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Three Preliminary Remarks

Jerusalem: The Birthplace of Jewish-Christian Monotheism

Even a cursory glance at present day Jerusalem reveals how diverse, multifaceted, and conflicted the (religious) perception of the city is. Tourists often experience the Old City in particular as an aesthetically-appealing open air museum of sorts—one that bears witness to a dramatic history, which has at times reverberated across the whole world. Pleasantly mixed in with this "museum" are elements of oriental hospitality and an eastern bazaar: Ashkenazi Jews, dressed in the coats and fur-trimmed hats of their eastern European heritage, pray at the Wailing Wall in the summer heat alongside emancipated Jewish women from the west. Then there are the Christians singing mournful songs as they carry a cross the length of the Via Dolorosa, and the Muslims prostrating themselves in long lines on the Temple Square facing the direction of Mecca. These groups constitute part of the religious or cultural attraction for those who visit the "museum" of Jerusalem.

Yet for adherents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Jerusalem is a holy city that has played and still continues to play a preeminent role—varying according to the specific religion, of course—both in the religious imagination and also, frequently, in religious practice of the faithful. For Judaism, Jerusalem is the site of the first and second temples; for Christianity, it is where Jesus Christ was crucified and res-

urrected; and, for Islam, it is the place of the prophet Mohammed's ascension.

Judaism as a whole has never underestimated the significance of Jerusalem, but some movements within it have interpreted the presence of God in the city as nothing less than a guarantee of its inviolability, despite the warning of certain prophets otherwise (Micah, Jeremiah, and Jesus). Despite this superstitious conviction—or perhaps better because of it—the city was repeatedly destroyed. At first, Christianity disdained the earthly Jerusalem and vaunted the heavenly Jerusalem. Yet soon after the rule of the emperor Constantine its estimation of the city began to rise steadily, culminating in the desire of the crusaders to win the earthly Jerusalem back for Christianity. For Islam, neither Mecca nor Medina were preeminent at first, with prayer being directed instead towards Jerusalem. This changed with Mohammed who, following his bitter dispute with the Jewish community of Medina, demanded that rather than praying towards Jerusalem his followers should pray in the direction of Mecca and the Kaaba. He defended this change in Sura 22:136–146. The construction of the "Dome of the Rock," however, elevated Jerusalem to the third most holy site in Islam.

Jerusalem remains to this day a kind of sacrament for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, bringing believers into direct contact with the objects of their religious longing. A visit often elicits the elated feeling of a great longing fulfilled. Once the pilgrimage has been made, religious faith is now not just spirit and word but has "taken on flesh." As with all things that are felt intensely, this experience too can sometimes turn unhealthy, as is seen in the emotional overreaction known as "Jerusalem Syndrome." Those affected by this syndrome tell of visions and apparitions, and sometimes identify themselves with Jesus, Mohammed, or even God.

How did the city come to exert such an intense and historic effect? Can this be explained by its geographical location? Did the city's geography predestine it to its later status? Or was it the city's visionaries, thinkers, poets, and politicians who, through their visions and language—not to mention the names and titles they lent the city and the institutions they created—gave the city its aura, insuring that it be seen as a very different, even holy, city? Or was it certain historical figures such as David, Solomon, Jeremiah, and Jesus? Or perhaps particular historical events such as the building of the temple, the city's destruction by Nebuchadnezzar, and the crucifixion of Jesus, that gave Jerusalem

its lasting character? Or was it the architecture, the grand and ornate buildings—in some cases still visited and seen by people today as monuments to decisive events—which are responsible for Jerusalem's distinguished profile?

This present study will first discuss the *location* of Jerusalem (chapter 2) before considering how its *different names* (chapter 3), not unlike its monuments, sum up what the city has meant to its inhabitants and worshipers down through the ages. The city's history can be written from very different points of view and with very different emphases (cf. chapters 4-15). Observations can be made about the way the city has grown, shrunk, and grown again through the course of time (see **Fig. 6**); or about who built its walls and where. One can describe the changing economic relations and their connection with the various forms of political organization. So, for example, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, in their book *David and Solomon*, portray the two founders of Jerusalem in political terms, focusing particularly on the type of rule they exercised over which territory, without even considering what effect they might have had on the founding of monotheism.[1] Finkelstein and Silberman touch on questions of religious history only in relation to the afterlife of the figure of David and the messianic hope for a David *redivivus*—but even then only in passing.

