

Source sheet for Exclusivism in Jewish texts and traditions

1. God, Israel and the other nations

(i) Rabbi Dr Alan Brill Seton Hall University

Many Nations Under God: Judaism and Other Religions

“Does Judaism have a theology of other religions? Emphatically, yes. Judaism has a wide range of texts that offer thoughts on other religions... As a prelude to encountering other religions, Orthodox Jews need to learn to kick the secularization habit, viewing the outside world as secular. The same forces that allowed the upswing of Orthodox Judaism during the last decades also led to the rise of Christian, Islamic and Hindu traditionalism...”

“**Exclusivism** [*my emphasis*], states that one's own community, tradition, and encounter with God comprise the one and only exclusive truth; all other claims on encountering God are, a priori, false.

Pluralism takes the opposite position, accepting that no one tradition can claim to possess the singular truth. All group's beliefs and practices are equally valid.

Inclusivism situates itself between these two extremes, where one acknowledges that many communities possess their own traditions and truths, but maintains the importance of one's comprehension as culminating, or subsuming other truths. One's own group possesses the truth; other religious groups contain parts of the truth.

Universalism postulates a universal monotheism; it was widely taught by medieval Jewish philosophers who postulated a common Neo-platonic or Aristotelian truth to all religions.”

The exclusivist texts include Toledot Yeshu, Kalir, Rashi, Abraham bar Hiyya, Naftali Zevi Berlin, Zvi Yehudah Kook, Luria, Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, and Tanya.

Inclusivist texts include: Halevi, Maimonides, Abarbanel, Emden, Hirsch, Kook, Philo, Kimhi, Gikkitilla, Adret, Arama, and Seforno.

Universalist texts include: Saadyah, Ibn Garibol, Ibn Ezra, Maimonidean commentators, Immanuel of Rome, Nathanel ibn Fayumi, Mendelssohn, Israel Lipschutz, Luzzatto, Mendel Hirsch, Menashe ben Israel, Elijah Benamozegh, Henry Pereira Mendes, Joseph Hertz.

(ii) Book by the author on the subject: *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; See preview of the work by the author including the above extract hosted on the Jewish Ideas website owned by Rabbi Marc Angel: <https://www.jewishideas.org/article/many-nations-under-god-judaism-and-other-religions>

2. Are there any pluralists among Jewish authors of theological texts and reflections on religion?

Yes. Brill maintains that inclusivist and universalist thought is precedent to pluralism and that the following modern Jewish thinkers (not an exhaustive list) offer the following pluralist viewpoints:

Epistemological - Jonathan Sacks

Ethical - Raphael Jospe

Philosophical - Elliot Dorff

Mystical - Zalman Shachter-Shlomi

Various – David Hartman

Brill points out that none of these started out as a pluralist but arrived there from a starting point in one of the other approaches.

Hartman, Sacks – why revelation and therefore truth is fragmentary –

The epistemological approach maintains that there is a limit to human knowledge and therefore we must accept “reality of truth of different religions” (Brill, p.130)

Specifically, Brill comments that Sacks “seeks to defend differences in a world of absolutes” and “nods in the direction of moral and epistemological pluralism”.

Does he do this? Sacksgate, the crises sparked by Jonathan’s viewpoints in the annus horribilis of 2001. The Guardian articles, the Dignity of Difference.

Jonathan Sacks, Dignity of Difference, 2001

In this book, Sacks declared:

While discussing extremism on p.19: Judaism, Christianity and Islam are religions of revelation – faiths in which God speaks and we attempt to listen.

“God is universal, religions are particular...In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims. Only such a God is truly transcendental, greater not only than the natural world, but also than the spiritual universal articulated in any single faith, any specific language of human sensibility” p.55

Sacks’ point: Anyone can believe that God is universal, if he exists at all, but one can only believe that He is transcendental to everything if he is accepted as expressing himself through every language or articulation i.e. religion through which people perceive him.

However, Sacks then differentiates between universalist and relativist truth:

“This means that religious truth is not universal. What it does not mean is that it is relative.”.

So: Sacks takes care to defend the requirement of each religion to accept the absolutes of its own teachings, and defends also that presumption that each of these is not less true one than the other just because they command different loyalties. It is the acquiescence of Sacks to the truths of Christianity and Islam and his refusal to relativise them against one absolute truth, that of Judaism, and the Sinaic revelation that earned him an appearance before an inquisition in Manchester. The convocation was summoned by the then, and current rabbi of Holy Law synagogue in Prestwich, Rabbi Yosef Chazan and the panel was attended by, amongst others, Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu, then the Av Beth Din of the Beth Din of the Court of the Chief Rabbi. The position of the Manchester panel which interrogated Sacks was undoubtedly exclusivist and certainly objected to Sacks’ apparent pluralism, and so they insisted on a reprint of his book, censoring out those sections which they considered offensive to (Orthodox) Jewish beliefs. Sacks publicly recanted but privately remained resolute about his affirmations, claiming that his opinion reflected the views of Maimonides.

