

DO MONOTHEIST RELIGIONS WORSHIP THE SAME GOD? A PERSPECTIVE ON CLASSICAL JUDAISM

JACOB NEUSNER

BARD COLLEGE

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I.

VERISIMILITUDE VERSUS AUTHENTICITY

A PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION ADDRESSED TO A REVEALED HISTORICAL RELIGION

The issue of verisimilitude versus authenticity need not detain us very long. Because things look alike, they are not necessarily alike and the same thing. I cannot overstress the fact: the monotheist religions concur with the principle that not all religions that declare God one are on that account the same. The task is to evaluate the differences in proportion and in context: to test the probative value of verisimilitude. We carry out the test by asking one monotheist religion its opinion of another monotheist religion: does it discern the similarities that appear obvious to us as outsiders? Let me start from the beginning: how we compare religions.

I begin with the paradox of asking philosophical questions of historical data: generalizing out of detail. When we speak of monotheist religions we invoke -isms — categories of generalization, philosophy,

applied logic and practical reason. But we find our data in the legal and exegetical, narrative canon of those religions. Rabbinic Judaism in its formative statements pursued philosophical problems about types of causation and the many and the one, for example. But it solved those problems through the analysis of cases and the provision of probative examples, leaving it to later generations to articulate the system implicit in the cases. Here therefore we raise a philosophical question about God in general. To respond to the question we draw upon the particular narrative canon in all its specificity.

“Monotheism” generalizes about the nature of God and speaks of the oneness, the unity, the uniqueness of God — all of them philosophical categories susceptible of critical generalization and logical analysis. But when we wish to speak of classical Judaism, we turn to its ancient canon of Scripture and Rabbinic tradition, and that tradition does not frame its conceptions in abstraction and generalization. The Judaic canon is comprised, first, by prophecy and narrative and the exegesis of narrative, second, by laws in all their specificity and the need to generalize about cases. Now there is no such thing as *religion in general*. But we pursue the conception of *God in general*.

Philosophy of religion in general contrasts with theology *of a religion*. A philosophical formulation responds out of a comprehensive logic, producing abstract generalizations concerning the nature of religion, a religious counterpart in theology responds out of the revealed truths of a necessarily-singular tradition. The former seeks to generalize data into comprehensive reason, the latter to particularize the question and to answer it out of a body of revealed truth. Philosophy establishes truth-claims out of diverse data through criticism and practical logic and reason. Religious

truth-claims based on a priori affirmations of truth and facts establish for themselves a position exempt from criticism and beyond the reach of reason. Such ready-made formulations as “this we believe” or “so we affirm” suffice to prove the point in the context of a revealed religion but shut off discussion in the setting of reason and philosophy of religion.

II.

DO MONOTHEIST RELIGIONS WORSHIP THE SAME GOD?

By their own word all monotheist religions — religions that define the omnipotent and universal God they worship as singular, unique, and manifestly one and not many beings or entities — worship the one and the same God. For when they speak of the monotheist God, that affirmation extends to all those who concur on the normative and indicative traits of God in general. That is why monotheist philosophers of religion — Judaic, Christian, Islamic — in medieval times could find it possible to engage in a common debate. They concur on the same language of abstract definition and on some of the same Scriptural and narrative traditions and share the same categories for the description of the one God they affirm. Not only so, but these categories derive from a logic in common concerning what that God is and does. If I affirm that by “God” I mean a unique omnipotent being, just and merciful and you affirm that by God you mean a unique omnipotent being with the same traits, then it follows that we concur in our respective accounts of the same being that we call by the same name and classify by the same traits. Each party speaks of God in a manner consistent with the other — a sharing of convictions. At the end I shall offer that affirmation in common as the foundation of interfaith dialogue; the possibility of debate on a common agenda.

Monotheist philosophy begins where religion (including theology) ends. It formulates an abstraction out of the resources of logic, along the lines of the following: “if there should be a monotheist God, of what would his definition consist?” Religion concludes in the following rejoinder: “since God revealed himself to the prophet, there is no *if* but only an established given,” a “*since*,” that is, established set of *a priori* facts. Monotheist religion thus frames a concrete doctrine out of the canonical writings it knows beyond all criticism to be true. But monotheist philosophers — systematic and critical — then pursue the logic of those revealed truths and facts. That is what I meant when I said philosophy begins where religion ends: philosophy takes up the revealed truths of religion and seeks to extend the results of revelation, to uncover what is implicit and to test the outcome against applied reason and practical logic.

Now that I have outlined what I conceive to be the two approaches, philosophical and generalizing, theological and particularizing, to answering the question, do the monotheist religions worship the same God? let me turn to the response of a particular religion, in all its specificity, in its classical canon, the one on which I work. How do we respond out of the resources of classical Judaism? What we shall see is a rejection of the logic outlined just now, the logic that treats resemblance as proof, monotheistic religions resemble one another in maintaining the unity of God, therefore monotheist religions ought to be construed to worship the same God. That would be true only if the particular monotheist tradition recognizes the religions that resemble monotheisms as monotheistic. We now ask Rabbinic Judaism in its classical canon whether it recognizes Christianity as resembling itself.

