

THE CHANGING FACE OF JEWISH MONOTHEISM IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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Two thousand years ago, in a polemical treatise called *Against Apion*, Josephus Flavius—Joseph ben Mathias, an exiled Jewish priest living in Rome after the destruction of the Temple and the failed rebellion that left Judea defeated, captive, and humbled—defined the essential nature of monotheism. His essay, which documents important aspects of the history of anti-Semitism in antiquity, was directed at the Jews' many adversaries and at the opponents of the Jewish belief in a single, abstract God, creator of heaven and earth, Who had no concrete representation but Whose will was revealed in a divine law found in sacred writings made known from heaven. Living as they did in a polytheistic world and a culture that affirmed a rich and varied pantheon of gods, the vast majority of the late-first-century CE Roman populace simply could not understand the Jewish belief in one exclusive God Who had created all. Only the Jews comprehended the unique nature of their religion, grounded in its believers' consciousness of a written law with a divine source and blending the hidden and the revealed, the divine and the historical; and only the Jews understood the nature of their refusal to recognize other gods. Josephus had been raised in Judea and the Galilee, educated on the forceful prophetic teaching that all gods other than the Lord were imaginary and that the worship of such gods, accordingly, was without reason or value. In

his treatise, he elucidated the nature of that Jewish religion, grounded in a belief in one God, the invisible creator of the world and author of law and morality, the eternal Master of history and Ruler of the nature He created. Josephus explained to his readers—idolatrous denizens of a Roman culture that esteemed beauty and held a panoply of gods to be holy, honoring them in a grand way through concrete representation, symbolism, and ritual—the meaning of a faith that demanded loyalty to a single, exclusive, abstract, and invisible God, creator of heaven and earth:

[Moses] represented [God] as One, uncreated and immutable to all eternity; in beauty surpassing all mortal thought, made known to us by His power, although the nature of His real being passes knowledge (*Against Apion* II: 16; Thackeray trans., vol. I, p. 359).

Uncoupling the divine and the eternal from human concepts of beauty and freeing them from the limits of aesthetic representation, Josephus offers some intriguing remarks about the relationship between absolute monotheistic abstraction and the concrete forms of a polytheism bounded by the material. He comments as well on the limits of artistic expression in comparison to the infinite divine sublimity expressed in the splendor of creation and evident in the eternally recurring natural courses as well as in the divine spirit that

creates and vitalizes nature—a spirit invisible to the eye but knowable through sacred writings and written law:

What, then, are the precepts and prohibitions of our Law? They are simple and familiar. At their head stands one of which God is the theme. The universe is in God's hands; perfect and blessed, self-sufficing and sufficing for all, He is the beginning, the middle, and the end of all things. By His works and bounties He is plainly seen, indeed more manifest than ought else but His form and magnitude surpass our powers of description. No materials, however costly, are fit to make an image of Him; no art has skill to conceive and represent it. The life of Him we have never seen, we do not imagine, and it is impious to conjecture. We behold His works: the light, the heaven, the earth, the sun, the waters, the reproductive creatures, the sprouting crops. These God created, not with hands, not with toil, not with assistants of whom He had no need; He willed it so, and forthwith they were made in all their beauty. Him must we worship by the practice of virtue; for that is the most saintly manner of worshipping God. (*Against Apion* II:22; Thackeray, vol. I, pp. 369-371.)

Josephus explains that the biblical concept of God refers to a single, unique higher force that created, directs, and rules over the world to the exclusion of any other higher force. His uniqueness follows from His dominion over both the natural phenomena, as evident in the eternal cycles of the universe, and the rules of morality related to humans and their society, conveyed through the eternal cycles of holiness. Josephus then goes on to describe the Jewish form of governance as a theocracy and the Jewish community as subject to divine will; “all sovereignty and authority [are placed] in the hands of God” (*Against Apion* II:16;

Thackeray, vol. I, p. 359). He adds that the human legislator justified this form of governance on the basis of divine morality and sanctity, which apply to both nature and to culture: “To [God] he persuaded all to look, as the author of all blessings” (Id.) He emphasizes as well that Moses “appointed the Law to be the most excellent and necessary form of instruction, ordaining, not that it should be heard once for all or twice or on several occasions, but that every week men should desert their other occupations and assemble to listen to the Law and to obtain a thorough and accurate knowledge of it” (Id., II:17; Thackeray, vol. 1, p. 363).

