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### *Deutsche Zusammenfassung des englischen Aufsatzes\*:*

# Ein Problem des Monotheismus:
# Judentum, Christentum und Islam
# im Dialog und im Widerspruch

## *Von Reuven Firestone*

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Phänomenologisch und historisch untersucht Firestone in diesem Artikel die geschichtlichen und strukturellen Gründe für Konflikte und Gewalt, die sich durch die lange gemeinsame Geschichte der drei monotheistischen Religionen wie ein roter Faden ziehen.

Der Text ist in fünf Abschnitte gegliedert.

- Ursprünge
- Vom Polytheismus zum Monotheismus
- Das Aufkommen neuer Religionen in der „religiösen Ökonomie"
- Wie die Griechen denken – teilhaben an der kommenden Welt
- Die Einheit in der Differenz

In ersten Teil konzentriert sich Firestone auf die Entstehungsgeschichte des Monotheismus, d.h. er legt den Fokus auf den konzeptionellen Wandel von einer Vielzahl an Göttern zu einem einzigen Gott. Allgemein wird der Wandel dem alten Israel zugeschrieben. Jedoch herrscht Uneinigkeit darüber, wo, wann und wie er entstanden ist. Bibelwissenschaftler, so Firestone, sehen diesen Wandel in der Zeit des Exils oder der postexilischen Zeit, im 6. Jahrhundert v. Chr. Es herrscht Einstimmigkeit darüber, dass Israel nicht plötzlich zum Monotheismus kam, sondern dieser sich in einem Prozess herauskristallisierte. Auch war Israel nicht das einzige Volk, das sich dem Monotheismus zuwandte.

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Ägyptens Herrscher Echnaton strebte, laut einiger Wissenschaftler, eine Form von Monotheismus an. Auf jeden Fall propagierte er eine Form von Henotheismus. Aber auch die hebräische Bibel, so Firestone, vermittelt den Eindruck, dass der Gott Israels neben anderen Göttern existiert. Als Beispiele nennt Firestone 2. Chronik 15:1, Joshua 10:12 und 2. Könige 23:4-15. Ist: Die hebräische Bibel ist unter anderem eine Chronik des langen, holprigen Wegs zum Monotheismus.

Im 2. Teil „Vom Polytheismus zum Monotheismus" bezieht sich Firestone vor allem auf Thomas Thompsons überzeugenden Ansatz zu diesem Thema. Thompson verortet exilische und postexilische Literatur innerhalb der Achsenzeit, einen Begriff, den Karl Jaspers geprägt hat. Thompson, so Firestone, sieht die Entstehung biblischer Texte wie: *Sprüche, Job und Kohelet* innerhalb eines intellektuellen Erwachens, das sich im ganzen Gebiet um die Ägäis artikulierte, eine „Achsenzeit". Beispiele dafür sind die Schriften Platons, Sophokles so wie die der mesopotamischen Keilschrift Literatur. In diesen Texten wird das wachsende Bewusstsein deutlich, dass veraltete Traditionen den intellektuellen und spirituellen Bedürfnissen der Zeit nicht mehr entsprechen, und somit unbedeutend sind. Strukturelle Veränderungen der Regierungsform regten Gedanken über eine Neubewertung der Machstrukturen des Kosmos an. Die primären Götter des Alten Israel wurden konzeptionell und strukturell unter dem einen Gott YHVH subsumiert, der jedoch trägt mehrere Namen.

Thompson und Firestone weisen darauf hin, dass alle Kriege in diesen Zeiten „heilige" Kriege waren, denn es waren die nationalen Götter, die mittels ihrer Gläubigen gegeneinander kämpften. In anderen Worten, während die Menschen sich unten auf der Erde bekämpften, stritten und zankten die Götter da oben. Ex 12:12 beschreibt einen solchen Kampf. Wie die meisten anderen Völker mit ihren nationalen Göttern, versuchte auch Israel zu überleben, wurde aber besiegt und musste ins Exil gehen. Vielleicht war Israel besser darauf vorbereitet als andere Völker, die mit ihren Göttern verschwunden sind, jedenfalls nahm Israel seinen Gott mit ins Exil. Hier kristallisierte sich eine irenische Neupositionierung des Gottes Israel. Jesaja 2:2-4 und Micha 4:4-5 sind beides Texte, die auf ein einen inklusiven Monotheismus Israels verweisen. Für eine gewisse Zeit existierte ein inklusiver Monotheismus neben einem exklusiven Monotheismus. Letzterer wurde vorherrschend in der angespannten Zeit nach dem Makkabäeraufstand und bekämpfte jede synkretistische oder abweichende Position innerhalb der eigenen rivalisierenden Auslegungstraditionen. Firestone beendet diesen Teil mit der Bemerkung, dass in der religiösen Welt, die die Bibel beschreibt, religiöser Synkretismus ebenso wie rivalisierende religiöse Bewegungen ein Teil der alten israelitischen Religion waren.

Im 3. Teil „Das Aufkommen neuer Religionen in der „religiösen Ökonomie"" bezieht Firestone sich vor allem auf den Religionssoziologen Rodney Stark. Um neue religiöse Bewegungen zu charakterisieren, stellt Stark die folgenden fünf Thesen auf:

- Neue Religionen erscheinen dann, wenn die etablierten Religionen die spirituellen und theologischen Bedürfnisse eines großen Teils der Bevölkerung nicht mehr erfüllen.

- Aber neue religiöse Bewegungen können sich nur dann bilden, wenn das politische und soziale System einen Raum dafür bereitstellen.

- Neue religiöse Bewegungen bedrohen die etablierten Religionen, da sie deren Versagen deutlich machen.

