

Why Groups Matter to Sociocultural Evolution: How Religio-Cultural Entrepreneurship Drove Political and Religious Evolution in Ancient Israel

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Abstract: Evolutionary concepts have a rich history in sociological theory, from Spencer to Durkheim, Marx to Weber. Recently, a neo-evolutionary revival has occurred in the social sciences, (1) bringing neuroscience into dialogue with age old sociological questions of origins; (2) considering the gene-culture relationship; and (3) constructing sweeping general theories of sociocultural evolution. Generally, the role collective actors play in the evolutionary process is taken for granted, as is the contingent, multi-directional, and multi-linear paths evolution takes when we focus on specific cases. The paper below examines the evolution of the ancient Israelites from the 8th-6th centuries BCE, teasing out a theory that supplements these other important areas. Specifically, it is argued that (a) institutional entrepreneurs are the collectives that *drive* sociocultural selection processes by innovating organizationally, normatively, and symbolically; (b) their cultural assemblages are sources of variation upon which sociocultural forms of selection, like *Spencerian* or *Marxian*, can work; and, (c) institutional spheres evolve and become “survivor machines” for the entrepreneur’s assemblage, imposing it on a significant proportion of the population and reproducing it across time and space.

Keywords: sociocultural evolution; institutions; entrepreneurs; ancient Israel; religion

INTRODUCTION

The study of cultural evolution, once at the core of the social sciences, has experienced somewhat of a resurgence in evolutionary and cognitive psychology, biosciences, and the social sciences (Atran 2002; Richerson and Boyd 2005; Runciman 2009; Turner and Maryanski 2009). The vast majority of this work falls along three axes: (1) the search for neurological architecture, be it hard-wired or a byproduct of some other hard-wired component of the brain, to explain the prevalence—and sometimes ubiquity—of a sociocultural phenomenon (Boyer 2001; Pinker 2006)—or, in some cases, the consideration of the relationship between the biogenetics and culture ; (2) the effort to explain sociocultural phenomena, whether described as “memes” or otherwise, through (neo-) Darwinian principles (Runciman 2004; Blute 2010); or, (3) the construction of general theories of macro-level evolution that are descendents, though with notable advantages and advancements, of old stage-models (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997; Nolan and Lenski 2010).

Undoubtedly, the insights offered by scholars in all three areas have been tremendous. Yet, in nearly all cases, these models either ignore or unsatisfactorily handle two facts: some aspects of sociocultural evolution, arguably, are driven by purposeful, active collective efforts (Boyd and Richerson 1992; Boehm 2008; Abrutyn 2015a) and the processes of selection, at some levels of social reality such as the group or, germane to our discussion below, the institutional sphere are driven by non-Darwinian selection forces (Verkamp 1991; Runciman 1998; Richerson and Boyd 2001; Turner and Maryanski 2009; Turner 2010). And, while scholars occasionally pay attention to specific historical cases to unpack the general processes from the unique ones (cf. Wilson 2002; Runciman 2004), too often sociocultural evolution treats the end result of evolution—whether it be an adaptation like “big gods” that can acts as invisible panapticons in heterogeneous societies (Norenzayan 2013) or the evolution of differentiated

institutions (Turner 2003)—as inevitable and the process as unfolding. Instead, this paper proposes looking to sociological theory for other types of selection that reflect (a) the role that historical and sociocultural contingency plays in cultural evolution, (b) the fact that innovation does not necessarily have to be material, but can be cultural (Eisenstadt 1964), to lead to qualitative, meaningful transformations, and (c) the reality that humans, especially when embedded within collectives striving for collective goals, pursuing shared interests, and bonded by affectual and moral sources of solidarity, can purposefully innovate and drive evolution. That is, I am suggesting two types of selection that lead to sociocultural evolution on a much greater scale: the first occurs at the group level, as specialized collectives seek to reproduce their own culture and sustain the solidarity and self-sacrifice members have to the collective; the second is characterized by that collective's *cultural assemblage*—or, bundle of collective memory, cosmologies, behavioral repertoires meant to re-enact and re-present that memory, and communicative devices meant to facilitate and constrain exchange and interaction—become installed within the core or center of an institutional sphere and, thus, transforming the social reality of a significant proportion of the population.

