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SOME REFLECTIONS ON JEWISH UNIVERSALISM

The accusation that Judaism is insular, ritualistic, misanthropic, and particularist is almost as ancient as Judaism itself. The idea seems to have first emerged in the third century BCE, around the same time that Jews throughout the Hellenistic world were establishing diasporan communities.¹ Although Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans accused these Jews, and their Judean kin, of being insular and misanthropic, the argument that Jewish particularism posed an existential threat to a universalist system is primarily a making of the Church Fathers.² Molded by second-century figures such as Justin and Tertullian, and expanded by John Chrysostom and Augustine in the fourth century, this idea presents Judaism as a symbolic force whose essence opposes and undermines the universality of Christianity. Ironically, the argument that Judaism is excessively legalistic presupposes gnostic ideas that the Church rejected in the fourth century that separate the Old Testament from the New Testament on the basis that the latter knows only a lower god that is angry and retributive, while the former encounters a higher deity that is nurturing and

¹ This paper uses the referential *Jews* and the term *Judaism* within the context of the second century BCE or later, following Shaye J. D. Cohen's position that the shift from *Ioudaios* as an ethno-geographic marker to an ethno-religious designation likely took place at this time. Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 2nd ed., (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

² On Greek and Roman accusations of Jewish misanthropy, see Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism, Volume One: From Herodotus to Plutarch* (Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976–1980), 1–5 (Herodotus), 62–83 (Manetho), 148–156 (Apollonius Molon), 193–206 (Cicero), 382–388 (Lysimachus), 389–417 (Apion). Cicero in particular set the Roman *religio* against the Jewish “*superstitio*”; see Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 382–388. For an overview of early Christian accusations against the Jews, see Paula Fredriksen and Oded Irshai, “Christian Anti-Judaism: Polemics and Policies,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, Vol. 4: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 977–1034.

forgiving.³ Though the Church rejected these gnostic ideas, it tolerated the notion that Jesus worked in opposition to a Jewish value system rather than within one, and that his relationship with the Pharisees was one of fundamental opposition.⁴ The presumption that Judaism is particularist while Christianity is universalist continues to find expression in theological and cultural discourse today.

Though it is tempting to equate contemporary accusations of Jewish particularism with ancient ones, a lexical difference distinguishes them. Greeks, Romans, Christians, and Jews did not have a common language for these accusations, and did not employ terms that correlate with “universalist” and “particularist.”⁵ These terms, and the theological categories that they represent today, derive from proponents of the Enlightenment who espoused the idea that individualism, rationality, and the study of science and philosophy would guide societies towards social and moral progress. Because the theological lexicon of Christian universalism and Jewish particularism is modern, I will begin by reviewing how ancient ideas about the Jewish people took new shapes and found new strongholds in the modern period. I will then turn to ancient Jewish sources that can help forge new discursive theological avenues in Jewish self-understanding, and will close with some suggestions about the utility of the terms “universalism” and “particularism” today.

The New Language of an Old Idea

The spreading emphasis on individualism that characterized the Enlightenment era in Europe gave way to a contradictory interest in universalism: Rather than imagining societies that were structured around a tiered

³ The view that Jews worship an angry and zealous God thus authorizes the Gnostic communities that were condemned as heretical. On Gnosticism, see Elaine H. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Random House, 1979). On the teachings of Marcion, one of the most influential Gnostics, and his attitude towards the Jews, see Stephen G. Wilson, “Marcion and the Jews,” in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity, Volume 2: Separation and Polemic*, ed. Stephen G. Wilson (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1986), 45–58.

⁴ A personal anecdote illustrates the deep roots of this bias. In the first Introduction to Judaism course I taught at Catholic Theological Union, I asked my students to define Judaism. One student cited an Italian priest who had provided him with the following parable: Two men are rowing alongside one another in a slow-moving river, each in his own gondola. As the current propels them towards their destination, one man looks straight ahead, maintaining keen awareness of various obstacles in order to stay the course. The other man compulsively turns his head backwards, looking towards their point of departure. “The latter,” my student informed me frankly, “is the Jew.”

⁵ Though ancient writers did not use these terms, they did develop categories that align with these terms, particularly in their accusation of Jewish *misanthropia*; see n. 2.

pyramid system comprising religious and political authorities at the top and an increasingly large base of subjects towards the bottom, rationalists began to perceive their societies as networks of systems that offered all people the opportunity to increase their philosophical understanding of the world. As a result, these thinkers began to challenge the Church's powerful hold on European kingdoms, while others justified it on the basis that, at its core, Christianity was a universalist religion that invited all people to participate in their faith community. This perspective would later be coupled with the belief that all people would be saved in the end-time, regardless of their religious affiliation.⁶ The universalizing of Christian dogma was often contrasted with Judaism, which was generally assessed through the lens of first-century Pharisaic Judaism, and which soon became an emblem of a corrupt and intolerant faith that shunned outsiders.⁷

By the early twentieth century, the view that Judaism was a religion whose architects were motivated by the preservation of their own power was commonplace. According to this perception, Judaism had lost its interest in social welfare by the first century, and its ethical core had given way to moral bankruptcy. In the words of the scholar Adolf von Harnack, “[Jesus] showed that while the Pharisees preserved what was good in religion, [the Pharisees] were perverting it none the less, and that the perversion amounted to the most heinous of sins. Jesus waged war against the selfish, self-righteous temper in which many of the Pharisees fulfilled and practiced their piety—a temper, at bottom, both loveless and godless.”⁸

The binary between Christian universalism and Jewish particularism remained ingrained in biblical scholarship well into the twentieth century. During this period, Christian biblical scholars read biblical prophetic literature as a condemnation of the Israelites' apathy towards outsiders and obsession with ritual, and they perceived the Second Temple period as one of ongoing decline for the Jewish religion. For these scholars, this was the period of “late Judaism,” a time characterized

⁶ This idea became foundational to the Universalist Church of America in the late eighteenth century and later to Unitarian Universalism.

