

PAUL



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PAUL
THE PAGANS'
APOSTLE

Paula Fredriksen

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This is for Krister.

The past is gone; and the truth of what is past lies in
our own judgment, not in the past event itself.

Augustine of Hippo, *Contra Faustum* 26.5

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PREFACE

The Kingdom of God, Paul proclaimed, was at hand. His firm belief that he lived and worked in history's final hour is absolutely foundational, shaping everything else that Paul says and does. And this conviction is all the more remarkable when we consider that, by the time that we hear from him, mid-first century, the Kingdom is already late.

We easily lose sight of this fact. Our historical perspective obscures it. We look backward, and for good reason see Paul's epistles as "early," a mere couple of decades after Jesus's execution. But while history is always done backward, life is lived only forward, one day at a time. This means that our view of Paul's circumstances and experience can never be the same as Paul's. When the god of Israel revealed his son to Paul (c. 34 C.E.), Paul had understood what it meant: the establishment of God's Kingdom could not be far behind. But Paul gives this interpretation in letters addressed to his gentile community in Corinth some twenty long years after the event (1 Cor 15.12–52). Why—how—can he still be so sure? And in another letter, written even later, we find him yet again asserting the nearness of the End: "You know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to awake from sleep. Our salvation is nearer *now* than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand" (Rom 13.11–12). How many years, by this point, stood between Paul and his call to proclaim this good news? Why—*how*—after the passage of so much time, can Paul still be so sure that he knows the hour on God's clock?

This is the question that drives the present study. It will lead us into a Jewish world incandescent with apocalyptic hopes: that God verged on realizing his ancient promises to Israel; that the messiah had come, and would soon come again; that the dead were about to be raised and, together with the living, transformed; that the nations and even the nations' gods would shortly turn to worship the god of Israel. And it will propel us into a Mediterranean world thick with ancient actors: pagans and Jews; healers and prophets; angels and demons; Greeks and Romans; and, not least, angry superhuman forces, divine powers, and hostile cosmic gods. Both worlds are Paul's, and his convictions about the first shaped his actions in the second.

Paul held these convictions as a committed Jew, and he *enacted* them as a committed Jew. In brief, so this study will argue, Paul lived his life entirely within his native Judaism. Later traditions, basing themselves on his letters, will displace him from this context. Through the retrospect of history, Paul will be transformed into a "convert," an ex- or even an anti-Jew; indeed, into the founder of gentile Christianity. But Paul did not know and could not know what these later generations, looking backward, did know: that his mission would end without the return of the messiah. That shortly after his lifetime, Rome would destroy his god's temple and his city, Jerusalem. That new gentile movements independent of and hostile to Judaism would crystallize around his letters, claiming their theologies as Paul's own.

But Paul lived his life—as we all must live our lives—innocent of the future. As historians, we conjure that innocence as a disciplined act of imagination, through appeals to our ancient evidence. Only in so doing can we begin to see Paul as Paul saw himself: as God's prophetic messenger, formed in the womb to carry the good news of impending salvation to the nations, racing on the edge of the End of time.

INTRODUCTION

THE MESSAGE AND THE MESSENGER

Paul, slave of Jesus Christ, called to be his messenger, set apart for God's good news—promised beforehand through his prophets in the sacred scriptures—concerning his son, from the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead: Jesus Christ our lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship in order to bring the obedience of faithfulness on behalf of his name to all the nations, including to you.

Romans 1.1–6

This is Paul's self-introduction, midcentury, to a community that he did not yet know: former pagans, now followers of Christ, gathered in the empire's capital city, Rome. His opening lines reveal much about the dramatic transformations of this upstart Jewish movement in the decades following Jesus's death. Jesus himself, teaching in Aramaic, had gone to fellow Jews in the Galilee and in Judea. Moving between villages and his people's sacred citadel, the temple in Jerusalem,¹ Jesus had proclaimed the message of his own slain mentor, John the Baptizer: God's Kingdom, they both taught, was at hand.²

Paul, Jesus's "slave" (*doulos*) and "messenger" (*apostolos*), continued to proclaim this message; but he lived and worked in a much bigger world. Paul taught, thought, and heard scripture in Greek, the English of

Mediterranean antiquity. Paul traveled widely, ranging along the *via Egnatia*, the great East–West highway that connected the cities of Asia Minor and of Greece to Rome. And Paul took the “good news” of God’s approaching Kingdom not to fellow Jews, but to a much larger population: Paul preached to pagans.³

In the time between Jesus and Paul, more than the ethnicity of their respective audiences had shifted. The content of their message, this “good news,” had altered too. Jesus, if we can trust the later gospel portraits of him, had summoned his Jewish audiences to repent of their sins in preparation for the Kingdom’s coming. “The Kingdom of God is at hand: Repent, and trust in the good news!” (Mk 1.15). Within its original intra-Jewish context, this call to repentance had specific content. *Metanoieite*, the Greek word that the gospels used for Jesus’s summons, implies a change of mind (*nous* means “mind” in Greek). But this idea rests on the Hebrew word *tshuv*, “turn,” hence the later rabbinic term for repentance, *tshuvah*. “Turning” from sin within a Jewish context meant, specifically, returning to the covenant between God and Israel, that is, to the teachings of the Torah.⁴

Other traditions about John the Baptizer and about Jesus also point in this direction of linking Torah-observance/*tshuvah* to preparation for the Kingdom. Josephus, contemporary with the gospel writers, relates that the Baptizer urged his hearers to “purify themselves by right conduct,” specifically by practicing justice (Greek *dikaiosynē*) toward each other and piety (Greek *eusebeia*) toward God (AJ 18.116–19). “Justice” and “piety” in this context are not pious abstractions: they are a two-word code for a core tradition of the Sinai covenant, the Ten Commandments. The first five commandments comprise the first table of the Law, *eusebeia*, governing relations with God (exclusive worship; no images; no abuse of God’s name; keeping the Sabbath; honoring parents). The second five, or second table of the Law, *dikaiosynē*, govern relations between people (thus, forbidding murder, adultery, theft, lying, and coveting).