By emphasizing collectives we term *institutional entrepreneurs*—a term inspired by Eisenstadt's (1964) cultural theory of evolution and Weber's *charismatic carrier groups*—an empirically useful model of sociocultural evolution may be proposed. A theory that considers the purposeful efforts of entrepreneurs, the reactions by elites and other strata in society, and the occasional success entrepreneurs have in reconfiguring the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space in ways that *qualitatively transform* the lived experiences and affectual, attitudinal, and action-based orientations of a significant proportion of the population satisfactorily explains the multi-linear, contingent, and multi-directional paths that evolution

(Steward 1955 [1972]) and historical change take (Eisenstadt 2000). Thus, the analysis below does not seek to supplant the three different strands of neo-evolutionary theory listed above, but rather, supplement them by fleshing out one level of evolution. By doing so, we can show how the specifics matter, while also elucidating some of the general aspects of sociocultural evolution (variation, selection, and transmission) at the group-level. As such, the analysis speaks directly to evolutionary sociologists by avoiding the mistakes Boyd and Richerson (1992:183) warn against: ignoring the dimensions of sociocultural evolution that “is much like the guided, nonrandom variation of ‘Lamarckian’ evolution,” shaped by historical and sociocultural contingencies.

Rather than build the theory in the abstract, or with a series of closely related cases, we train our lens on a specific case: the evolution of the Axial Age (c. 800-200 BCE) Israelite religion. Though this case may seem arbitrary, it is chosen for several reasons. First, religious evolution and the evolution of religion has been one of the most vibrant areas of research across disciplines (Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Norenzayan 2013), as scholars try to assess why religion appears universal. The evolution of the Israelite religion challenges these perspectives as any account of how the Judean religion and then post-Exilic Judaism evolved requires attention to geopolitics (Albertz 1992), hermeneutics (Levinson 1997), and Weberian party and status conflicts (Smith 1971 [1987]). Second, the ancient Israelites were essential to Weber’s (1917-19 [1952]) sociology of religion, and have thus received serious interest in more contemporary studies of the Axial Age revolutions (Eisenstadt 2004; Bellah 2011).

Third, the Axial Age in which this case is embedded can be characterized as a moment of “parallel” evolution, or an historical period in which several (relatively) independent societies evolved in the same direction (Abrutyn 2014a). In this case, Israel, India, China, and Greece were the sites in which several similar qualitative cultural transformations occurred: the

emergence of critical, theoretic thinking (Momigliano 1975), self-reflexive texts (Goody 1986), and transcendental view of the sacred vis-à-vis the secular (Eisenstadt 1982) as well as organizational and normative changes that saw the religious sphere become a discrete physical, temporal, social, and symbolic entity vis-à-vis the polity and kinship (Abrutyn 2013b, 2014a); it was during and, more accurately, after that the enduring “world” religions (Judaism; Hinduism/Buddhism; Confucianism/Taoism) and Greek proto-science/philosophy took purchase. Thus, the Israelites present several opportunities for developing a more coherent group-level theory of sociocultural evolution. Before considering this theory, we briefly consider some conceptual and methodological issues.

CONSIDERING THE BIBLE

Methodological Concerns

We begin by considering the methodological concerns many sociologists might have towards using the Bible as data; indeed, whenever one uses any historical data, there are choices and dilemmas. The Israelite case is especially troublesome. Consider sociology’s typical treatment (Weber 1917-19 [1952]; Eisenstadt 2004; Bellah 2011): the Bible’s historiography is rarely subjected to critical analysis, and the narrative is often taken for granted. To ignore the central debates in biblical scholarship is to invite severe errors into one’s research. At the core of these debates, all of which are touched by ideological, religious, and typical scholarly arguments, is the dating of the Bible; a debate which goes to the heart of the naïve acceptance of the Bible’s given historiography. On one pole, as would be expected, some maintain the veracity of the text’s chronology save for some minor adjustments (Zevit 2001). On the other pole, “minimalists” argue that the Bible was not likely written until either the Persian (550-330 BCE) period, with some pushing it back even further into the Hellenistic era (323-31 BCE) (Davies

1995, 2008; Lipschits and Blenkinsopp 2003). It remains an open question, then, just how useful the Bible is as data to draw sociological inferences.