⁷ The word “Pharisees” continues to be used in theological discourse and papal speeches to convey greed and misanthropy. See John Pawlikowski, “The Roots of the Present Controversy,” and my complementary piece, “On the Need to Identify, Deconstruct, and Renovate Inconsistent Attitudes Toward Jews in Catholic Teaching” (October 14, 2021), at <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/pope-francis-and-jewish-law-torah-0>.

⁸ Adolf von Harnack, *New Testament Studies*, trans. J. R. Wilkinson (CTL 20; Putnam, 1907) 14.

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by the devolution of Judaism into a shell of its old self, devoid of ethical interest and obsessed with ritual perfection.⁹ The Jewish model of particularist worship, in this view, inevitably incurred God's disapproval and was thus doomed to fail.¹⁰ Differences between Judaism and Christianity were not perceived as simply historical: universalism lay at the heart of the historical Jesus' message, but it also lay at the heart of Christian theology. Jesus' message of universal salvation, therefore, worked against everything that Jews stood for. While few scholars explicitly expressed interest in how the study of first-century Judaism impacted contemporary Christian theology, many were profoundly affected by their personal faith.

The new lexicon produced in the wake of the Enlightenment that reinvigorated the ancient Judaism-Christianity binary also infiltrated the scholarship of Jews who sought to integrate nascent universalist ideas into their own identities.¹¹ At the 1869 Philadelphia Conference of Reform Rabbis, for instance, members issued a statement that declared that "the messianic goal of Israel is not restoration, but the union of all mankind," and "Israel's chosenness is balanced with equal stress on its universal aims and on the equal love of God for all His children." These values were developed at the

⁹ This view is evident in Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Bedeutung der Person Jesu für den Glauben: Historische und Rationale Grundlagen des Glaubens* (Protestantischer Schriftenvertrieb, 1910), 14–17; Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R. H. Fuller, (Thames and Hudson, 1956), 74–75; Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus and the Message of the New Testament*, trans. K. C. Hanson (Fortress, 2002), 10, 19; Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Der Gegensatz des Katholicismus und Protestantismus nach den Principien und Hauptdogmen der beiden Lehrbegriffe* (L. F. Fues, 1836); and Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, trans. S. H. Hooke (Allenson Press, 1958). The latter claims that "the attitude of late Judaism towards non-Jews was uncompromisingly severe" and that Jesus rectified this narrowness by universalizing God's covenant (*ibid.*, 40).

¹⁰ Again, see Jeremias: "Paul fought the self-righteousness of Jewish legalism, the self-complacency of the pious and their self-glorification, against which he set the message that we are saved by faith alone." Jeremias, *Jesus and the Message of the New Testament*, 9. Though he was a Lutheran scholar, Jeremias was surely aware of the radical change in the Catholic Church's attitude towards the Jewish people when he produced his scholarship in the late 1960s and 1970s. But Jeremias' academic interests lay far afield from Jewish-Christian relations. His primary objective seems to have been a desire to justify his support for a relatively new subdiscipline in the field of New Testament studies, the pursuit of the historical Jesus.

¹¹ Two such figures are Moses Mendelssohn and Abraham Geiger. Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (University Press of New England, 1983); Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Its History, in Two Parts* (Thalmessinger and Cahn, 1866).

1885 Conference of Reform Rabbis, which published a document stating that “we recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite, and in every mode, source or book of revelation, held sacred in any religious system, the conscious indwelling of God in man.”¹²

Recent Attempts to Resolve the Universalist-Particularist Binary

By the middle of the twentieth century, secular Jews had long embraced modernity as a welcome opportunity to explore the universalist aspects which they believed were endemic to Judaism. Contradictorily, however, modernity invited the Catholic Church to legitimize the particularist claims of the Jewish people. Following the meeting of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, scholars and theologians responded to its assertion that God did not reject the Jewish people by complicating the binary of Christian universality and Jewish particularism. Instead, they declared that both Judaism and Christianity contain particularist and universalist elements.¹³ This change has given rise to academic works that explore Jesus’ Jewish identity. Scholars have also turned to the topic of Paul’s Jewish identity, and many now question whether Paul was the law-hating, universalism-loving fellow that many had long taken him for.¹⁴ These scholars have demonstrated that universalist ideas were central to Jewish thought before Jesus’ followers divested from the Jewish community.¹⁵

Most contemporary scholars would hesitate to characterize Judaism as entirely particularist and Christianity as entirely universalist. But the implicit

¹² This “Declaration of Principles” came to be known as the Pittsburgh Platform. It can be accessed at the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) website: www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles.

¹³ This change begins with the Second Vatican Council’s *Nostra Aetate* declaration on October 28, 1965.

¹⁴ One early influential study is Bernadette J. Brooten, “Paul and the Law: How Complete Was the Departure?,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin Supplement* 1 (1990), 71–89.

¹⁵ Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Christianity and Judaism: Two Covenants*, trans. C. W. Efroymson (Magnes Press, 1988), adapted from Kaufmann’s larger four-volume Hebrew work, *Gola ve-Nekhar* (D’vir, 1928–1932); James Dunn, “Was Judaism Particularistic or Universalist?,” in *Judaism in Late Antiquity: Part 3*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Issues and Debates in Ancient Judaism, Vol. 2: Brill, 1999), 57–73; John Barclay, “Universalism and Particularism: Twin Components of Both Judaism and Early Christianity,” in *A Vision for the Church: Studies in Early Christian Ecclesiology in Honour of J. P. M. Sweet*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Michael B. Thompson (T&T Clark, 1997), 207–224; Jon D. Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G Brett (Brill, 1996), 143–169.

