

Essay

The Hebrew Bible is a problem set

Von [Marcia Pally](#)



02.05.2013. The idea that one should look to Judaic monotheism for the root of anti-Semitism (or other violence) is a key confusion in this discussion, especially since Jan Assmann has no intention to blame Jews. Some ways out of an unproductive circle.

I have watched with interest the discussion on Jan Assmann's work, both his books and his many insightful contributions to Egyptology and to the role of religion and monotheism in western socio-political development. I recognize that I am coming into this discussion from the outside, but as I have been invited, I will try my best to explain what I see. It seems that a few misperceptions keep sending our discussion round in a circle. I will note a few important ones as I understand them. Perhaps it would be good not only to untangle these but also to figure out why they have been hard to untangle. (In my comments below, I rely on my reading of the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic texts in the original languages as well as on scholarship that does the same. All translations from the Bible are from the New International Version.)

The first of these misperceptions is about the origin of what we might call strong monotheism, the idea that there is but one God. This of course differs from the idea that there is but one God *for our people* though it is empirically obvious that other groups worship other Gods, what we might call weak monotheism. In the ancient Near East, most tribal groups had their God(s), particular Gods associated with particular tribes. This was no different for the Hebrews, who--perhaps lacking in mythic imagination or preferring pantheonic simplicity--had only one. The earliest commandments to this tribe were to worship its own God and not any of the others available. This is unremarkable and typical of tribes of the time, say roughly 1200 BCE to 600 BCE. In short, the Hebrews practiced weak monotheism--and for much of this post-exodus and first temple period, very weak indeed as large sectors of the population, including elites and kings, regularly worshipped Gods other than Yaweh. Though this exercised the prophets, even their call to worship only one God would not necessarily have meant strong monotheism but rather only that the Hebrew tribes stick to their own diety and not flirt around. In any case, not a large percentage of the Hebrew population listened to them, which is why there are so many prophets all repeating the same complaint.

Thus, the idea that there is only one God universally, as Assmann rightly points out, is an Egyptian invention--though as he also correctly says, it had a rather bumpy reception and did not become popular or win out against competing Egyptian ideas of diestic plurality. Nonetheless, credit must go to whom it is due, and the Egyptians must get it for the initial monotheistic spark. There is no reason to shift the credit (if

you like it) or blame (if you don't) onto the ragtag Hebrews. Moreover, if there was a group that not only believed in one God but had the power and influence to spread the idea around, it was in the great empire of Egypt, which in wealth, power, and influence was to the Hebrews something like what the US today is to Cameroon. Ideas popular in hegemonic nations get around--including minority views like monotheism in Egypt--even unintentionally and certainly without the imprimatur of officials or governments. In any case, the Hebrews of this time were not spreading it around as they themselves were at best weak monotheists and much of the time, polytheists--worshippers of Yaweh and a number of deities simultaneously. Moreover, the surrounding tribes became not a jot more monotheistic as a result of contact with the Hebrews while the Hebrews regularly played the pantheonic field, courting a gaggle of gods.

So I shall suggest, as Assmann and others do, that if you want to credit/blame someone for the first glimmers of monotheism, Egypt of 1200 or so BCE is your best bet. However, the more substantial author of stronger monotheism was the Zoroastrian Persians. With their vast and sophisticated empire, they certainly had the ability to disseminate the idea, as they no doubt did to the Hebrews, who were well-disposed to the Persians in any case since Persia had liberated the Hebrews from their exile in Babylonia. Persia of this period was to the emiserated Hebrews in some sense what the US was to newly-liberated, post-war Belgium. As we both applaud and critique America's cultural sway so too should we credit and criticize Persia's.

As for the Hebrews, some did return to Israel after liberation by the Persians, though most stayed in Babylon or spread throughout the Near East and North Africa. In this, the sixth century BCE, the Jews in these various locations held to something closer to strong monotheism. But even at this time it was an iffy proposition. The prophet Ezra--who came from Persian-influenced Babylonia, where he could well have come to appreciate stronger monotheism--and the prophet Nehemia had to make an all-out push for centralized religious worship dedicated to only Yaweh precisely because such a practice was not yet a given. Again, even centralizing worship in the newly built second temple would not necessarily have meant strong monotheism but rather only that the Hebrew tribes confine themselves to their own deity.