A third position, and the one adopted herein, exercises caution: older and newer traditions that became core to the Bible likely emerged in the eighth century BCE in the northern kingdom of Israel, were carried to the southern kingdom (Judah) after Assyria (721 BCE) razed the north, and then went through a series of edits, additions, glossing, and redaction (Römer and de Pury 2000; Dever 2001; Na'aman 2002; Schniedewind 2004; Finkelstein 2013). As we shall see, this position finds strong support not only through biblical exegesis and archaeology, but based on sound sociological principles and historical comparative analysis (for other examples of social science using biblical texts, see Gottwald 1979; Tollefson and Williamson 1992; Gottwald 2001; Abrutyn 2015c). Moreover, it allows us to accept the likelihood that many of the books were not written by the eponymous author, but rather contain older sources (which biblical exegesis, extra-biblical textual analysis, and archaeology can triangulate) that have been grafted onto new sources (van der Toorn 2007). In any case, the writers' interests are often laid bare by the choices they made in both adding, glossing, and rearranging the scrolls. Indeed, this position is both exemplary for fleshing out group-level selection, as well as benefits from an evolutionary perspective as we see the biblical entrepreneurs emerge, struggle with competitors, face exogenous and endogenous exigencies that threaten their survival, and are shaped by the conditions; moreover, this case highlights the equally important normative and symbolic innovations that became part of the core of Judaism—a religion, incidentally, that has proven resilient over the last 2,000 years without, until recently, being embedded in a politically sovereign state and, concomitantly, facing serious violent threats numerous times.

Thus, while Biblical scholarship presents an ever-shifting body of evidence, archaeology

and extra-biblical textual sources (e.g., the Armana letters) allow us to corroborate some parts of the Hebrew Bible well enough to allow sociology to apply its own principles drawn from similar cases. That being said, the analysis below focuses on just over two centuries of history: approximately the mid-eighth century BCE to the early seventh, late sixth century BCE. Several reasons inform this choice. First, little archaeological and extra-Biblical evidence supports the foundational Exodus-Moses story's veracity and, more importantly, supports the claims of a grand Davidic-Solomonic united kingdom in the 10th and 9th centuries BCE (Finkelstein and Silberman 2006). Second, because Biblical scholars, whether exegetical or archaeological, have been intensely debating when the Bible was written, intense empirical scrutiny has centered on both the Davidic/Solomonic period as well as the divided kingdom period that lasted until the Exile (587/6 BCE). As such, this scrutiny has provided enough evidence to sketch much of the historical narrative and, in some cases, posit clear conclusions.¹ Third, while the post-Exilic period presents an equally interesting period of time adding extra centuries would delimit precision in the analysis, while, in addition, the Axial Age, which centers on the sixth century in particular, is roundly considered essential to understanding the later developments in religions like Judaism or Buddhism (Armstrong 2006).

Before we turn to the analytic portion of the study, the briefest of historical accounts can be provided to situate the analysis, which will further flesh this account out; the interested reader can find much more detailed accounts in previously published work (Soggin 1999; Liverani 2005).

¹ The reader should note that biblical scholarship has few consensus issues, and thus some of my arguments are hotly contested by a group of scholars called "minimalists" who contend that the Bible could not have been written and organized earlier than the Persian period and, perhaps, much later (Davies 1995; Noll 2013). Archaeology does not support this assertion, and, moreover, the goal of this paper is not to wade into this debate. It is clear there were entrepreneurs working with older traditions, inventing new "old" traditions, and building the scaffolding of later Judaism. We are interested in who they were, what forces were both motivating them and selecting for their innovations, and, specifically, what made their innovations fit.