- Ganz gleich ob sich diese innerhalb (genannt Sekte) oder außerhalb (genannt Kult) einer etablierten Religion artikulieren, sie werden von den etablierten Religionen bekämpft, indem sie versuchen Sekten zu kontrollieren und einen neuen Kult zu zerstören.

- Die neuen religiösen Bewegungen wehren sich polemisierend gegen das etablierte religiöse System.

In einer polytheistischen Welt stellt der neu aufkommende Monotheismus keine Bedrohung dar. Sobald er sich jedoch etabliert hat, stellt jede Form von Polytheismus eine Gefahr dar und wird bekämpft. Von Josephus und aus anderen Quellen wissen wir, dass Sadduzäer, Essener und Pharisäer nebeneinander lebten, sozusagen unter dem Dach des Monotheismus. Der gemeinsame Feind war der griechisch, römische Polytheismus. Sobald dieser jedoch besiegt war, um das Jahr Null herum, wendete sich die aggressive Polemik und der Kampf gegen differente Formen des Monotheismus.

Die intermonotheistische Polemik erreichte ihren Höhepunkt in der Trennung von Judentum und Christentum (*the parting of the ways*). Die scharfe rhetorische Polemik der Abgrenzung wird im Neuen Testament offen ausgesprochen, während die rabbinischen Quellen, Talmud und Midrash, spärlicher und subtiler sind. Diese heftige, gewaltsame Polemik ist emblematisch für das Verhältnis aller monotheistischen Religionen untereinander.

Die religiösen Bewegungen, die zum rabbinischen Judentum und zum Christentum führten, versuchten beide den griechisch-römischen „religiösen Markt" zu beherrschen, indem sie heftig um Anhänger ihrer religiösen Gemeinschaft warben. Das Judentum verlor den Kampf, und im 4. Jahrhundert unserer Zeitrechnung war das Christentum die dominante Religion. Die Vorstellung von „richtigem Glauben" und, daran gebunden, das Versprechen vom ewigen Leben oder ewiger Verdammnis, beide Vorstellungen finden wir nicht in der hebräischen Bibel, markieren den Ursprung „heiliger Kriege", wie wir sie zwischen den monotheistischen Religionen kennen. Aber auch innerhalb der monotheistischen Traditionen werden „heilige Kriege" gefochten. Als Beispiele führt Firestone den Zwist zwischen Sunniten und Schiiten oder den Kreuzzug gegen die Albigenser an. Dieser Teil schließt mit der Bemerkung, dass alle drei großen monotheistischen Religionen in ihren Texten Belege finden können, die auf militante Auseinandersetzung oder friedliche Koexistenz hinweisen.

Im letzten Teil „Die Einheit der Differenz" reflektiert Firestone über die Implikationen des Vorangegangen für unsere heutige Zeit. Wir streben eine post-polemische Zeit an, in der wir uns einig sind, uneinig zu sein, ohne uns bedroht zu fühlen, oder um uns zu schlagen. Frieden und Erfüllung, schreibt Firestone, sollten unser aller Ziel sein. Beides jedoch kann nicht erreicht werden, wenn wir unsere Besonderheit aufgeben. Das Ende religiöser Unterschiede ist weder erstrebenswert noch möglich, denn es ist Teil unserer Existenz. Einzigartigkeit muss sich nicht durch Exklusion artikulieren. Firestone schließt seinen Artikel mit einem Zitat aus der Mischna Sanhedrin 4:5: *Dies beschreibt die Großartigkeit des Heiligen, gepriesen sei er: Ein Mensch prägt viele Münzen mit einem Stempel und alle sind gleich. Doch der König aller Könige, der Heilige, gepriesen sei er, prägte jeden Menschen mit dem Stempel des ersten Menschen [Adam], aber keiner von ihnen gleicht dem anderen."*

Eva Schulz-Jander
Präsidentin

# A Problem with Monotheism:
## Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Dialogue and Dissent

### *Reuven Firestone*

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All believers in one God – Jews, Christians and Muslims – derive their entire spiritual existence from the same deity, however that deity is called. God is always at the center, and God is always worshipped as a loving and compassionate being. This refers, at the very least, to billions of believers among all expressions of the three great families of religions we call Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Monotheism began as a *unifying* system. Conceptually, it removed the universe and all its peoples from the fractious and uncertain rule of often bickering and limited deities and placed them under the mercy and grace of the One Great God.[1] And yet from the earliest annals of religious history, we observe monotheists arguing, fighting and warring with one another through words and weapons about which understanding of the One Great God and the divine will is true – all others being false. What follows is an exploration of some historical and structural reasons for a long and violent history of conflict between monotheistic religions. I will attempt to examine the problem both historically and phenomenologically.

ORIGINS

The story begins with the *emergence* of monotheism. It seems to have taken monotheism quite a while to emerge as a belief system in the long intellectual history of humanity. Scholars of the ancient Near East generally place its origins among the ancient Israelites. But there is still controversy over exactly when, where and how monotheism emerged. My purpose here is to explore the conceptual change from a multiplicity of Gods to one God,[2] a change that current Biblical scholarship places in the exilic or post-exilic periods (6th century BCE or later). While my approach certainly includes theological issues, I want to be clear at the outset that I am not interested, for the purposes of this paper, in the theological problematic of "truth" in relation to the question of God.

There is wide agreement among biblical scholars and historians of religion that Israel did not suddenly come upon the notion of the One God. It was, rather, a process or development, and when I use these terms I am not referring to a Hegelian framework. The terms are intended to be value free and refer simply to change and focus. I treat the topic of monotheism also from the perspective of cultural history as I reflect on the emergence, inspiration and influence of ideas across what we often refer to as boundaries between nations or peoples, languages, religions and other articulations of human organization.