The idea that there is one universal God begins to emerge stably only in later Judaic writings, in books like Daniel. Composed in the second century BCE and back-dated to the sixth, the Book of Daniel was likely a response to the desecration of the temple by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Its vision of the temple as dedicated to Yaweh is certainly understandable as a reaction against the Greek colonial boot.

All this suggests that in the present discussion, the Hebrews do not deserve pride of place. It would be off-target to pin violence, war, and intolerance, ostensibly the result of monotheism, on the Hebrews of three thousand years ago--to make the Hebrew the Ur source of evil--when there are two great empires to credit or blame. When modern critics of capitalism, for instance, wish to investigate its abuses and reach, they correctly look at the hegemonies of Europe's colonial powers and the US rather than, say, capitalist Costa Rica. There is no reason, in this debate, to turn not to the hegemon but to the small Hebrew tribe of far lesser influence.

Assmann of course has no intention to make Hebrews the source of world violence and intolerance (or to make any other simplistic claims as far as I can tell). But it

seems that precisely because of this, talk about Moses as an Egyptian initiator of an intolerant religion is confusing discussion participants. People are talking past each other, and that usually means that key ideas-what people deeply mean, fear, and value-- are insufficiently understood. I do hope this can be repaired.

Linked to the question of the origin of monotheism is whether the later position of the Jews as the great Other of Christian Europe has colored the lens through which the ancient world is viewed-of whether the Near East of 1200 BCE is being recruited for Europe's deep structural anxieties about The Jew, The Other, Islam, religion, modernity, German guilt about the Holocaust, and resentment at feeling guilty.

The important word in the previous sentence is "Europe." The question about lens-coloring of course is not about Assmann or any other individual but about cultural change, which happens inevitably but slowly. Europe's unconscious assumptions and gut impulses about Jews, while vastly different from what they were in the past, are the heirs of an enduring, robust culture whose traces linger for good and bad. The same should be said, for instance, about racism in the US (and anti-Semitism for that matter). Americans unconsciously and consciously carry racist impulses with them-- including African Americans and Latinos, who are after all culturally American. It goes without saying that I include myself in the problem. Racism will I hope fade but it cannot fade unless we Americans are onto ourselves-critical of what "feels right" or what we do automatically, without thinking. For that's where our unconscious assumptions lie.

I am not sure if some cultural analysis would be useful in the present discussion; perhaps other participants feel the trouble is elsewhere. But it might be worth considering if it could untangle knots like this: Prof. Richard Wolin, in his recent [Chronicle Review article](#), holds that Assmann seeks to investigate the history of anti-Semitism in Europe. This is of course a commendable effort which Assmann could do expertly. Wolin becomes disconcerted, however, because he finds that the issue is framed as: why have the Jews have attracted such animus? After all, if one is interested in anti-Semitism, one might investigate the beliefs of anti-Semites. Choosing Judaic beliefs, about monotheism or anything else, looks like blaming the victim. Wolin also holds that Assmann is making a case for classic blowback in which anti-Semitism is the Jews' fault because they invented intolerant monotheism.

But since Assmann intends neither victim-blaming nor blowback, we are back in our muddle.

Another issue linked to the origin of monotheism is Assmann's claim, correct I think, that joining Egyptian monotheism and Moses has been a modern Christian European trope, begun in the Humanist Renaissance and repeated through the modern era, for the laudable goal of defanging the persecutory, warring Christian churches. By claiming that monotheism began in naturalist pagan Egypt, these humanist moderns hoped to refute the *Christian sectarian*, exclusionary claims that led so much persecution and war in early modernity.

Assmann has a fascinating point here. But it brings us back to the Christian perpetrators of violence, not to Judaic tradition. The Jews, by the early modern era, had been neither persecutory nor martial for 2,000 years while the Christians had been emphatically so. Perhaps it makes more research sense to investigate facets

specific to Christianity-not monotheism, which is common to several faiths--as the root cause of this violence. In other words, if Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, tells falsehoods and the Wizard of Oz does not, it might make sense to investigate something about Glinda (a terrible witch childhood, for instance) that is not true for Mr. Oz. In turn, it might make analytic sense to investigate something that Christianity has and Judaism does not-like crucifixion (in contrast to the Hebraic binding of Isaac, the lesson of which is that innocents never need be sacrificed), or the Eucharist, Trinity, and so on.