A Brief Historical Explication

In the mid-eighth century, what is Israel and Palestine today was split into a northern (Israel) and southern kingdom (Judah), which likely were unified prior to the 9th century. The north was far more culturally, politically, and economically advanced having been a satellite state within the Assyrian empire's geopolitical and economic sphere (Finkelstein 2013). Conversely, the south was a tiny political backwater, homogenous in culture, characterized by subsistence economies, and only occasionally involved in geopolitical conflicts. In the 720s, extra-biblical sources as well as the Bible reports that Judah agreed to be a vassal to Assyria in return for Israel's destruction; in 721, Sargon razed the north, deported thousands of people, repopulated the land with foreigners, and, literally, ravaged buildings and soil (Smith-Christopher 2002). Archaeology reveals that the southern kingdom rapidly grew in size, heterogeneity, and economic and political complexity within a few decades; Jerusalem alone appears to have doubled or tripled in population size, growing from a tiny hill village to an urban capitol (Liverani 2005). Until the fall of Judah in 586 BCE at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, Hezekiah's—who had drawn a real or, more likely, fictive ancestral link to the David and Solomon (Finkelstein and Silberman 2006)—family, including his son Manasseh and grandson Josiah—ruled over the south. When the Babylonians razed Judah, Jerusalem, and Solomon's Temple, the poorest of Judeans remained on the land, while a small segment of Judeans fled to Egypt; to Babylon went a contingent of elites, building relatively autonomous communities and welcomed to assimilate into Babylonian society residentially, occupationally, and martially (Pearce 2006). In 539, the Babylonian empire began its descent, eventually being conquered by Cyrus and the Persians. Rather than using deportation as a mechanism of control, the Persians created satrapies, or local provinces that were relatively culturally autonomous (e.g.,

religious freedom was encouraged) and ruled by a vassal king and administration beholden to Persia. We are told that in 536 BCE, some Israelites returned from Babylon—how many and how fast is in severe dispute—to reconstitute a Judean state; and, by the late fifth century had finished building a second Temple and imposed a religious state that looked very different from pre-Exilic Judah (Edelman 2005).

For the first 20 years of Hezekiah's (716-687) reign, Judah grew rapidly as it became a source of olive oil and wine for Assyria. Hezekiah decided to sever ties with Assyria as a vassal, and by some twist of fate, survived a siege by Sennacherib in 705 BCE, and spent the remaining years of his reign relatively free from Assyrian interference as their power receded from the region. The first real wave of entrepreneurship occurred during his reign. When he died, he was succeeded by Manasseh (687-642) who purposefully worked to undo much of the entrepreneurial project, alienating many of the factions and putting new endogenous pressures on the cultural assemblage and its purveyors. When he died, his son Amon took over, but was quickly dispatched by "the people" (2 Kings 22:1), who consequently placed a nine year, Josiah, on the throne (2 Kgs. 23-24); Josiah ruled until he died in battle against the Babylonians (609) and, with his death, entropy ensued until Babylon crushed the rebellious Judeans.

Before and during Josiah's reign we can identify a second wave of entrepreneurship under different pressures, yet motivated by similar reasons as the first; while the Exile presents a third period of entrepreneurship with, again, very different pressures and context. What is remarkable is both the continuity and discontinuity of each wave's institutional project. On the one hand, what happened during Hezekiah's rule became the foundational building blocks of future entrepreneurial projects, all the way up to the second Diaspora in 70 CE. On the other hand, what made each wave distinct and what underscores the multi-directionality of

sociocultural evolution is that each wave “freed” itself from the past in ways that were essential to understanding how they used the past to create the present and the future.