This same theme of keeping (especially) the Ten Commandments echoes in gospel traditions about Jesus. When asked what were the greatest of the commandments, the Jesus of the Synoptic tradition answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6.4 (love of God, that is, *eusebeia*) and Leviticus 19.18 (love of neighbor, that is, *dikaiosynē*, Mk 12.29–31 and parallels).

Elsewhere he cites these forthrightly. “You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and your mother’” (Mk 10.19). And again like John, Jesus evidently linked the message of the Kingdom’s coming and his call to repentance with threats of eternal punishment, the dire consequences of apocalyptic judgment: by such, both men focused their listeners’ attention on God’s burning anger toward sinners, the better to spur them to repentance.⁵

Paul’s *evangelion* did and did not continue in this vein. He too spoke of the Kingdom’s rapid approach, and he warned his listeners of God’s wrath against sinners. And from time to time he too urged them to conduct their lives according to the standard of the commandments, and specifically of (most of) the Ten Commandments (e.g., 1 Cor 7.19; Rom 13.8–10). But his letters are also filled with what might seem like the opposite message: warnings against the Law, demands that his congregations *not* observe it, claims that the Law languished under the power of sin and of death (e.g., Rom 7.7–25).

Most dramatically changed in the period between Jesus and Paul, however, is the figure of Jesus himself. In Paul’s *evangelion*, Jesus has become a main feature of the message. Jesus is the *Christos*, God’s “son” and his messiah.⁶ In 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, and Romans, Paul connected Jesus intimately with a dramatic and definitive End-time event, the resurrection of the dead (1 Thes 4.13–18; 1 Cor 15 passim; Rom 1.4 and 11.15). And finally, and momentously, and most surprisingly—another significant change from the message and the mission of Jesus of Nazareth—Paul declared that the good news about the establishment of Israel’s messiah and of the Kingdom of Israel’s god as forespoken by Israel’s prophets in Israel’s scriptures was meant as well to go to the *ethnē*, the “nations,” that is, to pagan hearers.

To understand these few lines of Paul’s brief self-introduction in Romans, then, we need to skip back almost three decades, to a prehistoric (that is, prerecorded) moment of this movement, the time before we have any writings from its members. The origins of Paul’s gospel trace not only to the mission and message of Jesus of Nazareth (27–30 C.E.?), but even more dramatically and specifically, to traditions about his resurrection.



What happened then is now impossible to say. Our different sources tell different stories; only the broadest outlines are clear. Absolutely certain that Jesus of Nazareth had died, some of his followers began to perceive, and then to proclaim, that Jesus lived again. God, they said, had raised him from the dead.

Paul, mid-first century, is our earliest source for this tradition, and he implies that these experiences were visual: Christ “was seen” (*ōphthē*), he says, first by Peter (“Cephas”), then by “the twelve” (the inner group of Jesus’s followers). Then he “was seen” (same verb again, *ōphthē*) by almost 500 followers; thereafter by James (Jesus’s brother); and then finally “by all the apostles” (1 Cor 15.5–7). “Last of all,” Paul concludes this passage, Christ appeared to him (*ōphthē* again, v. 8; cf. 9.1: “Have I not seen Jesus our lord?”).

Where did all these visions occur? Paul says nothing about the venues of the original community’s experiences, but he implies in his letter to the Galatians that his vision came to him in Damascus (Gal 1.15–17). A generation or two after Paul, the evangelists will situate the initial resurrection appearances variously in the Galilee (thus Mark and Matthew), or in or around Jerusalem (Luke, John), and they will name different initial witnesses, whether female followers, Peter, or anonymous disciples.⁷ What did they see? Christ in a spiritual body, Paul insists, and definitely *not* in a body of flesh and blood (1 Cor 15.44, 50). Christ in a flesh-and-blood body, some later evangelists insist no less strongly (Lk 24.39–40; Jn 20.27).⁸

At what point did the risen Christ appear? According to the gospels, shortly after Jesus’s crucifixion. But Acts recounts that the risen Christ appeared continuously for forty days in and around Jerusalem after Jesus’s resurrection (Acts 1.3–12). And Paul’s chronology suggests that his own vision came to him quite a while thereafter, in distant Damascus (thus c. 34? The movement needed time to consolidate, to organize enough to spread out from Jerusalem, and to reach Syria). Clearly, “the” resurrection was not a single event, but a protracted series of visionary experiences occurring variously and in widely different places over an extended period—in Paul’s case, several years after Jesus’s crucifixion.

Despite the confusions and contradictions of our sources and the uncertainties about what they recount, this conviction that God had raised Jesus from the dead opens up onto an entire world of ancient Jewish biblical and extrabiblical traditions and fiercely held expectations and commitments. And these in turn all cohere with Jesus's inaugural proclamation, "The Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1.15).