This of course is cheeky. I am not in the least bit suggesting that any of these Christian tenets leads to violence. But at least as I observe it, the idea that one should look to Judaic monotheism for the root of anti-Semitism (or other violence) - as the phenomenon that comes to mind to investigate - is a key confusion in this discussion, especially since Assmann has no intention to blame Jews or otherwise promote anti-Semitism. Indeed, if Wolin is right, Assmann seeks to interrogate it. We are back in the muddle.

At this point, one must take the bull by the horns and say that none of this means that Germans, owing to the Holocaust, should avoid talking about such a sensitive topic as Jews and violence--that they should leave Jew-blaming to those with PC *bona fides*, like the Canadians. It does however point to our unproductive circle, a few key of which I've tried to describe, centrally about identifying the roots of monotheism as well as how to investigate the causes of violence. It is notable, for instance, that the Nazi Holocaust was perpetrated not under a monotheistic ideology but under an ideology anti-pathetic to Judeo-Christian thought, indeed an ideology of neo-paganism.

In any case, repeating a confusion isn't getting us anywhere. Again, from the outside, an important question seems to be why it has been difficult to clear up. Perhaps we should sit round a table together to more easily untangle the issues, which I understand is a proposal by Prof. Rolf Schieder.

Another tangle of this debate is in the proposition that monotheism-Judaic or otherwise-has empirically brought more violence to the world than other belief systems or that there is something in it that tends people to mayhem. Wolin and others hold that Assmann says this "something" is the "Mosaic distinction"-the claim of one universal God, which ruins the "divine translatability" and thus tolerance of polytheistic peoples. This builds on the idea that monotheism is Judaic (the *Mosaic*, not Egyptian, distinction) and ratchets up human violence because it makes all conflicts into conflicts about final, universal truths. And they ask, why are we not talking about the "Egyptian" or "Persian" distinction?

Yet, Assmann himself notes that even a short review of the wars, invasions, racial and ethnic persecutions, subjugation, and methods of torture invented in East Asia, Africa, and the pre-Columbian Americas would end the idea that monotheists are more violent than others. All of these civilizations have also been brutally persecutory toward their own people and co-religionists-in the name of God(s), to placate God(s) when they God(s) were "angry," to feed/serve God(s) and so on. Moreover, the wars attributed to the ancient Hebrews were in fact not about final truth but about land, as almost all wars of the era were. And the Hebrew got very little of it and wiped no other tribe out to get what they got, as both the archeological and

Biblical descriptions of their life in Israel/Palestine shows them living mostly peaceably among many other groups.

I do understand that, if one is *a priori* hostile to monotheistic religion, one might be attracted to a theory that says: belief in one God necessarily makes one intolerant and thus persecutory towards those with other beliefs. Some contemporary thinkers hostile to religion do hold to this, though Assmann is not one of them. Furthermore, however attractive, it's not an idea that holds much water. First, much violence occurs among people of the same faith--within a nation or across nations--be it in medieval Catholic Europe or Confucian/Buddhist China. Second, the historical record provides no evidence to substantiate greater violence under monotheism's influence. Humans seem to be quite capable of substantial brutality without its help.

As John Maynard Keynes said when he was criticized for changing his views on monetary policy (in light of the Great Depression), "When my information changes, I alter my conclusions. What do you do, sir?" If history has not shown greater records of violence among monotheists, what exactly are the Judaic monotheists culpable of?

It seems they are guilty of betraying their ideals of peace and love. This is a frequent question about the Judeo-Christian traditions, and I am sympathetic to it. Indeed, why do we humans hold to the ideals of justice and goodness and do the contrary? Ironically, this has been a prime topic of the Judeo-Christian theodicy, which recognizes the fallenness of humankind (as other great philosophies do) and struggles with what can be done to bring us closer to our humane ideals.

Yet blaming monotheism for human aggression is like blaming adultery on the marriage vows. Humans in all traditions- Buddhist and Shinto, animist and polytheist--betray their ideals. We do so in all arenas of life--the economic, social, and political--and no matter how small or grand the ideals are. This failing is not special or intrinsic to monotheism. We make New Year's resolutions to get to the gym yet we watch TV and eat chips the rest of the year. We say we will have no debt higher than 3 percent (an EU stipulation) and ignore our own wisdom, as even Germany has done. We ignore the Geneva Conventions, declarations on human rights, and the homeless on our streets.

If it is the ideals of *significant* philosophical systems *per se* that one doesn't like--on the idea that grand programs and ideals are inherently oppressive--then one would have to include grand ideas like democracy and inalienable rights on that blame-worthy list of things we should avoid.