Born and raised as a priest, Josephus here presents, in effect, a précis of the priestly legislation regarding the sacred times of the year (Leviticus 23), which defines sanctity of time as dependent on cycles of liberty and of rest from labor. This concept, unique to Jewish monotheism, establishes a divine cycle of times when rest from labor is mandated; it is intended to perpetuate cycles of liberty and justice that are observed through weekly public reading of the sacred writings: “On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there shall be a sabbath of complete rest, a sacred occasion. You shall do no work; it shall be a sabbath of the Lord throughout your settlements. These are the set times of the Lord, the sacred occasions, which you shall celebrate each at its appointed time” (Leviticus 23:3-4). Josephus notes the profound connection between the heavenly mandated cycles of sacred divine time, when rest is mandated (“a sabbath of complete rest”), and the obligation to read God's sacred word in public on a fixed cycle, an obligation discharged by the human beings who sanctify the Sabbath (“the sacred occasions”; OJPS: “the holy convocations”). That connection underlies the covenant between God and humans, based on observance of the Sabbath and reading the Torah in eternal, seven-based cycles.

Josephus describes the role played by the divine law, written down in the holy books, in the lives of the Jews who read it or heard it read every Sabbath. In so doing, he makes clear their enduring devotion to the divine legislator, to the written law, to the words of the heard but unseen God, to the duty of periodic study, and to the holiness of the books—all of these characterizing Jewish monotheism in its ideal form:

It is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard [the books] as the decrees of God, to abide by them, and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them (*Against Apion* I:8; Thackeray, vol. 1, p. 181).

For us, with our conviction that the original institution of the Law was in accordance with the will of God, it would be rank impiety not to observe it. What could one alter in it? What more beautiful one could have been discovered? What improvement imported from elsewhere? Would you change the entire character of the constitution? Could there be a finer or more equitable polity than one which sets God at the head of the universe....? (*Id.* II: 21; Thackeray, vol. I, p. 367).

As noted, *Against Apion* was written after the destruction of the Temple and the failure of the Jews' rebellion against the Romans. The rebellion had been motivated by religious considerations, and its resounding failure was understood by the Romans as, among other things, the triumph of polytheism over the monotheism that had demeaned the gods by claiming an exclusive place for the one God. That triumph left monotheism's proponents—the Jews—as subjugated, disparaged exiles, demeaned in the eyes of the Roman world. Writing in Rome, Josephus therefore depicts the elements of monotheism in idealized, outline form. His account omits the multiple aspects of the biblical God and the diversity of views held

by His believers, and it makes no reference to the prophets' condemnation of gap between real and ideal or to the shortfalls in human behavior in the real world. But despite his polemical and apologetic efforts to defend the embattled, unconventional idea maintained by a downtrodden people, Josephus provides a good sketch of the elements of dialectical biblical monotheism: a belief in one God, Creator of heaven and earth, Whose being incorporates opposing features. He is invisible; yet His essence is revealed in His everlasting creation with its ongoing cycles, both seen and heard. He is omnipotent, eternal, and beyond history, the creator of the universe and what lies beyond it; yet He is the author of a time-bounded history that is embodied in recurring cycles of books, covenants, times of rest, commandments, and law. The polemical account does not include the many faces of the biblical God, Who is variously portrayed as a merciful and gracious father, caring for his children "like an eagle who rouses his nestlings, gliding down to his young" (Deuteronomy 32: 11); and as a jealously vengeful embodiment of terrifying violence toward His enemies: "Vengeance will I wreak on My foes, will I deal to those who reject me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood—as my sword devours flesh—blood of the slain and the captive from the long-haired enemy chiefs" (Deuteronomy 32:41-42).