III.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF CLASSICAL JUDAISM:

THE STATUS OF THE MINIM, WHO POSSESS THE SAME SCRIPTURES AS ISRAEL AND ARE LIKE ISRAEL

I turn to the question: *On what grounds does normative Judaism claim that its monotheism encompasses all monotheisms, so that Judaic faithful worship the same God as Christian or Islamic worship*

In its classical sources normative Judaism does not recognize any other religion as monotheistic like itself, and any other people as the same thing as holy Israel — the people of the *Shema*, Hear Israel the Lord our God is the one God. The question addressed to normative Judaism in its formative age finds its response in the canon of that Judaism, consisting of Scripture and the Rabbinic documents from the Mishnah through the second Talmud, ca. 200-600, that extend Scripture. But those sources do not explicitly reply to that question. The problem is not only that Islam begins after the closure of the formative stage of the Rabbinic canon. Judaism in its formative age makes no comment on the third in sequence of the monotheist religions. The problem is that normative Judaism does not recognize the truth or even the existence of *any* other religion. By that I mean classical Judaism does not engage with the truth-claims of any other religious system. No other religion qualifies as monotheist, for by definition and by analysis none can. Integral to true monotheism is the source of truth, which is the revealed Torah of Sinai. Israel is authentic by reason of the Torah, and Israel uniquely possesses the Torah. So Islam later on differs not at all from Christianity earlier.

The normative legal sources accordingly take for granted that Judaism is the only true religion. The law recognizes the claim of another religious

tradition to inherit the Torah and rejects that claim. Confusing verisimilitude with authenticity Christianity is portrayed as both like and not like Judaism. It resembles Judaism only in part. But it replicates its truth not at all. It is characterized in the following language:

TOSEFTA SHABBAT 13:5

- A. The books of the Evangelists and the books of the *minim* they do not save from a fire [on the Sabbath]. But they are allowed to burn where they are,
- B. they and the references to the Divine Name that are in them.
- C. R. Yosé the Galilean says, “On ordinary days, one cuts out the references to the Divine Name which are in them and stores them away, and the rest burns.”
- D. Said R. Tarfon, “May I bury my sons, if such things come into my hands and I do not burn them, and even the references to the Divine Name that are in them.
- E. “And if someone was running after me, I should go into a temple of idolatry, but I should not go into their houses [of worship].
- F. “For idolaters do not recognize the Divinity in denying him, but these recognize the Divinity and deny him.
- G. “And about them Scripture states, ‘Behind the door and the doorpost you have set up your symbol for deserting me, you have uncovered your bed’ (Is. 57:8).”
- H. Said R. Ishmael, “Now if to bring peace between a man and his wife, the Omnipresent declared that a scroll written in a state of sanctification should be blotted out by water, the books of the *minim*, which bring enmity between Israel and their Father who is in heaven, all the more so should be blotted out,
 - 1. “they and the references to the Divine Name in them.
- J. “And concerning them has Scripture stated, ‘Do I not hate them that hate thee, O Lord? And do I not loathe them that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred, I count them my enemies’ (Ps. 139:21-22).”
- K. Just as they do not save them on account of fire, so they do not save them from a ruin, or a flood, or anything that will turn them to rubble.

The issue is how in case of fire to deal with books of *minim* on the Sabbath. Scrolls of the Torah are saved from fire on the Sabbath, even

though one is not permitted otherwise to handle fire on the Sabbath. The *minim* possess scrolls in which are incised the divine name. Because they belong to Minim, they are left to burn. Possession by *minim* or (in context) other idolaters disqualifies the scroll and removes its sacred status. The formulation of the issue thus presupposes that the scrolls are holy but the disposition of the case denies that holiness by reason of the Min's ownership of them. So the *minim* no different from idolaters affect the standing of the object that is possessed. The *minim* exercise the power of sanctification. But so do idolaters.

Who are those in a class of outsiders but other than that of idolaters? They are persons who share the same canon as is held by the Rabbis, for the law takes for granted we deal with scrolls deemed sacred by Israelites. Otherwise there is no issue. On the margins of Israelite society, the *minim* clearly belong to non-Israel, since their ownership of the scrolls disqualifies the otherwise valid holy scrolls. That precipitates the problem before us: the ambiguous status of the scrolls, which are like Israel's scrolls in their contents but not like Israel in their circumstance.

Two positions contend. First, we recognize the sanctity of the scrolls and rescue them from a fire even on the Sabbath, because the character of the scrolls, their contents, not the circumstance of who owns them, settles the question. Second, we ignore the indicators of sanctification in the scrolls and invoke the criterion of circumstance, ownership by non-believers. That right of ownership nullifies the sanctity of the scrolls including the representations of the divine name incised in them.

We now ask our particular question: in the conception of the Rabbinic canon portrayed by the Tosefta do the *minim* worship the same God as does normative Judaism represented by the Rabbinic canon? This question is

answered in so many words: they know but deny. By their own action, in possessing canonical documents, the *minim* mark themselves as Israelites. And this is made explicit, for the authentic idolaters do not recognize the Divinity in denying him, but these marginal people recognize the Divinity and deny him. It is a spiteful act of denial of what authentic Israel affirms.

We thus address a sector of Israel, not the idolater, for the idolater is not represented as spiteful, the *Min* is. We furthermore acknowledge the Israel-ness of the *minim*, because our ruling concedes their power to define the status of the Torah-scrolls, The fact that they own them suffices implicitly to resolve the conflict between governing considerations, contents versus circumstance.

