchard, ed., The Ancient Near East: A New Anthology of Texts and Pictures (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 2:123.

[5] The traditional Jewish term Israel is a shortened form of “the people of Israel” (‘am yisra’el or beney yisra’el), not a reference to a modern nation-state. The actual name of the modern Jewish state is medinat yisra’el, “the state of (the people of) Israel.” In this essay, I use the traditional term Israel to refer to the Jewish people from the biblical period (for which a common parallel reference is Israelites) to the modern period (for which the term Jews is the more common term).

[6] See, for example, Deuteronomy 7:6–11; Amos 3:2, 9:7–8. Even more discomfort with the association of the particularistic “God of Israel” with the universal God of all existence is found throughout rabbinic literature of the Talmud and Midrash.

[7] The Israelites also represented a confederation of tribes referred to in the Hebrew Bible as “the twelve tribes of Israel,” and there is evidence that other tribal deities among them may have coalesced in the notion of the One Great God. Further, see Mark S. Smith, The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Ziony Zevit, The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches (London: Continuum, 2001).

[8] The classic study of the notion of conversion is Arthur D. Nock, Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

[9]This passage is read every year in the Passover ritual, prefaced by these ancient words from rabbinic tradition: “At the beginning our ancestors served idols, but now God has embraced us so that we may serve Him, as it is written, ‘Joshua said to all the people.’”

[10] 2 Kings 21:1–15, 23:4–15, etc.

[11] Exodus 20:2–3; Deuteronomy 5:6–7, 6:13–14; 2 Kings 17:35–36.

[12] Leviticus 18:24–28; Numbers 33:50–52; Deuteronomy 6:10–15, 7:1–5, 12:1–7.

[13] The sins of Israel for which God brought about the destruction of both the First and Second Temples are discussed in a number of Talmudic sources. The most famous is in the Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 9b.

[14] John Gager, The Origins of Anti-Semitism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 84–88.

[15] Martin Goodman, Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

[16] For the origins of religious mission, see Goodman, Mission and Conversion.

[17] H. H. Ben-Sasson (ed.), A History of the Jewish People (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 349–56.

[18] Robert Seltzer, Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 255; Louis Feldman, “Proselytism by Jews in the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Centuries,” Journal for the Study of Judaism 24, no. 1 (1993):1–58.

[19] Further, see Reuven Firestone, “Muslim-Jewish Relations,” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), https://doi.10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.17; Firestone, “The Problematic of Prophecy: IQSA Presidential Address,” Journal of the International Qu’ranic Studies Association 1 (2016):11–22.

[20] Babylonian Talmud, Hullin 92a; Sanhedrin 105a.

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