In contrast, the present study of the first 1,700 years of Jerusalem's history focuses on the *religious history of the city*, which is generally neglected by contemporary secular Israeli historians who have little interest in religion. In terms of its physical extent, Jerusalem could never compete with the big cities of antiquity or the present. Alexandria and Antioch were much more significant in this respect. Unlike Tyre or Carthage, Jerusalem was never a major economic player, nor did it achieve world fame through science, philosophy, or art as Athens did. It didn't transform itself into a major power through inspired politics and technical know-how, and somehow manage to hold this intact for centuries with relatively little military force, as Rome did. It was only through the *religious practices it founded* (for example, the seven-day week) and the *theology it developed* that Jerusalem achieved world-historical significance in pre-Christian antiquity and even more so thereafter. Jerusalem's most important monuments, visited by hundreds of thousands of people, do not have the same aesthetic appeal as the great museums of the world; neither do they have the political

1. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

significance of some government palaces. They are instead religious in nature.[2] On the basis of the theological traditions that arose and were developed in this place, Jerusalem became the birthplace of monotheism, or to be more precise—of *one particular type of monotheism*. It was not the first monotheism, but it was by far the most important and consequential.

A Crucial Distinction: Exclusive vs. Integrative-Cumulative Monotheism

The first historically-documented belief in just one god is the monotheism of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten (1353–1336 BCE). In a short but masterly excursus on Akhenaten in his classic *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, the noted Egyptologist Erik Hornung first lists traditional Egyptian solar-cult elements in Akhenaten's system.[3] What is new in Akhenaten's initiative, according to Hornung, is that he looked "to derive all phenomena from a single cause,"[4] believing to have found that one cause in light, which became the sole divine principle and therefore the basis of monotheism and the foundation of religion:

> Now, for the first time in history, the divine has become one, without a complementary multiplicity. . . . The mass of divine forms is reduced to the single manifestation of the Aten with rays . . . and out of the mass of names of gods all that is left is one double name: Re, who reveals himself ("has come") as Aten. A god "without equal" has become, at an enormous remove, a god "without any other except for himself," and the king too is now "sole king like Aten; there is no other great one except for him." . . . Anything that does not fit with the nature of the Aten is no longer divine, and its existence is denied through its not being mentioned. The hymns of Akhenaten, which use familiar phraseology to praise the Aten, differ from older hymns principally in what they omit.[5]

The divine realm is reduced to the light of Aten. It is an *exclusive type* of monotheism. Everything is excluded save for Aten. Egyptian culture was not ready to renounce all other (and complementary) deities, how-

2. Max Küchler, *Jerusalem: Ein Handbuch und Studienreiseführer zur Heiligen Stadt* (OLB IV/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).
3. Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: the One and the Many* (trans. John Baines; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982 [German orig: 1971]).
4. Ibid, 253.
5. Ibid., 246, 248.

ever, such as Osiris, the god of the afterlife, or the female deities like Hathor, Isis, Mut, Neith, and Sekhmet. As Jan Assmann has remarked, Akhenaten was a sort of pre-Socratic philosopher around 700 years before his time.[6] What Akhenaten brings, therefore, is a philosophical insight rather than a new religion. Everything is reduced exclusively to one single (empirical) principle, sunlight, as with Thales of Miletus and his theory that water constituted the *arche* of all things. And Akhenaten's innovation was short lived: All traces of his monotheism were obliterated after his death. His bold initiative was only rediscovered during the scientific exploration of Egypt in the nineteenth century.

A late work by Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, which appeared shortly before his death in 1939, made popular the hypothesis that Moses passed on the religion of Akhenaten to the Israelites.[7] This is not historically defensible, however. The religion of Akhenaten was no longer known in the twelfth century BCE. The historical Moses was, as far as we can make out, a polytheist. He is portrayed as such in the seminal story of his meeting in the burning bush with a divine being, who tasks him with leading the Hebrews out of Egypt. It is not the one God that appears to him, but a divine being that must have a name so as to be distinguished from all the other divine beings. The god who appears to Moses gives his name as YHWH. In Hebrew only the consonants are written. On the basis of Akkadian and Greek transliterations, which include the vowels, we can assume that the name was pronounced "Yahweh." "This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation," YHWH states in Exod 3:15. That the Jews used the name less in the post-exilic period (see below) had nothing to do with the fact that it had become too holy to say aloud; that mistakes the issue at hand. The disuse was, rather, due to the fact that after monotheism had become established the specific name YHWH served as a reminder that YHWH was once (just) one god among many. In brief, the historical Moses did not found Israelite-Jewish monotheism. This, as will be seen, arose only in the 8th-6th centuries BCE.