Idolaters and *Minim* possess the power to resolve the ambiguity of status involved in the case of holy scrolls owned by unholy persons. Their owners' attitudes register and dictate the standing of the scrolls subject to their attitude. This brings us to the heart of the matter. The Rabbinic laws regard the pagan and the *Min* as possessing the power of intentionality to define the standing of Scriptures for the *min* or of idols for the idolater. So the *min* and the idolater categorically differ but correspond. This classic case of verisimilitude versus authenticity is made explicit in the law:

MISHNAH ABODAH ZARAH 3:4-5

3:4 F. It is said only, “. . . their gods” (Dt. 12:3) — that which one treats as a god is prohibited, but that which one treats not as a god is permitted.

3:5 E. On what account is an “asherah” prohibited? Because it has been subject to manual labor, and whatever had been subject to manual labor is prohibited.

The fact that the gentile treated the object as a God and subjected it to manual labor assigns to it the status of a god, has sanctified the object. That brings us back to the main point: *the minim possess the power to sanctify the*

scrolls. Does that mean they worship the same God as the Israelites? No, it does not. The actions of the *minim* are comparable in effect to the actions of the idolaters. Idolaters and *minim* do not believe in the same God as the Israelites. Yes, the *min* or idolater has the power to effect the sanctification of the object. No, the *min* does not worship the one true God. His marginal status assigns him a place in Israel but not a secure place.

We now revert to and answer the four basic questions:

Does classical Judaism believe that Jews and gentiles and *Minim* worship the same God? The gentiles are idolaters and worship sticks and stones. The *Minim* by contrast possess the Torah, but they have taken the path of apostasy from the God of Israel. They worship the same God as do the Israelites but do so in a flawed manner.

On what basis do the Rabbinic laws make the judgment that they make? They acknowledge the Israelite scriptures, but err in their reading of those Scriptures so that that recognition imposes the status of heretic on *the Min*.

What conditions must be satisfied for us to say that Jews and Christians worship the same God? Christians or *Minim* must acknowledge the God worshipped by Israel as the one true God. This requires confessing the truth that is in hand.

Is the question of whether Jews and Christians believe in the same God categorically different from the question of whether Jews from different periods of time or radically different schools of thought believe in the same God? Yes, a continuity of conviction marks the state of the authentic monotheism in Israel over time. The Israelites from all periods have in common affirmed the unity of God and have told about themselves the established narratives of Scripture.

Does this question matter to them? We should have to establish as fact the diversity of conceptions of God that characterized Jews in different times and places. But what changed over time is the interpretation of the Scriptures of monotheism, not the principle. The paradox yields the last word: the *min* by his actions does recognize the God worshipped by Israel. His spite expressed in his misreading of Scripture is his act of faith, so he testifies to his faith by what he denies.

IV.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF CLASSICAL JUDAISM:

THE STATUS OF THE IDOLATERS, WHO ARE SUBJECT TO THE SAME MORAL AUTHORITY AS ISRAEL

Thus far we have pursued the question of the status as to Israel of the *Min*, not focusing on the idolater. The mode of portraying the *Min* yielded a clear picture of his marginal status but his ultimate place in Israel. He knew the truth and denied it. What about the gentiles? We now address the idolater. What places him outside the boundary of Israel altogether, while the *Minim* belong on the borderline?

In a critical construction explaining the exclusion of the gentiles and implicitly encompassing Israel, all humanity by its nature is subject to the Torah. The natural condition of humanity is violated by the gentiles by reason of their indicative qualities. When the nations attain their natural condition, the condition in which God made them, they will become part of Israel. More exactly, they will revert to their natural and original character. As matters stand, the nations' distinctive qualities separate them from God. What is implicit in this proposition is that the natural condition of the gentile assigns him a position alongside Israel in the presence of God. The unnatural condition of the gentiles divides them up into particular nations and defines

the difference between one gentile and another. What is implicit will become clear when we have examined the monumental narratives that explain the human condition.

So now the question becomes urgent: how has this catastrophic differentiation imposed itself between Israel and the gentiles, such that the gentiles, for all their glory in the here and now, won for themselves the grave, while Israel, for all its humiliation in the present age, inherits the world to come? And the answer is self-evident from all that has been said: the gentiles reject God, whom they could and should have known in the Torah. They rejected the Torah, and all else followed. The proposition then moves in these simple steps:

[1] Israel differs from the gentiles because Israel possesses the Torah and the gentiles do not;

[2] the gentiles rejected the Torah because it contradicts their nature and so because of their character because they do not possess the Torah, so the gentiles also worship idols instead of God; and

[3] therefore God rejects the gentiles and identifies with Israel.

Here monotheism intervenes: the conviction that the one God governs all humanity and does so justly. The status of the gentiles testifies to the oneness of God: his uniform justice in governing all of humanity. The Oral Torah has to demonstrate the unity of God by showing that the same justice that governs Israel and endows Israel with the Torah dictates the fate of the gentiles and denies them the Torah. And, predictably, that demonstration must further underscore the justice of the condition of the gentiles: measure for measure must play itself out especially here.