This foundational prophecy provided much of the content of the early movement's message as well as its motivation. Yet by itself, it probably would not have sufficed to posthumously propel Jesus's followers out of Jerusalem to Caesarea and to Jaffa, thence to Damascus, to Antioch, and eventually to Rome. Other visionary Jews, centuries to either side of Jesus's lifetime, had uttered similar prophecies and also gathered their own groups of committed followers; but no sustained missionary movements had grown in the aftermath of their deaths.⁹

What distinguishes Jesus from his mentor John the Baptizer, or from the Dead Sea sectarians' Teacher of Righteousness, or from the signs prophets described by Josephus, or from the authors of apocalypses whether canonical or apocryphal, is this singular claim that some of his followers made *about* him—namely, that he had been raised from the dead.

That claim tells us nothing directly, of course, about the historical Jesus himself. Nor, as we have just seen, does it help us much in reconstructing the actual experience of his earliest disciples: the written traditions are too late and too various. What this claim does provide, however, is a strong index of the degree to which Jesus's followers lived, thought, and worked within a framework of apocalyptic expectations—or, rather, within *two* apocalyptic frameworks. The first was older and traditional, the second recent and particular.

The older framework drew upon Jewish convictions about God's Kingdom as an event at the End of Days, the historical realization of God's promises of redemption to Israel. (Christ had come, explained Paul to his gentile readers in Rome, precisely in order to confirm these promises: Rom 15.8; cf. 1.2–3.) Within this older context, as we shall see, the resurrection of the dead had come to be anticipated as one of a number of God's saving final acts. As such, resurrection was imagined as an event that would be both eschatological (that is, occurring at or as the

End-time) and communal (see Ezek 37.11, “the whole house of Israel”; cf. 1 Cor 15.12–16).

As measured by these older traditions, then, claims about Jesus’s own resurrection would have been doubly anomalous: they concerned not a collective, but an individual; and thereafter, time and the quotidian had continued. But the disciples also functioned within a second apocalyptic framework, the recent and particular teaching of Jesus himself: not just that the Kingdom was coming, but that it was coming *very soon*. If we can trust a theme present in the later gospels (which were written probably sometime between c. 70 and c. 100), Jesus had taught that his own activities—healings and exorcisms—themselves demonstrated or enacted the Kingdom’s kinetic proximity.¹⁰ In other words, it was less the content of Jesus’s message as such that had distinguished it from that of so many others, but rather its urgent timetable, his insistence that the eschatological future impinged *now*, upon the present. And the pressing urgency of his good news combined with the degree to which Jesus forged his immediate followers into a community utterly committed to himself, to his prophecy, and to his singular authority in announcing it. Indeed, his followers’ insistence that Jesus had been raised measures the intensity of their commitment: his death neither disillusioned (many of?) them nor, in their view, could it disconfirm his prophecy.¹¹

These two apocalyptic frameworks, ancient and proximate, combined powerfully, mutually reinforcing each other, as the disciples sought the significance of their own experience of a raised Jesus. Jesus’s individual resurrection, they reasoned, reinforced his original message by itself heralding the eschatological End-time, thus the coming general resurrection and the establishment of God’s Kingdom. (Decades later, Paul would encourage his gentile communities by teaching similarly, 1 Thes 4.13–18; 1 Cor 15.12–24.) For these disciples, Jesus’s resurrection supported and even vindicated the foundational gospel prophecy: the Kingdom truly was at hand. The risen Jesus was thus in a sense the first swallow of the impending eschatological spring.

But why should these resurrection experiences have supported an identification of Jesus as “messiah”? Why would such a conviction lead his apostles to continue, and even to expand, Jesus’s original mission to

Israel? What prompted their extending this idiosyncratically Jewish message even further, to pagans? By what criteria would these pagans be included in this movement? And what about this mission and its message would provoke the hostility of other Jews, of other pagans, of Roman magistrates, and even, as Paul will complain, of pagan gods (e.g., 2 Cor 4:4; 11:25–28)?

To understand all of these developments, and to see more clearly Paul's important place within them, we need to situate Paul's letters within their two generative contexts, the scriptural and the social. The first, the sacred texts and traditions of Israel and the ways that late Second Temple Jews would have interpreted these especially in light of apocalyptic hopes, represents an explicitly and idiosyncratically Jewish context, though one in which the idea of the non-Jewish nations played various prominent roles. The second, the world of the Greco-Roman city, which was Paul's apostolic ambit, represents a wide-flung and explicitly pagan social context, though one into which Jewish populations had been comfortably settled for centuries by Paul's lifetime. We begin, then, with scriptural stories, before turning to social institutions and behaviors.

ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS

We think of the Bible as a book. It begins at the beginning, with Genesis, and it proceeds to its closing—2 Chronicles for Jews, Revelation for Christians—tucked neatly between two covers. But the Greek term that stands behind the modern English equivalent—*ta biblia*, “the books”—conveys more accurately the manifold nature of these ancient texts. This collection comprises a multitude of individual writings, whose period of composition stretches for well over a millennium. And its discrete writings are themselves composite documents, containing within their seeming unity a diachronic multitude of voices, literary genres, religious and political visions, local oral traditions—the work of countless now-lost authors, editors, and scribes. The Bible is not a book: it is a library.

