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The institutional evolution of religion: innovation and entrepreneurship in ancient Israel

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ABSTRACT In light of contemporary advances and in an effort to supplement and add to the vibrant discourse surrounding the evolution of religion, a distinctly sociological theory that returns to and pushes forward the insights of Durkheim and Weber is offered. The unit of evolution is the institutional sphere, or the macro-level structural and cultural sphere of religious action, exchange, and communication; and evolution is the process by which religious entrepreneurs are able to secure material and symbolic independence vis-à-vis other strata and, thereby, carve out an autonomous religious institution to reproduce their symbolic, normative, and organizational innovations. To illustrate the way this sociological theory of institutional evolution works, and how it accounts for multi-linear evolutionary paths, while considering contingencies, the evolution of the Ancient Israelite religion from the late 8th century BCE to the end of the Exile in the late 6th century BCE is examined.

KEY WORDS: sociology; theory and metatheory; comparative themes; current debates in religious studies; Judaism; religions; sociocultural evolution

Introduction

The sociological study of cultural evolution has experienced a resurgence over the last few decades. While the unit and level of evolution vary across theories, a significant body of scholarship continues to focus on the evolution of macro-level phenomena such as societies (Turner and Maryanski 2008, 2009; Nolan and Lenski 2010; Chase-Dunn and Lerro 2013) or institutional spheres (Turner 2003, 2010; Abrutyn 2013, 2014a, 2014b). Like most evolutionary theories, the focus tends to be on adaptivity in an effort to draw strong analogies between biological and sociocultural evolution (Richerson and Boyd 2005; Levinson 2006; Richerson and Christiansen 2013). Thus, these theories tend to isolate a universal feature of sociality or a cultural element found in a social sphere, and look for explanation in cognitive or evolutionary psychology (Kirkpatrick 2005), at the intersection between psychology and sociology (Norenzayan 2013; Slingerland, Henrich, and Norenzayan 2013), or through sociological principles (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997; Sanderson 1999; Abrutyn and Lawrence 2010; Turner 2010). While this particular strategy has offered undeniable insights into the interplay between

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biological and cultural evolution (e.g., see Slingerland, Henrich, and Norenzayan 2013), it often takes for granted the role historicity and contingency play (Boyd and Richerson 1992), while generalizations lose the multi-linearity found across specific cases (Steward 1955 [1972]).

In this article, I posit a slightly different theory that supplements the already rich and robust study of sociocultural evolution. To do so, evolutionary-institutionalism, or the evolution of macro-level structural and cultural milieu like polity, religion, or economy, is brought into dialogue with the agentic, meso-level evolutionism found in work on institutional entrepreneurship (Eisenstadt 1964, 1990; Colomy 1998; Abrutyn 2014a, 2014b). In bringing these two strands of theory together, the focus becomes less on adaptation and more on the way macro-level exigencies create selection pressures that are responded to by groups; while their responses are intentional, they are facilitated and constrained by sociocultural and historical contingencies and, thereby, sociocultural evolution is often twisting, unpredictable, and less adaptive throughout the process. That is, sociocultural evolution at the institutional level is a product of the interaction between: (1) exogenous and endogenous macro-level exigencies; (2) the selection pressures these exigencies create; (3) the historical and sociocultural contingencies shaping innovation; and (4) the intentional, motive-driven action of special collective actors Weber (1946) identified as ‘carrier groups’ or entrepreneurs.

From this vantage point, sociocultural evolution becomes less analogous to its biological counterpart (Turner and Maryanski 2008; Abrutyn 2013), and draws more from sociology, anthropology, and archaeology (Steward 1955 [1972]; Adams 1966; Sanderson 1999; Yoffee 2005). Most noticeably, Darwinian mechanisms – or what Levinson (2006) calls ‘designerless’ cultural evolution – play a smaller, though still important, role than Lamarckian-like processes (cf. Johnson and Earle 2000). Hence, while diffusion processes on the individual level still drive some forms of cultural evolution (Henrich 2001), evidence abounds illustrating how evolution is sometimes driven by groups responding to (real or perceived) crises, innovating symbolically, normatively, and organizationally, and using positions of power to impose new institutional patterns (Eisenstadt 1982, 1990; Berman 1983; Colomy 1998; Wilson 2002; Abrutyn 2014a). These groups are called, herein, institutional entrepreneurs as they assume high-risk/high-reward strategies (Eisenstadt 1964; Leca and Naccache 2006), which, when successful, give them the capability of becoming an engine of institutional evolution by way of securing material and symbolic independence, carving out autonomous institutional space, and reconfiguring the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space. The reconstruction of social niches has objective and intersubjective consequences for the phenomenological construction of social reality for a significant proportion of the population and, according to Gabriel Levy (2011), it may even feed back on portions of the population’s biological and genetic characteristics.

To demonstrate fully how macro and meso-level evolutionary processes interlock, we examine the evolution of religious autonomy, or the emergence of a religious sphere that was relatively discrete vis-à-vis other spheres like polity or kinship. In the mid-1st millennium BCE, a series of independent religio-cultural entrepreneurs appeared in India, Israel, China, and Greece (Arnason, Eisenstadt, and Wittrock 2005) and, through different evolutionary paths, arrived at a similar destination: the first autonomous religious institutions or spheres (Eisenstadt 2012; Taylor 2012; Abrutyn 2014b). Where most scholarship has focused on
the common consequences of the Axial Age, such as a transcendental supernatural (Schwartz 1975; Eisenstadt 1982; Schloen 2001) or the appearance of second-order thinking (Elkana 1986) and historicity (Wittrock 2005), analysis of the evolutionary processes underlying each case have not yet been elucidated. Though any case could serve our purposes, the Israelite case is chosen, in part, because of its relevance to the sociological study of religion (Weber 1917–19 [1952]; Eisenstadt 2004; Bellah 2011; Abrutyn 2015) and because of its importance in Western religious history.

At the paper’s core, it will be argued, is the emergence of a scribal culture (the core of the institutional entrepreneurship) whose symbolic, normative, and organizational innovations emerged under different exigencies and selection pressures (Levinson 1997; Schniedewind 2004; van der Toorn 2007; Ben Zvi 2009), and which was subjected to sociocultural and historical contingencies that both facilitated and constrained the Israelite entrepreneurs’ goals, motives, and interests. In doing so, this paper contributes in several important ways. First, it examines the intersection of exigency, contingency, and entrepreneurship in a specific case, thus revealing the less-than-linear path the evolution of religion, or any institutional sphere for that matter, may take. Second, it brings critical biblical scholarship into dialogue with sociological principles. While some biblical scholars have turned to sociological principles (cf. Gottwald 2001; Liverani 2005; Finkelstein 2013), most sociologists have not approached the biblical narrative from a critical perspective (cf. Weber 1917–19 [1952]; Eisenstadt 2004; Bellah 2011). The two disciplines stand to gain from a more integrative perspective. Third, by offering a micro-evolutionary processual view of the evolution of religion, it supplements the adaptationist approach that isolates important consequences of religious autonomy, such as the salience and ubiquity of supernatural monitors (Norenzayan 2013), by providing much of the backdrop for these adaptations.

Theoretical, methodological, and ‘historical’ background

Evolutionary-institutionalism

Evolutionary-institutionalists consider the institutional sphere the unit of evolution (Turner 2003, 2010; Nolan and Lenski 2010). Institutional spheres are defined herein as the macro-level structural and cultural milieu comprised of congeries of individual, collective, and clusters of collective actors, material and symbolic resources, and systems of authority distributed along both horizontal (functional) and vertical (hierarchical) divisions of labor (Abrutyn 2014a). Institutional spheres are real in so far as they comprise physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space, and become real constraints on goal-setting, decision-making, strategizing, and making sense of situations (Parsons 1990) as well as, importantly, coordinate (inter)action, exchange, and communication (Luhmann 2012). Because actors and resources are distributed in space via divisions of labor, institutional spheres are also stratified spaces. Anthropologists and sociologists have long identified six ubiquitous institutional spheres: kinship; economy; religion; polity; law; and education (Turner 2003). What varies across time and space, then, is the degree to which an institution is autonomous, or a relatively discrete structural and cultural sphere of social reality (Abrutyn 2009; Abrutyn and Turner 2011). The greater the degree to which the institution is autonomous, the greater the degree to which it
(1) competes with other institutions for resources – like attention, money, human capital – and (2) exerts control over a significant portion of the population, thus disrupting their everyday lives and reordering them according to its underlying values and norms.