The gentiles are subject to the dominion of the one God but deprived themselves of the Torah because they rejected it, and, showing the precision

of justice, the canonical sources hold they rejected the Torah because the Torah deprived them of the very practices or traits that they deemed characteristic, essential to their being. That circularity marks the tale of how things were to begin with in fact describes how things always are; it is not historical but philosophical. The gentiles' own character, the shape of their conscience, then, now, and always, accounts for their condition — which, by an act of will, they can change. What they did not want, that of which they were by their own word unworthy, is denied them. And what they do want condemns them. So when each nation comes under judgment for rejecting the Torah, the indictment of each is spoken out of its own mouth, its own-self-indictment then forms the core of the matter.

When they protest the injustice of the decision that takes effect just then, they are shown the workings of the moral order, as the following quite systematic account of the governing pattern explains:

Bavli tractate Abodah Zarah 1:1 I.2/2a-b:

A. R. Hanina bar Pappa, and some say, R. Simlai, gave the following exposition [of the verse, “They that fashion a graven image are all of them vanity, and their delectable things shall not profit, and their own witnesses see not nor know” (Isa. 44:9)]: “In the age to come the Holy One, blessed be He, will bring a scroll of the Torah and hold it in his bosom and say, ‘Let him who has kept himself busy with it come and take his reward.’ Then all the gentiles will crowd together: ‘All of the nations are gathered together’ (Isa. 43:9). The Holy One, blessed be He, will say to them, ‘Do not crowd together before me in a mob. But let each nation enter together with [2B] its scribes, ‘and let the peoples be gathered together’ (Isa. 43:9), and the word ‘people’ means ‘kingdom’: ‘and one kingdom shall be stronger than the other’ (Gen. 25:23).”

We note that the players are the principal participants in world history: the Romans first and foremost, then the Persians, the other world-rulers of the age:

C. “The kingdom of Rome comes in first.”

H. “The Holy One, blessed be He, will say to them, ‘How have you defined your chief occupation?’

I. “They will say before him, ‘Lord of the world, a vast number of marketplaces have we set up, a vast number of bathhouses we have made, a vast amount of silver and gold have we accumulated. And all of these things we have done only in behalf of Israel, so that they may define as their chief occupation the study of the Torah.’

J. “The Holy One, blessed be He, will say to them, ‘You complete idiots! Whatever you have done has been for your own convenience. You have set up a vast number of marketplaces to be sure, but that was so as to set up whorehouses in them. The bathhouses were for your own pleasure. Silver and gold belong to me anyhow: “Mine is the silver and mine is the gold, says the Lord of hosts” (Hag. 2:8). Are there any among you who have been telling of “this,” and “this” is only the Torah: “And this is the Torah that Moses set before the children of Israel’ (Dt. 4:44).” So they will make their exit, humiliated.

The claim of Rome — to support Israel in Torah-study — is rejected on grounds that the Romans did not exhibit the right attitude, always a dynamic force in the theology. Then the other world-ruler enters in with its claim:

K. “When the kingdom of Rome has made its exit, the kingdom of Persia enters afterward.”

M. “The Holy One, blessed be He, will say to them, ‘How have you defined your chief occupation?’

N. “They will say before him, ‘Lord of the world, We have thrown up a vast number of bridges, we have conquered a vast number of towns, we have made a vast number of

wars, and all of them we did only for Israel, so that they may define as their chief occupation the study of the Torah.’

O. “The Holy One, blessed be He, will say to them, ‘Whatever you have done has been for your own convenience. You have thrown up a vast number of bridges, to collect tolls, you have conquered a vast number of towns, to collect the corvée, and, as to making a vast number of wars, I am the one who makes wars: “The Lord is a man of war” (Ex. 19:17). Are there any among you who have been telling of “this,” and “this” is only the Torah: “And this is the Torah that Moses set before the children of Israel” (Dt. 4:44).’ So they will make their exit, humiliated.

R. “And so it will go with each and every nation.”

As native categories, Rome and Persia are singled out, “all the other nations” play no role, for reasons with which we are already familiar. Once more the theology reaches into its deepest thought on the power of intentionality, showing that what people want is what they get.

But matters cannot be limited to the two world-empires of the present age, Rome and Iran, standing in judgment at the end of time. The theology values balance, proportion, seeks complementary relationships, and therefore treats beginnings along with endings, the one going over the ground of the other. Accordingly, a recapitulation of the same event — the gentiles’ rejection of the Torah — chooses as its setting not the last judgment but the first encounter, that is, the giving of the Torah itself. In the timeless world constructed by the Oral Torah, what happens at the outset exemplifies how things always happen, and what happens at the end embodies what has always taken place. The basic thesis is identical — the gentiles cannot accept the Torah because to do so they would have to deny their very character. But the exposition retains its interest because it takes its own course.

Now the gentiles are not just Rome and Persia but others; and of special interest, the Torah is embodied in some of the ten commandments — not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal; then the gentiles are rejected for not keeping the seven commandments assigned to the children of Noah. The upshot is that the reason that the gentiles rejected the Torah is that the Torah prohibits deeds that the gentiles do by their very nature. Israel ultimately is changed by the Torah, so that Israel exhibits traits imparted by their encounter with the Torah. So too with the gentiles, by their nature they are what they are; the Torah has not changed their nature.