No one in Paul’s period would ever have seen a “Bible.” Individual texts or discrete collections (such as Psalms, or Proverbs, or various prophets) were bound together as separate scrolls. The scriptural texts in themselves, further, were unstable: Qumran’s library of twenty-one Isaiah manuscripts, for example, preserves over 1,000 individual textual variants. Other books, noncanonical now but authoritative for different Jewish communities then, recast, updated, or expanded the earlier biblical stories. (Jubilees, an extremely important apocryphon from the second century B.C.E., retells in accents peculiar to itself the older stories from Genesis and Exodus; other important traditions, associated with the

figure of Enoch, retail visions of fallen angels, of an apocalyptic Jerusalem, and of the coming judgment of a heavenly “Son of Man.”¹) Finally, significant differences and textual variations measure the distance between Hebrew texts and Hellenistic-period Greek versions. Our modern ideas of “book” or of “canon” or of “*the Bible*” simply do not capture this fluid aspect of ancient textuality.²

In the crucible of apocalyptic hope, in the course of the late Second Temple period to the high Roman Empire (roughly 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.), the documentary montage preserved in these scriptures achieved, for some Jews, a new kind of notional unity. Their many different elements, themes, and traditions coalesced to support various master narratives of Israel’s impending redemption. This genre of master narrative—“apocalyptic eschatology,” in academic parlance³—filled a gap perceived between lived experience and the promises, covenants, and hopes that shaped Jewish scriptures.⁴ Apocalyptic eschatology corrects history. It promises a speedy resolution of history’s moral dissonances: good triumphs over evil, peace over war, life over death.

Apocalyptic hope, the vibrant matrix of Jesus’s mission to Israel, is also the interpretive context for understanding the gentile mission of Paul. Tracing its development—and Paul’s understanding of his own role in realizing its promises—means tracing as well the dynamic interactions between Jewish scriptures and Jewish history that would have shaped both these biblical traditions and the sensibilities of their first-century readers and hearers. In the chapter that follows, I will comment from time to time on issues of redaction (that is, how a given segment of scripture might have been edited into the story as it now stands) and of historical provenance (when such a piece of tradition, generated by what historical context, might have entered into the biblical text). But I am not interested in biblical criticism as such. Rather, I want to survey the stories in the Jewish Bible, attending to both its Hebrew and its Greek voices, in order to trace the themes shaping Roman-period hopes for the coming of God’s Kingdom. Understanding that story of redemption requires having a grasp of the characters of its three chief *dramatis personae*: God, the nations, and Israel.

BEGINNINGS

God and Cosmos

Without explanation, without introduction, evidently unaccompanied, the god of Genesis simply appears “in the beginning.” He commands light and darkness, shapes order out of chaos, and in six days makes the heavens, the earth, and everything in them, including, finally, humanity “both male and female” (Gen 1.1–30). A special intimacy connects this god with his human creatures: them he makes after his own “image and likeness,” and he grants them dominion over the earth (1.28–30). Finishing his work, God himself then rests on the seventh day, the Sabbath, and blesses it (2.1–4).

This god is a solitary and universal deity, these elegant verses imply. Yet Creation conceals complications: who are the others whom God addresses once he proposes to create humanity (Gen 1.26)? The text does not say.⁵ Another complication of this god’s unique and universal status is his resting on the seventh day (2.2–3): by writing the Sabbath and the divine observance of it into the very structure of the universe, these same verses render this god “Jewish”: keeping the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week will eventually unite this god with his people Israel (Exod 31.13–17).⁶ How Jewish, then, is God? Different ancient authors, commenting on these verses, answered this question differently. But as we will see, Paul himself affirms this ethnic identification. His god is the universal deity, superior to all other divine personalities; the god of all humanity, “the god of the nations also” (Rom 3.29). Yet at the same time and in particular ways he is also the god specifically of Israel, the god of “the forefathers” (that is, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Rom 15.8), the god of Jewish history, the “father” both of Israel and of its messiah (Rom 9.4–5 and *passim*). The universal high god’s “Jewishness,” and his fidelity to those promises that he makes (later on in the book of Genesis) to the patriarchs of Israel, is the pivot upon which Paul’s vision of universal redemption will turn.

(Divine ethnicity may seem a strange idea; but gods in antiquity tended to share in the ethnicity of the peoples who worshiped them. The Jewish god was no exception: Roman gods were particularly invested in

the future and the well-being of Rome: Athena in Athens, Aphrodite in Aphrodisias, and so on. And ancient gods and humans—we will see how in the next chapter—tended to cluster in family groups. In this regard, then, the biblical god's "Jewishness" simply marks him as an ancient deity. What *was* odd, in the perspective of their non-Jewish contemporaries, was the Jews' insistence that their particular god was *also* the universal, highest god—a claim that Paul himself affirms, but a claim that later gentile interpreters of Paul, as we shall see, will deny.)

The god of the Bible does not long remain in the magnificent isolation of this creational week. Jewish scriptures teem with other supernatural personalities. The "sons of God" who mate with human women seem to have some sort of superhuman status (Gen 6.1–4; cf. Job 1.6): according to Enoch, they were fallen angels, their progeny evil spirits.⁷ God avails himself of divine intermediaries (Exod 3.2, 14.19); he converses with Satan (Zech 3.1–2; Job); he is attended by cherubim (Ps 80.1; Ezek 10.20) and seraphim (Isa 6.2–6); he presides over a heavenly angelic court (1 Kgs 22.19; Job 1.6). According to Jubilees, the two highest orders of angels in God's presence were circumcised (15.27), and they keep the Sabbath with him (2.17–20). All of these divine entities are elevated, superhuman powers. In the biblical narratives, however, they are also clearly God's subordinates.