The religious institution, then, is one of many institutional spheres, but is distinguishable from the others by the underlying concerns that come to shape interaction, exchanges, and communication. For example, social space, where religion has attained a moderate to high degree of autonomy, becomes defined by symbols and norms related to sacredness or piety (Abrutyn and Turner 2011; Luhmann 2013). Temples are physical locations of the supernatural, and their function is focused on communicating with the supernatural, whereas the Palace or the village square comes to be functionally and symbolically different. Hence, the growth or decline in institutional autonomy is evolutionary as it (1) qualitatively reconfigures social reality; (2) represents a higher level of complexity, size, and scale; and (3) becomes a mechanism of cultural reproduction that survives for an indefinite period of time (Turner 2010). As such, the more autonomous a given religious sphere is, the more distinct its physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space will be both because religious entrepreneurs work to protect the boundaries and because large swaths of the population are socialized into a new social reality and come to take for granted the existence of a religious sphere vis-à-vis a political sphere. Adaptivity, in this case, is not really important as the focus is on whether or not entrepreneurs can reproduce their cultural assemblage over an indefinite period of time, regardless of whether it benefits society, large sections of society, or simply themselves (Nolan and Lenski 2010). Most evolutionary-institutionalists stop short of explaining how institutions evolve.

It is at this point we can bring in the process of institutional entrepreneurship (Eisenstadt 1964, 1990; Colomy 1998; Leca and Neccache 2006). Autonomy is the result of entrepreneurial projects that aim to impose entrepreneurial symbolic, normative, and organizational innovation on greater portions of the population for both collective-benefit and out of self-interest (Aldrich and Ruef 2006; Abrutyn 2014b). Institutional evolution, then, is driven by groups struggling for independence, securing this independence, and carving out space to sustain their success, while attempting to expand it (Abrutyn 2013; Abrutyn and Van Ness forthcoming). Selection is eminently social, in most cases, as power relations become a central variable in the equation: e.g., Constantine elevated one faction of early Christianity, and thus gave these actors access to the administrative, ideological, and coercive power of the state to select ‘against’ competing rivals. Institutional evolution includes, then, considerations of power and the use of structure and culture to impose reproduction and ensure an entrepreneur’s cultural assemblage survives for longer than its initial member’s lifetimes. The Israelite case, as we shall see, clearly demonstrates this: pre-Exilic Israel and Judah were radically different, structurally and culturally, from post-Exilic Judah, though we can see the fits and

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1To be sure, the institutionalization of new symbolic, normative, and organizational patterns must prove ‘adaptive’ to society over the long run, lest the society collapse, be conquered, or ‘disintegrate’ (or break into small segmentary societies) (Tainter 1988; Yoffee and Cowgill 1988). But, in the short run, which is a relative temporal distinction, institutional domains are adaptive in so far as they can reproduce the culture of its elite and a significant proportion of the population continue to sustain the institutional sphere both materially and cognitively.
starts of entrepreneurship and traces of the overall project before the exile. What changed were the historical and sociocultural circumstances, paving the way for aggressive, purposeful efforts to ‘take control’ of the reconstitution of Israelite society.

Furthermore, what makes institutional entrepreneurship interesting is that it is relatively rare in history. The most obvious case was the political entrepreneurship that occurred 5000 years ago in Sumer, the Indus Valley, Egypt, and China (and again a few millennia later in Peru and Mesoamerica) that led to political autonomy, or what has been often considered an ‘axial’ moment in human history (Adams 1966; Yoffee 2005). The Axial Age, or the religio-cultural entrepreneurship that occurred in the mid-1st millennium BCE, presents us with a second historical epoch in which massive institutional evolution occurred. One may also point to the legal transformation of Europe predicated on the religio-legal entrepreneurs of the Catholic Church during the Gregorian Reformation in the 11th and 12th centuries CE (Berman 1983; Abrutyn 2009), or the scientific transformation of human societies that began in the enlightenment and has also been called an ‘axial’ age.

Using biblical and extra-biblical sources

It is a fair question to ask, ‘How accurate is the Bible?’ This question is at the center of several debates surrounding authorship, intent and motive, and so forth (Albertz 1992–94; Davies 2000, 2009; Van Seters 2000; Dever 2001; Liverani 2005; Noll 2007, 2013; van der Toorn 2007; Edelman 2009). An overarching trend has been to push the writing of the various books of the Bible further and further into the Persian (538–330 BCE) and, even, Hellenistic (323–31) periods (Lipschits and Blenkinsopp 2003; Lipschits and Oeming 2006; Lipschits, Knoppers, and Albertz 2007). Because there is little consensus among scholars, opinions range from conceptualizing the texts as near-total fictions written to metaphorize the Persian/Hellenistic experience without rousing the ire of authorities (Davies 1995, 2008; Knauf 2009; Noll 2013) to those who presuppose the bible’s chronology is relatively accurate (Zevit 2001). Rather than choose either end, this paper argues for a middle position.² To be sure, this position remains as speculative as the other two, but is arrived at through the integration of biblical scholarship, archaeology, and basic sociological principles. Hence, on the one hand, the material base for a scribal culture appears to have been improbable before the Omride dynasty (c. 884–841) in the north, and definitely not until Hezekiah’s reign in the late 8th century in the south

²Others have argued that a sizable group of Judeans, who remained in Judah during the Babylonian period, were principally responsible for the sustaining and writing of many of the scrolls (Barsted 2003). This thesis is also challenged by the extant archaeology, which shows that by the 6th century the number of Judean sites around Jerusalem and the hill country dropped from 116 to 41, as well as serious conflagrations, which were indicative of a ‘scorched-earth’ policy (Stern 2001). In Vanderhooft’s (1999, 106) words: ‘The material culture of Judah and adjacent regions in the first half of the sixth century points to a sharp contraction in demographic terms and economic activity.’ This destruction, the half-heartedness of Babylonian administrative policy in the western region, and the effects of depopulation are supported by evidence of other Canaanite cities, like Ashkelon: its destruction came around 604 BCE, and archaeology shows it was not until the Persian period – some 75–80 years – before the site shows signs of material growth (Stager 1996). This position is also thrown into doubt, considering biblical texts express intense metaphysical pain that could only be produced by intense dislocation (Gottwald 1962; Bright 1985; also Isa. 52.13-53.12, or the ‘Song of the Suffering Servant’).
(Schiendewind 2004; Finkelstein 2013). On the other hand, it remains an open question as to why some biblical traditions with extra-biblical support would be maintained across the destruction of the northern and then southern kingdom, in addition to generations of deportation, if they were not already deemed important to some scribes. That is, it seems dubious to imagine a group of people inventing an entire historical world hundreds of years after the fact when it is much more likely that aspects were carried across generations because they were key to the group’s cultural assemblage and survival.

This article adopts a middle position acknowledging the historicity of some of the traditions, while recognizing that the compilation of much of the Bible does not begin until some time in the 8th century BCE (Schiendewind 2004; Finkelstein and Silberman 2006; Finkelstein 2013). Thus, there are good sociological reasons, as well as extra-biblical support, for supposing that a scribal class or culture could have emerged and become vibrant around the time of the fall of Israel (722 BCE) (Schiendewind 2004; Edelman 2005). What would have made this group unique vis-à-vis other religious entrepreneurs, like the Confucian literati, was its lack of homogeneity and the institutionalization of tension, heterodoxy, and compromise (Eisenstadt 2004, 2012). To be sure, entrepreneurship surely continued into the Babylonian exile and beyond (Ackroyd 1968; Smith 1987; Blenkinsopp 1995; Liverani 2005), but lasting, creative symbolic, normative, and organizational changes were constructed in the two centuries between the fall of the north and the return from exile – changes which warrant our attention.