The Abrahamic monotheistic traditions--like several others--at least have regulatory principles that from time to time guide humankind towards care for others. To begin with, those humanists and other early moderns--who, Assmann rightly holds, were pressing for toleration and peace against the wars of religion--were after all Christians and Jews. The prime advocates of toleration, from Castellio to Spinoza to Locke, were drenched in Judeo-Christian teachings and with a few exceptions, were devout believers. It is also banal here to recall the hospitals, schools, prison programs, substance abuse clinics--all the agencies of care that are run by people of (monotheistic) faith. In sum, monotheism breeds neither greater violence nor more frequent betrayal of its ideals than any other system of belief. Its regulatory principles--including the intrinsic worth of each person who is thus entitled to dignity

and certain inalienable rights-are what we base our human rights on today.

Yet another of our mix-ups is with the exegetical methods appropriate to interpreting and understanding the Hebrew Bible. There seems to be some notion afoot that the Hebrew Bible is a blueprint for living or a model one copies and thus should be interpreted as endorsing the conduct described in its pages. (Here, I am far from Assmann's writings but am surveying the discussion more broadly.) First, Biblical instruction about ritual conduct-bathings, dunking objects in water, animal sacrifice, etc.--were quite common to the era among believers of many faiths and not unique to the Hebrews. Second, injunctions about conduct among men enjoins the Hebrews to rather high standards of concern for the needy, including the non-Hebraic stranger (more, below)-hardly a blame-worthy program.

Far more importantly, however, the *narrative* portions of the Hebrew Bible are neither blueprint nor model, and the conduct of its characters is not to be mimicked. They-like other real humans-- cheat, lie, grouse, deceive, murder and are petulant, scheming, ungrateful and often mistaken. And those are the good guys (gender neutral). Even God loses his cool from time to time and needs someone like Abraham or Moses to calm him down. And these two are no bargain either. Abraham sells his wife to another man to save his own skin; God chastens him for it--and then Abraham goes right out and does it again. Moses starts off his career by so losing his temper that he commits a murder. Out of jealousy, Sarah throws another woman and her child into the desert. Jacob (with his mother's help) cheats Isaac and Esau, Laban cheats Jacob, Jacob cheats Laban, Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery, no sooner does God liberate the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt than they start complaining about their unsuitable accommodations in the desert, David steals Bathsheba from her husband, whom he sends off to be killed in war ... the list of very bad behavior goes on.

But that is the point. It is precisely to help us deal with greed and aggression that the Hebrew Bible is *a problem set*-one miserable personal or societal dilemma after the other, through which its readers are to struggle to derive a set of ethics. The lying, cheating and so on are not to be replicated but examined for what they tell us about human nature-more *Henry IV*, in an imprecise analogy, than Ikea instructions. Far from a totalitarian program, it is an analytic tool and ethics-building text. Perhaps passages of the New Testament Gospels can be looked to as a model. But even most of them-even with their godly central character-require rigorous interpretation. The Hebrew Bible, with its rogues' gallery, is incomprehensible as anything but a text about human foibles and the lessons we are to learn from them. Jewish scholars from the rabbinic era onward have thought the Bible has things to teach us, but not through mimicry.

Assmann and others are concerned, as I am, that people behave more ethically. Perhaps we should be teaching the Bible--rigorously examining the dilemmas it poses--much more than we currently do.

Even the wars of conquest in the Hebrew Bible are not meant to teach either war or conquest today. They too are a problem set-a contradiction between the Biblical narrative of war and Jewish ethics. Since the writing of Deuteronomy (eight to sixth centuries BCE), the Bible enjoins the Hebrews to show concern even for their enemies-indeed even for the worst enemy, the enslaving, violent Egyptians. The

Hebrews are to remember that--though they were persecuted and nearly annihilated by their Egyptian slave masters--earlier on the Egyptians did take them in during the famine at the time of Joseph. The Bible commands that by the third generation after the exodus, Egyptians are to be fully accepted: "Do not despise an Egyptian, because you resided as foreigners in their country. The third generation of children born to them may enter the assembly of the Lord." (Deuteronomy 23:7-8). This concern is ritualized in the Passover Seder (dinner commemorating the exodus from Egypt), where a mournful moment is set aside--in a meal otherwise about liberation--to spill wine in memory of the slain Egyptians. In discussion of the exodus, the rabbis (second to fifth century CE) comment that while the angels sang at Egypt's defeat at the Red Sea, God was angry with them, as the drowning Egyptians are his children too and he mourns for them.^[1]

This suggests that the Hebrews, as early as the sixth through eighth centuries BCE, were ethically rather exemplary in their concern for the enemy, not especially violent. If monotheism teaches persecution, grieving for one's enemy is a strange way to show it. In light of these ethical principles, what are we to make of the Biblical wars of conquest? This is where one begins with Biblical exegesis--not with mimicry.