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assumption that universalism is superior to particularism still prevails.¹⁶ The same scholars who argue against the Judaism/particularist vs. Christian/universalist binary treat universalism and particularism as being in tension with one another. Like the Christian theologians who once accused Judaism of particularism, the theologians who now rebut them believe that adopting universalist ideas is morally preferable to espousing a particularist identity. With a few exceptions, the pushback against describing Judaism as particularist still presumes that particularism is essentially bad.¹⁷

Part of the reason for the negative bias against particularism is that theological works and biblical academic studies that address Jewish universalism are so often conducted in comparison to early Christian literature. They therefore adopt a Christian understanding of universalism, which presumes that it requires an openness to conversion. Such works argue that ancient Judaism was not entirely particularistic by claiming that post-biblical Judaism was open to gentile converts and, to a degree, open to cultural assimilation.¹⁸ Although these studies commendably nuance the dynamics of post-biblical Judaism, their assumption that universalism requires openness to conversion has limited research on Jewish universalism. Even non-comparative works are implicitly comparative: Many scholars presume that if Christian universalism is defined as expanding the covenantal community by giving Gentiles who believed in Jesus' messiahship access to this community, Jewish universalism is to be defined as Jewish willingness to expand the covenantal community by welcoming gentile converts. By analyzing Jewish universalism through the lens of conversion, these scholars remain focused on the particularistic. A community's openness to conversion enforces the conviction that a

¹⁶ Many scholars have commendably sought to nuance this binary. For some examples, see Jon D. Levenson, "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism," in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G Brett (Brill, 1996), 144–145; Ephraim E. Urbach, "Self-Isolation or Self-Affirmation in Judaism in the First Three Centuries: Theory and Practice," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition, Volume Two: Aspects of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman Period*, ed. Edward P. Sanders (Fortress, 1981), 269–298.

¹⁷ Wyschogrod deserves recognition for pushing back against this bias, though it is not within the scope of this paper to delve deeper into his philosophical approach to Jewish particularism. Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); cf. Svante Lundgren, *Particularism and Universalism in Modern Jewish Thought* (Academic Studies in the History of Judaism; Binghamton, NY: Global Publications, 2001).

¹⁸ Alan F. Segal, "Universalism in Judaism and Christianity," in *Paul in his Hellenistic Context*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Fortress, 1995), 1–29; cf. Jon D. Levenson, op. cit., 143–169.

person is either “in” or “out” of the covenantal community, and only those who are “in” will enjoy salvation in the messianic era.

Most problematically, scholars and theologians simply do not define their terms. Some assume that universalism is measured according to the degree to which a community is open to converts. Others assume that universalism regards the question of whether all people will enjoy salvation in the end-time. Because they have different assumptions about what universalism is, scholars writing about universalism are not in conversation with one another. In sum, they tend to make the following qualitative judgments:

- particularism and universalism can be defined as being opposite of one another;
- particularism and universalism serve to undermine one another;
- particularism is inferior to universalism and should be suppressed.

I propose that we seek a new definition of universalism that does not impose modern conceptions of universalism onto ancient texts and ideas, but draws from ancient texts that serve to shape it. This definition would conclude that universalism should be defined only according to the degree to which outsiders are invited to worship alongside the covenantal community without being asked to assimilate into the other community, on the recognition that any universalist model based on conversion is essentially particularist.

In the next section, I will consider whether this definition of universalism finds expression in texts preserved in the *Tanakh*. I will then trace the development of universalist thinking in late Second Temple Jewish literature. It is these texts, and not the rabbinic texts that scholars have often compared with New Testament passages, which can be productively placed into conversation with early Christian documents, since they engage with the same ideas that the first followers of Jesus engaged with.

Towards a New Understanding of Jewish Universalism

As I have noted, the concept that Judaism is insular and misanthropic has ancient roots which precede the rise of Christianity. Greek and Roman writers commonly accused Jews of *misanthrosia*, a phrase literally meaning something like “anti-human.” They pointed to the Jews’ attachment to their ancestral traditions, their refusal to eat popular foods, particularly pork, their insistence on circumcising their sons, their dogged observance of the Sabbath, and their refusal to participate in public festivals that celebrated the gods as overwhelming evidence that Jews clung to

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an irrational tradition that was barbarically unpatriotic and uninterested in serving the common good. In the absence of a mechanism to disentangle public life and religious life from one another, it is not surprising that Jews in the Hellenistic period were accused of malevolent insularity. Refusing to participate in public festivals that honored the gods was an act of public misanthropy. And not eating pork, the meat most favored by Romans, was a hostile insult. The perception that Judaism was antagonistic towards outsiders culminated in horrific and absurd stories that circulated about the Jewish people. According to the first-century BCE Roman historian Apion, for example, the Jews kidnapped a Greek person every year, kept him in their Temple, fattened him up, ritually sacrificed him in a forest, and then devoured him while swearing an oath of hostility against the Greek gods.¹⁹

By the first century, such stories were commonplace. And although Jews continued to insist that they worshiped a universal God, the fact that these Jews adhered to their ancestral practices made them subject to the suspicion of their Greek and Roman neighbors. Their claim of being elected by a universal God made their self-separation even more insulting, since this separation suggested that they were even more intolerant than their supposedly universal God. Rather than advocating for polytheistic difference, which would espouse an ethos of “you have a God who cares about you, and we have a God who cares about us,” Jewish monotheists claimed that “even though our God is universal and created the entire universe, He is the only God, and we are His favorites.”

As accusations of Jewish misanthropy began to circulate, Jews prolifically produced literature that one might call universalist, including texts that explicitly invite all people to worship God alongside Jews without converting. Some of these, like the *Letter of Aristeas*, emphasize the universality and ethical nature of Mosaic Law. Others, like the *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides*, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and the third *Sibylline Oracle*, only emphasize the Mosaic commandments that focus

¹⁹ Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.79–96. This accusation resonates not only with the antisemitic blood libels of the medieval period beginning with William of Norwich, but with modern accusations that Jews control the media, the government, and Hollywood to achieve their own nefarious ends. On occasion, America has even been home to actual blood libels, including a well-known incident in Massena, a small town in upstate New York, where, in 1928, rumors spread that Jews had kidnapped and murdered a young girl, Barbara Griffiths, following her disappearance. On this incident, see Edward Berenson, *The Accusation: Blood Libel in an American Town* (Norton, 2019).

on the betterment of all of humanity.²⁰ These texts underscore the notion that the Jewish God is a God concerned for all of humankind, and that Jews, likewise, are concerned for all of humankind.