Once more a single standard applies to both components of humanity, but with opposite effect:

Sifré to Deuteronomy CCCXLIII:IV.1ff.:

1. A. Another teaching concerning the phrase, “He said, ‘The Lord came from Sinai’”:
- B. When the Omnipresent appeared to give the Torah to Israel, it was not to Israel alone that he revealed himself but to every nation.
- C. First of all he came to the children of Esau. He said to them, “Will you accept the Torah?”
- D. They said to him, “What is written in it?”
- E. He said to them, “‘You shall not murder’ (Ex. 20:13).”
- F. They said to him, “The very being of ‘those men’ [namely, us] and of their father is to murder, for it is said, ‘But the hands are the hands of Esau’”(Gen. 27:22). ‘By your sword you shall live’ (Gen. 27:40).”

At this point we cover new ground: other classes of gentiles that reject the Torah; now the Torah’s own narrative takes over, replacing the known facts of world politics, such as the earlier account sets forth, and instead

supplying evidence out of Scripture as to the character of the gentile group under discussion:

G. So he went to the children of Ammon and Moab and said to them, “Will you accept the Torah?”

H. They said to him, “What is written in it?”

I. He said to them, “‘You shall not commit adultery’ (Ex. 20:13).”

J. They said to him, “The very essence of fornication belongs to them [us], for it is said, ‘Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their fathers’ (Gen. 19:36).”

K. So he went to the children of Ishmael and said to them, “Will you accept the Torah?”

L. They said to him, “What is written in it?”

M. He said to them, “‘You shall not steal’ (Ex. 20:13).”

N. They said to him, “The very essence of their [our] father is thievery, as it is said, ‘And he shall be a wild ass of a man’ (Gen. 16:12).”

O. And so it went. He went to every nation, asking them, “Will you accept the Torah?”

P. For so it is said, “All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth” (Ps. 138:4).

Q. Might one suppose that they listened and accepted the Torah?

R. Scripture says, “And I will execute vengeance in anger and fury upon the nations, because they did not listen” (Mic. 5:14).

At this point we turn back to the obligations that God has imposed upon the gentiles; these obligations have no bearing upon the acceptance of the Torah; they form part of the ground of being, the condition of existence, of the gentiles. Yet even here, the gentiles do not accept God’s authority in matters of natural law:

S. And it is not enough for them that they did not listen, but even the seven religious duties that the children of Noah indeed accepted upon themselves they could not uphold before breaking them.

T. When the Holy One, blessed be He, saw that that is how things were, he gave them to Israel.

Along these same lines, the gentiles would like to make a common pact with Israel, but cannot have a share in God:

Sifré to Deuteronomy CCCXLIII:IX.2:

A. Thus the nations of the world would ask Israel, saying to them, “‘What is your beloved more than another beloved’ (Song 5:9)? For you are willing to accept death on his account.”

B. For so Scripture says, “‘Therefore they love you to death’” (Song 1:3).

C. And further: “‘No, but for your sake are we killed all day long’” (Ps. 44:23).

Now comes the envy of the gentiles, their desire to amalgamate with Israel, and Israel’s insistence upon remaining a holy people, a people apart:

D. [The nations continue,] “‘All of you are handsome, all of you are strong. Come and let us form a group in common.’”

E. And the Israelites answer, “‘We shall report to you part of the praise that is coming to him, and in that way you will discern him:

F. “‘My beloved is white and ruddy...his head is as the most fine gold...his eyes are like doves beside the water-brooks...his cheeks are as a bed of spices....his hands are as rods of gold....His legs are as pillars of marble....His mouth is most sweet, yes, he is altogether sweet’ (Song 5:10-16).”

G. When the nations of the world hear about the beauty and praiseworthy quality of the Holy One, blessed be He, they say to them, “‘Let us come with you.’”

H. For it is said, “‘Where has your beloved gone, O you fairest among women? Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you’” (Song 5:1).

The various gentile nations rejected the Torah for specific and reasonable considerations, concretely, because the Torah prohibited deeds essential to their being.

What then is the difference between the gentile and the Israelite, individually and collectively? A picture in cartographic form of the theological anthropology of the Oral Torah, would portray a many-colored Israel at the center of the circle, with the perimeter comprised by all-white gentiles, since, in the *Halakhah*, gentiles are a source of uncleanness of the same virulence as corpse-uncleanness, the perimeter would be an undifferentiated white, the color of death. The law of uncleanness bears its theological counterpart in the lore of death and resurrection, a single theology animating both. Gentile-idolaters and Israelite worshippers of the one and only God part company at death. Israelites die and rise from the grave, gentiles die and remain there. The roads intersect at the grave, each component of humanity taking its own path beyond. Israelites — meaning, those possessed of right conviction — will rise from the grave, stand in judgment (along with some gentiles, as we shall see in a moment), but then enter upon eternal life, to which no one else will enjoy access. So, in substance, humanity viewed whole is divided between those who get a share in the world to come — Israel — and who will stand when subject to divine judgment and those who will not.