Actually, Israel may not have been the only community working on the issue of monotheism. There is that pesky Egyptian pharaoh, Akhenaton who, among his fascinating innovations in art, government and religion, seems to reflect, at the very least, a kind of henotheism in which only one God

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[1] This differentiation between an organized and benign universe under the One God in contrast to a fractious and chaotic universe of "the Gods" is actually a presumptive construct that monotheists can agree upon without argument, but it is an a priori assumption. The Hebrew Bible, New Testament and Qur'an, all of which assume the rule of the One God, also include important passages describing a universe that is on the verge of chaos and destruction.

[2] Standard English convention is to capitalize only designations for the monotheistic deity while referring to deities in polytheistic systems in lower case. Because this is, at core, a historical/phenomenological rather than theological study, I prefer to refer to the deity or deities in the same manner.

is worshipped while not denying the existence of other Gods. Some consider him to have been a true monotheist.[3] A similar relation to the Gods and the cosmos is reflected in ancient Israel during what appears to be a slow and cumbersome movement toward belief in- and worship of- only one great God. Virtually throughout, the Hebrew Bible conveys the view that the God of Israel exists alongside other Gods. Even psalms associated with the Temple cult assume the existence of deities in addition to the Israelite God, YHVH.[4]

And while current scholarship is now chronicling a history of emerging Israelite monotheism, it is also uncovering expressions of monotheism that, like the religion of Akhenaton, did not survive the vicissitudes of history. Much later than the Egyptian experiment, during the period of emerging Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism of Late Antiquity, Greco-Romans held religious beliefs that, although generally labeled negatively as pagan or superstition by Christians, were actually competing Hellenistic expressions of monotheism that were arising at the same time.[5] And although less well known, the Qur'an refers to pre-Islamic *hanif*s, those who turn their faces away from idolatry and to the One God.[6]

We have learned a great deal about the Israelite development from a near-contemporary Near Eastern religious system with many parallels to the religion of ancient Israel. Our knowledge comes from an archaeological site in Ugarit, in today's northwest Syria, that has yielded a large library of religious poetry and narrative that has forced scholars to read many biblical texts differently than before its discovery.[7] In the religious system of Ugarit, the head or king of the pantheon was El, and his consort, the queen mother, Ashera. So too in the Judean cult, the writers of the book of Kings knew that a Goddess named Asherah was also worshipped in Jerusalem, and she was closely associated with the queen mother Ma'akah: "[King Asa] deposed Ma'akah, mother of King Asa from the rank of queen mother, because she had made an abominable thing for [the Goddess] Asherah." (2Chron.15:16).[8]

In another biblical memory of polytheism, Joshua directs a prayer to the common west Semitic deities, *shemesh* and *yareach* in and old poetic fragment: "Stand still, O Sun (*shemesh*) at Giv'on, O Moon (*yareach*), in the Valley of Ayalon!" (Josh.10:12), though the editor reconstructs the text to be an appeal to YHVH ("Joshua addressed the Lord and said in the presence of the Israelites…"). There are a great many more cases of monotheistically reworked polytheistic traditions in the HB that have been amply documented by biblical scholars.[9]

These are not cases of "straying after foreign Gods" (Deut.11:16), an idiom that implies that the people of Israel saw the light when God redeemed them from Egyptian bondage, brought them through

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[3] Donald Redford, "The Monotheism of Akhenaten*,"* in Hershel Shanks and Jack Meinhardt, *Aspects of Monotheism* (Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1996), 11-26. For a fuller discussion, see Erik Horning, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light* (transl. David Lorton, Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 87-94.

[4] Ps.8:6; 82; 86:8; 89:7; 95:3; 97:7; 135:5; 138:1; 148.

[5] Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[6] Most references are to Abraham the *hanif*. Some note how his monotheism is prior to those of Judaism or Christianity, and Muhammad himself is referred to as a *hanif* on at least one occasion (Q.2:135, 3:67, 95, 4:125, 6:79, 10:105, 30:30). See Uri Rubin, *"Hanifiyya* and Ka`ba: An Inquiry into the pre-Islamic Background of *din ibrahim*," in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990), 85, 112; Andrew Rippin, "*Rhmnn* and the *hanif*s," in Hallaq and Little, *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 153-168; Dale Eickelman, "Musaylima: An Approach to the Social Anthropology of Seventh Century Arabia," in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 10 (1967), 17-52; Ella Landau-Tasseron, "Unearthing a Pre-Islamic Arabian Prophet," in *JSAI* 21 (1997), 42-61, and G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[7] The best recent work on Ugarit and its relationship to Biblical Religion, and which synopsizes all significant prior studies, is Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[8] William G. Dever, "Folk Religion in Early Israel: Did Yahweh Have a Consort?" in Shanks and Meinhardt, *Aspects of Monotheism*, 27-56, Herbert Niehr, "The Rise of YHWH in Judahite and Israelite Religion," in Diana V. Edelman, *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 54-55.