The extent to which these documents function as polemical apologies that respond to accusations of Jewish misanthropy is unclear. Indeed, such universalist ideas seem to precede such accusations. They were first developed in the wake of the Babylonian exile, when it became apparent that not all Judeans would return to Judea following Cyrus' edict permitting them to return and rebuild their temple. As reality set in that the Judean community would have a global presence for the foreseeable future, theological questions arose. The primary problem concerned how the success of diasporan Jews intersected with matters concerning identity and homeland. What did the Jewish God say about all of humankind? To whom were those Jews expected to direct their primary loyalty: Jerusalem or a host government? How were Jews expected to relate to all of humankind? The Jews' ancestral scriptural traditions had not satisfactorily addressed these questions, since in earlier times, gods were known to be local, geographic, and ethnic. The earliest claim preserved in the Hebrew Bible that the God of the Israelites was a universal God was radical, shocking, and, to many non-Jews, offensive.²¹

The Hebrew Bible

The notion that the Jerusalem Temple is meant to function as a center for all nations to worship the God of Israel alongside one another finds expression in King Solomon's prayer on the occasion of the Temple's dedication in I Kings 8. Towards the end of his prayer, Solomon imagines the Temple as a center of gravity that draws worshipers from throughout the world:

Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of Your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of Your name—for they shall hear of Your great name, Your mighty hand, and Your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling-place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do Your people Israel, and so that they may know that Your name has been invoked on this house that I have built (I Kings 8:41–43).²²

²⁰ Translations of these documents are taken from James Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Hendrickson, 1984).

²¹ Jan Assman, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford University Press, 2009).

²² Citations of the Hebrew Bible, deuterocanonical works, and the New Testament are taken from the NRSV, with occasional emendations.

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The insistence that this individual comes and goes as a foreigner who is not a member of Israel is key to the Temple's stated function. If this foreigner were to eventually assimilate into the community of Israel, the Temple would lose its universal significance. The passage's central argument is that the foreigners who worship Israel's God without assimilating into Israel underscore the Temple's position as a centripetal force that unites humanity.

Some of the *Tanakh's* latest strata of texts develop the idea that all nations can worship the same God alongside one another without assimilating into the covenantal community of Israel. This idea, which appears prominently in Isaiah and the final pericope of Zechariah, is articulated as taking place in the distant future. Note the closing words of Zechariah:

This shall be the plague with which the Lord will strike all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem: their flesh shall rot while they are still on their feet; their eyes shall rot in their sockets, and their tongues shall rot in their mouths. On that day a great panic from the Lord shall fall on them, so that each will seize the hand of a neighbor, and the hand of one will be raised against the hand of the other Then all who survive of the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year by year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the festival of booths. If any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain upon them. And if the family of Egypt do not go up and present themselves, then on them shall come the plague that the Lord inflicts on the nations that do not go up to keep the festival of booths. Such shall be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations that do not go up to keep the festival of booths (Zechariah 14:12–21).

This text does not optimistically predict that all people will be saved in the messianic era, or that all of the nations will one day be welcomed into the polity of Israel. Instead, it envisions an end-time in which all people will be subject to the same covenantal terms, and by extension, the same punishments. The fact that God will have uniform expectations for all of humanity does not imply that the nations will abandon their ethnogeographic identities and assimilate into the community of Israel. Instead, they will retain their identities while worshipping the Israelite God. While this text predicts Israel's triumph over the foreign nations, the expectation that the people of Egypt will adopt Israel's worshiping practices surpasses standard expressions of political loyalty under conquest. Such worship presumes that the nations, while they may not be equal to Israelites in political power, might one day stand alongside Israel in the sight of God. Such a reading does not compromise the centrality of Israel's election, but suggests that God may maintain other distinct relationships

with those outside the elected community, should they worship Him. Because this text envisions a time when all people will enter into a covenantal relationship with God without assimilating into the boundaried community of Israel, I view this text as one of the *Tanakh's* only explicitly universalist statements.

The final eleven chapters of Isaiah also envision a time when those among the foreign nations who have survived God's final judgment will stream to Zion to worship God alongside one another. This image frames this prophetic collection, appearing in Isaiah 56 and 66 in visions of restoration and reconciliation between God, Israel, and humanity. Note the following verses in Isaiah 56:

And the foreigners who join themselves [*nilvim*] to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast to my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered (Isaiah 56:6–8).

The precise nature of how foreigners will live in relation to God and the people of Israel depends on how to render the Hebrew "*nilvim*," which means something like "stick to."²³ Scholars have mistranslated the term as "converts," a word which suggests that these foreigners will assimilate into the polity of Israel. Yet this passage never suggests that foreigners will lose their ethnic identities and become part of Israel.²⁴ Instead, these foreigners will worship God *as foreigners*. The term *nilvim* suggests that individual foreigners who join the community of Israel will not become assimilated into the covenantal community. Their identity retainment is confirmed in the following explanatory verse, which states that God's house will be a "house of prayer for all people." If these foreigner individuals become part of Israel, this would suggest that God's house would be only for Israel, but not for foreigners who have not become part of Israel. The image of distinct ethnogeographic groups coming to Jerusalem to worship alongside one another reaches a narrative climax in the prophet's closing words:

²³ I discuss the meaning of *nilvim* in Malka Z. Simkovich, *The Making of Jewish Universalism: From Exile to Alexandria* (Rowman, 2016), 27–29.

²⁴ There is no evidence of systematic conversion at this early stage; see Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew," *HTR* 82:1 (1989), 13–33.

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For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. From them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud—which draw the bow—to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations. They shall bring all your kindred from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, on horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and on mules, and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites bring a grain-offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord. And I will also take some of them as priests and as Levites, says the Lord. For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your descendants and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord (Isaiah 66:18–23).