Finally, to fully understand how and why evolution “works” we must not only consider the exogenous pressures, but also dynamic group-level forces present in most cases. In short, collectives within and between three occupational classes struggled for the right to monopolize authority, but also coalesced at important junctures in ways that facilitated punctuated evolution: priests from the north *and* from the south; prophetic circles that originated in the north, but who influenced the emergence of those in the south; and scribes who, as noted above, occasionally overlapped with priests and/or prophets, but who also had their own interests.

INSTITUTIONAL EVOLUTION

Institutions

The abstract. It is true that few concepts are less precisely defined in sociology than institutions. The definitions range from any and all enduring patterns (Jepperson 1991) to cultural “myths” or patterns adopted by organizations for legitimation (Meyer and Rowan 1977) to specific spheres of social reality like religion or kinship (Turner 1972). Scholarship that adheres to the former offers a bewildering set of examples that have far more differences than similarities (Jepperson 1991:44-5): the president, the handshake, Harvard, sexism, and voting. Those adhering to the new institutionalist perspective range from processes like rationality (Meyer and Rowan 1977) and individualization to historically specific patterns like the Church, state, and capitalism (Friedland and Alford 1991). We adopt the last conceptualization, defining

institutions as macro-level structural and cultural spheres constituted by individual, collective, and congeries of collective (e.g., fields; niches) actors that are empirically real in physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space (Abrutyn 2014b). This tradition delineates a set of ubiquitous institutional domains, drawing from history, archaeology, ethnography, and sociology to induce this delimited set: kinship, religion, law, polity, economy, and education (Turner 2003; Nolan and Lenski 2010); in addition, several “secondary” spheres have become prominent in modernity, including science, medicine, art, sport, entertainment, and media.

Institutional spheres vary in terms of their level of differentiation (Luhmann 1982)—e.g., number of actors and resources discretely related to the unique functioning of the institution—and autonomy (Abrutyn 2009)—e.g., the degree to which these actors and resources are physically, temporally, socially, and symbolically embedded within the specific institution. Differentiation implies structural differences, whereas autonomy infuses symbolic meaning to these differences such that goals, motives, lines of action, value-orientations, and decision-making processes are cognitively distinct both for the incumbents of these differentiated social units as well as for observers. A chief, for instance, is a differentiated political role whose phenomenological and objective existence cannot be detached from the kinship domain in which it remains deeply embedded (Earle 1991), whereas a king and his court are develop goals understood by both them and others as “different from other types of goals or from goals of other spheres or groups in society [in that their] formation, pursuit, and implementation became largely independent of other groups, *and were governed mostly by political criteria and by consideration of political exigency*” (Eisenstadt 1963:19). Hence, as institutional autonomy increases, the broader society cannot help but be transformed as polity or religion becomes a qualitatively different experience and objective fact for more and more people. Conversely, when autonomy

decreases, social reality also changes as boundaries between roles or organizations or goals blur. It is argued below that institutional evolution is the process by which autonomy grows or declines.

Institutions do not have “adaptive” functions, *per se*; biological evolution does have its limitations (Turner and Maryanski 2008). Rather, institutions become the spaces in which collectives can institutionalize their cultural assemblages, using various mechanisms of control to increase the probability that their assemblages will persist over time, be adopted by greater swaths of the population, and influence the “steering” of a given society. Thus, institutions are “adaptive” for the collective entrepreneur or entrepreneurs successful in securing structural and symbolic independence and carving out physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space for the realization of their interests and, within varying degrees, the collective’s interests (Abrutyn and Van Ness 2015). Sociocultural evolution, then, is not purely driven by competition as Darwinian biological evolution is. Rather, some entrepreneurs take advantage of structural opportunities to innovate, some are “authorized” by extant elites to resolve perceived problems, and others simply fill a vacuum left by environmental or ecological change. Other times, of course, evolution occurs *within* existing social spaces due to competition over resources and the purposive efforts to specialize, expand resource basis, carve out new niches, or, in the most radical cases, create new institutional domains. The former type of evolution is built on Spencerian selection pressures, whereas the latter obeys Durkheimian selection pressures. In either case, institutions do not simply evolve on their own, but are a product of the concerted efforts of collective actors called institutional entrepreneurs.