[9] See Smith, *Origins*.

the Red Sea and revealed to them the Torah. From the perspective of current biblical scholarship, it is clear that Israel did not suddenly "see the light." But neither did they stray after foreign Gods. What is denounced in Israel is actually faithful commitment to indigenous pre-monotheistic Israelite religious practices.[10] A partial menu of what was available can be seen in 2 Kings 23:4-15. This is the story of King Josiah's reforms, and it lists all the old practices by applauding Josiah's destruction of the means to engage in what appears to be the extremely popular and varied modes of polytheistic worship. He destroyed the objects made for Ba'al and Asherah and the "Host of heaven," he suppressed the idolatrous priests who made offerings to Ba'al and the sun and moon and constellations throughout Judah, tore down the cubicles of the male religious prostitutes within the Temple itself, destroyed many altars and shrines, including the Tofeth in *Gey Ben-Hinnom* where people burned their sons or daughters to Molekh, got rid of the horses dedicated to the sun and burned the chariots of the sun, defiled shrines built for the Goddess Ashtoret and the God Chemosh on the Mount of the Destroyer, and shattered the sacred pillars and posts.

Most of these were not foreign deities, the Gods of the hated "Canaanites," but were actually Gods *traditionally* worshipped by Israel. N. P. Lemche has shown that "Canaan" refers more to a geographical area than a people, a land in which lived a variety of peoples that we know from biblical texts as Hittites, Girgashites, Emorites, Perizites, Hivites, etc., often lumped together in the Hebrew Bible (and Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts) as Canaanites.[11] The Israelites lived there too.

Israel, it now appears, emerged out of Canaan. To put it bluntly, Israelites *were* Canaanites, but they were one group of Canaanites that was experimenting with or were "growing" an innovative religious idea that would eventually result in monotheism. The Bible itself witnesses the bumpy road to monotheism. Why the arduous process, and why the near-universal change from polytheisms to monotheisms?

FROM POLYTHEISMS TO MONOTHEISMS

Thomas Thompson has a compelling approach to the question. He takes exilic/post-exilic biblical literature and places it within what Karl Jaspers refers to as the "Axial Age," a period from approximately 800-200 BCE that marks a series of conceptual revolutions in human thinking from Greece to China.[12] Thompson locates the Biblical Proverbs, Job and Qohelet within an axial intellectual ferment occurring also in the Aegean in the writings of such innovative thinkers as Plato or Sophocles, and also but less obvious in Mesopotamian cuneiform literature. The texts he cites articulate a defining crisis created by the growing awareness that the old, past tradition appears to have seemed increasingly irrelevant.[13] The old polytheistic systems no longer spoke to the intellectual (and spiritual) needs of the time. The Greeks began rejecting the Gods and the cosmology of Homer and Hesiod for such as Plato's portrayal of the ideal philosopher. In the Near East, however, "…this intellectual crisis was resolved in the clear distinction between the reality of the spirit, the true abode of the divine, and the realities of the human world, including the Gods of human making, which are intrinsically partial and increasingly understood as fallacious….Traditional understanding and religion were not so much false as human. Traditions needed not to be rejected, only reinterpreted."[14]

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[10] Herbert Niehr, "The Rise of YHWH in Judahite and Israelite Religion," in Diana V. Edelman, *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 51.

[11] N. P. Lemche, *The Canaanites and Their Land: The Tradition of the Canaanites* (JSOT Sup. 110; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 25-62.

[12] Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Munich: Piper, 1949), cited in S. N. Eisenstadt, *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 1.

[13] Thomas L. Thompson, "The Intellectual Matrix of Early Biblical Narrative: Inclusive Monotheism in Persian Period Palestine," in Diana V. Edelman, *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 113.

[14] Ibid. p. 114.

By this time, the Achaemenid Persian Empire had united many national religions with their individual pantheons under the overarching rule of the Persian emperor, the king of kings, and the transcendent God of spirit, Ahura Mazda. If one traveled from the Persian heartland into Babylonia and on to Harran, Phoenicia, Philistia or Egypt, one would pass from place to place but find the same Gods. They might have different names but they occupy the same place on what one might call "the food chain" of divinity.

Thompson maintains that this unity of many political rulers under the one emperor, and the many ruler-Gods under the great God of Persia, evoked a kind of unified God theory that made names irrelevant. The history of empire forced "…a world view that distinguishes relative perceptions that are contingent geographically and religiously from an assertion of ultimate reality that is beyond human expression, perception and understanding."

There was a growing realization of the irrelevance of old systems in combination with changes in social-political structures within the empire. The structural changes in governance stimulated a reevaluation of the structures of the powers that run the cosmos. According to Thompson, the Greek intellectuals tended to reject the old system entirely for a new one that we call philosophy, but some Asian intellectuals redefined the role of the divine in the old tradition. Rather than a series of parallel Gods with different names – something like the parallel kings of small ethnic regions – there emerged the notion of a universal God – conceptually parallel to the Emperor of the material world. This was an "inclusive monotheism" through which the God of Israel charges Cyrus, the King of Persia, to allow Judeans to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild there the House of God (Ezra 1:1-3).[15] Thompson goes on to indicate how a Pentateuchal editorial hand conflates the God of the Exodus with that of Sinai and shows how YHVH is also Elohim, El Shadday, and the Gods of the Patriarchs. The primary Gods of old that Israel knew became conceptually and structurally united in the One God, YHVH, but who is also known by other names.

Thompson's conclusions correspond with my own work on divinely authorized or "holy" war in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East.[16] In this world, each nation or ethnic group had a variety of deities whom it worshipped, but each tended to single out one divine entity to which it found a more personal relationship, and it was this God that cared especially for its people. All wars between nations in those days were divinely authorized – therefore, "holy," because in all cases the national Gods of the various peoples engaged in one way or another in the fray along with their human subjects. To put it schematically, while humans were fighting down below, their Gods were bickering or actually fighting on high. Clear remnants of this exist in the Hebrew Bible, such as when the God of the Hebrews defeats the divine powers of Egypt (Ex.12:12): "For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night…and against all the Gods of Egypt I will execute judgment."