The gathering of “all nations and tongues” does not culminate in the assimilation of these nations into the community in Israel. Instead, those among the nations who survive God’s judgment will act as ambassadors to others, to whom “they shall declare [God’s] glory.” These foreign nations, in turn, will stream to Jerusalem, not as future members of Israel, but as distinct communities. This distinctiveness makes the next claim all the more shocking: God seems to take from these nations people who will serve as priests and Levites. God assures the people that “your descendants and your name [will] remain,” but in this model of worship, all nations will acknowledge God as the one true God. Nothing in this passage indicates the ultimate assimilation of all people into the polity of Israel. Even one who understandably resists the apparent assertion that non-Jews would serve as priests and Levites would presumably recognize that they are coming to the Temple to enhance its service.

The texts that I have looked at thus far imagine a time in the distant future when all nations will stream to Jerusalem and worship God alongside one another. In the middle of the Second Temple period, however, Jewish writers began to transfer this idea onto their present reality, using it as a tool to understand the changing world around them. The notion that distinct populations could come together in the present to worship God finds early expression in the book of Daniel and in some later psalms, such as Psalm 97, which invites the “families of the peoples” to gather at the Temple and praise God:

Ascribe to the Lord, O Families of the peoples / ascribe to the Lord glory
and strength / Ascribe to the Lord the glory of His name, bring tribute

and enter His courts. Bow down the Lord majestic in holiness; tremble in His presence, all the earth! Declare among the nations, “The Lord is king!” the world stands firm; it cannot be shaken; He judges the people with equity. Let the heavens rejoice and the earth exult; let the sea and all within it thunder, the fields and everything in them exult; then shall all the trees of the forest shout for joy at the presence of the Lord, for He is coming, for He is coming to rule the earth; He will rule the world justly, and its people in faithfulness (Psalms 96:7–13).²⁵

The date and provenance of this text is obscure, though its invitation to the foreign nations to worship the Israelite God finds a kind of fulfillment in Daniel 4, which imagines the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar worshipping Daniel’s God as the creator God:

I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me. I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored the One who lives forever. For His sovereignty is an everlasting sovereignty, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and He does what He wills with the host of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth. There is no one who can stay His hand or say to Him, “What are You doing?” (Daniel 4:34–37).²⁶

These texts, reflecting the end of exilic period, mark a transition point wherein Jewish writers began to imagine non-Judeans worshipping God alongside them in the immediate present. It would only be in the Hellenistic period, however, that Jews began to develop the idea that all nations could worship God alongside one another. This idea took hold in the Jewish literary imagination in the second century BCE, as Jews began to contend with the advantages and challenges of living under and adjacent to Hellenistic rule. The texts these Jews produced cross geographic and linguistic boundaries: they are both diasporan and Judean, and were written in Hebrew and Greek.

Universalism in Late Second Temple Literature

The book of Tobit, a late third-century BCE document likely composed in Hebrew in Judea, expands on Isaiah and Zechariah’s messianic visions of the ingathering of multiple nations to Jerusalem:

But God will again have mercy on them: God will bring them back to the Land of Israel. They will rebuild the Temple, although not like the first

²⁵ Cf. Psalms 145:18.

²⁶ Cf. Daniel 6:25–27, 7:13–14.

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one, until the era when the appointed times shall be completed. Afterward all of them will return from their exile and will rebuild Jerusalem in her splendor. And the Temple will be rebuilt within her, just as the prophets of Israel spoke concerning her. Then the nations in the entire world will turn towards God and will worship God in sincerity. They will abandon their idols, which have deceitfully led them into error, and in righteousness they will bless the eternal God. And all the nations will bless the Lord. And his people will give thanks to God, and the Lord will exalt His people. All who love the Lord God in truth and righteousness will rejoice, showing mercy to our kinsmen (Tobit 14:7).

While Tobit's author followed earlier biblical precedent by focusing on an imagined future, other Jewish writers began to articulate a present (or interpreted the biblical past) in which nations worshiped alongside one another. Some writers did so by idealizing a relationship between Israel and the foreign nations that highlighted the distinctive practices and traditions of the people of Israel. Others, however, idealized a relationship that minimized these differences.

One text that advances a universalist worldview wherein the nations maintain their distinctive characteristics is the Letter of Aristeas. This second-century BCE text is the earliest surviving account of how the Pentateuch was translated from Hebrew into Greek under the patronage of the Ptolemaic King Ptolemy II Philadelphus. It opens with a scene in which representatives of the Alexandrian Jewish community ask the king to release Jewish prisoners as a gesture of goodwill before embarking on the project of translation. In a speech that beseeches the monarch to take pity on these prisoners, the speaker insists that Jews and Greeks, though not part of a single religious community, worship the same God alongside one another, and are thus inextricably linked to one another in worship and kinship:

These people worship God the overseer and creator of all, whom all men worship including ourselves, O King except that we have a different name. Their name for him is Zeus and Jove . . . Sosibius and some of those present thus said, "It is worthy of your magnanimity to offer the release of these men as a thank offering to the Most High God. You are highly honored by the Lord of all, and have been glorified beyond your ancestors, so if you make even the greatest thank offerings, it befits you" (Aristeas 16–19).

The claim that Jews and Greeks worship the same creator God would be developed by the first-century Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo. Philo was witness to anti-Jewish violence in his city that was ostensibly due to a visit by the Judean client king Agrippa, but the violence was

more accurately the product of simmering antagonism against Jews on the basis that they were misanthropic, insular, and disloyal to Rome. Philo defends Jews and the Jewish scriptures against these accusations and insists that Jewish values are consonant and even superior to Hellenistic philosophy. Rather than being disinterested in those outside their community, Philo argues, Jews are more philanthropic than other nations. Philo elaborates on this claim in a treatise defending the rationales of Jewish laws and scriptures:

It amazes me that some dare to charge the nation with an anti-social stance, a nation which has made such an extensive use of fellowship and goodwill toward all people everywhere that they offer up prayers and feasts and first fruits on behalf of the common race of human beings and serve the really self-existent God both on behalf of themselves and of others who have run from the services which they should have rendered. These are the things they do for the entire race of human beings (Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus* 2.167).