The God Who is beyond comprehension is understood to be the giver of an enduring written law that establishes social justice. That law has eternal force, and its observance is conditioned on seven-based cycles of rest that obligate the entire community to refrain from working during the recurring sacred time and grant the entire community the "free time" that allows for public reading of God's word on a fixed, eternally recurring schedule. Conversely, the promise that the community, whose life is grounded in social

justice, will enjoy the sacred sense of order that depends on the law's stability is conditioned on the directive that the divine command, given its heavenly origin, can never be changed or revoked. The idea that Moses received the entire Torah from God is included among the principles of Jewish faith (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Repentance" 3:8), for it is the Torah in which God reveals Himself to humanity and in which He is presented as the God of truth, righteousness, and justice. The Torah's laws, which reflect to a great extent the values of justice, uprightness, wisdom, and understanding, the love of kindness, and the desire to do good to others, are defined as "statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law" (Deuteronomy 4:8; OJPS). In the traditional view, a failure to observe the heavenly Torah and to adhere to the divine ideal as written brings about the recurring defeats and disasters in Jewish history; on the other hand, adherence to the Torah entails the expectation and promise of redemption, reconstruction, and rebirth.

The Scrolls of the Judean Desert (Dead Sea Scrolls) shed additional light on our subject. Written by priests of the House of Zadok a few hundred years before Josephus lived and hidden away around the time of the destruction of the Temple, during a period of polemic and controversy, the Scrolls remained hidden until their chance rediscovery at Qumran, on the shore of the Dead Sea, in 1947. The Scrolls show the critical importance assigned to the eternally recurring cycle of divine time, demanding the periodic cessation of work and embodying the cycle of freedom, knowledge, and justice that underlies biblical monotheism and its expansion in the priestly literature. The infinite God Who is beyond time, "the one, unique, God, invisible, not created, and eternally immortal," is the author of the heavenly command regarding the cycles of rest: "These are the set times of the Lord,

the sacred occasions, which you shall celebrate each at its appointed time." He is, moreover, the source of the two cycles of time that underlie the created and the sacred realms—one revealed and one hidden. The cycle that is seen, revealed in the eternal sequence of sunrise and sunset, of four annual seasons, of spring and fall equinoxes and winter and summer solstices, establishes the periods and time units of daily life; it is referred to, in the priestly literature, as "the chariots of heaven" (see 1 Enoch 72-82; Charlesworth, vol. 1 pp. 50-61). The cycle concealed from the eye, called "the set times of the Lord" and "the set times of release [*deror* "liberty"]," comprises several components, all based on the number seven: the weekly day of rest, called "Sabbath"; the seven annual "set times of the Lord," which fall between the first month and the seventh month of the year; the *shemittah* ("fallow") year, during which the land is not worked, once every seven years; and the "jubilee" once every seven heptads of years. The two divinely ordained cycles—the visible one of eternal creation and the invisible one of periodic rest—differ in that the former reflects God's grace and kindness as embodied in the laws of nature while the latter is entrusted to human beings and represents the foundation of the covenant between God and His people. The visible cycle of creation has followed its course and will continue to do so forever, entirely independent of any human action; hence its designation as "the chariots of heaven." In contrast, the unseen cycle, which humanity hears of from God and which constitutes the underpinning of justice and morality, entails human participation. It is by force of the command issued and heard from heaven that humans interrupt the flow of secular time for the weekly Sabbath and for the seven annual festivals. Until the destruction of the Temple, twenty-four companies of priests would serve there on a rotating basis for one week at a time, "attending to

the duties of the sanctuary” (Numbers 3:28, et al.). According to the Hymns Scroll and the Calendar of Priestly Courses found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, they had charge of synchronizing the seven-based sacred cycles heard of from the heavens (“the set times of the Lord”) with the eternal quarterly cycles seen in the heavens (“the chariots of heaven”).

In Jewish iconography, “seen” time—which pertains to the heavenly forces that since creation have plied their eternal, seasonal courses in the “chariots of heaven” (1 Enoch 75:3) and attest to God’s kindness—is represented by the wheel of the zodiac, by the four seasons, and by the chariot of the sun. These images allude to the eternal quarterly and twelve-fold divisions of the year, and to the sun, which serves as the basis for calculating the solar calendar that comprises seven-day weeks. “Heard” time, meanwhile—which pertains to the divine command that requires seven-based cycles of release from secular activity and from subjugation to nature—is represented iconographically by the seven-stemmed candelabrum, which recalls the menorah that stood in the Temple. Describing the Temple menorah, Josephus writes: “of these [lamps] there were seven, indicating the honour paid to that number among the Jews” (*The Jewish War*, VII:5; Thackeray, vol. III, p. 549)¹. The importance of the matter is demonstrated by the fact that for thousands of years, no one other than the Jews adhered to a seven-based cycle of rest or to a division between weekdays and Sabbaths.