But another category of supernatural beings, more independent than subordinate, also populates ancient Israelite scriptures: other *elohim*, "gods." Sometimes Israel's god battles (and bests) these forces, or he "executes judgment" on them (Exod 12.12); at other points he takes these gods captive (Jer 43.12), or punishes them (46.25), or sends them into exile (49.3). Sometimes these gods are mentioned as matter-of-fact: "All the peoples walk, each in the name of its god," observes the prophet Micah, "but we will walk in the name of the Lord *our* god forever and ever" (Mic 4.5). "God stands in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he gives judgment" (Ps 82.1). At other times, these gods are overpowered by Israel's god (as Ps 82.6–8, asserting God's "international" or transethnic power and authority), or they are scorned because of the worship that foreign peoples tender to their images (Ps 95.5, 97.7; Isa 44.6–20). Often, they serve as the inferior contrast to Israel's god. ("Who is like you, O Lord,

among the gods?” sings Moses, Exod 15.11; “All gods bow down before him,” Ps 97.7.) The point to note for now, however, is that some passages of scripture speak simply of these other gods: they *are*.⁸

Scriptures’ acknowledgment of other gods can come as a surprise to modern readers. Were ancient Jews not “monotheists”? Yes and no. Earlier scholarship came up with the term “henotheism” as a way to accommodate the Bible’s other divinities. “Henotheism” means the worship of only one god, without denying the existence of other gods; “monotheism” indicates the conviction that only one god exists. Henotheism was supposedly a prior developmental stage along the evolutionary road to monotheism: eventually, monotheism triumphs. The Bible, according to this way of thinking, preserves traces of the “more primitive” phase (multiple gods, with one god supreme) within an essentially monotheistic (one god only) text.⁹

The problem with all of this terminological finesse is the way that it obscures a simple historical observation: in antiquity, “monotheists” were polytheists. That is to say, no matter how fiercely loyal to their own chief deity ancient Jews and, eventually, Christians might have been, their world view still left scope for many other gods. As we will see, Paul himself speaks of these gods, complains about their activities, bemoans their effects, and predicts their coming destruction or defeat or submission to the returning, triumphant Christ; but their existence is a given. Well into the fifth century C.E., in *City of God*, Augustine will sound much the same way. The difference between pagans and Christians, he notes there, is not their respective beliefs in the existence or in the powers of these other divine entities, but what they *name* them. Christians call these gods “demons”; pagans call these demons “gods” (*City of God* 9.23). This distinction between “gods” and “demons” will be introduced, as we will see, once Hebrew scripture transitions to Greek; but it is not a distinction native to these ancient Hebrew writings themselves. In antiquity, “monotheism” is a species of polytheism.¹⁰

Eventually, what are now extrabiblical traditions will fill in perceived gaps in the biblical narrative, explaining how these other gods—errant angels? heavenly rebels?—came to be. But before we can further frame this issue of other gods, we need to consider the humans who honored

them. Where did the nations who honored these other gods come from, and what is their relation to Israel, and to Israel's god?

God and Humanity

The stately creational days of Genesis 1 yield abruptly to a different (and probably older) story of beginnings in Genesis 2. Here, human history unwinds as a tale of disobedience and punishment, striving and failure. The first couple defies the divine command, bringing pain, hard labor, and death into the world (Gen 2–3). Cain kills his younger brother Abel in humanity's second generation (4.1–13). Within ten generations, human wickedness is so great, corruption and violence so rampant, that the Lord regrets having created them at all (“And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind upon the earth, and it grieved him to his heart,” 6.6). Unleashing the waters of chaos that he had pent up on Creation's second day (1.6–8), God obliterates life from the earth, saving only one family, that of Noah, “a righteous man, blameless in his generation” (6.9). “I am going . . . to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which there is the breath of life,” God tells Noah, “but I will establish my covenant [*brit*] with you” (6.17–18; cf. 8.21–9.17, for its terms). The waters come and consume all life. “Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark” (7.23).

Once the waters recede, God has an insight about the creature that he made in his own image (an idea recalled in Gen 9.6): “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth” (8.21). Vowing never again to annihilate all life because of humanity's moral failures, God sets a rainbow in the sky to remind both him and them of their covenant (9.15). Humanity now begins again with the families of Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japhet, and the children and grandchildren born to them after the flood: in Jewish tradition, some seventy different “nations” (Hebrew *goyim*, Greek *ethnē*; 10.1–32). All humanity descends from Adam and Eve; but more precisely, all humanity—seventy nations by this count—descend from Noah.¹¹

The “Table of Nations” in Genesis 10, and the primacy of Noah, express a foundational biblical concept, the idea of the totality of the

family of man. The word *goyim*, “nations,” occurs for the first time in the Hebrew Bible here. The three founding kinship units—those of Shem, Ham, and Japhet—are listed according to “their genealogies, their languages, their lands, and their nations” (on Shem, 10.31; cf. 10.5 on Japhet and 10.20 on Ham). These ethnic identifiers—kinship group (shared “blood”), language, and locality (“land”)—quite commonly cluster in ancient writings. The Greek historian Herodotus, famously, will define “Greekness” (*to hellēnikon*) in much the same terms (see below, p. 35). Conspicuous by its absence in the Table of Nations, however, is one of the most important and basic of ancient ethnic identifiers: Genesis does *not* say, “according to their gods” (though cf. Deut 32.8). The gods of the nations are not listed with this first tabulation. Other gods *qua* narrative characters have yet to appear in the story.¹²