Like the author of the Letter of Aristeas, Philo believes that Greeks worship alongside Jewish people while maintaining boundaries between these communities that are non-negotiably separate.

Other Alexandrian Jewish writers, however, harbored universalist ideas that idealized the ultimate assimilation of all Gentiles into the polity of Israel. One example of this perspective is found in a novella known as *Joseph and Aseneth*, which I date to the second century BCE.²⁷ This text responds to the exegetical problem that Joseph married the daughter of an Egyptian priest by recounting the dramatic circumstances in which Joseph's wife Aseneth experiences a spiritual transformation wherein she abandons her idolatrous practices and assimilates into the Israelite community. In a climactic scene that describes Aseneth's conversion, an angel tells Aseneth that one day all nations will worship the One God together, but not as distinct communities. Aseneth, who has become part of the people of Israel, is imagined as a mother to countless Gentiles who will likewise enter the community:

And your name shall no longer be called Aseneth, but your name shall be City of Refuge, because in you many nations will take refuge with the Lord God, the Most High, and under your wings many peoples trusting in the Lord God will be sheltered, and behind your walls will be guarded those who attach themselves to the Most High God in the name of

²⁷ Following Gideon Bohak, *"Joseph and Aseneth" and the Jewish Temple in Hieropolis* (Scholars Press, 1996), 84–87, and in contrast to Ross Kraemer's late dating. See Ross S. Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 296.

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Repentance. For Repentance is in the heavens, an exceedingly beautiful and good daughter of the Most High. And she herself entreats the Most High God for you at all times and for all who repent in the name of the Most High God, because he is (the) father of Repentance. And she herself is guardian of all virgins, and loves you very much, and is beseeching the Most High for you at all times and for all who repent she prepared a place of rest in the heavens (*Joseph and Aseneth* 15:6–8).

In this dramatic scene, the writer depicts Aseneth as the conduit through which all nations will convert into the Israelite community. These people, “who attach themselves to the Most of High God in the name of Repentance,” will enjoy divine protection. Because Aseneth abandons her religious identity, I assume the author is suggesting that those who will ultimately mimic her behavior will likewise abandon their identities upon joining the Israelite community. Nevertheless, I cannot say with certainty that he intended his prediction of mass “conversion” to entail the total abandonment of ethnoreligious identity.

Other Jewish authors writing in Alexandria went farther by imagining a time when all nations would enter a single covenantal community that would not practice distinctive aspects of Judaism such as the Sabbath, dietary laws, and circumcision.²⁸ One text which might represent such

²⁸ The wisdom document known as the *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* is a good representative of this model. The document has been identified as Christian by some scholars, who, in my opinion, make incorrect conclusions based on the document’s lack of references to the distinguishing markers of early Judaism. Despite these absences, the document repeatedly references the Septuagint, opens with a paraphrasing of the Decalogue in Exodus 20, and lacks references to Jesus and the early Christian scriptures. In my opinion, it should be read as representative of universalist thinking that was prevalent among Jews in Alexandria during the late Second Temple period. Consider the following verses, which, when read alongside one another, suggest a striking amalgam of particularist and universalist thought: “Let all of life be in common, and all things be in agreement” (*Pseudo-Phocylides* 30); “One should not take from a nest all the birds together, but leave the mother bird behind, in order to get young from her again” (84–85); “Do not dig up the grave of the deceased, nor expose to the sun what may not be seen, lest you stir up the divine anger. It is not good to dissolve the human frame; for we hope that the remains of the departed will soon come to the light (again) out of the earth; and afterward they will become gods. For the souls remain unharmed among the deceased . . . for we have a body out of earth, and when afterward we are resolved again into earth we are but dust, and then the air has received our spirit . . . We humans live not a long time but for a season. But (our) soul is immortal and lives ageless forever” (100–115); “But if a beast of (your) enemy falls on the way, help it to rise” (140). Compare *Pseudo-Phocylides* 84–85 with Deuteronomy 22:6–7 (the command of sending away the mother bird), and *Pseudo-Phocylides* 140 with Exodus 23:5 (“When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free”). The fact that the author does not tell

an outlook is the Testament of Abraham, which situates ethical material within Jewish scriptural tradition and yet ignores distinctive Jewish practices. This text is a satirical telling of Abraham's death that was probably written by a Greek-speaking Jew in the first century CE. The author humorously describes how Abraham flees from the Archangel Michael, whom God has tasked with bringing Abraham into paradise. Abraham negotiates with Michael the terms of his death, agreeing to enter Paradise on the condition that Michael show him a scene of divine judgment and a chariot ride that will reveal the affairs of all humankind. The author describes the trip as follows:

The Archangel Michael went down and took Abraham on a chariot of cherubim and lifted him up in to the air of heaven and led him onto the cloud . . . and on the carriage Abraham soared over the entire inhabited world. And Abraham beheld the world as it was that day: Some were plowing, others leading wagons; in one place they were pasturing (flocks), elsewhere abiding (with their flocks) in the fields, while dancing and sporting and playing the zither (Testament of Abraham A 10:1–3).

Following this trip, Michael escorts Abraham into the heavens, where he is shown a vision of souls being judged in the divine court. No reference or distinction is ever made between Gentiles and Jews. Instead, the author imagines Abraham as the patriarch of all humanity, while grounding his story in a particularly biblical setting.