To start to work through it, one might note that even without this and other passages of concern for one's foe, the wars of conquest of the earlier, twelfth century Hebrews cannot be seen as exceptionally violent. They were typical of tribes of the period; the Hebrew tribes were no more martial than the Hittites or Ugarites, and likely less aggressive than the Philistines, all of whom were polytheistic. The Moabites have in their texts exhortations to wipe out every creature of the enemy tribe, as appears once or twice in the Hebrew Bible. It is not clear that the Moabites ever did so, but the Hebrews most likely did not, as the tribes they ostensibly wiped out flourished in Israel/Palestine and were the Hebrews' neighbors throughout antiquity.

Moreover, the expectation that the Hebrews of this period should be less martial than others is anachronistic--as though the more pacific ethical standards developed in later centuries (when the Hebrews were indeed monotheistic) can be projected onto the Hebrews of this earlier period (only weakly monotheistic or in practice, polytheistic) -who can then be faulted for not measuring up to an anachronistic bar. But of course the unexceptional twelfth century conduct cannot be cited as exceptionally violent while the ethics from the eighth century on-- exceptionally concerned for the enemy--goes unconsidered. Moreover, the twelfth century conduct, which proceeded under weak monotheism, cannot be cited as proof that strong monotheism yields violence while the strong monotheism of later periods, yielding concern-for-the-enemy ethics, is ignored.

In any case--not to belabor one moment of Biblical narrative-- treatment of the enemy, by the Deuteronomic period, had become part of the problem set that we are to struggle with. The *directive* portions or laws of the Hebrew Bible focus on ritual practice and care for the needy, the non-Hebraic stranger, and enemy. Exodus 22:21 declares, "Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt." In what is sometimes called the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26, likely from the first temple period), the law mandates that farmers leave the corners of the fields for Hebrew and *other resident poor* (Leviticus 19: 9-10). Deuteronomy 24: 19-22 repeats this obligation. Leviticus 19:33-34 firmly states, "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated

as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

The provisions for the non-Hebraic poor are of course just one aspect of the extensive Tanachic (Hebrew Bible) laws protecting the needy. Just a few examples--in addition to the famous mandates to leave the corners of one's field for poor, widow, orphan and stranger, and the provisions of *shmitah* and jubilee, which require that every seventh and fiftieth years respectively, debts be forgiven, slaves be manumitted, and fields like fallow. Deuteronomy 23:15-16 prohibits the return of run-away slaves. Exodus 20:22-23:33, one of the chronologically earliest sections of the Bible, prohibits taking interest from the poor (specifically Exodus 22:25). Exodus: 22: 26-27 requires that a garment taken as a loan pledge must be returned by sunset so that the poor have something to cover themselves in the night chill.[2] Psalm 82:3-4 asks that we "Defend the weak and the fatherless, uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." Deuteronomy 15: 7-10 enjoins the Hebrews not to follow the poor laws precisely but generously, open-endedly, to give with a generous hand and heart:

If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart.

Failure to fulfill these obligations to the less fortunate is considered so grave a sin that it constitutes a breach of the covenant with God. Chastening the rich for this failure is the stuff of the entire prophetic literature, of which this passage in Isaiah (58: 6-7) is representative:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter--when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

These are but a few of the Tanachic sources mandating care for needy, including non-Hebrews. The later rabbinic works, both the tannaim of the mishnaic period (roughly the first two centuries CE) and the Talmudic amoraim (200-500 CE), raise the level of obligation. This ethical upgrade--recorded in hundreds upon hundreds of pages--occurred in many areas of rabbinical jurisprudence, such as the re-working of capital punishment, technically allowed by the Bible, so that the requirements for invoking it were so high that it could never in practice be carried out. The re-working of the *lex talionis* ("eye for an eye" physical compensation for bodily injury) into a monetary equivalent likely occurred much earlier, in the period of the Hebrew Bible redaction.[3] Yet the rabbis took pains to re-emphasize the point.