A distinguishing feature of Jewish monotheism is the attribution to time of a divine origin; time itself is regarded as divine, eternal, cyclical, continuous, and bi-directional. The aspect of time that is seen in the eternal laws of nature is a divine gift to all humanity; the aspect heard through covenant, commandment, and law is given to the

Jewish people. Seen time flows continuously and eternally; the quarterly and twelve-fold courses of the “chariots of heaven”—the seasons and the constellations of the zodiac—have been renewed through God’s kindness ever since Creation. Heard time—the mandated rest of “set times of release,” known through God’s heavenly command and enshrined for the Jews in covenant and law—has a seven-based rhythm maintained in daily life for thousands of years. It has shaped Jewish historical memory and the foundations of sanctity and culture with reference to the seventh day and the seven set times of the Lord.

The word “time” (*zeman*), connoting an ungrounded abstraction, is not mentioned in the Torah. Biblical monotheism maintains the viewpoint that the sequence of natural time, which has undergirded the universe since the creation of the heavenly luminaries, is a divine kindness to His creatures. It is marked by periods and time units, days and seasons, cycles of fertility and harvest that have gone on since the creation of the world. The sequence of times of mandated rest, marking cycles of liberty and release, meanwhile, is a sacred obligation, borne by those who uphold the covenant, on which holiness and justice are contingent. The ancient Hebrew word denoting “time” is *mo’ed* (rendered in this article as “set time”), which pertains to sacred times of mandated rest that maintain the liberty and release grounded in the heavenly command directed to the community that adheres to it in the course of their lives.

The story of divine, rest-mandating time—or the story of Jewish time—unfolds in a sacred, historical-mythical expanse that begins with the Exodus from Egypt as recounted in the biblical book of that name. It is there that the word “nation” (*‘am*) is first applied to the Israelites and that the idea of divine liberty in contrast to human

servitude appears. The month of the Exodus, in which servitude ends and liberty begins, is the point at which Jewish time becomes the historical time of a nation whose identity is tied to one God. In summarizing the Exodus from Egypt and the movement from slavery to freedom, Exodus 12:2 declares, in the name of the God Who fixes the annual calendar and cycles of time and emancipates slaves, that “this month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.” Later, in Exodus 13:4, we read that “You go free on this day, in the month of Abib.” Under the biblical ordering, the first month of the Jewish calendar is the month of Nisan (that is, the month of Abib; as a common noun, *abib* in Hebrew can also denote springtime), in which the Exodus took place; it is also the month, on the ancient Jewish calendar, that begins the year and in which the world was created—the act that marks the decisive transition from chaos to Creation and from servitude to liberty. To recall that transition, which replaces human servitude and injustice with divine liberty and justice and replaces a life lacking any cyclical rhythm with one encompassing rhythmic mastery over time, the Torah commands a fixed, sanctified cycle of profane and holy time, of labor and rest. With the force of a divine command, the Torah requires an oath of freedom and a seven-based cycle of times of rest called “the set times of the Lord, the sacred occasions.”

Jewish time is divided into annual and multi-year segments based on the number seven that perpetuate the emancipation from servitude. The year is segmented into seven-day weeks and incorporates the seven set times of the Lord during its first seven months (Leviticus 23:1-44). Multi-year historical time is divided into seven-year periods marked by the concluding *shemittah* year and jubilees of seven such seven-year periods

(Leviticus 25:1-14). Each of these cycles includes a time of refraining from creative activity and of freedom from subservience to labor and to the profit motive, all in the name of liberty, justice, and equality. The Sabbath—characterized, as noted earlier, as “a sabbath of complete rest, a sacred occasion[; y]ou shall do no work” (Leviticus 23:3)—is the basis of historical Jewish time, for it is a seven-based unit of time dependent on divine command, on counting, and on attestation. It is neither seen by the eye nor mandated by natural phenomena; rather, it exists solely because it was heard by the ear as a heavenly attestation to the sacred cycles of time. Extant in human consciousness since it was written down, it attests to memory and to covenant. It has been maintained for as long as there has been a continuous seven-fold sequence of days recognized by a memory-community that is subject to the cycles of rest, justice, and liberty marked by the sacred occasions.