Finally, the author of a first-century collection known as the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs imagines the speeches that Jacob's sons delivered on their death beds. These speeches underscore the centrality of ethical behavior towards all people without foregrounding the particular aspects of law that would become developed in later generations.²⁹ Note, for instance, the following passage in the Testament of Zebulon:

Now, my children, I tell you to keep the Lord's commands; show mercy to your neighbor, have compassion on all, not only to human beings but to dumb animals. . . . Being compassionate, I gave some of my catch to every stranger. If anyone were a traveler, or sick, or aged, I cooked the fish, prepared it well, and offered to each person according to his

his audience to observe distinctive aspects of Jewish practice suggests that he wants to present Jewish tradition as consonant with Hellenistic life. Yet his contradictory insistence on resurrection and the immortality of souls testifies to his desire to construct a text that can be read and appreciated by Jews as well as Gentiles.

²⁹ This contrasts with later midrashic texts that anachronistically imagine the family of Abraham observing Jewish law. While one might not expect Jacob's sons to have been observant of Jewish law, the absence of all distinguishing markers of Jewish practice is unusual for literature of this genre.

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need, being either convivial or consoling. Therefore the Lord made my catch to be an abundance of fish; for whoever shares with his neighbor receives multifold from the Lord (Testament of Zebulun 6:4–6).

The injunction to act ethically to all people—and “not only to human beings but to dumb animals”—makes no qualification that this applies only to Jews. Instead, the author is careful to suggest the very opposite: the children of Jacob are to extend kindness and friendship to all of God’s creatures, neighbor or stranger. While the testaments include a few allusions to Jewish law, such as the laws of levirate marriage and mourning, the collection as a whole underscores the proper behavior with which Jacob’s descendants must treat all humankind.³⁰

There is abundant evidence that by the first century, Jewish thinkers were experimenting with the universalist idea that all people can join together in worship of the one God without assimilating into the nation of Israel.³¹ This finding indicates that Paul’s universalist ideas were not directly inspired by Stoic concepts, as some have suggested, but by universalist ideas developed by Greek-speaking Jews, which made their way to Judea.³² But whereas Greek-speaking Jews claimed that people could worship God without assimilating into the community of Israel, Paul made a new claim: all of humankind could experience salvation by entering the covenantal community of Christ-followers, through which they would ultimately enter the nation of Israel.

Universalism in Rabbinic Literature

It is beyond the scope of these reflections to collate the vast number of rabbinic texts that address matters related to universalism.³³ It is sufficient

³⁰ Testament of Simeon. 9:1; Testament of Zeb. 3:2–4.

³¹ Some of these texts may reflect an attitude of extreme universalization, which serves to erase human difference by eliminating the observance of distinctive Jewish practice in favor of the study of these practices’ allegorical significance. Philo lambasts this kind of universalization in his treatise *The Migration of Abraham*, and refers to those who espouse this view as “radical allegorizers” (Philo, *Migration of Abraham*, 87–95). Philo’s critique of “radical allegorizers,” Jews who abandoned the practices of seemingly irrational laws whose symbolic meaning they believed to have attained, might have been targeting some of the authors of the texts that I discuss in this paper.

³² Simkovich, *The Making of Jewish Universalism*, 143.

³³ Marc Hirshman, “Torah in Rabbinic Thought: The Theology of Learning,” in *Cambridge History of Judaism*, IV, ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 899–924, and Marc Hirshman, “Rabbinic Universalism in the Second and Third Centuries,” *Harvard Theological Review* 93:2 (2000), 101–115; Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Abingdon Press, 2007).

to note that the rabbis did not use the terms “particularism” and “universalism,” and did not think with these categories in ways that placed them in imminent tension. Nevertheless, rabbinic writers were deeply sensitive to the question of how the Jewish people could lay claim to an omnipotent God whose very universality was undermined by the notion of Israel’s election. As Cass Fisher has noted,

to diminish God’s providence is to simultaneously diminish God’s perfection, and this is a fact the Sages knew well. If we fail to see that the rabbis wrestled with [these] problems, we miss important contours to rabbinic theology and deprive contemporary Jewish theology of resources for addressing the perennial issue of how to balance universal truths grounded in divine perfection with particular truths that are unique to Jewish religious life and practice.³⁴

Like the Second Temple Jews who preceded them, the rabbis underscored God’s love for the Jewish people in passages that humanize God as a beloved collaborator, and insist on God’s omnipotent power over the universe in passages that depict God as supremely unknowable.³⁵

This attitude is represented in a tradition recorded in the early midrashic collection *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* (*Yitro, Ba-Hodesh* 1, s.v. *va-yahanu*), which notes that the Torah was given in the wilderness to convey the message that it is intended for all of humanity. The midrash notes that “the Torah is given in unclaimed territory. For had the Torah been given in the Land of Israel, the Israelites could have said to the nations of the world, ‘you have no share in it.’ But since it was given in the wilderness publicly and openly, in a place that is free for all, everyone wishing to accept it could come and accept it.” Marc Hirshman points out that this source’s Hebrew transliterations of the well-known Greek words “*demos*” and “*parresia*” intentionally convey a tone of public democracy.³⁶

³⁴ Cass Fischer, “The Cosmic Eye and its Pupil: Divine Perfection and the Mediation of Universal and Particular Truth in Rabbinic Theology,” in Alon Goshen-Gottstein, ed., *Religious Truth: Towards a Jewish Theology of Religions* (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2020), 61–82, at 63.

³⁵ On the former divine persona, see Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

³⁶ See also *Pesikta de-Rabbi Kahana* (23:1), which notes that the 25th of Elul “marks the beginning of creation . . . on it (judgment) is pronounced upon the nations of the world, which to the sword, which to peace, which to famine, which to plenty, which to death, and which to life. On this day all creatures are noted and remembered, for life, for death.” The midrash continues: “God said to Adam: ‘Even as you came into my presence for judgment on this day and went forth free, so will your children come into my presence for the judgment on this day and go forth free.’”