An international worldview of polytheism that includes national Gods makes sense in a world in which basic ethnic independence with occasional and temporary conquest or subjugation was the norm, or at least a distinct possibility, in a basically level playing field. There was always the hope and the possibility that "our God" (or Gods) would help us to beat "theirs" and thus provide greater material wealth and security. And most of the Near East, aside from Egypt, was basically a level playing field. Egypt was different, but Egypt's empirical interests and cultural influences seem to have had less of an impact on the Fertile Crescent than Assyria with its rise to empire.[17]

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[15] Thompson (p. 116) generalizes far more than the sources would seem to indicate, but he is building a case really for Israel.

[16] Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1999; "Holy War Idea in the Biblical Tradition," in Palmer-Fernandez, G. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and War* (1st ed.). New York: Berkshire/Routledge, 2004, 180-85; "Conceptions of Holy War in Biblical and Qur'anic Tradition," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996), 801-824.

[17] Diana V. Edelman (ed.), *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996, 20-21.

The rise and expansion of the Assyrian Empire permanently changed the face of the ancient Near East by imposing the phenomenon of super-king while defeating virtually all other rulers and their Gods. The empire God, Ashur, likewise became the "king of the Gods,"[18] as did the Babylonian Marduk after the defeat of Assyria.[19] The military unification of empire posed and then immediately answered the question of what was the value of the little Gods that could not defeat the great powers. Most local rulers continued to play the game in the hope of becoming rulers of a great empire like those controlling them.

So did Israel, or at least some of Israel. Isaiah 11 sees the Davidic heir as a just ruler, defeating the wicked and aiding the poor. God will gather up the Israelites and cause them to defeat their enemies (Philistia, Edom, Moav, Ammon), after which the wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie with the kid. God will destroy Babylon (Isaiah 12-13), Assyria (14), and Moav (15-16). In Isaiah 29, God will humble Egypt and Israel will be partners with Egypt and Assyria in a kind of "G-3" (Isaiah 19:24-25). For Israel, it was only a dream, but some national peoples, like Babylonia and Persia, along with their Gods, succeeded, at least for a while. Most did not.

Like most peoples and their national deities, Israel tried to survive, but eventually was forced into defeat and exile. Much has been written about how Israel "prepared" intellectually for a final defeat through its Deuteronomistic reforms associated with King Josiah and others between the destruction of the Northern Kingdom and the defeat of the Southern Kingdom.[20] Perhaps Israel's national religion was somewhat better prepared than the national religions of other conquered peoples that disappeared from history. In any case, Israel went into exile with its God, and some texts of the Hebrew Bible witness Israel's anger and desire for revenge.

Other texts, however, convey a different sentiment. Witnessing the grandeur of Babylon may have convinced Israel that it and its God would never defeat the Gods of Babylonia. Perhaps the overwhelming shock of the destruction of its national cult center in Jerusalem forced a major intellectual and spiritual retooling among some thinkers. Some trace a shift in conceptualization to the Persians, under which the defeated Gods become equated with the Empire God through the new title, *Elohey Hashshamayim* – "the God(s) of the Heavens,"[21] and this term becomes a common one in the Hebrew Bible. Whatever the exact cause, the net result was, as witnessed by some Biblical texts, an irenic repositioning of the God of Israel.

The ideal-typical expressions of this sentiment are the famous statements of Isaiah and Micah.

In the days to come, the Mount of the Lord's House shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills; and all the nations shall gaze on it with joy. And the many peoples shall go and say, 'Come let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; that He may instruct us in His ways and that we may walk in His paths.' For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Thus He will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not take up sword against nation. They shall never again know war (Isaiah 2:2-4)

The image conveyed here should be construed as an expression of the supremacy of the God of Israel that parallels that of victorious God(s) of empire, but the victory of the God of Israel is actually a victory only through conceptual absorption. It is a triumphal universal statement couched in the particularist symbolism of Jerusalem. The final result is, indeed, peace, but it is actually an expression of

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[18] J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (ANET) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 278, 283, 285, 288, 295, 297, 298.

[19] ANET 307, 310. Whether the unifying process under the Assyrians and Persians resulted in a slightly different relationship of the great God of empire with local national Gods makes little difference to the basic argument.

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[21] Edelman, 22.

intellectual acrobatics. It is peace along the lines of the *pax romana*, but only a conceptual construct, not one born of actual military and political victory. The Micah text parallels much of the Isaiah text but adds a surprisingly pluralistic note. The Israelite God, the "Lord of Armies" is responsible, but all peoples are nevertheless seen as walking according to the dictates of their own Gods.

Everyone shall sit under their grapevine or fig tree and with no one to disturb them, for it was the Lord of Hosts who spoke. Though all the peoples walk each in the names of its Gods, we will walk in the name of YHVH our God forever and ever. (Micah 4:4-5).