The Torah alludes to the ancient calendar that reflects the sanctity of time and God’s crucial command related to it, and the calendar is detailed explicitly in Enoch, Jubilees, and several of the Dead Sea texts—the Hymns Scroll, the scroll known as *MMT* (*Miqzat ma’aseh ha-torah*; “Some Observances of the Law”), and the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. In that calendar’s scheme, every year contained fifty-two weeks of seven days each, or 364 days. 1 Nisan, the first day of the year, uniformly fell on a Wednesday (the fourth day of the week, on which the sun, moon, and stars were created). The seven “set times of the Lord” comprise eighteen days; adding those days to the fifty-two Sabbaths in the year produces a total of seventy days. The seven-branched, seventy-part Temple candelabrum served, according to Josephus, as a concrete, symbolic reminder of this sacred, seven-based system (*Jewish Antiquities* III:6; Thackeray, vol. IV, p. 405).

The Jews were the only nation in antiquity to enjoy, by force of a divine command, seventy days of liberty each year. The “set times of the Lord, the sacred occasions” were days on which the entire community was forbidden to labor. This seven-based cycle of the year—the essence of divine sanctity in monotheistic thought—was extended to include the *shemittah* year every seven years and the jubilee every seven heptads of years. The longer the seven-based cycle, the greater the renunciation of human mastery in favor of notions of justice, equality, and liberty. (The *shemittah* year and jubilee entailed not only cessation from work but also the emancipation of slaves and of land-holdings.) The uniqueness of the Sabbath as a concept and its implications with respect to justice, liberty, and equality become even more evident when they are compared to the lengthy terms of slavery that predominated in the ancient world, where agricultural and urban societies alike were dependent on various sorts of manual labor and on the acquisition of slaves through military conquest.

Writing in the first millennium BCE, the anonymous authors of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice defined the nature of the sanctity associated with the divinely commanded cycle of rest in honor of which they sing: “[spi]rits of the knowledge of truth and righteousness in the holy of [ho]lies, [the images of living divine beings [images of luminous spirits]” (Carol Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985], p. 295; see also, for the Hebrew, id., p. 293). Two thousand years removed, Albert Einstein (1879-1955), not only one of the twentieth century’s greatest scientists but also one of its greatest humanists, opinion-makers, and lovers of truth and justice, paraphrased the basic ideas of biblical monotheism reflected in the foregoing words of the Zadokite priests. Though unaware of the statement in the scroll or of the

deep-seated connection between the set times of the Lord and the times of release that made slaves into free people, Einstein nevertheless showed a profound understanding of biblical monotheism when he wrote:

The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence—these are the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it.

...so long as we remain devoted servants of truth, justice, and liberty, we shall continue not merely to survive as the oldest of living peoples, but by creative work to bring forth fruits which contribute to the ennoblement of the human race, as heretofore. (Albert Einstein, *The World As I See It*, trans. from the German by Alan Harris [Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1979], p. 90.)

Endnotes

Translated from the Hebrew by Joel Linsider. Hebrew Bible verses are quoted from the New Jewish Publication Society version (NJPS) (*Tanakh* [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2nd ed., 1999]), except where the Old Jewish Publication Society translation (OJPS) (*The Holy Scriptures* [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1917]) better conveys the point for which the verse is here cited; references to OJPS are so noted. Except as otherwise noted, translations of other primary Hebrew sources are by the present translator. Quotations from Josephus are from *Josephus*, English trans. by H. St. J. Thackeray (8 vols.) (London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1926) (Loeb Classical Library). References to the Pseudepigrapha are to *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

¹ The Hebrew translation of Josephus by Jacob Naftali Simhoni here renders the Greek original as “in honor of the Jews’ seven-day week.” As Thackeray observes in a note to *Jewish Antiquities* III:7 (Thackeray vol. IV, p. 405, note b), the Greek word may bear either meaning.