The concrete. In the case of the Israelites, the analysis below asks the basic question: if the Axial Age was about creating religious autonomy where it had previously not existed (cf.

Taylor 2012; Abrutyn 2014a), how did the religious sphere eventually become an autonomous institutional sphere where no previous model of autonomous religion had existed? Students of ancient political states have long noted that beginning about 5,000 years ago, the major evolutionary processes were urban, autonomous polities (Adams 1966; Abrutyn and Lawrence 2010). The basic model that emerged in China, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Peru, Mesoamerica, as well as smaller imperial states like the Hittites, was the fusion of polity with religion as distinct from local, village kinship systems (Yoffee 2005). Physically, temples were placed near palaces; temporally, major religious celebrations were rooted in the king's myths of foundation, victory, and the like; socially, kings were reincarnated gods, high priests, or central to all public and private rituals; and, symbolically, the pantheon came to mirror the hierarchy of political and occupational life. Compare this to Ezekiel's (40-48) exilic vision of the someday reconstituted Judean (Albertz 2003): the Temple was to be physically demarcated from the Palace; the king's land was given to him by the priests and not vice versa; the priests' income was provided by the people and not the king; and the king was no longer allowed within the inner sanctuaries of the Temple, thus severing his role from the religious sphere. In short, a blue print for a religious domain from polity and kinship was created in exile. This piece of propaganda appears to have been part of the "constitution" authorized by the Persians when they allowed the Jews to return to Judah and create a new religiously free society with delimited political rights (Edelman 2005).

To be sure, monotheism, which is the key "adaptations" that many social scientists and evolutionary psychologists attribute to the Israelites (Weber 1917-19 [1952]; Norenzayan 2013), was likely preceded by religious autonomy. More plausibly, the pre-exilic Israelite/Judean peoples were polytheistic until, perhaps, Josiah (more on him below) when they may have become monolatrous—that is, believers in a polytheistic world, but adherents to a single god

(Lang 1983). There is, unfortunately, no way to know for sure how long Yahweh was worshipped with a female consort, Asherah, but monotheism could not have existed until at least the Exile and, among the masses, much later (Schniedewind 2004). Hence, it is impossible to see monotheism as the enduring evolutionary feature of Israelite society when there are far more plausible candidates like the portability of the law, the invention of a personal, portable god that existed both in every Torah/Ark and in the very soul of each adherent (Abrutyn 2015c); both of which provided Diasporic Jews with a direct link to the foundational mythos, behavioral repertoires meant to re-enact this myth annually and, sometimes, daily, and the linguistic tools for interpreting and re-interpreting these myths and practices as well as exchanging, and interacting with fellow members of the community—no matter how far-flung they might be geographically.

Entrepreneurs and Cultural Assemblages

The abstract. Though few sociologists would consider Max Weber an evolutionist, he offers a group-level theory of social change which would be modified by Eisenstadt a half-century later. Eisenstadt (1964:384) remarked that evolution was predicated on the “presence or absence...of an active group of special “entrepreneurs,” or an elite” capable of innovating organizationally, symbolically, normatively, and technologically in ways that radically alter extant institutional structures or create new ones. Furthermore, in his introduction to Weber’s work on charisma Eisenstadt (in Weber 1968:xv-i) reminds:

Weber emphasizes...the charismatic group or band, be it the religious sect or the followers of a new political leader...[Hence] the test of any great charismatic leader lies not only in his ability to create a single event or great movement, but also in his ability to leave a continuous impact on an institutional structure—to transform any given institutional setting by infusing into it some of his

charismatic vision, by investing regular orderly offices, or aspects of social organization, with some of his charismatic qualities and aura.