**Making sense of ‘history’**

What is historical? As many biblical scholars have noted, history was understood differently in Antiquity. Thus, to set up a historical narrative, given the current body of evidence, decisions have to be made. First, the entire pre-monarchical history of Israel is not accepted as factual. It is perhaps true that the exodus-desert wandering tradition is an older tradition, but whatever it actually was and whether it approximated true events cannot be discerned. Second, the united monarchy – David and Solomon – was likely real, but because there is little corroborative evidence, it is nearly impossible to tease apart the historical reality from the myths perpetrated by Hezekiah over two centuries later in an effort to legitimize his political ambitions and power (Finkelstein and Silberman 2006). Third, the picture begins to become clearer in the 9th century, as extra-biblical archaeological evidence supports the existence of the Omride dynasty – e.g., a large enough polity to need administrative writing; therefore, large enough to perhaps need to compile or collate traditions as authentic and essential (Finkelstein 2013).³ The north continued to grow politically, economically, and culturally through Jeroboam II’s (788–747) reign until Sargon II leveled the capital in 722 BCE (Vanderhooft 1999; Stern 2001; Liverani 2005). Though estimating population size is challenging, Israel’s population may have been 350 000 or more in the middle 8th century, making it at least three times larger than its southern neighbor, Judah (Finkelstein 2013). Given what we know about political complexity in ancient agrarian states, as well as the explosion of archaeological evidence like ostraca, it

³See, for instance, the Moab Mesha Stela (c.850 BCE) (Schniedewind 2004).
is safe to assume writing quite closely parallels growth in political complexity (Goody 1986; Yoffee 2005).

Upon the collapse of the north, the south rapidly expanded in population in the hill region just south of Shechem (the southernmost province of Israel, where Bethel was located); the South’s economy rapidly expanded as it was thrust into the Assyrian economic system, was flooded with northern refugees carrying skilled and unskilled human capital, and experienced acute urbanization (Finkelstein 2001). The population of Judah doubled, perhaps tripled, and Jerusalem grew from a ‘traditional highlands town’ to a city up to 60 hectares. When King Hezekiah (729–697) pushed back against the Assyrian state, these population pressures became even more intense as Sennacherib’s conflagration of the northern hill country would have sent tens of thousands of refugees into Jerusalem, as well as the southern ‘suburbs’ of Jerusalem.

Under these intense selection pressures and others (discussed below), the Judean polity would have evolved quite rapidly (Abrutyn and Lawrence 2010); and, like the north before it, it would have needed scribes for administrative purposes (Abrutyn 2015). It is one thing when a polity gradually evolves over a long period of time – e.g., Egypt or Sumer/Akkad; it is different when a state is forced to evolve in a short period of time. In this instance, the need for a scribal class would have been enormous. While there is little hard evidence, given the small footprint 8th-century Judah assumed (Finkelstein 2013), it is also very likely that a dearth of southern scribes would have been present, leaving a yawning structural opportunity to be seized by the wave of human capital coming from the north. It is reasonable to assume many of these scribes would be carrying northern oral and, especially, written traditions (Halpern 2001; Stern 2001; Hutton 2009), the latter of which would carry special authority given the unique place writing had in Antiquity (Schniedewind 2004). Given the proximity the temple at Bethel had to the south, it is also not unreasonable to assume that many of the scribes came from that temple (Schniedewind 2004; Finkelstein 2013). If this is the case, then an important set of traditions would have come with these particular ‘literati,’ or the most likely pool of scribes who would become the first Israelite entrepreneurs. The following section, then, begins by more fully elucidating the exigencies driving the initial evolution of Israelite entrepreneurs.

**Theorizing the evolution of the Israelite religion**

*From northern to southern: inventing ‘Israel’*

If we consider the similar impact that exile, diaspora, deportation, and forced migration have on people across various times and space (Smith-Christopher 2002), the events of the late 8th century take on different meaning and import than is often attributed to that time period. The significance of the destruction of the northern kingdom and its capital has generally been downplayed by biblical scholars, yet it appears there are few reasons to do so. It is known that the Assyrians’ ‘diplomatic policy of “peace” involved deportation and demolition [and that it] was not enough for the conquerors to raze every sign of human habitation in the group, not enough to cut down the trees and burn the crops … [they also] disinterred the dead’ and literally took the topsoil back home (Jonker 1995, 47–48). Their reign of terror would have been something new to Near Eastern peoples,
as pre-Iron Age warfare was not as brutal. Given that the bible reports the events, chronologically, as they are reported in Assyrian documents, and archaeological evidence confirms the extent of the Assyrians’ attack, one could conclude that those on the receiving end of the Assyrian conquest would have experienced serious social-psychological and metaphysical strain. Additionally, their religious system(s) would have been presented a severe challenge in the face of selection pressures arising from the threat of absorption, loss of homeland and political autonomy, and sudden dislocation (Abrutyn 2015). This is obvious given the fact that Assyria swallowed up numerous cultural assemblages, while key cultural components from the north survived in the south and then, later, in Exile and beyond. Perhaps this occurred because the Israelite resilience was more a matter of random luck, but equally likely, they survived because of the intersection between contingency and intentional entrepreneurship that resulted in innovations allowing for the survival and reproduction of northern religious elements.4

**Selection pressures**

In a sense, the late 8th century was the ‘perfect storm’ for rapid, qualitative transformation. Besides the Assyrian conquest providing a massive metaphysical and spiritual dilemma for the northern and southern people to make sense of, it caused a massive migration from the north, threatening to destabilize the south both in terms of its size and diversity. The south would have been inundated by both poor dispossessed farmers, skilled farmers whose land was either destroyed or who were looking for more favorable opportunities, and, of course, the most precious human capital in the ancient world: scribes (Blenkinsopp 1995; Levinson 1997; Schniewind 2004; Ben Zvi 2009). It would be plausible to believe these actors did have an impact on Judean society – a backwater polity at the time. As noted above, the first wave of migration in 722 quickly doubled the size of the southern kingdom; by the end of the 8th century, Jerusalem grew from a small hillside town to nearly 60 hectares (Finkelstein 2013). This population boom had an immediate impact on the economy; signs of its rapid expansion occurred both in terms of greater production of wine and olive oil as well as growing inequality (Blenkinsopp 1995, 32–3; Liverani 2005, 135). Equally important, Judah, having lost its physical buffer to geo-political entanglements, suddenly found itself firmly ensconced in Assyria’s orbit. In 701, all of these pressures intensified, as we are told King Hezekiah decided to end Judah’s vassalage to Assyria, inviting invasion (2 Kgs. 18.7). Consequently, the Assyrians destroyed large chunks of the northern hill country, which is borne out by the growth, during this time period, of Jerusalem and the ‘suburbs’ surrounding the capital. Ultimately, Sennacherib would attack Jerusalem and, somehow, be rebuffed, beginning the gradual decline of Assyrian influence and presence in the region. If the destruction in the north had metaphysical and spiritual consequences, then the successful defense

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4I realize it is not fashionable to suggest a group’s culture may be more ‘adaptive’ than another’s, as it reeks of Social Darwinism. Yet, even in modern times, sociologists and criminologists point to family cultural patterns that promote the health and happiness of their children, as well as those that increase the potential for risk-taking and self-harming behaviors. Thus, it is not argued that ancient Israelites were superior to their neighbors, but rather that their level of solidarity was one contingency intersecting with environmental contingencies that ‘favored’ their survival.
Hezekiah would have been faced with a bigger, denser, and more diverse population, with little of the infrastructure necessary to produce enough for everyone, distribute resources efficaciously, and reduce tensions between kin, ethnic, and occupational strata. Nor would Hezekiah have had the luxury of letting his political sphere grow gradually. Under these pressures, he would have needed to erect a political system capable of dealing with internal problems and, also, the logistical problems caused by being suddenly thrust into a global economy. Most importantly, he would need a scribal class for correspondence, administration, and the construction and maintenance of a kingship ideology (Goody 1986). Within this confluence of events, opportunities for innovation would have become apparent, and entrepreneurship entirely plausible. Moreover, the unique configuration of these selection pressures would not only have increased the chance of successful innovation, but also shaped its initial trajectory. Scribes likely existed in Judah before the fall of the north, but there is little reason to believe there was a sufficient number of them or that they were as skilled as their northern counterparts, who had been deeply embedded in geopolitics and statecraft for several generations – at least as far back as the Omride dynasty (Na’aman 2007). Thus, unlike other cultural assemblages that Assyria swept into history’s dustbin, the northern assemblage found a material base in the suddenly ascendant south, as well as ideological anchorage, as southern Judeans shared several cultural traditions that could easily serve as points for grafting northern traditions (Hutton 2009; Fleming 2012). Furthermore, as the northern kingdom had long been bigger and more successful than the south, to a king like Hezekiah, usurping the traditions and then adding to them so that Judah could re-invent itself politically and ideologically as the true heir to the Israelite traditions would have been enticing (Fleming 2012; Finkelstein 2013).5