This is a surprisingly open expression of "inclusive monotheism." Thompson suggests that these and other universalizing poems (Hosea 2, Amos 5 and 9, Micah 5 and 6:2-7:7, and especially Isaiah 44:28-45:13) are positioned in earlier periods by the biblical editors by using a tradition-building technique of story-writing known better from Ruth, Jonah and Esther. The Israelite God is recast as the universal God of heaven. "The underlying doctrine of transcendence is that God is the author of the world, both evil and good, and that he had created it for his own purposes, not those of humanity. History; i.e., tradition, reflects his glory. Israel, having committed unforgivable crimes, is forgiven. How else describe the wonder of the God of mercy?"[22]

This monotheism is typified by a merciful God. Previously, the Gods rendered judgment but rarely mercy. In monotheism, however, "[t]he Divine creates and is responsible for both good and evil, but his mercy is without end."[23] Inclusive monotheism existed side-by-side with a different worldview that Thompson terms "exclusive monotheism." Exclusive monotheism may indeed have emerged under the influence of empire, when authority was centralized through both political and military control on the one hand, and through religion on the other. In the worldview of exclusive monotheism, the one true God is at war with the false Gods of all bad things. This notion became dominant in Judea during the tense period followed by the Maccabean revolt against the tremendously successful culture of Hellenism under the Seleucids. The overwhelming appeal of Hellenism and its steamrolling "cultural imperialism" was considered a threat to the very existence of the Judeans and therefore, their culture and religion, but in the second century, BCE, the Maccabean revolt succeeded in slowing down that threat by establishing a powerful particularism in Israelite – now unambiguously Judean – monotheism.[24]

The Hasmonean period that followed this revolt is known for its syncretism and infighting between the emerging streams of late antique Judaism, which in turn, increased the tendency toward polemical, exclusivist interpretations of the divine will. Hellenism's appeal and dominance as the "higher culture" needed to be rejected, and this activist monotheistic rejection produced exclusive expressions of monotheism. We observe how the various Jewish interpretive communities that emerged during this period fought between each other as well as the outside threat of Hellenism. Exclusivist expressions of Judean monotheism would surpass the earlier inclusive monotheism and fight what each believed to be the syncretistic and incorrect position of its competing schools. This would be the legacy of monotheism in general.[25]

Thompson's schema is interesting, but he seems to be suggesting that prior to Hellenism, Israelite monotheism was free from syncretism and competing religious expressions. The Hebrew Bible would seem to indicate otherwise, for it records countless struggles for religious as well as political dominance, from the obvious depictions that we just noted in 2 Kings to more subtle arguments found

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[22] Thompson, 120.
[23] Thompson, 122.
[24] Elias Bickerman, *From Ezra to the Last of the Maccabees* (NY: Schocken, 1962), Lawrence Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (NY: Ktav, 1991), 60-79.
[25] Thompson 124.

within the Prophets and in the third division of the Hebrew Bible, "Hagiography."[26] These arguments are so deeply intertwined with political or kinship divisions that they are not always immediately recognizable, but they are certainly there. And when one takes a moment to ponder the nature of organized religion as we know it worldwide, and then re-examine the world of organized religion depicted by the Bible without romantic inclination, we shouldn't wonder at the evidence indicating religious syncretism and competing religious movements within ancient Israelite religion.

EMERGING RELIGIONS IN A RELIGIOUS ECONOMY

Thompson's general conclusions are particularly interesting when compared to the most influential current sociological theory of emerging religions. Rodney Stark has been a leader and certainly the most prolific sociologist of religion studying the emergence of new religious movements (NRMs).[27] What follows derive from his study of contemporary emerging religions – not ancient NRMs such as Islam, Christianity or biblical religion. Nevertheless, some of Stark's observations, with my own extensions, apply directly to our topic of the polemical relationship between monotheisms.[28]

1. New religious movements begin when established religions do not speak to the theological and spiritual needs of a significant population of potential consumers.
2. But NRMs can only form when there is room in the larger social and political system for them. They are most likely to succeed when there exists a religious "free market economy."
3. NRMs threaten established religions by their very existence, because they symbolize the failure of established religions to speak to everyone.
4. Whether an NRM begins as a branch or stream within an established religion (sect) or an independent movement (cult), it is opposed by established religions, which feel threatened by the new developments. When the practice or belief system of an internal movement moves beyond the unwritten defining parameters of the established religion out of which it emerges, it becomes a true new religion. Established religions try to control NRMs if they begin within them, or destroy them if they begin on the outside.
5. NRMs "fight back" through polemical means to demonstrate to an audience of potential believers that they are better expressions of the divine will or provide better spiritual services than establishment religions.

Stark uses market-economy vocabulary when describing the emergence of NRMs. A new religious movement is a new "product" in the "religious economy," and those who promote the new product desire to gain "market share" in the "religious consumer market." The promoters – that is, believers and particularly the leadership of NRMs – attempt to "sell" their new product by demonstrating that it will provide better services and give more satisfaction than the traditional products on the market.

Stark conducted his initial studies on new religious movements in the USA and Europe, which all emerge within a religious environment that is overwhelmingly monotheistic and mostly Christian. New religious movements in an overwhelmingly polytheistic environment do not represent such a threat to establishment religions.[29] If there already exist a multitude of deities, or if the conception of deity is one that accepts multiple means of representation, then a new movement would not represent much of a religious threat (it might represent a political or economic threat if it threatened the established political

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[26] Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* [1971], London, SCM Press, 1987.
[27] For a recent bibliography of his work, see his *For the Glory of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
[28] See Stark, and Laurence R. Iannaccone, "A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the 'Secularization' of Europe," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 (1994), 230-52, Stark, "How New Religions Succeed: A Theoretical Model," in *The Future of New Religious Movements*, ed. by David G. Bromley and Phillip E. Hammond (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 11-19); Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* [Peter Lang, 1987] (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).
[29] Stark, "The One True God" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 31-113.

system or economy through religious affiliation, but for the purposes of this discussion, I must consider this a different topic even though it can be very closely related, as in the case of the emergence of Islam). A new religious movement or sect formation within polytheistic environments simply adds another God to the pantheon.

This appears to have been the case in the ancient world prior to the rise of monotheism, when multiple expressions of polytheism lived side by side. It is clear that different theisms, whether poly-, heno- or mono-, have existed side-by-side for a very long time, because whatever the true reality of the cosmos, our human perceptions tend to be individual, and we can observe this phenomenon long before the modern and post-modern glorification of individual intellectual efforts.