If a gentile keeps the Torah, he is saved. But by keeping the Torah, the gentile has ceased to be gentile and becomes Israelite, worth even of the high priesthood. First comes the definition of how Israel becomes Israel, which is by accepting God's dominion in the Torah:

1. A. “The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to the Israelite people and say to them, I am the Lord your God”:
- B. R. Simeon b. Yohai says, “That is in line with what is said elsewhere: ‘I am the Lord your God [who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage]’ (Ex. 20:2).
- C. “Am I the Lord, whose sovereignty you took upon yourself in Egypt?”
- D. “They said to him, ‘Indeed.’
- E. “Indeed you have accepted my dominion.’
- F. “They accepted my decrees: “You will have no other gods before me.”“
- G. “That is what is said here: ‘I am the Lord your God,’ meaning, ‘Am I the one whose dominion you accepted at Sinai?’
- H. “They said to him, ‘Indeed.’
- I. “Indeed you have accepted my dominion.’
- J. “They accepted my decrees: “You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws.”“

I cite the passage to underscore how matters are defined, which is by appeal to the Torah. Then the true state of affairs emerges when the same definition explicitly is brought to bear upon the gentiles. That yields the clear inference that gentiles have the power to join themselves to Israel as fully-naturalized Israelites, so the Torah that defines their status also constitutes the ticket of admission to the world to come that Israel will enter in due course. Sages could not be more explicit than they are when they insist, the gentile ceases to be in the status of the gentile when he accepts God’s rule in the Torah:

Sifra CXCIV:ii.15

15. A. “...by the pursuit of which man shall live”:

B. R. Jeremiah says, “How do I know that even a gentile who keeps the Torah, lo, he is like the high priest?”

C. “Scripture says, ‘by the pursuit of which man shall live.’”

D. And so he says, “‘And this is the Torah of the priests, Levites, and Israelites,’ is not what is said here, but rather, ‘This is the Torah of the man, O Lord God’ (2 Sam. 7:19).”

E. And so he says, “‘open the gates and let priests, Levites, and Israelites will enter it’ is not what is said, but rather, ‘Open the gates and let the righteous nation, who keeps faith, enter it’ (Is. 26:2).”

F. And so he says, “‘This is the gate of the Lord. Priests, Levites, and Israelites...’ is not what is said, but rather, ‘the righteous shall enter into it’ (Ps. 118:20).

G. And so he says, “‘What is said is not, ‘Rejoice, priests, Levites, and Israelites,’ but rather, ‘Rejoice, O righteous, in the Lord’ (Ps. 33:1).”

H. And so he says, “It is not, ‘Do good, O Lord, to the priests, Levites, and Israelites,’ but rather, ‘Do good, O Lord, to the good, to the upright in heart’ (Ps. 125:4).”

I. “Thus, even a gentile who keeps the Torah, lo, he is like the high priest.”

That is not to suggest God does not rule the gentiles. He does — whether they like it or not, acknowledge him or not. God responds, also, to the acts of merit taken by gentiles, as much as to those of Israel. The upshot is, “gentile” and “Israel” classify through the presence or absence of the same traits; they form taxonomic categories that can in the case of the gentile change when that which is classified requires reclassification.

Tosefta-tractate Abodah Zarah 8:4-6

A. Concerning seven religious requirements were the children of Noah admonished:

B. setting up courts of justice, idolatry, blasphemy [cursing the Name of God], fornication, bloodshed, and thievery.

We now proceed to show how each of these religious obligations is represented as applying to gentiles as much as to Israelites:

C. Concerning setting up courts of justice— how so [how does Scripture or reason validate the claim that gentiles are to set up courts of justice]?

D. Just as Israelites are commanded to call into session in their towns courts of justice.

E. Concerning idolatry and blasphemy— how so? . . .

F. Concerning fornication— how so?

G. “On account of any form of prohibited sexual relationship on account of which an Israelite court inflicts the death-penalty, the children of Noah are subject to warning,” the words of R. Meir.

H. And sages say, “There are many prohibited relationships, on account of which an Israelite court does not inflict the death-penalty and the children of Noah are [not] warned. In regard to these forbidden relationships the nations are judged in accord with the laws governing the nations.

1. “And you have only the prohibitions of sexual relations with a betrothed maiden alone.”

The systemization of Scripture’s evidence for the stated proposition continues:

8:5 A. For bloodshed— how so?

B. A gentile [who kills] a gentile and a gentile who kills an Israelite are liable. An Israelite [who kills] a gentile is exempt.

C. Concerning thievery?

D. [If] one has stolen, or robbed, and so too in the case of finding a beautiful captive [woman], and in similar cases:

E. a gentile in regard to a gentile, or a gentile in regard to an Israelite— it is prohibited. And an Israelite in regard to a gentile— it is permitted.

8 :6 A. Concerning a limb cut from a living beast— how so?

B. A dangling limb on a beast, [which] is not [so connected] as to bring about healing,

C. is forbidden for use by the children of Noah, and, it goes without saying, for Israelites.

D. But if there is [in the connecting flesh] sufficient [blood supply] to bring about healing,

E. it is permitted to Israelites, and, it goes without saying, to the children of Noah.

Nothing intrinsic distinguishes Israel from the gentiles, only their attitudes and actions. Opinion coalesces around the proposition that Israel and the gentiles do form a single genus, speciated by the relationship to God and the Torah. So in the end, a ferocious Israelite or a forbearing gentile represent mere anomalies, not categorical imperatives. Sufficient proof derives from the explicit statement that, when Israel acts like gentiles, it enters the classification of gentiles; if Israel conducts itself like the gentiles, Israel will be rejected and punished as were the gentiles, with special reference to Egypt and Canaan. This matter is spelled out in another formally-perfect composition:

Sifra CXCIII:I.1-11

1. B. “The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to the Israelite people and say to them, I am the Lord your God”:

C. “I am the Lord,” for I spoke and the world came into being.

D. “I am full of mercy.”

E. “I am Judge to exact punishment and faithful to pay recompense.”

F. “I am the one who exacted punishment from the generation of the Flood and the men of Sodom and Egypt, and I shall exact punishment from you if you act like them.”