Undoubtedly, it would not have been simply a case of synthesizing northern and southern traditions, because the destructive horrors of Assyria’s sieges would have demanded innovative interpretation of these events, as would the loss of the entire northern homeland and holy spaces like Bethel and Samaria and the miraculous survival of Jerusalem against the Assyrian army. Pragmatic problems would have further intensified the need for a new institutional project: the sudden diversity Judah faced because of the influx of migration meant northern scribes would not have been able simply to impose northern traditions. Rather they would have integrated them with extant southern traditions better to placate the Judean people and as part of an effort to compromise with southern scribal or priestly classes who would have legitimate claim to authority (cf. van der Toorn 2007, 93–96). To be sure, northern and southern scribes would have had common ground, and Hezekiah would have had expedient interest in employing the northern scribes without upsetting their southern counterparts. Hence, in an effort to resolve pragmatic problems, Hezekiah would create a situation that favored normative (hermeneutical techniques – cf. Levinson 1997) and organizational (a priestly division of labor) innovations among competing, but complimentary,

5In Mesopotamia, upstart political elites would often add their local god to the top of the pantheon, while preserving the older gods.
strata. The institutionalization of heterodoxy, borne of shared traditions and a zealous commitment to a monolatrous conception of religion (Smith [1987]), was one of the lasting contributions to the evolution of the Israelite and then later Judaic religion. Heterodoxy typically tears a collective apart, introducing sectarianism, but in the midst of pragmatic and metaphysical selection pressures, solutions to reduce conflict and encourage cooperation were crystallized into the first Israelite entrepreneurs’ institutional project.

In short, the first wave of entrepreneurs and the evolution of Israelite religion began in the face of real macro-level forces putting pressure on a group to innovate lest it vanish like other groups. Sociocultural evolution is most likely to happen when several exigencies amplify each other, such as was the case with the destruction of the northern kingdom, rapid population growth in the south due to the influx of refugees, sudden heterogeneity as the south had to absorb northerners, economic expansion that brought both complexity, opportunity, and inequality, as well as the potential competition between northern and southern scribes/priests. There was no guarantee that innovation would happen, or that the Israelite cultural assemblage would survive these exigencies, but several contingencies opened up opportunities: Hezekiah needed scribes for administrative, diplomatic, and ideological purposes; the Assyrians attacked the south, but failed to destroy Jerusalem; the northern refugees would have likely contained some human capital capable of meeting Hezekiah’s expedient needs; and several of the northern traditions would have been commensurate with southern traditions. The question we turn to now is, what was innovative about the first entrepreneurs?

**Zealous entrepreneurs**

Two key innovations, the first normative and the second symbolic, became the hallmark of this first entrepreneurial project. On the one hand, a set of hermeneutical strategies (Levinson 1997) and mnemotechniques (Assmann 2011) became normative patterns of Israelite scribal culture. On the other hand, a zealous effervescent attachment to Yahweh, not as the only deity, but as the only relevant deity to Judean politics and religion became the ‘totemic’ center. The normative pattern shaped the practices of scribes and priests, making the traditions and texts both flexible across sociocultural contexts, while also anchoring it in the techniques themselves, the heterodoxic creative tension, and the portability of an all-powerful Yahweh. The symbolic innovation was both the ritualistic anchor and the source of socioemotional solidarity.

Bellah (2011) has argued it was the portability of the texts that mattered, but portable texts had existed for some time before the 8th century BCE. Moreover, it could not simply be the simplification of the writing via the Hebrew alphabet, as writing itself had been around for millennia and the alphabet for at least 2000 years before the Israelite case. The evolution of religion, then, was not predicated on technological innovation so much as it was rooted in normative innovations that led to what Assmann (2011) calls mnemonic techniques, or normative patterns governing how a scribal culture builds its collective memory and identity through textualization; the hermeneutic techniques that made provided aspects of the traditions rigid anchors while paradoxically affording their interpretation tremendous flexibility was (re)evolutionary (Levinson 1997).
In short, the institutionalization of heterodoxic compromise (Eisenstadt 2012) led to the institutionalization of a living, written tradition open to glossing, editing, and reinterpretation – it was the invention of what Assmann (2011) calls ‘mnemohistory,’ or the construction of an identity through the interpretation and reinterpretation of the past through a contemporary lens; a normative pattern remained alive in books like the Talmud. One need only look at writing in Mesopotamia to understand the radical nature of this innovation: the Assyrian library was a storage facility with little evidence that political or religious documents underwent editing (Machinist 1986) or reinterpretation. Furthermore, the documents were ‘flat’ and functional in the sense that they were produced by a scribal class highly dependent on the political elite for subsistence (Levy 2012, 50ff.). Even in the case of prophecy, we hear nothing of oracles being read to the people, or being attributed to an ‘author’ (Schaper 2013). Besides redefining the role of religious actors and the construction of texts, what made the earliest Israelite entrepreneurs evolutionary forces was their purposeful selection of traditions. In the case of Hezekiah – under intense selection pressures – he needed a state and its apparatus, while the northern and southern scribal classes had to work out their own issues while making sense of the late 8th-century crises. The question, then, is what extant traditions were selected to serve these varied interests?

The answer, I believe, is rooted in the invention of Yahwism as a political, religious, and sometimes integrated ideological force. This position is not accepted in all corners, yet it is difficult to explain why Hosea – or whatever prophetic fragments were brought from the north and combined in a tradition called Hosea – survived until it became canonized (Fleming 2012); or, why the Jacob cycle and the desert tradition continue to play a role in Judean society despite their obvious connection as ‘charter’ myths of the north. Both of these traditions are characterized by the special place Yahweh assumes, and, especially in the former, the zealous effervescent relationship between Yahweh and his ‘people.’ In the past, scholars have overstated the existence of a Yahweh-aloneist movement in the north as early as Elijah/Elisha (early/mid-9th century BCE) (Lang 1983; Smith 1987), yet the idea that some factions had a strong affinity with Yahweh by the fall of Samaria makes sense. For one, Hezekiah would have had pragmatic and ideological interest in elevating a god above all other gods to help legitimate his centralization project. The northern scribes, especially those from Bethel, may have already been carrying a monolatrous system in the form of Yahweh combined with the more generic Canaanite god El and his consort Asherah. The loss of both political center (Samaria) and cultic center (Bethel) may have hastened the adoption of an omnipresent deity who was bigger and badder than all other deities as a symbolic innovation in the face of metaphysical dilemmas. And, given the emotional trauma wrought by the Assyrian conquest and the very real threat of destruction they posed to Hezekiah, the northern scribes’ adopted home (Judah), and all other interested parties in the south, Yahwism would have offered a strong emotional anchorage to combat the metaphysical and political problems facing the community.