3. Is there particular sensitivity about Torah and Revelation as the only truths in the Jewish exclusivist approach? Is it connected to election?

(i) Deuteronomy 10:15

15 Only the LORD had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and He chose their seed after them, even you, above all peoples, as it is this day. **16** Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart and be no more stiff-necked.

(ii) If covenant determines what is exclusive, what does the Torah say about that?

Breaching the Covenant - Deuteronomy 29:23:

23 even all the nations shall say 'Wherefore hath the LORD done thus unto this land? what meaneth the heat of this great anger?' **24** then men shall say: 'Because they forsook the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them forth out of the land of Egypt; **25** and went and served other gods, and worshipped them, gods that they knew not, and that He had not allotted unto them; **26** therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land, to bring upon it all the curse that is written in this book.

(i) David Hartman's approaches –

Hartman A: Two Covenants, one universal, the other particular; this would accommodate the Maimonidean view that there should be no room for other religions relying on other, alternative revelations; compare:

(ii) Maimonides – Law of Kings 10:9

"The general principle governing these matters is: They are not to be allowed to originate a new religion or create *mitzvot* for themselves based on their own decisions."

Does this mean that if a people adhere to an already-existing religion they are not transgressing the injunction against creating a new religion? The Christianity of Paul could be seen to cast Jesus as a preacher for Noahidism. Islam recasts all faith as an Islam, a submission to God, and only individuals convert themselves from the original faith (Islam) to another individual religion e.g. Judaism or Christianity.

(iii) Hartman B: "Revelation...was not meant to be a source of absolute, eternal and transcendental truth. Rather, it is God's speaking to human beings within the limited framework of human language and history". For Hartman A, religion follows a God to Man vector; for Hartman B religion follows a God to Man vector. Furthermore, Hartman sees individual religions not as alternative truths but how each religion creates its own understanding of the divine.

(iv) Do Classical Jewish texts relate to the concept of Man searching for and identifying God? The God of Abraham, clearly the same God as the God of Moses, even the God precedent for Moses, was the result of a man to God search, the account of which is seen by Rabbinic tradition to be edited out of the Torah (Genesis 11:30-12:1):

30 And Sarai was barren; she had no child.

ל ותהי שְׂרַי עֲקָרָה אֵין לָהּ וְלֹד:

31 And Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter in law, the wife of Abram his son, and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Canaan, and they came as far as Haran and settled there.

לֹא וַיִּקַּח תֵּרַח אֶת־אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ וְאֶת־לוֹט בְּנוֹ־הָרָן בְּנוֹ־בְנוֹ וְאֶת שְׂרַי כַּלְתּוֹ אִשְׁתְּ אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ וַיֵּצְאוּ אִתָּם מֵאוּר כַּשְׁדִּים לְלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־חָרָן וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם:

32 And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in Haran.

לִב וַיְהִיו יְמֵי־תֵרַח חֲמִישׁ שָׁנַיִם וּמֵאתַיִם שָׁנָה וַיָּמָת תֵּרַח בְּחָרָן:

1 And the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ־לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרַאֲךָ:

Samaritan text: Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee.

(v) The sudden address of God to Abram in Genesis 12:1 is unexplained. This gap is filled in by the narrator of Jubilees, which describes the address of God mentioned in the Torah, Genesis chapter 12:1 as a response to a question which Abram but to God:

1. And he said, 'Shall I return unto Ur of the Chaldees who seek my face that I may return to them, am I to remain here in this place? The right path before Thee prosper it in the hands of Thy servant that he may fulfil (it) and that I may not walk in the deceitfulness of my heart, O my God.'
2. And he made an end of speaking and praying, and behold the word of the Lord was sent to him through me, saying: 'Get thee up from thy country, and from thy kindred and from the house of thy father unto a land which I will show thee, and I shall make thee a great and numerous nation (Jubilees 12:1-2)

(vi) Thus, within Jewish texts the first revelation to Abram is not initiated by God impacting upon man but in response to a prayer. Thus, prophecy or revelation to the individual is pre-Sinaic, but distinguished from the generation as inferior in quality to redemptive divine communication with mankind (Exodus 6:2-4):

2 God spoke to Moses, and He said to him, "I am the Lord.

ב וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה:

3 I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob with [the name] Almighty God, but [with] My name YHWH, I did not become known to them.

ג וַאֲרָא אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אֶל־יִצְחָק וְאֶל־יַעֲקֹב בְּאֵל שַׁדַּי וּשְׁמִי יְהוָה לֹא נִודַעְתִּי לָהֶם:

4 And also, I established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned.

ד וְגַם הִקְמַתִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתָּם לָתֵת לָהֶם אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר־גָּרוּ בָּהּ:

Thus, the realisation of the Abrahamic Covenant implies a new and higher level of Revelation, the transcendence from El Shaddai to YHWH. The implied purpose of this is to prepare to introduce the descendants of Abraham to the land of Canaan.