First comes Egypt:

2. A. And how do we know that there was never any nation among all of the nations that practiced such abominations, more than did the Egyptians?

B. Scripture says, “You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt.”

C. And how do we know that the last generation did more abhorrent things than all the rest of them?

D. Scripture says, “You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt.”

E. And how do we know that the people in the last location in which the Israelites dwelt were more abhorrent than all the rest?

F. Scripture says, "...where you dwelt, you shall not do."

G. And how do we know that the fact that the Israelites dwelt there was the cause for all these deeds?

H. Scripture says, "You shall not copy...where you dwelt."

Now we deal with the Canaanites, following the given form:

3. A. How do we know that there was never a nation among all the nations that did more abhorrent things than the Canaanites?

B. Scripture says, "You shall not copy the practices...of the land of Canaan [to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws]."

C. And how do we know that the last generation did more abhorrent things than all the rest of them?

D. Scripture says, "You shall not copy the practices of the land of Canaan."

E. And how do we know that the people in the place to which the Israelites were coming for conquest were more abhorrent than all the rest?

F. Scripture says, "...to which I am taking you."

G. And how do we know that it is the arrival of the Israelites that caused them to do all these deeds?

H. Scripture says, "or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws."

Now the two cases are expounded in the same terms, and the specific type of laws that Israel is not to follow is defined:

7. A. If "You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt...or of the land of Canaan,"

B. might one think that they are not to build their buildings or plant vineyards as they did?

C. Scripture says, "nor shall you follow their laws":

D. "I have referred only to the rules that were made for them and for their fathers and their fathers' fathers."

E. And what would they do?

F. A man would marry a man, and a woman would marry a woman, a man would marry a woman and her daughter, a woman would be married to two men.

G. That is why it is said, "nor shall you follow their laws."

8. A. ["My rules alone shall you observe and faithfully follow my laws":]

B. "my rules": this refers to laws.

C. "...my laws": this refers to the amplifications thereof.

D. "...shall you observe": this refers to repeating traditions.

E. "...and faithfully follow": this refers to concrete deed.

F. "...and faithfully follow my laws": it is not the repetition of traditions that is the important thing but doing them is the important thing.

At stake in differentiating Israel from the gentiles is life in the world to come; the gentiles offer only death:

9. A. "You shall keep my laws and my rules, by the pursuit of which man [shall live]":

B. This formulation of matter serves to make keeping and doing into laws, and keeping and doing into rules.

10. A. "...shall live":

B. in the world to come.

C. And should you wish to claim that the reference is to this world, is it not the fact that in the end one dies?

D. Lo, how am I to explain, "...shall live"?

E. It is with reference to the world to come.

11. A. "I the Lord am your God":

B. faithful to pay a reward.

Here we find the entire doctrine of the gentiles fully exposed. God judges Israel and the gentiles by a single rule of justice; to each is meted out measure for measure Israel is not elect by reason of privilege; Israel is elect solely because Israel accepts the Torah and so knows God. The same punishment exacted from the generation of the Flood, the Sodomites, the Egyptians, and all others will be exacted from Israel if Israel acts like them. At that point, Israel becomes gentile. It is the Torah that differentiates.

The attitude of the idolater governs God's disposition of matters. God hates idolaters more than he hates the idol itself, for, all parties concur, in any case there is no substance in idolatry itself. The idolater rejects God and so makes the idol. So what is at issue in idolatry is the attitude of the idolater, that is, his rejection of the one true God, made manifest in the Torah. The idolater by his attitude and intention confers upon the idol a status that, on its own the idol cannot attain, being inanimate in any event. So the logic that governs distinguishes the actor from the acted upon, the cause from that which is caused, and the rest follows.

Now the gentiles are not just Rome and Persia but others; and of special interest, the Torah is embodied in some of the ten commandments — not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal; then the gentiles are rejected for not keeping the seven commandments assigned to the children of Noah. The upshot is that the reason that the gentiles rejected the Torah is that the Torah prohibits deeds that the gentiles do by their very nature. Israel ultimately is changed by the Torah, so that Israel exhibits traits imparted by their encounter with the Torah. So too with the gentiles, by their nature they are what they are; the Torah has not changed their nature.

Once more a single standard applies to both components of humanity, but with opposite effect:

Sifré to Deuteronomy CCCXLIII:IV.1ff.:

1. A. Another teaching concerning the phrase, “He said, ‘The Lord came from Sinai’”:
- B. When the Omnipresent appeared to give the Torah to Israel, it was not to Israel alone that he revealed himself but to every nation.
- C. First of all he came to the children of Esau. He said to them, “Will you accept the Torah?”
- D. They said to him, “What is written in it?”
- E. He said to them, “‘You shall not murder’ (Ex. 20:13).”
- F. They said to him, “The very being of ‘those men’ [namely, us] and of their father is to murder, for it is said, ‘But the hands are the hands of Esau’”(Gen. 27:22). ‘By your sword you shall live’ (Gen. 27:40).”