In the area of poor relief, the temple, until its destruction in 70 CE, had extensive alms programs (see, among others, Josephus, *Ant.* 19:294; Mark 12:41-43; Luke 21:1; m. Shekalim 6.5). After its destruction, through the Roman period and after, the

extensive network of synagogues ran what would now be called social services for both the local and transient poor.[4] While concern for the non-Hebrew poor declined as tensions arose between Christians and Jews in latest antiquity, Jewish provisions for the needy were on the whole so extensive that Julian, in enjoining the Galatian high priest Arsacius to shore up the poor relief, noted his embarrassment that the Jews and Galileans did a far better job than did Rome. "I order," Julian wrote in 362 C.E., "that one-fifth of this be used for the poor who serve the priests, and the remainder distributed by us to strangers and beggars. *For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.*"[5]

I have made this--I hope forgivable--digression into poor relief in service of two points relevant to the present discussion. First, as monotheism became stronger, so too did mandates to care for the poor, stranger, and enemy. I am not suggesting that this correlation proves causality: that strong monotheism of necessity yields concern for others. But it seems strange to argue, in the face of this historical correlation, that monotheism cannot and does not lead to compassion. (Again, I am here not addressing points of Assmann's but am scanning the discussion more broadly.) At times, monotheism does lead to care. Monotheists like all other humans betray their ideals--but not all the time. It seems also perplexing--in light of this correlation--to argue that monotheism leads to more violence than other systems. And that monotheism makes people betray their ideals more often than other systems do.

Second, it is odd to claim that monotheism--by dint of it being monotheistic--does not evolve. That--everywhere and in all times since the exodus from Egypt--monotheistic principles and practices have had the same import as in the twelfth century BCE. And not only the same but especially intolerant and violent--so much so that they overrule any later ethical development regarding concern for the enemy or peace more broadly. And not only that they themselves are intolerant, violent, and rigid but are able to pervert any culture with which they come into contact to a type of intolerance and violence of a period three thousand years past.

In short, that once polluted by monotheism, peace doesn't have a chance. Yaweh would find this undue flattery. Even he gave people free will.

The idea of monotheistic stasis would make monotheism unique among human institutions. Ideas and practices of human creation--be they religious, political, or socio-economic--change through time and from place to place. The historical record suggests that this is true for Judaic monotheism as well. As we've seen, the theology shifted throughout the exodus, first, and second temple periods from weak monotheism to strong; mandates to aid the needy increased from the Hebrew Bible through the rabbinic eras and beyond. Worship shifted, beginning with the Babylonian exile, from gifts and animal sacrifices to study and prayer. Not to mention the ways Judaism is practiced today in Buenos Aires or Minneapolis. The same is true for Christianity and Islam. Religion changes for all the reasons all other human endeavors do.

Finally, I thought my closing section might look at what the core tenets of monotheistic Judaism indeed are--even if they, like all ideals, are both followed and breached. These regulatory principles are grounded in the notion of a double covenant: between man/God and man/man. There are at least two modes of the

man/God bond in Judaic thinking: the contractual, narrower mode, sometimes referred to as the law of Moses, and the over-arching covenantal frame, characterized by a fluid open-endedness, mutual obligation and giving, mutual respect, and the excess of love-called the testimony of Moses. Political theorist Yoram Hazony writes, covenant "is a new metaphor for understanding man's relationship with God, which arises precisely from the fact that man, who is free to choose, is not in God's pocket, as the ocean and the stars and the animals are.... those who turn to him of their own, placing themselves in his service, are described as obtaining something that mere obedience could never have obtained-God's love."[\[6\]](#)

The covenantal bond may include contractual elements,[\[7\]](#) in the way that the covenantal bond between parents and children might: you can't go out to play until you clean up your room. But these are an aspect of a broader relationship, which is a Moebius strip. By this I mean, you can't get covenantal relations among men until they have covenant with God. But you also can't get relationship with God without covenantal relations among men because covenantal relations among men is the *occasion* for the bond with God. The medieval master of Biblical commentary, Rashi, reads in Isaiah, "I cannot be God unless you are my witness," and Rashi glosses, "I am the God who will be whenever you bear witness to love and justice in the world."[\[8\]](#) God is God when man is loving and just.