Speculative as this thesis might sound, the vast majority of the human capital coming from the north would have likely come from the southernmost territory in Israel, which included the sanctuary of Bethel. (cf. Liverani 2005, 123–135; Finkelstein 2013). Besides the practical skills the Bethel scribes would have carried, they would have brought with them the oral and written traditions related to Yahweh-
El-Baal and his female consort Asherah (Lutzky 1998; Fleming 2012). Scholars have identified these traditions as likely including the Jacob cycle, the exodus tradition, Judges, traditions supporting Samuel and Saul, the Elijah/Elisha stories in Kings, and Hosea and Amos (Römer and de Pury 2000; Halpern 2001; Na’aman 2002; Hutton 2009) – as well as other traditions that may be impossible to identify today because of glossing or because they were abandoned at some point. Additionally, it is possible that if El had already been integrated with Yahweh, then many in the pool of scribes Hezekiah might have drawn from would have been devoted strictly to Yahweh-Asherah. Data collected at the archaeological site Kuntillet ‘Arjurd, for instance, points to this syncretic process as already underway: Yahweh and El had already begun to be integrated conceptually (cf. Smith 2002) and a cult devoted to a ‘Yahweh of Samaria’ had emerged – quite possibly with Bethel as its principal center (Finkelstein 2013, 148–149). If this happened, and Bethel had become a hotbed of Yahwists, this would have added to the chances for their assemblages to survive, especially given the fact that northern peasant Judeans would have been familiar with Bethel as a sanctuary and its traditions, perhaps having made pilgrimages there before Assyria’s incursion. What this suggests, then, is that the eventual invention of monotheism is not the most creative accomplishment of the Israelite entrepreneurs, but rather the gradual result of symbolic, normative, and organizational innovations made long before the idea of monotheism could even have been possible. Though this remains an open debate, it appears as if there were a shift toward an intensely, zealous henotheism or monolatrous theology⁶ that was predicated, in part, on legal innovations (e.g., the covenant) that re-imagined the relationship between the supernatural and the natural (Smith 2002; van der Toorn 2007), while also likely anchoring the theology in socioemotional moorings.

It was the early stages of Yahwism, then, that engendered strong solidarity among diverse strata, compelling the various factions to cooperate and compromise. On the one hand, it was the normative innovations surrounding how the texts were to be treated in terms of selection, editing, glossing, and interpreting. This afforded the entrepreneurial project flexibility as the political, economic, and cultural landscape changed. On the other hand, it was the coalescing around an increasingly singular ‘totemic’ force, Yahweh, which produced a socioemotional and symbolic anchor in the face of change. Indeed, sociological research has shown rituals are notably efficacious at generating solidarity through collective emotions or effervescence (Durkheim 1915 [1995]; Collins 2004, 47–101), as well as motivating individuals and groups to act in the world and to protect a set of traditions against any and all polluting forces. The emotional undercurrents of group life – exacerbated by the supernatural authority of religion – act as the ultimate glue linking people to each other, concrete collectives, and abstract social systems (Lawler, Thye, and Yoon 2009; Turner 2010): social systems which may stand outside of profane time, and stretch for centuries or even millennia (Rappaport 1999). Thus, as it relates to Israel, it was not only the living tradition that mattered, but also the evolution of a zealous effervescence toward Yahweh that could draw an invisible thread linking ancient Israel to the exilic entrepreneurs, post-exilic

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⁶Henotheism or monolatry is the belief and worship of a single god, while acknowledging that other gods exist.
entrepreneurs, and the second Diaspora (Smith 1987; Albertz 2003). If the living tradition was an innovation allowing future generations to intellectualize the past in light of the present, the zealous effervescence was the affectual undergirdings motivating the selection of documents and, importantly, acting out intellectual conclusions. As Lang (1983, 30) remarked, it is ‘the beginnings of the Yahweh alone fanaticism … [that] will finally drive out polytheism.’

As an example of the link between the normative and symbolic innovations, we see that the Book of Hosea survives not by way of his force of personality as past sociologists have claimed (Weber 1917–19 [1952]), or even because he was a real person, but because the traditions carried down from the north served the interests of the scribes – i.e., making sense of the disaster that had recently befallen them (Römer and de Pury 2000), as well as the king and other political elites’ interests in legitimating the polity and its claims. In part, Hosea’s survival reflects the success the scribal entrepreneurs had in entering the political center. Anecdotally, we are told that Isaiah is counsel to Hezekiah (Isa. 36.2–22; 37.1–8), thus highlighting the first prophet gaining access to the true power. Moreover, numerous scholars have noted the nearly identical structure and content of Micah, Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah, which again points to a scribal culture sharing symbolic interests (Blenkinsopp 1995). The scribal entrepreneurs also appear to have found support with some in the rural and urban middle classes, and who Micah purportedly addresses directly (Blenkinsopp 1995; Micah 1.2). What is most remarkable, however, of these prophetic books – especially Hosea – is the zealous attachment to Yahweh presented in the text: in one verse attributed to Hosea, and not later redactors, the author posits: ‘But I have been Yahweh, your god, since your days in Egypt. You shall know no god but me! There is no savior but me!’ (Hos. 13.4). Not only does this statement link Hosea and the bearers of his ‘words’ to the Moses tradition, which legitimates the king’s claims, but it also highlights the covenant between Yahweh and the people. There may be no better example of the zealousness of the Yahwists than Hosea as found in his ‘adultery’ imagery:

On the one hand, Yahweh, as husband, loves Israel, and Israel is to love him in return. On the other hand, Israel is unfaithful and Yahweh’s love therefore becomes hatred and is expressed in punishment… [These] are the language of obsessive passion… [and was] Yahweh’s jealousy which justified the first of his commandments… Consequently the imitation and execution of his jealousy are the particular virtues of his followers. Here the meaning of the term goes over from ‘jealousy’ to ‘zeal’; it is impossible to decide which translation should be preferred. (Smith 1987, 32–33)

7It is true that Durkheim meant that assemblies that featured rhythmically synchronized behavior, ecological boundaries, and common focus could generate powerful affect that was understood as external or outside of the individual’s subjective reality. The use of ‘effervescence’ is more in the spirit of Durkheim’s larger point: religious commitment, and thus the solidarity that tied religious actors in a moral community together, was predicated on collective emotions both in the midst of religious actions as well as reproduced when one saw an object imbued with this emotion. The relationship Yahweh-alonists had with the supernatural, with each other, and with any objects – e.g., social, physical, or ideational – is best described as zealous effervescence. Unlike regular effervescence, the zealousness is not only rooted in the direct or visceral experience of ritual, but in the resistance and reaction by the political and religious elite, and, later, in the belief that the prophesies came true.
Hosea’s (2.4–15) adultery metaphor becomes standard, taking on especially violent imagery with Jeremiah (3) and Ezekiel (16, 23). In the following section, we examine the emergence of a full-blown entrepreneur along with the next great innovative leap: the move from oral to written authority (Schniedewind 2004).

In sum, the evolution of the Israelite religion begins where exigencies (the destruction of the north; population pressures in the south; political dilemmas) intersect with contingencies (a northern scribal class or classes carrying traditions that could both make sense of the north’s demise and which could be grafted onto extant southern ones) and innovation (Yahwism; hermeneutical techniques, a division of labor between the northern and southern scribes and priests). The resulting outcome was a scribal culture that tolerated heterodoxy by: (1) coalescing around a monolatrous Yahwism that was charged with zealous attachment born of trauma and dislocation; (2) instituting techniques for selecting, glossing, and interpreting texts that made them rigid and flexible at the same time; and (3) shared goals and interests related to Hezekiah’s political policy and making sense of the north’s demise. These innovations would become the lasting legacy of the first religious entrepreneur, as they would be adopted by successive entrepreneurs facing their own historical and sociocultural contingencies. The entrepreneurs became forces of selection, as traditions that made sense of the tragedies, elevated and legitimated the south, and celebrated Yahweh’s power or demanded commitment to him would have been chosen over others.

**Transforming northern into southern traditions**

Several events would shape the next part of the evolutionary process: in particular, the rebuffing of Sennacherib, Hezekiah’s (supposed) modest reforms (2 Kgs. 18.4), his son’s (Manasseh’s) renewed apostasy (2 Kgs. 21.2–16), and the reign of Josiah (640–609 BCE) (2 Kgs. 22–23). Within this short century a second and more cohesive entrepreneur would most likely emerge. Scholars often refer to these scribal schools as Deuteronomic or Deuteronomistic, because the core of Deuteronomy (chaps. 12–26) is generally attributed to them during the Josianic era (Römer 2000; van der Toorn 2007). Deuteronomy evolved out of the events that transpired, and reflected a change in the sociocultural conditions in which the Yahwist entrepreneur developed its institutional project (Smith 1987, 36). Unlike the previous entrepreneurial project during Hezekiah’s reign, this new entrepreneur would mostly be driven by endogenous forces – specifically, the loss of power during Manasseh’s reign, and the chance to totally remake society during Josiah’s reign.