In an overwhelmingly polytheistic world, emerging monotheism would not represent a religious threat. History has demonstrated, however, that once monotheisms have been established, polytheisms *do* represent a significant threat to *them*. Monotheism cannot countenance the existence of multiple Gods. In polytheistic systems, as noted above, various Gods with different names can function similarly or identically – they occupy the same place in the "food chain of divinity." Polytheism by its very nature is inclusive. But if one great God covers all the functions, then any interlopers are existentially threatening. It probably mattered little in early expressions of monotheism as represented in the Hebrew Bible exactly what was the nature of God. Early expressions of monotheism – or to put it differently, early *monotheisms* – were all acceptable to one another because they were articulated and experienced in relation to the overwhelming falseness of polytheisms. It would be self-destructive and probably unimportant to be overly critical of the differences between the monotheistic expressions when the specter of polytheism looms overhead. Therefore, monotheistic believers might disagree about any number of issues, but there was a limit beyond which the arguments would probably not pass.

We know from Josephus and from other literary and archaeological sources that Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes and other lesser known groups lived side-by-side in the Late Second Temple period. Those that did not retreat into their own communities like the Essenic type groups competed with one another openly over political influence, and sometimes nastily, but all were part of an inclusive group of monotheisms that saw themselves as a union in contrast to the polytheist Greeks and Romans.[30] At some point, however, this multi-monotheistic union would break apart.

By roughly the year "zero," Greco-Romans began to express an increasing interest in the various expressions of monotheism. As Greco-Romans began joining one or another of the monotheisms "on the market," their consumer interest raised the stakes with regard to the differences and identities of the new religious products. Greco-Romans had the option of "shopping" for philosophical schools for centuries, but "better or worse" and "true or false" became important internal categories now also for monotheistic options because they could mean an increase or decrease in affiliation or support from the huge pool of potential patrons. The question of affiliation raised the stakes because numbers relate to political and economic power and influence, and the rise in the political and economic stakes naturally increased the level of polemic.

Internal differences tend to be unimportant when the battle with the outsider is the overwhelming consideration. But when the outside competition of polytheism began to subside, then previously unimportant issues became issues of the day.

THINKING LIKE GREEKS AND A STAKE IN THE "WORLD TO COME"

As more could be gained or lost in the competition between monotheisms, new and more effective tools were sought to enhance one's rating. Two very important innovations entered the Judean

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[30] Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Transl. G. A. Williamson, Rev. E. Mary Smallwood (London: Penguin, 1981), 133-138.

universe during this late Second Temple period. One, noted by Thompson, was syllogistic thinking and the search for [capital 'T'] Truth. The second innovation, also acknowledged by students of this period for generations, was a systematic notion of a place in a heavenly World-to-Come that derives from the nature of the individual while in this world.[31] We find neither of these in the Hebrew Bible.[32] Placed together, linear thinking, in combination with the enticement of heaven and the threat of hell, leads to what, extending Thompson's language, might be called *extremely* exclusivist monotheism, one that applied the exclusive attitude toward competing expressions of monotheism as well as toward polytheisms.

During the early period of these emerging innovations, Josephus notes the ideational differences between the Jewish "parties" or "philosophies." He also notes that Essenes and Pharisees believe that the soul is immortal. But there does not seem to be evidence in his works that right thinking merits a heaven or a hell, even among the Essenes who had a well-developed idea of a world to come of bliss and happiness, and another, "a darksome, stormy abyss, full of punishments that know no end."[33]

Inter-monotheistic polemic intensified and reached its first peak in the "Parting of the Ways" between Judaism and Christianity. The violent rhetorical battles recorded so clearly in the New Testament and more subtly in the Rabbinic literature of Talmud and Midrash, became emblematic of the relationship between monotheistic religions in general, extending beyond Judaism and Christianity to Islam and its derivatives.

The movements that became Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism emerged out of a spiritual environment that strongly reflected both Biblical and Greco-Roman religions and cultures. As they emerged into separate religious movements they competed fiercely for consumers from the Greco-Roman religious market,[34] and this increased the level of polemic between them. We do not have much of the Jewish polemic because the Jews lost the market to what eventually became a virtual Christian monopoly, after which it became un-politic and eventually illegal to criticize Christians and Christianity in a Christianized Roman Empire. But we have plenty of the Christian polemic, and it became quite shrill.[35]

This Jewish-Christian competition set the tone for all subsequent relations between expressions of monotheism. Once the overwhelming threat of Roman polytheism backed by the state was eliminated, monotheistic believers and their growing institutions no longer needed to tolerate alternate monotheisms. The right expression of the divine will became a matter of great concern – of ultimate concern for some expressions – and that ultimate concern could be expressed as a future eternity in bliss or eternity in wretched misery. This became more of an issue to Christianities than Judaisms, but that may have been one reason why Christianity captured the market in the fourth century of the Common Era. To use the economic vocabulary of Stark et al, what was important was not simply the product, but also the brand name.

This terminology may not be an overstatement. The work of John Gager shows how from the Greco-Roman perspective, the product was, simply, monotheism. The leading brands were the movements that became Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism. Both movements had similar features: worship of one mighty and universal God, ancient origins, moral-ethical systems, scripture-based

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[31] George Nickelsburg, Jr., *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[32] With the one exception of Daniel 12.

[33] Josephus, *The Jewish War* p. 137. That right belief may result in a place in the World to Come later becomes axiomatic in Rabbinic Judaism (Mishnah Sanhedrin, chapter 10).