For now, it is enough to note that this way of saying “all humanity,” referring to the plenum of nations descended from Noah, will reverberate throughout scripture, echoing in the prophets, especially Isaiah; in later Second Temple writings (Jubilees, Qumran texts, the Sibylline Oracles); continuing on in Josephus, the rabbis, and the later Aramaic Targumim.¹³ Paul too will think with this idea, alluding to the Table of Nations at the crescendo of his argument in Romans 11:25–26. All human families look back to Noah, in this tradition; thus all human families, later Jewish traditions will say, likewise look back to Noah’s covenant with God.¹⁴

God and Israel

The god of the Bible makes the universe by divine fiat. He preserves Noah because of Noah’s righteousness (Gen 6.9), giving humanity its second chance to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (9.1). But God creates Israel by an unexplained choice,¹⁵ over time, through a promise:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go out from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the Land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation [*goy gadol*], and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed. (Gen 12.1–3)

The promise of coming into the land—*the* Land, in biblical narrative; the Land of Israel—combined with the promise of progeny/“nationhood” and of universal blessing for all the earth’s families, exerts a gravitational pull over the rest of Abram/Abraham’s story and, indeed, over the rest of the book of Genesis. God subsequently makes a covenant with Abraham, again pledging the Land (15.12–21) and foretelling Abraham and Sarah’s status as progenitors of “many nations” (17.5–6, 15–16). More signally, Abraham and Sarah will produce Isaac, whose children will inherit the Land “for a perpetual holding; and I will be their god” (17.8). Abraham for his part must “walk before [God] and be blameless” (17.1; cf. 18.19), circumcising all the males of his house as “a sign of the covenant between me and you throughout your generations . . . an everlasting covenant” (17.10–14, esp. 17.12, which specifies circumcision “on the eighth day”). From Abraham through Isaac to Jacob (named “Israel,” 32.28) and thence to Jacob’s sons and grandsons, the eponymous fathers of Israel’s twelve tribes, this covenant is affirmed and repeated. Joseph, dying in Egypt, surrounded by his brothers, closes the book of Genesis by recalling God’s promise: “God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the Land that he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (50.24). When Paul speaks in Romans of “the promises given to the fathers” (Rom 15.8), it is passages like these that he has in mind.

The next four books of the Torah, from Exodus through Deuteronomy, narrate the stages through which God shapes the children of Israel into the foretold *goy gadol*, a great nation. Liberating them from Pharaoh with great signs and wonders, contesting against the gods of Egypt, leading the people out into the wilderness of Sinai, God reveals his plan to Moses:

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell to the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exod 19.4–6)

Thereafter, an enormous body of legislation fills the rest of these “five books of Moses.” Cultic and ethical instruction; agricultural regulations and statutes protecting the poor; sacrificial protocols and rules for animal

husbandry; food ways, sexual codes, criminal and property law and torts; rules for distinguishing between pure and impure; the establishment of community holy days and especially rules for observing the Sabbath; measurements for the sanctuary and specifications for everything from priestly garments to curtain rings: God's commandments comprise the content of his *torah*, his "instruction" or "teaching" to Israel, setting the terms of their covenant.¹⁶ Part of the reason for God's mandating these practices is specifically to set Israel apart from other peoples ("You shall faithfully observe all my laws and all my regulations. . . . I, the Lord, am your god, who has set you apart from other peoples," Lev 20.22, 24). And included in this revelation are prescriptions for repairing the relationship between God and the individual Israelite when, whether deliberately or inadvertently, the human partner to the covenant erred (e.g., Lev 26.41–42). To the whole nation, further, God gives a "fast of atonement," Yom Kippur (16.1–34), "an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once a year for all their sins." God builds a relationship meant to last.

Fundamental to this god's covenant, emphasized repeatedly, are his twin demands for exclusive and aniconic worship. No other gods, and no images. (These are the first two of the Ten Commandments, Exod 20.3–5; Deut 5.7–8.) Accustomed as we are to these two provisos, we can easily fail to see how odd they were in their historical context. In cultures where all gods exist—a social reality that Israel's god does not deny—worshipping only one god to the *exclusion* of others can seem at least incautious, if not downright impious. By definition, any god is more powerful than any human; and gods as a group tended to be sensitive to human slights, and quick to let their displeasure be known. (The humans who worshiped them were no less sensitive. Later Greek and Latin ethnographers, as we shall see, will complain about Jewish "atheism," that is, the Jews' refusal to honor the gods of the majority.) But Israel's god was particularly adamant on these two points: his people may not worship him by making an image (e.g., Deut 4.15–16), nor may they make and bow down to an image of any humans, birds, or animals (4.16–18; the story of the Golden Calf, Exod 32, provided a standing cautionary tale). What about worshipping objects not made by human hands, such as natural phenomena? Other

nations worship stars and planets; Israel may not (Deut 4.19). More: when they come into the Land, Israel must eradicate the peoples who dwell there, because they have practiced linked abominations: idol-worship and infanticide.