This entwined loop-man/God and man/man-affects not only these relationships but the cosmos. Covenant is the way the world goes. When we don't do our part, we gum up not only our personal relationships but the workings of the world. Consider the twining of the two covenants and the fundamentals of the universe in Micah 6:8, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good [good in the universe per se]. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy [covenant with mankind] and to walk humbly with your God [covenant with God]." Isaiah (1: 17, 23, 27) reprises the idea that Israel's redemption-its justification or rightness with God/the universe--comes with its defense of the poor, "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow... Your rulers are rebels, partners with thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them... *Zion will be delivered with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness.*"(emphasis mine) In Isaiah 5:16, God himself is valued for his righteousness, "But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will be proved holy by his righteous acts." Psalm 146: 7-9 is an early source (written most likely between the post-Davidic, tenth century and early exilic period in the sixth century) valorizing God for his protection of the unfortunate.

*He upholds the cause of the oppressed/ and gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets prisoners free/ the Lord gives sight to the blind,
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, / the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the foreigner/ and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. (emphasis mine)*

With these few points on Judaic thought, we can turn to the Christian tradition-not to leave it out of the monotheism discussion. Here, the idea that love of man is constituent of loving God is found in Jesus' explanation of the Last Judgment: those who are justified with God are those who loved man--who "when I was hungry and

you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink..." (Matthew 25: 34-36). Yet it is not only aiding Jesus while he was on earth that constitutes loving God but rather aiding all in need, as Jesus continues, "whenever they did it to the least of these brothers and sisters, they did it to me" (Matthew 25: 40).

The Moebius-strip nature of the two covenants is found also in 1 John 4: 7-21,

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him... No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us...God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.... We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

In Paul, the unity of the God-of-salvation [man/God] and the God-of-agapic-giving [man/man] is made a structural aspect of Christianity. While justification may rest on faith (Romans 3:28), salvation rests on love of others. I Corinthians, 13: 2-3 notes, "if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned [in martyrdom], but have not love, I gain nothing." In discussing the three key aspects of the Christian, it is love that Paul prioritizes: "These three abide, faith, hope, love; but the greatest of these is love" (I Cor., 13:13).

In both the Judaic and Christian traditions, covenant is made possible by grace, *chesed* or *chen* (Hebrew), *charis* (Greek). Grace is given, as the covenant itself, for the sake of the relationship/bond, out of love, and as both dyadic relationship between man and God and an inclusive loop among men. The Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote that as Jesus opened himself to existence on earth--the kenosis or self-emptying/receptivity to mankind--so we open ourselves to each other. To close the relational loop, so to speak, our openness to others opens us to God.

For a look into the development of this idea today, one might begin with the works, in the Judaic tradition, of Leo Baeck and Franz Rosenzweig in the early twentieth century, the mid-century thinkers Martin Buber, Mordecai Kaplan, and Abraham Joshua Heschel, and more recent writers such as Eugene Borowitz, Arthur A. Cohen, Jon Levenson, and David Hartman. Levenson suggests that covenant, this framework for the profound care of others, is central to Judaic thought because of the difficulties of Jewish survival from its earliest day such that empathy for the sufferer has prime place.^[9] Borowitz holds that ethics is a matter of living covenantally,^[10] that it is every generation's responsibility to make certain that the "acts through which the covenant is lived are appropriate to that generation's situation."^[11] The great twentieth century thinker Martin Buber based his work on the unity of the man/God and man/man covenants.^[12] He proposed that God is present in every human encounter where one does not instrumentalize the other or foist one's own projections onto her but sees her as the complex person she is--that is, sees her covenantally. "Buber identifies God as the third partner in every human relationship,

as the Eternal Thou underlying all human meetings.... Buber points to a condition of unmediated relationship in which participants share a single and reciprocal reality. ... God appears when people truly meet others."

In the Christian tradition, one might look at the work of the twentieth century German Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who writes, "the categorised explicit love of neighbour is the primary act of the love of God... It is radically true, i.e. by an ontological and not merely 'moral' or psychological 'necessity,' that whoever does not love the brother whom he 'sees', also cannot love God whom he does not see, and that one can love God whom one does not see only *by* loving one's visible brother lovingly." The American philosopher and theologian Richard Kearney echoes, "This is a *deus capax* who in turn calls out to the *homo capax* of history in order to be made flesh, again and again--each moment we confront the face of the other, welcome the stranger... A capacitating God who is capable of all things cannot actually be or become incarnate until we say yes... it is a dynamic call to love that possibilizes and enables humans to transform their world by giving itself to the least of these, by empathizing with the disinherited and the dispossessed, by refusing the path of might and violence...."