[34] John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[35] At the top end can be found John Chrysostom's 8 "Sermons Against the Jews." Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel* Transl. from the French, H. McKeating (London: Littman Library, 1996) 217-223.

traditions, messiahs, and salvation. John Chrysostum's sermons against the Jews were attempts to keep the Greco-Roman consumer pool loyal to his brand of monotheism in the church. He did not want them to be consumers of the Jewish brand of worship as well. His problem was that his parishioners were attending both church and synagogue.[36]

In the course of the polemic, the stakes were raised. When the stakes are low, it matters little what one thinks. But when the risk is the difference between eternal bliss and eternal damnation based on what one thinks or believes, then it matters much.

This combination is a one-two punch: that there is a single religious truth out there that must be realized, and that there are serious consequences for realizing or failing to realize that truth. And it is well-known that the argument was not only between Christianity and Judaism, but also between the many different expressions of Christianity.

This nexus may also represent a development that produced monotheistic "holy war." Prior to the convergence of the notion of right belief with the notion of an afterlife in heaven or hell, there was plenty of violence and strife among Israelites and in the ancient world in general. As noted above, the Hebrew Bible witnesses both religious rivalry and political rivalry couched in religious terms. But the rivalry was clearly and un-self-consciously associated with material issues, and the stakes did not include the notions of eternal damnation or bliss. I would suggest that with the convergence of the two notions of right belief and the expectation of reward or punishment in heaven or hell, competition and fighting between groups, even over purely material issues, became articulated increasingly in spiritual terms.[37] The convergence moved conflicts – or more accurately, motivation for engaging in conflicts – from the material to the spiritual-ideological. This is a movement from obvious material motivations of conflict and war to, at the very least, the possibility of ideological motivations.

This transition needs to be explored further, but it may mark the conceptual birth of "holy war" as we have come to know it between and among all three families of monotheistic religion.[38] "Holy war," whether named Crusade, Jihad or "Commanded War," was always a distinct possibility (and not infrequently, also a reality) between competing religious expressions *within* as well as *between* the three monotheistic clans. The wars between Sunnis and Shi`is and the Albigensian Crusade mark only two of the best-known examples of "holy war" waged within monotheistic systems. The emergence of Islam followed the basic model described above of a threatening new religious movement that was opposed by the establishment religions – Meccan idolatry because Islam threatened its intimate economic tie with the lucrative pilgrimage industry,[39] and Medinan Judaism because surviving monotheisms were highly particularist in the 7th century Middle East. The militant opposition of the Christian Byzantine Empire, both on the battlefield and in the propaganda of the Church, helped the Muslims to find their own particularism. However, as with the defining scriptures of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the Qur'an contains both militant and irenic material, and either pole of which can be activated by religious scholars when the need arises.

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[36] Gager, 119.

[37] Stark argues that not all warring is materialist in origin. Readiness for martyrdom would disprove that, and the Crusades, if material-driven, would have been directed toward Spain rather than the Holy Land in the 11th century (*One True God*, 151-152).

[38] James Turner Johnson, *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1997), Karen Armstrong, *Holy War: The Crusades and their Impact on Today's World* (NY: Doubleday, 1988), Majid Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955), Alfred Morabia, *La Notion de Gihad dans L'Islam Medieval* (Paris, 1975), Rudolf Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1996), Salo Baron and George Wise, *Violence and Defense in the Jewish Experience* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1977), Reuven Firestone, *The Resurrection of Holy War in Modern Judaism* (forthcoming).

[39] Not for religious reasons, because from the perspective of the polytheist, veneration of only one God within the system was not considered threatening.

THE UNITY OF DIFFERENCE

This essay has explored early social-historical motivations for religious competition, polemic and eventually, war among monotheisms. We have observed how monotheism may have emerged from a paradigm shift caused by the unifying conquests of empire. Even the God of Israel, who was not engaged in any truly successful conquest of empire, assumes the universal image of "God of Armies" (the meaning of "Lord of Hosts"); perhaps because it never actually became a true political Empire-God, the God of Israel was the only God of the ancient Near Eastern world that survived the inevitable defeat of empire. As the polytheistic competition gave way to enduring notions of monotheism, these came increasingly into competition and polemical relationships. The increasing particularization was expressed, not only in purely theological terms, but also through a cultural discourse that was influenced by the languages and worldviews of the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman world, Persia and Arabia.

Each of the three "families" of monotheisms, therefore, reflects different anthropologies as well as theologies. Each family is made up of distinct member groups that express unique aspects of the Ineffable, each member group according to its own particular cultural, social, intellectual and linguistic discourse. The differences are not merely accidents of human culture and history. They reflect what is unique in every one of us who make up the members of our distinctive religious families as we, each by our very createdness, reflect the uniqueness of the Divine Essence.

We rightly strive for a post-polemical age when we can agree to disagree without feeling so threatened that we lash out in violence. Peace and fullness is and should be our grand aspiration, but these will never be achieved by attempting to reduce our particularities. The end of religious diversity is neither desirable nor possible, for it is part of our createdness. But distinctiveness need not be expressed as exclusivity. Monotheism cannot be homogenized, for the unity of the Divine Essence is not a unity that can be reflected adequately in human terms, and certainly not by the example of theological or religious uniformity. An observation is given in the Talmud:[40] "This expresses the greatness of the Holy One: a man stamps many coins with one die and they are all alike, but the King of the king of kings,[41] the Holy One, has stamped all humanity with the die of the first Adam, but not one of them is like the other."

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[40] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.
[41] Note how its designation for God reflects the Achaemenid discourse of "king of kings."