When the Lord *your* god has cut off before you the nations whom you are about to enter to dispossess them, when you have dispossessed them and live in their land, take care that you are not snared into imitating them, after they have been destroyed before you. Do not inquire concerning *their* gods, saying, “How did these nations worship their gods? I also want to do the same.” You must not do the same for the Lord your god, because every abhorrent thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. (Deut 12.29–31)

Closing with blessings and with curses—blessings if Israel keeps the covenant, curses if they do not; punishment promised for waywardness, compassion and forgiveness for rededication—Deuteronomy brings the five books of the Law to its close (Deut 30–33). Moses dies. The twelve tribes stand on the east bank of the Jordan River, poised to come into the Land; ready, finally, to realize God’s ancient promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

KINGDOM AND EXILE

David’s House, and God’s

Once settled in the land of Canaan, the different tribes worshiped at various altars scattered throughout the countryside. Priests and judges regulated cultic and social life. Persisting in this way for several centuries, this loose confederacy of tribes and clans eventually reorganized under a monarch, first Saul (c. 1020–1000 B.C.E.), and after him, David (c. 1000–961) and then David’s son, Solomon (c. 961–922).

Both in his own lifetime and later, in the perspective of biblical tradition, David was the key figure. He united the tribes and defeated local enemies (such as the Philistines). He shut down regional sanctuaries. And he consolidated both political and military power and traditional cult in his capital city, Jerusalem. Biblical tradition voiced ambivalence about

these arrangements, (retrospectively) warning the tribes in the wilderness about some of the questionable consequences of kingship (Deut 17.14–19; cf. 1 Sam 8.10–18). But these same scriptures also embraced and endorsed David and his dynasty, asserting that God himself had loved the king and promised eternal dominion to the sons of his line:

The Lord declares to you [David] that the Lord *will make you a house*. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you . . . and I will establish his kingdom. *He shall build a house for my name*, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. *I will be a father to him, and he will be my son*. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him . . . but I will not take my steadfast love away from him. . . . And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. *Your throne will be established forever*. (2 Sam 7.11–17)

In the ancient world, divinity localized in two prime ways: it attached to places (sacred groves, mountains, altars, temples) and it attached to peoples (hence the idea of gods' ethnicities, mentioned above). The dynamics of the story that stretches from Genesis through Deuteronomy articulate the Jewish refractions of this idea in continually asserting the binding relationship between Israel's god, his people, and the Land. And the people's relationship with God is frequently expressed in the language of family descent: "Israel is my first-born son," God declares in Exodus 4.22, and this image of Israel's sonship, thus of God's "paternity," recurs throughout Jewish scriptures (e.g., Jer 31.9, 20; Paul repeats this idea of Israel's sonship in Rom 9.4). God, further, dwells *with* his people (as do other gods with theirs), and God's proximity is one of the reasons for and requirements of Israel's dedication to "holiness," that is, separateness. (When Paul calls his gentiles away from their gods to his own, he too will insist on their "separation" or "sanctity," *hagiasmos*.)

The messianic-Davidic traditions about these two houses, however—the genealogical-biological house (David's) and the sanctified house of the temple (God's)—intensified for Israel these two ways of expressing divinity's locality, in people and in places. God remains Israel's "father"; but in a special way he is father to the kings of David's line. "You are my

son; today I have begotten you,” God says on the coronation day of an Israelite king (Ps 2.7). “I have found David, my servant,” sings the Psalmist; “With my holy oil I have anointed him; . . . He shall cry to me, ‘You are my father’” (Ps 89.20, 26). “I will be a father to him,” God through the prophet Samuel tells David about David’s son (2 Sam 7.14, cited above). And since kings are “crowned” in Israelite tradition by being anointed with oil, this means that the “anointed one” (Hebrew *mashiach*, Greek *christos*), David’s heir, is in this special way God’s “son” (cf. Rom 1.3). This idea would have a long future in later Christianity.

The divine aspect of Davidic royalty, unlike Egyptian or Greek or Roman expressions of this idea, did not imply literal divine descent. David’s offspring are normally human. Individual kings are mortal; it is their *succession* that is immortal. The messiah’s divine sonship in these Hebrew texts articulated a special relationship with God; it did not mean that the messiah himself (unlike Pharaoh, or Alexander the Great, or the emperors of Rome) was a god in his own right. The message that formed around the memory and mission of Jesus of Nazareth will draw on all of these themes while enlarging them; eventually, Jesus’s messianic “sonship” will indeed imply a divine status, one that Paul himself will affirm and articulate. Those developments lie off in the late Second Temple period, however; the ancient scriptural texts seem to distinguish between Davidic descent and actual divinity.

What about that other aspect of ancient, localized divinity, the sanctity of God’s “house”—that is, of the temple in Jerusalem—that David’s son would build? Israel’s god, Jews insisted, was the lord of the whole universe, the god of all other gods, the “god of the nations also” (Paul again, Rom 3.29). “The heavens to their uttermost reaches belong to the Lord your god,” God tells Israel in the wilderness, “the earth and all that is on it” (Deut 10.14). God had framed everywhere and everything, and no place was far from him. But because of David’s consolidation of the cult in Jerusalem, and especially because of Solomon’s construction of a temple and an altar on *har bayit-Adonai*, “the mountain of the Lord’s House” (Isa 2.2), God was thought to “live” particularly in Jerusalem, within his *mishkan*, his “dwelling place.” (Paul repeats this idea too, Romans 9.4; so too Jesus in the gospel of Matthew 23.31.)

Jerusalem thus became the pilgrimage center for the three annual holidays that had been introduced as part of the covenant during Israel's period of wandering in the desert: Sukkot (in the fall, eventually commemorating the desert wandering), Passover/Unleavened Bread (in early spring, commemorating the redemption from Egypt), and Shavuot (in late spring/early summer, eventually associated with the Sinai revelation). The laws pertaining to sacrifices, framed in biblical narrative as relating to the mobile tabernacle, were "transposed" to this regal new setting. The temple and Jerusalem, God's presence therein, the eternal dominion of David's line: these aspects of David's consolidation of authority and of military and political power entered into Israel's construction of covenant. The city and the temple, too, pronounced prophets and psalms, would abide forever.