The roster of contemporary theologians and clergy developing such ideas is of course long. I can recommend, further in the Christian tradition, the works of Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank, Robin Lovin, Glen Stassen, Tony Campolo, David Gushee, Miroslav Volf, Gregory Boyd, Peter Heltzel, Ron Sider, Jim Wallace, Brian McLaren, David Kinnamen, Gabe Lyons, Shane Claiborne, among many others. It is this monotheistic double covenant of love and generosity that obligates mankind to aid and love the poor, stranger and even enemy, as discussed above. That mankind does not always do so is not the fault of its ideals but of all the human things this monotheistic covenant despises--greed, selfishness, jealousy, rage, and violence.

This exceedingly brief look at the principles of monotheistic Judeo-Christian thought is not to claim that monotheism necessarily yields covenantal concern for others. It is to suggest that, in light of this serious covenantal emphasis, it is difficult to claim that monotheism cannot lead to compassion but rather leads to the betrayal of this ideal and to violence--indeed, to more betrayal than in other belief systems and to violence of an excessive, poisoning kind.

Monotheism, like all human endeavors, bears our human traits--our capacities for selflessness, beauty, and grace as well as our appetitive, mean-spirited aggression. It can be and has been used for all human purposes, both nefarious and grand. Religious exceptionalism is the idea that religion differs from all other human efforts--that religion is exceptional in that it somehow does not evolve as other human endeavors do and that it is not used willy nilly for both good and evil. But, as the White Sox fan said to Shoeless Joe Jackson (on hearing of the famed player's involvement in the 1919 baseball scandal), "Say it ain't so."

Religious exceptionalism is a fundamentalist idea. Its proposition that religion never evolves is just like the claims of religious zealots--who hope it never evolves. One blames, the other praises the same fiction. Yet while God--for believers--may be God, monotheism is a human effort and is simply no better or worse than any other. The source of our violence is us. If one wants something better, I suggest one look to another species--or, as suggested earlier, that we spend a good deal more time

studying monotheism's ethical dilemmas and taking seriously the implementation of its ideals of dignity, love, and justice.

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[1] MidrashAgadah, (S. Buber, Ed., Vienna, 1894). Exodus 14:28-29 ; see also, Exodus Rabbah (Vilna), Ch. 23; Talmud Bavli, Tractate Megilah, 10:2.

[2] In Hebrew language Bibles, 22:1 is numbered 21:37, and 22:2-31 is numbered 22:1-30.

[3] see, Westbrook, R. (1986). Lex talionis and Exodus 21, 22-25. Revue biblique, Vol. 93, nr.1, pp. 52-69.

[4] See, Levine, L. (2000). The Ancient Synagogue; the First Thousand Years. New Haven: Yale University Press, especially pp. 132-133, 372-373, 580-602.

[5] Stern, M. (1980). Greek and Latin authors on Jews and Judaism. From Tacitus to Simplicius. Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, pp. 549-50 = No. 482; see also, Hamel, G. (1990). Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine: First Three Centuries C.E. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, p. 321.

[6] Hazony, Y. (2012). The philosophy of Hebrew scripture. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, p. 94.

[7] Examples include Exodus 19:5-6: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" and Deuteronomy 29:1, "These are the terms of the covenant the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab, in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb."

[8] See, Rashi. The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary. New York: Mesorah, 1997.

[9] Levenson, J. (1976, March). Poverty and the state in Biblical thought. Judaism 25, (2), pp. 230-241. pp. 231-232.

[10] Borowitz, E. (1990). Exploring Jewish ethics: Papers on covenant responsibility. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press; see also, A New Jewish Theology in the Making (1968) Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, pp. 63-64; Renewing the Covenant: A Theology For the Postmodern Jew. (1991). Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society; and Covenant. In Borowitz, E. (1999). Judaism After Modernity: Papers From a Decade of Fruition. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, pp. 195-204.

[11] Borowitz, E. (1975). The Chosen People Concept as it Affects Life in the Diaspora, Journal of Ecumenical Studies 12, no. 4 (Fall 1975): 553-568, p. 566.

[12] Buber, M. (2010). I and Thou. Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books [first published 1923, translated into English 1937].