**Exigencies and pressure**

If the Yahwists learned of the power of the throne from Hezekiah, they learned the tenuous, ephemeral nature of power when his son, Manasseh, took the throne, expelled the scribal and priestly classes, reintroduced syncretic worship to Jerusalem, and returned Judah to Assyrian vassalage (2 Kgs. 21.2–16). The consequences of Manasseh’s actions alienated several factions, leading to their solidarity in the face of a common threat: the Yahwist priests were suddenly competing with Ba’alist priests for human and material resources; a ‘di-theism’ that would have been an affront to the zealous attachment many in the Yahwist camp felt, reminding them of the northern kings and their purported apostasies; and the nouveaux...
riche (created by the rapid economic expansion) suffered materially from Manasseh’s vassal policies as well as spiritually (Blenkinsopp 1995, 158). The loss of power would have both created and reinforced a sense of shared destiny and threat. Consequently, a coup to replace Amon, Manasseh’s heir, with a nine-year old boy (Josiah) was carried out by the am hā‘āres (‘the people of the land’) (2 Kgs. 21–22), but most likely orchestrated by the ousted scribes and priests.

Symbolic and organizational innovation

It would be under Josiah’s reign, and in the vacuum left by the vanishing Assyrians (Ackroyd 1968, 69), that the next set of adaptive innovations would emerge: the firm shift from oral traditions (and prophecy) to written authority and the shift from traditional notions of the supernatural-natural to the idea of a transcendent supernatural sphere (Schniedewind 2004). Both innovations were in response to the exigencies found in the changing political environment. As in the previous wave of entrepreneurship, these innovations would continue to develop over time and were not firmly ‘fixed’ during Josiah’s reign; what was important, however, was that they emerged within the intersection of exigencies and contingencies. In terms of the first, having seen both the good and bad of political patronage, the scribal classes – supported by a swath of economic strata – sought to protect their ideological power by circumventing the king’s claims to ultimate authority and co-opting the prophetic strand (Bellah 2011, 314). To do so, they shifted authority to the written word, thus making the king dependent upon their unique skill set. In terms of the second, it served to protect the first: by making Yahweh transcendent in time and place, the entrepreneur invented a sacred, religious sphere that was discrete from and above the secular and, at the same time, in control of it. Thus, the ‘ruler’ of the religious sphere, Yahweh (and perhaps Asherah at this time), ruled the secular sphere, while the religious entrepreneurs interpreted the words of god (Eisenstadt 1982).

At the heart of this reform was Deuteronomy, which was a legal document ‘designed to possess full authority over the community it tries to create’ (Noll 2013, 133, emphasis added). A true entrepreneurial project is evolutionary when it creates something new, and the Israelites did just that when they invented the Deuteronomic scroll (Lang 1983; Smith 1987; van der Toorn 2007), or the book of the covenant. For instance, in only two places in the Torah does the term ‘the book of the covenant’ appear: in 2 Kgs. 23.2 and Exodus 24.7 (Schniedewind 2004). In 2 Kings 22, it is the high priest Hilkiah who ‘finds’ the scrolls and Shapan the scribe who reads them to Josiah, and Huldah the high prophetess who confirms their authenticity. This ‘lost’ scroll is directly linked to the Exodus story: Moses goes up Mount Sinai/Horeb twice. The first time he comes down and relays the word of Yahweh orally, and the people promise to obey the commandments (24.1–4). Moses then writes the word of god down (24.7), calling it the ‘book of the covenant.’ In a second tradition (24.12–18), placed immediately after the first tradition, Moses is said to have been called up again, but this time Yahweh himself writes the book with his own finger (Ex. 31.18)! Symbolically, it grafts the Moses story onto the extant ‘wandering desert’ tradition, thereby positioning those who wrote and understood the scroll – the priesthood, scribal class, and court prophetic circle – in a direct line of authority from a mythic time and place; made all the more powerful by theophany. The laws have been lost,
and now they are found – and the ink is perhaps not yet dry! Josiah is immediately overcome with intense emotions and has it read aloud to the leaders of the community, after which he declares it the official law of Judah and begins an ambitious project (2 Kgs. 22.8–23) – a reform project unlike Hezekiah’s in that it would be religious and not political.8

Central to the Deuteronomistic project, then, was: (1) the tenuous balancing between Moses-as-first-prophet and the elevation of the written word (symbolic innovation); (2) spreading human power across ‘several offices with the scroll at the center of all decision making’ (organizational innovation); and (3) monopolizing the legitimate right to develop, transmit, disseminate, and interpret the religious ideology of Yahwism in Judah (normative innovation) – and, later, beyond (Noll 2013, 133; also, van der Toorn 2007, 151ff.). Not coincidentally, Deuteronomy became the actual linchpin between the Torah and the historical narrative, and a symbolic linchpin legitimating Judean supremacy through the invention of a ‘pan-Israelite’ ethnicity (Ben Zvi 2009). In a sense, it concretized the source material that would become the heart and anchor of the living tradition and embodiment of zealous effervescence. Not surprisingly, the scrolls, even today, take center stage in every synagogue and incite intense reverence. A shared sense of history and destiny emerged among these entrepreneurs, pressured by the exogenous crises of the near-past as well as by endogenous exigencies of the immediate presence. Just as the Babylonians and the Egyptians began to return to the geopolitical scene, the Yahwist entrepreneur coalesced around

the legends and history of the people, their laws and customs, and the teachings of those prophets who had demanded worship of Yahweh alone … At the heart of the system is the teaching of the Yahweh-alone prophets: Yahweh’s jealous love for Israel. (Smith 1987, 39)

That is, the previous adaptations – hermeneutical techniques and social bonds anchored in – were grafted onto the new ones, the elevation of written authority and reimagining Yahweh and the supernatural as transcendent. In turn, this new cultural assemblage provided the second entrepreneur with a potentially portable, coherent cultural memory. All that would be necessary for this cultural assemblage to be selected for or against, was another set of selection pressures capable of reducing competition, encouraging solidarity, and favoring some entrepreneurs over others.

The final ‘act’

Numerous questions surround the exile, in particular how much, if any, a role the deportees played in shaping the evolution of the Israelite religion (Davies 2008). Additionally, it remains an open question as to whom the deportees were – elites only or a mixed set of strata – and whether the returnees who eventually rebuilt Jerusalem were direct descendants or ‘spiritual’ descendants (cf. Blenkinsopp 2009). What is not in doubt is the fact that the Babylonians laid waste to most of

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8 As Weber (among others) have argued, political projects are focused primarily on power and coordinating divisions of labor. Religious projects, while also focused on power sometimes, are rooted in control over psychic violence and symbolic power. They are rooted in pursuit of monopolies over communicating with the supernatural, accessing the sacred and dispensing piety.
Judah and myriad surrounding kingdoms (Stager 1996; Stern 2001). Thus, some simple facts serve to raise challenging questions regarding the critical biblical school’s assertions. Today, the Philistines’ cultural assemblage does not exist, nor does it appear to have survived the 6th century (Stern 2006). How could the Judean cultural assemblage been fictionalized several centuries after the fall of Jerusalem if the adaptive innovations, as elucidated above, had not already been constructed and a capable and motivated entrepreneur been in existence to sustain them? In addition, archaeology confirms that massive depopulation happened in Judah (Smith-Christopher 2002), while also pointing to the dearth of political or economic resources necessary to sustain or expand a literary community broad and deep enough to write or develop these texts (Schniedewind 2004; Finkelstein 2013). As such, it could be argued that: (1) the political disaster that followed Josiah’s death (609) at the hands of Pharaoh Necho (2 Kgs. 23.34–37); (2) the assault and policies of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon on Jerusalem (captured in 597 BCE; raze to the ground in 587) (2 Kings 18.31–32; Jer. 38.2; Ezek. 11); and (3) the exile that lasted for, at least, two generations (c.587–538) made up the second acceleration of sociocultural evolution, or a moment of social selection resembling ‘bottlenecking’ in biological evolution.