But David's throne and God's temple in fact did not abide. History battered Israelite prophecy. After Solomon's death (c. 922 B.C.E.?), the kingdom split in two, ten tribes living in the northern region ("Israel") and two tribes in the south ("Judah"). Regional cultic sites again sprang up, while the old indigenous deities once again made their presence felt. Within two centuries, the north capitulated to Assyrian expansion (c. 722 B.C.E.). Some of its people were deported, scattered, and resettled within the Assyrian empire: these ten "lost" tribes would forever after haunt Jewish memory.¹⁷ Once Assyria fell to Babylon, the newer imperial power consolidated its control over the southern kingdom of Judah. But in 586 B.C.E., following an ill-advised rebellion, Judah too fell. The temple was destroyed, the city laid waste; and the king Zedekiah, blinded and battered, was taken into exile in Babylon with many of his people (2 Kgs 25.1–12).

Only after Babylon fell in its turn to the growing power of Persia were the Judean exiles allowed to go home (c. 538 B.C.E.; 2 Chr 36.22–23). Those who returned rebuilt the temple, but it was a small and humble affair compared to the remembered grandeur of Solomon's. Governors and high priests who reported to Persia served in the stead of defunct Davidic kings. The trickle of returning Judeans nonetheless made a tremendous effort at reconsolidation. They were helped in this effort by a vital legacy: the traditions of their prophets.

Prophecy and Promise

Our English word *prophet* rests on the Greek *prophētēs*. A Greek *prophētēs* (*pro-*, for; *phanai*, to speak) was someone who spoke for a god, interpreting an oracle. Since the question taken to the god usually concerned the course of the future, a prophet functioned as the seer who foresaw and elusively described its course. The god would inspire the oracle, which the prophet would tender to the pilgrim questioner.¹⁸

For Hebrew, “prophet” translates both *ro’e* (seer) and *nav’i* (speaker). The Hebrew prophets were God’s spokesmen. Growing up as an institution together with the monarchy, prophets not only foretold the future; they also commented tellingly on the present. In particular, they criticized Israel, both kings and commoners, for wandering from the covenant—worshiping images, paying cult to other gods, compromising the exclusive relationship between Israel and its god. Sometimes, the perceived breach might be what we would consider ethical, not cultic (such as defrauding the poor or not providing for the vulnerable, e.g., Isa 4.14–15, 10.1–2); but these two domains—distinct in our categories, not theirs—were both conditions of keeping the covenant.

Prophetic literature, no less than the other genres of literature encompassed within the vast collection that is the Hebrew Bible, presents to the modern scholarly view a stratigraphic record of traditions: writings about or attributed to these prophets actually span lifetimes of accumulated sayings, legends, warnings, curses, oracles, affirmations, consolations, visions and revisions, and experiences to either side of the events that they (whether notionally or actually) presage. Given the fluidity of oral tradition and of manuscript culture in antiquity, prophecies could be continuously sharpened, modified, or updated, the better to speak to current circumstances. And *the* circumstance, the event that more than any other left its mark on ancient Jewish prophecy and history, was the experience of the Exile under Nebuchadnezzar.

Many essential elements of biblical tradition, of course, substantially predate 586–538 B.C.E., the years of the Babylonian captivity. That particular experience was defining, however, because of its traumatic clarity.

Exile challenged Israelite identity in fundamental ways, undermining the constitutive ideas of covenant and promise, of peoplehood and Land; denying the clustered concepts of Jerusalem, temple, and messiah/Davidic dynast; calling into question the power, the loyalty, and the constancy of Israel's god. With the threat of the loss of the Northern Kingdom and, once that was realized, the threat to and loss of Judea in the south, the covenant could have seemed canceled, its agreements annulled.

Prophetic traditions urged otherwise. There was no question, they insisted, of Israel's god having been defeated by foreign gods; rather, Israel's god was using the nations for his own purposes, to discipline and to punish his own people. God's wrath was indeed dreadful, admonished the prophets; his patience with waywardness expired, his afflictions extreme. Speaking for God, the prophets heaped harrowing curses upon errant Israel: "I will dash [the residents of Jerusalem] one against the other, fathers and sons together, says the Lord. I will not pity or spare or have compassion. . . . I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled which shall burn forever" (Jer 13.14, 15.14). Enumerating the terrible sufferings that would devour Jerusalem, Ezekiel voiced the Lord's rage: "Because you . . . have not walked in my statutes or kept my ordinances, but have acted according to the ordinances of the nations round about you . . . I will do what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again. Fathers shall eat their sons in the midst of you, and sons shall eat their fathers; and I will execute judgments on you, and any of you who survives I will scatter to all the winds" (Ezek 5.7–10). And the experience of Exile cast a giant shadow "backward," into the period of Israel's foundational history, because of post-Exilic traditions redacted into the earlier text. Thus Moses himself "spoke" of the Exile: if the people are not true to the terms of the covenant, he warned, God would "take delight in bringing ruin upon you and in destroying you; and you shall be plucked off the Land" (Deut 28.63).

These dire admonitions (and retrospective descriptions) framed prophetic discourse. But they did not exhaust it. Against history's disconfirmations of the covenant, the prophets also juxtaposed incandescent affirmations of the eternity of God's bond with Israel, the constancy of his love, the surety of his promise.