YHWH implies: Creator

(vi) Does the fact of the release of God's higher name imply an exclusivist approach to the spiritual supremacy of the descendants of Abraham, perhaps even more elevated than Abraham himself, or Noah before him?

Exclusivism is not feasible in an environment which does not insist on the uniqueness of Judaism over another. Even idolatry, central to the Abrahamic spiritual revolution (Jubilees), is possibly not an absolute to the Deuteronomist (see 29:23 above under point 3. Breaching the Covenant). *The Midrashist certainly recognises the value in other religions, claiming idol-worshippers as monotheist as they above in one over-arching God; also, shituf.*

3. Idolatry rejected and embraced as valid expressions for Gentiles

(i) עלינו

שלא שם תלקנו פהם, וגורלנו נוסח עדות המזרח: (יש גורסים: ולא גורלנו) ככל-המונים, שיהם משתחוים להקל נריק, ומתפללים אל אל לא יושיע.

נאנחנו פורעים ומשתחוים ומודים לפני מלך המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא, שהוא נוטה שמים ויסד ארץ

“...when Israel holds sway over the nations of the world, we are forbidden to tolerate a gentile who worships an alien deity in our midst.” Maimonides, Laws of Idol Worship 1: 7)

- David Novak, 1999 ‘The Mind of Maimonides’ <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1999/02/the-mind-of-maimonides> “Maimonides sees the relation of Islam to Judaism as primarily theoretical. With the strict monotheism of Islam, Maimonides has no quarrel. Indeed, he could not have formulated his monotheistic theology if he had not learned his philosophical method for theology from Muslims. Maimonides finds fault, however, with the practical politics of Muslim regimes. He considered Islamic ethics and politics to be inferior to their Jewish counterparts. As much as he possibly could as a second-class citizen in a Muslim society, Maimonides expressed his displeasure with the decided lack of virtue in the way Muslims rule their societies and relate to one another.”
- Shemoneh Peraqim LeHaRambam: **אסמע אלהאק ממך קלאה**

(ii) Anti-Exclusivism: the prohibition against showing disrespect to idolatry

[Responsum Yad Yehezkel](#), based on Zohar, that idolatry operates in ultimate service of God.

כשהיו ישראל במצרים היו יודעים באותם שרי העולם של מעלה, הממונים על שאר העמים. וכל אחד ואחד היה לו יראה ואליל בפני עצמו מהם. ואח"כ כיו שנתקשרו בקשר של אמונה, והקב"ה קרב אותם לעבודתו, אז נפרדו מהם

ומעבודתם, ונתקרבו אל האמונה העליונה הקדושה של הקב"ה. ובשביל זה כתוב "איש כי יקלל אלהיו", דהיינו אחד משרי מעלה, אף על פי שהעבודה אל שרי העמים הוא עבודה זרה, עם כל זה כיון שאני מניתי אותם לממונים להנהיג את העולם, מי שמקלל ומבזה אותם "ונשא חטאו", ודאי שיענש כראוי לו, כי ברשותי הם עומדים התרגום מארמית מועתק מספר הזוהר עם פירוש ("ומהלכים ומנהיגים את העולם")
 ("מתוק מדבש").

(iii) "After [Jesus] arose the Madman who emulated his precursor [Jesus], since he paved the way for him. But he added the further objective of procuring rule and submission [talb al-mulk; pursuit of sovereignty] and he invented what was well known [Islam]."¹⁴
 (Maimonides - iggeret Teiman)

(iv) Maimonides: Laws of Kings, Laws 11:10-12 (Capach Edition):

"...Can there be a greater stumbling block than this (Christianity)? That all the prophets spoke that the Messiah will redeem Israel and save them, and gather their dispersed and strengthen their Mitzvot, and this (one, i.e., Jesus) caused the Jews to be destroyed by the sword, and scattered their remnants and humbled them, and exchanged the Torah, and caused the majority of the world to err to serve a god other than the Lord. Nevertheless, the thoughts of the Creator of the world are not within the power of man to reach them, 'for our ways are not His ways, nor are our thoughts His thoughts.' And all these matters of Jesus of Nazareth and that of the Ishmaelite who arose after him are only to straighten the way of the king Messiah and to fix the entire world, to serve God as one, as it is stated (Zephaniah 3:9), "For then I will turn to the peoples (into) clear speech, to all call in the name of G-d and serve Him unanimously. How (will this come about)? The entire world has already become filled with the mention of the Messiah, with words of Torah and words of mitzvot and these matters have spread to the furthest isles, to many nations of uncircumcised hearts, and they discuss these matters and the mitzvot of the Torah. Some say: "These mitzvot are true but were already nullified in the present age and are not applicable for all time." Others say: "Hidden matters are in them (mitzvot) and they are not to be taken literally, and the messiah has already come and revealed their hidden (meanings). And when the true Messiah stands, and he is successful and is raised and exalted, immediately they all will retract and will know that fallacy they inherited from their fathers, and that their prophets and fathers caused them to err."