Several exigencies emerged during this period that was probably more intense in magnitude than previously. First, a parallel, yet more severe collective trauma pressed against the Judeans. That is, the exilic community was faced with the most massive existential dilemmas possible (Smith-Christopher 2002; Albertz 2003): if Yahweh was Israel’s only god, how were Yahwists to deal with him being weaker than Babylon’s god? Furthermore, how were the Yahwists to reconcile Yahweh’s love for his people, Jerusalem, and the land with their near complete destruction? Second, the physical home of Yahweh was destroyed, demanding interpretation and, concomitantly, favoring the strands of transcendentalism that had begun to emerge after the destruction of the north and which had become increasingly salient during Josianic times. Third, the Diaspora was not large, but the quality of deportees was significantly drawn from the royal family, priesthood, and scribal classes (Edelman 2009). These elites would have inherited the various strands of the previous two entrepreneurial projects and, in exile, been presented with new constraints and risks as well as new opportunities for innovation. It is perhaps here that the anchorage in a monolatrous deity and Deuteronomic text provided the portable center, while the hermeneutic techniques and tolerance of heterodoxy generated a flexibility other deported groups lacked. Fourth, archaeological evidence, Babylonian documents, and the Hebrew Bible confirm that the Judean deportees appeared to have been occupationally mobile in exile; likewise, they suggest that the deportees were allowed to live in religio-ethnic enclaves that served as financial centers, as well as afforded them the freedom to practice their religion (Pearce 2006).

Prevailing conditions generated contradictory selection pressures essential to the trajectory of Israelite evolution: from one perspective, an educated group became detached from the physical and organizational demands of monarchical, scribal duties and the centralized Jerusalem temple-cult responsibilities, while carrying a still-developing set of traditions, a zealous effervescent relationship with each other, Jerusalem, and Yahweh, and, given the amount of redaction and glossing found throughout the first half of the Hebrew Bible, the willingness to treat these traditions as living and mutable. From another perspective, the Babylonian exile
presented conditions favoring assimilation and absorption – thus intermarriage, conversion, and the like were very real dangers (Albertz 2003). In short, the pre-exilic Judeans entered the exile as loosely coupled groups of collectives, with a shared sense of history, shaped by the Josianic Deuteronomists and strong overlapping sociocultural and socioemotional anchorages. The physical, emotional, textual, and cultural constraints placed on these people led to powerful selective forces which favored traditions that made the most sense of the predicative events and sustained the collective in the face of powerful acculturative pressures. In Lang’s (1983, 41) words:

The hour of the Yahweh-aloneists had come. Polytheistic Israel [was] dead [in the exile], and out of its ashes arises [a monolatrous Israelite religion], being firmly based on the teachings of the aloneist movement. The decline of the state and the Babylonian exile [came to be representative of] results of polytheistic heresy and as punishments of the god who is to be worshipped exclusively.

Within this crucible, a third entrepreneur left the exile ‘a tight-knit, cohesive social group’ with a shared body of traditions, sense of history and destiny, and set of goals (Ben Zvi 2009, 17), even if the interests and motives within the entrepreneurial unit were not always perfectly aligned; the bottleneck created by various sources of social selection had weakened rival entrepreneurs, while certain conditions set by Persian policy further selected for the exilic entrepreneurs. Under these conditions, two key innovations of the entrepreneurs’ became lasting in the evolutionary process: the symbolic resolution of the pressing metaphysical questions and the organizational changes put into practice during the second Temple era and, more essentially, after the fall of the Second Temple (70 CE).

**Symbolic innovations**

The great solution, predicated on a zealous answer to the two pressing issues that led to new innovations was proto-monotheism. If Yahweh were the only god, then the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem could be reconciled as having been ‘commissioned’ by Yahweh and, thereby, a sign of his omnipotence. Furthermore, if Yahweh were omnipotent, he could be omnipresent. This symbolic innovation was a major step towards monotheism, as it suggested the supernatural did not really dwell in any single physical domain, but rather was everywhere: portable like the scrolls these entrepreneurs carried. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple – both symbols in the Near East of a deity’s literal home – were not signs of his destruction, but punishment meted out on his ‘adulterous’ children and, in addition, further signification of Yahweh’s unlimited power (Isa. 44.28). Wherever the Judeans/Israelites went, Yahweh would be there too, which also meant Jerusalem and Judah could be rebuilt. Though it is impossible to ascertain whether monotheism was born in exile, the closest line to acknowledging this new theory of god could be said to have been written within the Isaiah tradition (Isa. 44.6–8). With this symbolic innovation came a shift in tone from anger to hope. Deutero-Isaiah (40.12–17) ‘prophesies’ Persia’s destruction of Babylon and, subsequently, the freeing of the Exilic Jews as both a sign of Yahweh’s mastery over history and all

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9Scholars identify three ‘authors’ in Isaiah: the first in chapters 1–39; Deutero-Isaiah in chapters 40–55; and Trito-Isaiah in 56–66.
people, but also further validation of the Yahweh-aloneist’s zealous commitment to their project.

Moreover, with this innovation Yahweh became something eternal, wholly outside of profane time (Isa. 40.28); and, given his role in the desert-exodus tradition, he became the first ‘center-less’ deity wandering with his people (Abrutyn 2015). As a result, the Exodus narrative was elevated beyond its previous function: as a link between those finding Deuteronomy and Moses receiving the scroll. When the scroll is placed in the Ark, Yahweh and the scroll (and thus the tradition and the people) became mobile. In parts added to the original core of Deuteronomy, the exilic entrepreneurs invented an artificial world in which the fictitious Moses anticipated the coming exile hundreds of years in the future (Deut. 4.25–31; 28:64–68; 29:27) … Real time [was] dissolved by this rhetoric, and Deuteronomy became the voice of Moses, the voice of Yahweh, for all times. (Noll 2013, 133–134)

Freed from the constraints of a political or religious center, the idea that the sacred sphere resists man-made time and place became crystallized.

Religious autonomy: conjuring up distinction

If the evolution of religion follows the adaptive efforts of entrepreneurs, recall it is the institutional sphere that is the unit of evolution – that is, when entrepreneurs become ‘free’ to reconfigure the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic world, they become capable of making their assemblage last for several generations or more, while simultaneously imposing it on a large swath of the population. In Shils’s (1975, 36–37) words, an autonomous institutional sphere develops a ‘center of gravity’ within itself, i.e., it must have its own system of authority within its own boundaries. It must also have its own culture … [And, it] will consist of beliefs about the history and nature of the society, its relationship to certain ideal or transcendent entities or values, its origin and destiny. It will include beliefs about the rightfulness of its existence as a [distinct space] and about what qualifies its members to belong.

The exiled entrepreneurs lacked a physical center. Jerusalem was laid to waste; Judah was depopulated and then repopulated by first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians with people from other lands with other faiths; and the golah (exilic community) was under threat of assimilation. Again, the only possible center could be found in the symbolic and normative innovations of previous entrepreneurial projects; key aspects that shaped a scribal cultural assemblage that could sustain the acculturative assault from the Babylonian culture.

Some, like Ezekiel (40–48), re-imagined the return to Judah and invented a new religious center: the rebuilt temple. This temple would be autonomous from the political sphere, and Yahweh would be above whatever king was created. This was radical, as all previous states had a distinct division of labor: political elites ruled and religious elites legitimated their rule. That the religious sphere could be physically, temporally, socially, and symbolically distinct was unimaginable, as was the idea that religious entrepreneurs could put political counterparts in check (Eisenstadt 1982; Bellah 2011). In actuality, the Deuteronomic entrepreneurs began this process, but it was being freed from the burdens of ruling and being responsible for rituals that allowed these entrepreneurs to invent a new world.
Ezekiel achieved religious autonomy by reimagining the boundaries protecting religious claims to authority and resources. This meant physically protecting the Temple from the Palace, as well as prohibiting any non-religious actors from using it for political or economic activities (Ezek. 43.7–8). Besides physical boundaries, religious elites would also seek material independence by drawing their subsistence not from the king, but from the people (Ezek. 45.1–8; 48.8–14). Indeed, the covenant was between Yahweh and the people, not Yahweh through the king to the people; and, as such, religious actors were structurally and symbolically freed from the political realm. This meant the status of the priests was no longer legitimated by the king, but by the people (Ezek. 43.1–5, 10), which further shrank the distance between the people and Yahweh.