At this point we cover new ground: other classes of gentiles that reject the Torah; now the Torah’s own narrative takes over, replacing the known facts of world politics, such as the earlier account sets forth, and instead supplying evidence out of Scripture as to the character of the gentile group under discussion:

- G. So he went to the children of Ammon and Moab and said to them, “Will you accept the Torah?”
- H. They said to him, “What is written in it?”
- I. He said to them, “‘You shall not commit adultery’ (Ex. 20:13).”
- J. They said to him, “The very essence of fornication belongs to them [us], for it is said, ‘Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their fathers’ (Gen. 19:36).”
- K. So he went to the children of Ishmael and said to them, “Will you accept the Torah?”
- L. They said to him, “What is written in it?”
- M. He said to them, “‘You shall not steal’ (Ex. 20:13).”
- N. They said to him, “The very essence of their [our] father is thievery, as it is said, ‘And he shall be a wild ass of a man’ (Gen. 16:12).”

O. And so it went. He went to every nation, asking them, “Will you accept the Torah?”

P. For so it is said, “All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth” (Ps. 138:4).

Q. Might one suppose that they listened and accepted the Torah?

R. Scripture says, “And I will execute vengeance in anger and fury upon the nations, because they did not listen” (Mic. 5:14).

At this point we turn back to the obligations that God has imposed upon the gentiles; these obligations have no bearing upon the acceptance of the Torah; they form part of the ground of being, the condition of existence, of the gentiles. Yet even here, the gentiles do not accept God’s authority in matters of natural law:

S. And it is not enough for them that they did not listen, but even the seven religious duties that the children of Noah indeed accepted upon themselves they could not uphold before breaking them.

T. When the Holy One, blessed be He, saw that that is how things were, he gave them to Israel.

Humanity divides into Israel with the Torah, and the gentiles with their idols. The one is destined to life eternal with God, the other to the grave, there to spend eternity. World order then finds its center and focus in Israel, and whatever happens that counts under Heaven’s gaze takes place in relationship to Israel. That division yields rich and dense details but only a simple story, easily retold. In a purposeful act of benevolence, the just God created the world in so orderly a way that the principle of justice and equity governs throughout. Fair rules apply equally to all persons and govern all circumstances. God not only created man but made himself known to man

through the Torah. But man, possessed of free will, enjoys the choice of accepting and obeying the Torah, therefore living in the kingdom of Heaven, or rejecting the Torah and God in favor of idolatry and idols.

Now we realize the full potentiality contained in the simple doctrines with which we began: that those who accept the Torah are called Israel, and the others are called gentiles. The gentiles hate Israel because of the Torah, and they also hate God. But the world as now constituted is such that the gentiles rule, and Israel is subjugated. Where is the justice in that inversion of right, with God's people handed over to the charge of God's enemies? Israel has sinned, so rebelled against God, and the gentiles then form God's instrument for the punishment of Israel. God's justice governs, the world conforms to orderly rules, embedded in the very structure of creation. Israel's own condition stands as the surest testimony of the world's good and just order. That guarantee is for now and all time to come.

V.

CONCLUDING CONTEMPORARY POSTSCRIPT

The classical and normative sources of law and theology have guided us into a cul de sac. Judaic monotheism expounded by its normative sources cannot acknowledge the claim to truth of any other monotheism, even though all monotheisms concur on the same theological logic. Christianity and Islam concur on the unity of God and can recite the Shema, hear Israel the Lord our God the Lord is one, except for the opening invocation, Surely if you and I concur on the same proposition about God, that he is one —just and merciful, omnipotent and unique — we should be able to recognize our agreement. When we say that God is one and unique, we aver that there can

be no other being like God in uniqueness. It must follow that all who affirm the unity and uniqueness of God speak of the same God. Yet when we survey the classical and normative sources of Judaism we produce the contradiction: Judaism declares God to be one but denies the comparable declaration of Christianity and Islam that God is uniquely one. Is the monotheism of Judaism in its classical statement different in its characteristics from the monotheism of Christianity or Islam? The answer is, only if there are variations to the definition of monotheism. But while polytheism makes provision for diversity, monotheism does not. The very logic of monotheism governs and defines the outcome: all religious systems that affirm the unity of God necessarily speak of one and the same God.

The position of Judaism cannot defy logic and must give way to its requirements. Monotheism stands in judgment upon all monotheist systems. Contemporary Judaism parts company from the received system in submitting to the judgment of monotheist logic: there can be and is only one God, and all whom affirm one God affirm that one and the same God. That is so even though all who recognize many gods do not by definition affirm the same god. The dialogue among Judaism, Christianity and Islam begins with the criticism of the purity of the monotheism affirmed by the competing monotheist systems.

Interfaith dialogue is made possible by monotheism, which defines the common ground on the foundations of which debate can take place. Polytheism defines dialogue out of existence, making provision, rather, for an exchange of opinions in a spirit of tolerance. Since the polytheist religions lay no claim to unique possession of the truth, nothing is left about which to contend. That is why Judaism stands in judgment of Christianity and Islam specifically as these form explications of the meaning of the unity

and uniqueness of God, and Judaism — so Judaism must claim — sets the standard for true monotheism. Christianity and Islam claim the same right of judgment of the competition. The anomaly of the classical statement of Judaism — only Judaism affirms authentic monotheism — yields the only true interfaith dialogue: a debate on the same issues resting on the same premises.