If a historical connection can be made between Egypt and the beginning of Israelite-Jewish monotheism, it is not to be found in the teaching of Akhenaten but in the "Memphite Theology."[8] Egyptologists increasingly date this text to the time of the twenty-fifth Dynasty

6. See, e.g., Jan Assmann, *From Akhenaten to Moses* (Cairo: American Univeirsity in Cairo Press, 2014); and idem, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).
7. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Vintage, 1955 [German orig: 1939]).
8. For English translations, see *ANET*, 4–6 and *COS* 1.15:21–23.

(728–656 BCE).[9] This unique work attributes the creation of all other deities to Ptah, the main god of Memphis, through his thinking (heart) and his speaking (tongue). Strictly-speaking, Ptah is not hereby made a monotheistic deity, but a god whose thinking and speaking gave rise to the creation of all other deities and everything else. The slightly younger creation story found in Genesis 1 of the Bible, contains a similar idea, but in this case the text is purely monotheistic in thinking and formulation. There are no other gods in Genesis 1. The "Memphite Theology" on the other hand places all other gods below Ptah, but does not deny their separate existence: such a conception and formulation is clearly not monotheistic. So from the Egyptian side there remains just the monotheism of Akhenaten, of which nothing would have been known in the Jerusalem of the first millennium. Even more important than the missing historical connections is the fact that Israelite-Jewish monotheism was entirely different from that of Akhenaten.

In contrast to Akhenaten's *reductive-exclusive monotheism*, the Jerusalem variety disempowered the various gods and goddesses while simultaneously transferring many of their attributes and stories to YHWH. In this way Israelite-Jewish monotheism can be seen as an *inclusive-cumulative* or *inclusive-integrative* type. A few examples serve to prove this. Whereas in Egypt and in Mesopotamia as a rule a male and a female deity were involved in human creation, in Genesis 2, YHWH alone fulfils both male and female roles. This is even clearer in the story of the Flood, which in the older Mesopotamian versions at least four deities play a role—namely, the three male gods Enlil, Adad, and Enki-Ea, along with one female god, Nintu-Ishtar. In the biblical versions, YHWH takes on all four roles of these four deities, which is less coherent but somehow make the character of YHWH more complete or comprehensive. YHWH is made particularly sympathetic by assuming the role of the goddess who at the end of the story swears that never again shall a flood cover the earth. In Isaiah 54:9, the promise made by the goddess in the Mesopotamian flood story reappears, this time attributed to YHWH. Or one might consider how, in the story of Sodom, YHWH appears in the form of the judgmental sun god, or, in Psalm 29, how he is portrayed as the thundering weather god. This inclusive-integrative monotheism was interpreted in different ways by

9. C. Peust and H. Sternberg-el Hotabi, "Das 'Denkmal memphitischer Theologie,'" in *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments* (ed. O. Kaiser; Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 2001), 166–175; A. El Hawary, *Wortschöpfung: Die Memphitische Theologie und die Siegesstele des Pije – zwei Zeugen kultureller Repräsentation in der 25. Dynastie* (OBO 243; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010).

early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In a number of works, Assmann has revisited the allegation made repeatedly since Hume and Schopenhauer that the monotheistic religions are more aggressive and violent than the polytheistic varieties.

I will return to this matter when describing the set of conditions giving rise to monotheism in the context of the history of Jerusalem; how it took shape and was expressed; its merits, strengths, and weaknesses; and how it finally became the basis of the three quite different monotheistic religions. The rise of monotheism is a central concern of this book. It remains possible, of course, to write about the history of Jerusalem without reference to religious history and theological questions of this type.

Monotheism: An Urban Product

Psalm 107 urges four groups of people in exceptional need to redeem the promise made to them. First there is the group who have become lost in the desert and who almost died of hunger and thirst (vv. 4–9). Then follow mentions of imprisonment, illness, and distress at sea. The wilderness (Hebrew *midbār*) and the desert (*yĕšîmōn*) are contrasted in this psalm with the inhabited dwelling place (*ʿîr môšāb*). The desert is generally portrayed in the biblical texts as the opposite of the city—as a no-man's land, a non-land, the land of death.