Sacred space was tied closely to sacred time: the spatial dimensions of the Temple correspond to the year in exile in which Ezekiel had his vision and halfway to the jubilee year of redemption (Ezek. 40.1). The building of Solomon’s Temple (1 Kings 6.37–38) took seven years in accordance with the seven days of creation; and, perhaps most importantly, ‘the axial points of [the Priestly history] are the creation of the world, the construction of the wilderness sanctuary, and its erection at Shiloh after the settlement of the land’ (Blenkinsopp 1995, 112). These temporal innovations brought the exilic experience into the interpretive frame of the Exodus, the creation mythos that was becoming increasingly important during exile, and the construction of the first temple. Each event was probably considered real, but standing outside of profane time (Assmann 2011).

In addition to Ezekiel’s pursuit of structural autonomy, some exilic entrepreneurs sought to recenter the religious sphere into the individual through a personal soteriology: if Yahweh and the Deuteronomic texts were portable, then the center could be in each of Yahweh’s ‘children.’ By centering the sacred into the individual self, the person became the portable vessel, with the center of gravity being ‘activated’ through rituals meant to pull the person and his/her family into the stream of sacred time. This symbolic innovation clearly supplemented the structural and cultural separation of the religious sphere – physically, temporally, socially, and symbolically – from earthly spheres like kinship or polity (Ezek. 40–48; also, see Num. 2:1–34; 10:13–28). That is, it is only within a distinct religious center and autonomous religious domain that the everyday experiences of those coming into contact with the domain – along with their goals, decision-making processes, lines of action, strategies, worldviews, and interests – could be re-oriented toward the religious core, which was partially found within the self (Abrutyn 2015). The decisions made in exile, and subsequently instituted upon return, would have consequences for the evolution of later cultural aspects of Jewishness – e.g., the prevalence of literacy – and, thereby, the construction of post-Second Commonwealth social niches during the European diaspora (Levy 2011). For instance, the exilic entrepreneurs demanded that every (male) Jew be taught the fundamentals of the religion at a young age (Deut. 4.6), a key evolutionary innovation that found its fitness during the Second Temple era and during the second Diaspora. In terms of the former, it became increasingly important that the men of the community be literate, as text became increasingly more important to linking the community and the people to Yahweh, as well as inculcating piety.

In addition, the Sabbath was institutionalized during the exile as a way of bringing families into contact with the holy on a weekly basis, while also tying it to the local community and the centralized Temple (Lang 1983, 43; Albertz 2003). Another
example of bringing families together came through the integration of the feast of Matzot (a cultic ritual) (Deut. 16.1–8) with the Passover ritual (traditionally an annual family ritual), which drew a palpable link between the family units in the community, each family with the synagogue/priest/rabbi, each family with the community with the real and imagined past community, and, in particular, each father with his child (Assmann 2011). Every male became responsible for acting as direct vessel of the sacred, passing on the Passover (charter myth) story to their children (Albertz 1992–94, 213; cf. Deut. 6.20; Josh. 5.10–12; Ex. 12.1–14, 43–50) and, thereby, becoming one link in a seemingly unending chain of cultural transmission. Thus, these innovations allowed for the ‘internalization of the Israelite’s relation to God and an ethical penetration of it at all levels, leading to a closer link between personal piety and official religion’ (Albertz 1992–94, 211).

Concluding thoughts

In essence, entrepreneurship is the engine of some types of sociocultural evolution, specifically, institutional evolution. Where macro-level exigencies intersect with historical and sociocultural contingencies, entrepreneurship becomes plausible. Through symbolic, normative, and organizational innovation, entrepreneurs seek to deal with real or imagined exigencies within the constraints of their particular environments. To be sure, the invention of a monotheistic religious system, with a transcendental god, may be adaptive in the long run in terms of its ability to create cooperation in big, depersonalized societies, but the innovations are rarely created to serve these purposes. Rather, the evolution of monolatry and then monotheism was a product of religious entrepreneurs dealing with both the pragmatic and metaphysical dilemmas that were salient to them, while also being conscious of their own interests.

In the case of the Israelites presented above, three discernible entrepreneurial waves were identified. The first came as the northern kingdom of Israel collapsed and a set of endogenous and exogenous selection pressures emerged that favored entrepreneurship towards both a source of solidarity and ontological certainty (the centralization of the cult and the elevation of a monolatrous supernatural) and a normative pattern for selecting traditions that both made sense of the north’s demise and the south’s claims to legitimacy. The second wave came after the Hezekian reforms were abandoned and, in fact, rolled back. Under these renewed selection pressures that directly threatened the material and ideal interests of several strata, a new entrepreneur emerged to put Josiah on the throne and innovate, once again: the invention of Deuteronomy elevated the written word, drawing a direct link to the tablets Yahweh wrote with his own finger, while also deepening the zealous effervescent link to Yahweh. Finally, with the destruction of the southern kingdom, Jerusalem, and the Second Temple, the deportees faced new pressures of a greater magnitude. In exile, freed from the constraints of political and religious duties and carrying the previous two entrepreneurs’ innovations in both the portable scrolls and the scribal cultural assemblage, two further innovations emerged: the severing of the supernatural from a physical location and the reconfiguration of the image of society and self. In the latter two, the seeds for religious autonomy were present as Ezekiel laid out the organizational and symbolic plans for an idealized society in which the religious sphere was elevated above and beyond the political or kinship, while other entrepreneurs sought to
transfer Yahweh and the text’s portability into the self and the soul; a point, incidentally, made by Bellah (2011, 314ff.) in his discussion of the Shema prayer and the ‘grafting’ of self directly onto Yahweh (see also Levy 2012, 19–20). At every step of the way, entrepreneurship, and therefore the trajectory of evolution, was shaped by the pragmatic and metaphysical exigencies felt by the entrepreneurs and the historical and sociocultural circumstances that channeled and blocked their choices.

For the sake of brevity, this article was unable to explore the entire evolutionary history of the Israelite religion. A complete analysis would require considering the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman eras in addition to the varied experience of the Second Diaspora. For what has been analyzed, suffice it to say that when the exiles returned to Judah, they came with a living, established tradition – replete with a series of written texts, a belief in their authority, and confidence in their ideological commitment. In addition, the invention of a transcendental henotheism that was simultaneously rooted in Jerusalem and in the written traditions proved highly adaptive over the course of the next 500 to 600 years. Underneath this intellectual source of solidarity were the powerful socioemotional dynamics of the zealous effervescence, which bolstered their confidence, their claims of legitimacy, and their belief in the sacred link between their project and the real and imagined past that was breathing in the scrolls. Further, the traumas wrought by Assyria and then Babylon were collectivized in the written texts. It is within these adaptations and the different phases and episodes described above that the nascent Israelite religion took root.

Future research could explore not only how the theoretical framework provides clarity to other eras of Judaism’s evolution, but in addition, other cases of religious evolution. While the specific goal herein was to elucidate a theory by way of concrete case – that of the Israelites – much work remains. As several religions evolved at around the same time as the Israelite case – e.g., Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism – during the so-called Axial Age (c.800–200 BCE), some degree of parallel evolution (similar to the process found 5000 years ago in the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Chinese, and Indus Valley states) most likely existed. Future research should compare two or more of these events to each other, teasing out the diachronic and synchronic aspects. Examination of other moments of sociocultural evolution might also benefit from this type of sociological framework – e.g., besides the transformation of political society in the earliest states, the evolution of law in Europe beginning around the 11th century may prove fruitful, as would the consideration of science in the Islamic civilization in the 12th to 14th centuries and then again in Europe from the 17th to 20th centuries. Though these analyses lay outside the scope of this paper, it is believed the strengths of this theoretical framework remain clear and worth extending.

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