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The rabbis also circulated traditions about Israel's elected status that distinguish them from other nations. The tenth chapter of the Mishnaic tractate *Sanhedrin*, for instance, declares that "All Jews have a share in the World to Come," while *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* expresses a more universalist outlook, stating that "Righteous people of all nations have a share in the world to come."³⁷ The universalist and particularist sources are endless, as are the seeming contradictions. The tension produced by the dual ideas that Israel was the elect people of God and that this God is universally interested in the welfare of all humankind seems to have made Jews in the Second Temple period self-conscious about potential accusations of Jewish inconsistency and misanthropy. There is less evidence, however, that rabbinic writers felt pressure to justify or resolve this tension. Certainly there is no evidence that they would have done so by minimizing the centrality of Jewish chosenness.³⁸ God's universal interest in humankind is never explored as an interest that comes at the expense of Israel's election.

THE JEWISH EMBRACE OF UNIVERSALIST VALUES and simultaneous claim to divine election has fostered confusion, resentment, and accusations of exclusivity since ancient times. While some Jews have responded to these accusations by abandoning the particularist aspects of their ancestral traditions, others have embraced particularist notions of Jewish chosenness. Most Jews, however, would probably agree that ideas we label "universalist" and "particularist" are not truly in tension with one another. And while some scholars presume that early Christians borrowed universalist ideas from Stoic philosophy, a study of Jewish literature produced in the Hellenistic era suggests that Paul likely based his universalist ideas on Jewish ideas, which were in turn influenced by Stoic thinking. Discourses regarding Jewish universalism should foreground Jewish documents that have been historically ignored in order to highlight the ways that universalism has been endemic to Jewish theological thinking.

I want to close by considering some possible strategies that can correct some of the misconceptions addressed in this paper, particularly misconceptions about universalism expressed in contemporary Jewish thought: The first strategy offers conditions by which we might continue to use the words "universalism" and "particularism"; the second proposes that we

³⁷ *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* 7; cf. *Sanhedrin* 105a; *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 13:2.

³⁸ Besides Wyschogrod (cited above), other notable efforts to contend with Jewish chosenness and its particularist aspects can be found in David Novak, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "The Uniqueness of the Jewish People," in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. E. Goldman (Harvard University Press, 1992), 79–87.

replace these terms with less loaded ones; and the third considers whether we should retire these phrases and avoid replacing them. First, we ought to cease treating the words “universalism” and “particularism” as binary opposites. This suggestion presumes that every religion includes—and requires—particularist elements in order to delineate stable boundaries between their faith communities and others. Most monotheistic religions, the same ones that are particularist, contain universalist elements that imbue their covenantal relationship with transcendent meaning by making sense of their theological destiny vis-à-vis the rest of humankind.

The second strategy presumes that “particularism” is a term too laden with problematic misunderstandings to be salvageable in theological discourse. While “particularism” should be recognized as a healthy boundary stabilizer that has nothing to do with mission and conversion, that is simply not how most theologians and academics understand it. Any religion that requires one to convert into it in order to receive equal benefits in the end-time cannot be regarded as purely universalist, since it depends on the idea that people outside the covenantal community are excluded from such benefits. Yet an impurely universalist community should not be considered a defect that must be overcome.³⁹ Rather than being a toxic centrifugal force that pushes those on the margins or outskirts further away from the community, particularism is a necessary and even healthy system that can be mapped onto a universalist outlook.⁴⁰

If the terms “universalism” and “particularism” are so problematic, then, should we use other words instead? Rather than attempting to exorcise the connotations of these words, we might consider replacing “particularist” with another word, such as “covenantal.” This word gestures towards the positive aspects of particularism, such as the belief that one’s faith community has been chosen to participate in a distinct relationship with God that offers specific benefits and requires additional responsibilities. Instead of using the word “universalist,” moreover, perhaps theologians and scholars can speak of an “inclusivist” vision of

³⁹ As Paula Fredriksen correctly emphasizes, Paul had no intention of requiring Gentiles to convert to Judaism. Paula Fredriksen, “Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 42 (1991), 532–564.

⁴⁰ Like their Jewish counterparts, early Christians asserted doctrines that we would label as both universalist and particularist. While they agreed that all people could achieve salvation, they also believed that, as the Church Father Origen pointed out, “outside of this house, that is, outside of the Church, no one is saved; for, if anyone should go out of it, he is guilty of his own death.” Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 3:5.

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salvation, or of an “expansive” prophetic ethos. Admittedly, “expansiveness” is not the catchiest of terms.

The third strategy is based on an argument developed by Ellen Birnbaum, which maintains that replacing one category with another will not solve the essential problem caused by using a single label that is meant to capture a set of concepts that fluidly manifest themselves in diverse ways depending on the social setting. Birnbaum argues that it is best to resist using any one term, since this term will inevitably become inaccurate when broadly applied. Instead, she suggests that we focus on “asking specifically how religious concepts, expressions, and traditions are and are not open to others and keeping in mind what issues we are and are not addressing and [bearing in mind] the importance of these issues within each tradition of expression.”⁴¹ In other words, rather than starting with a vocabulary of words that were not used in the ancient world, and applying this vocabulary onto complex ancient belief systems, we should produce descriptive evaluations based on the evidence. Replacing “universalism” and “particularism” with such descriptions could help to dismantle the false binary that contrasts Judaism and Christianity.

I assume that most Jewish theologians and scholars will be hesitant to permanently retire these terms. My suggestion, then, is to use them narrowly and selectively, and to clarify their definitions in all contexts where they appear. My own definition of universalism, for instance, is that universalism represents the invitation to all people to worship God alongside other faith communities without asking them to assimilate into a different faith community. Other definitions of universalism may be useful, depending on the research at hand. Should the words “universalism” and “particularism” remain in our nomenclature, I would hope that we stop speaking of them as systems that undermine one another, since both are essential to maintaining a healthy covenantal community that seeks to nourish its relationships with God and with other people.

⁴¹ Ellen Birnbaum, “Some Particulars About Universalism,” in *Crossing Boundaries in Early Judaism and Christianity: Ambiguities, Complexities, and Half-Forgotten Adversaries—Essays in Honor of Alan F. Segal*, ed. Kimberly B. Stratton and Andrea Lieber (Brill, 2016), 115–137.