According to biblical tradition, Moses met YHWH as he led his small herd of cattle across the wilderness (*midbār*) to Mount Horeb (Exod 3:1). The prophet Elijah, persecuted by Jezebel, wanders from Beersheba in the Negev desert into the wilderness (*midbār*) where he spends forty days and nights before arriving at Horeb, the mountain of God (1 Kgs 19:1–18). It could be, as Ernst Axel Knauf believes, that the name Horeb, which means "desert place," is simply a pseudonym for the older name Sinai, which during the reign of the Babylonian King Nabonidus (556–539 BCE), a worshiper of the moon god Sin, had become tainted.[10] Sinai too is in the desert (Exod 16:1). Exodus 19:1 says that in the third month after leaving Egypt the people came into the Sinai desert. That is a good deal farther than the three-day journey into the desert that Moses requests from Pharaoh so that his people can worship their god (see Exod 3:18; 5:1; 7:16; 8:27–28). Regardless, on the basis of texts like these, it is possible that the worship of YHWH

10. See Ernst Axel Knauf, "Sinai," in *Neues Bibel-Lexikon* 3 (eds. M. Görg and B. Lang; Zürich: Benziger, 1990), 607–8.

may have been brought to Palestine from regions that today form the extreme south of Jordan and the extreme northwest of Saudi Arabia (see below).

Now, as noted above, the original YHWH was no monotheistic god, even if some later strands of biblical heritage made one of him. Yet the tradition of the remote, unreachable desert mountain as his original residence lent him the aura of one who was alien, unapproachable, and incomprehensible, and made a kind of divine transcendence imaginable, indeed almost palpable. Romanticism, with its love for and sense of the uniqueness of the landscape, allowed monotheism to bloom in the desert as it were. Ernest Renan's work, *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques*, was particularly influential in spreading this view.[11] It is also said of Islam—as, for example, in the writings of Willibald Gebel, who wrote of "Der Islam—die Religion der Wüste" (Islam: The Religion of the Desert).[12]

More than 100 years after Renan's work, Friedrich Dürrenmatt described a flight over the Negev in his "Essay on Israel":

> Staring down on this dead world it becomes clear to me that the god who created the desert, this invisible god, the god of Abraham who became the god of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims, is a desert experience not a philosophical deduction or conception, and that without this experience we do not have the language to speak about him. We can only be silent.[13]

A similarly romantic view of the connection between monotheism and the desert is common to this day, thanks in part to the striking desert topography. Opponents of monotheism have made a polemic out of this: "A god who comes from the desert can only turn the world into a desert," some have opined. This cliché seems to have become well established. In 2006, M. Schreiber wrote that "[t]he three main monotheistic religions are products of the desert. . . . The barren environment is the ideal backdrop for devotion to a distant, invisible god who demands asceticism–mental self destruction" in a popular article for *Der Spiegel* magazine.[14]

In point of fact, however, the historical record shows that the concept of monotheism developed and became established in cities, not in

11. Ernest Renan, *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques* (4th ed. Paris: M. Levy, 1863).
12. Willibald Gebel, "Der Islam – die Religion der Wüste," *Beihefte zu den Jahresberichten der Schlesischen Gesellschaft für vaterländische Kultur* 1 (1922): 104–33.
13. Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Zusammenhänge* (Zürich: Diogenes, 1985), 127.
14. Mathias Schreiber, "Mose Superstar," *Der Spiegel* (April 15, 2006): 164.

the deserts. For the modern city-dweller looking down from the airplane, the desert is dead. For the desert-dweller, of course, it is a living thing. Monotheism first arose in Thebes and Amarna. It became a world-historical phenomenon in Jerusalem and Babylon as this book will show, and in Mecca and Medina, as is well known in Islam. To be sure, none of these cities is situated very far from the steppes and deserts or from city dwellers's experiences of the same. Such desert experiences were important and explored, as is demonstrated by the biblical traditions about the wilderness wanderings and the mountain of God. As an element of *theologia negativa* (important for every monotheistic faith) that stresses the inconceivability and ineffability of God, the "desert motif" can serve as an antidote to an overly-simplified and overly-anthropomorphic image of God. One should recall how numerous mystics have discussed the concept of the "dark night" or "desert of God."

The ultimately subordinate and relative importance of the desert and desert experiences is demonstrated by the fact that none of the monotheistic religions made a mountain in the desert the holiest of cult sites. The holiest locations for the monotheistic religions are without exception cities: Rome, Constantinople, Mecca, Medina—but above all Jerusalem, which is the only city to be important to all three monotheistic world religions. The love of creation, the world, and culture, which are fundamental and intrinsic to the Canaanite-Jewish-Christian-Islamic tradition, are manifest here. . . . And the most meaningful symbol of the world, the holy place itself, is in the very center of the city.