What Eisenstadt suggests, then, is that institutional entrepreneurs provide the source(s) of variation that group-level selection can work on, and actively shape the process of selection as they act and react to environmental and sociocultural changes. They purposefully deal with real (or perceived) exigencies by trying to resolve them, whether for their own self-interested benefit and/or because they are concerned with a broader collective; their innovations become the structural and cultural changes, once institutionalized, that qualitatively transform human societies, organization, and action. But, they are not just passive sources of variation: collectives act on material and ideal interests, collective and self-serving interests, and with varying levels of power and access to human, material, and symbolic resources. Because of these variables, group-level evolution is rarely complete or total as actors strive to secure their position, which often results in strategies of accommodation, adjustment, and, in some cases, co-optation (Abrutyn and Van Ness 2015).

While some scholars have focused on the meme, or “items or packages of information transmitted from mind to mind by imitation or learning” (Runciman 2009:3) as the unit of evolution, it is at the institutional level that sociocultural evolution is most powerfully divorced from biology or studies in diffusion. Control over an institutional sphere, that is the carving out of a distinct institutional core from which entrepreneurs can produce and distribute resources, impose a vision of institutional reality by way of a monopoly over authority, and shape the reality of greater and greater numbers of people, is the true driving force of sociocultural evolution at the level we are interested in. Rather than institutionalize a meme-set, entrepreneurs store their *cultural assemblages* in the institutional core (Abrutyn 2014b). A cultural assemblage consists of (1) collective memory, including the “foundational” myth that legitimizes the group’s

claim to authority and its relationship to the ultimate ends associated with the institution (Assmann 2011), (2) a plausible cosmology (Berger 1969), (3) behavioral repertoires that enact and re-present these memories in performance and ritual (Alexander 2004), and (4) communicative devices like *themes of discourse* and self-reflexive texts (Luhmann 2004) and generalized symbolic media (Abrutyn 2015b) that supply institutional actors with the linguistic abilities to talk about the institution, its actors, their motives, and, less explicitly, constrain what actual phenomenological encounters are “about.” Each of these elements contribute to the probability of within group solidarity—a key for the group’s survival over time. Unlike blind natural selection, groups can refashion their cultural assemblage to accommodate, absorb, and include non-members or rival factions, bringing members closer together and harnessing greater amounts of social power; conversely, they can make these assemblages more exclusive and the cost of membership higher as a strategy of solidarity. In other cases, existing elites *elevate* or co-opt cultural assemblages of mobile, upstart entrepreneurs because they see integrative *and* regulative value in the novel normative, symbolic, and organizational frameworks.

Regardless of the underlying causes of an assemblages “success,” what matters for evolution is that it finds its way into an institutional core and becomes the *de facto* social reality taken for granted by some, imposed on others. When the beliefs and practices of one group become the generalized cultural patterns for a significant proportion of the population, inscribed in an altered physical, temporal, social, and symbolic landscape that transforms actual movements and habits, reorients emotions, attitudes, and actions, and changes the way individuals and collectives throughout society order their material and symbolic interests, the residue of the evolutionary process is laid bare. It is the enduring institutional structure that acts as a vault, warehouse, and library for its cultural assemblage. And, it is through the carving out

of autonomous institutional space that the group can elevate its assemblage beyond its own boundaries and daily routines and impose it upon a significant proportion of a local, regional, national, or even inter-state population in ways that diffuse some of its history, repertoires, and sources of solidarity onto those people while also providing paths to absorbing and accommodating local cultural elements and reproducing the assemblage over indefinite periods of time.

In sum, then, institutions are vaults, then, because autonomy involves the physical, temporal, social, symbolic, and power differentiation of a core that protects some of the most cherished aspects of the assemblage from being lost, stolen, usurped, or tampered with; they are warehouses because institutional cores serve as distributional hubs that facilitate the flow of material, symbolic, and human resources from one location to another; and, they are libraries because they are cultural repositories from which actors, both elites and non-elites, can draw old, forgotten elements, combine and recombine them into new ones, or simply “invent” a new tradition grafted onto the old. Entrepreneurs, then, are the creators, propagators, and purveyors of variation. They are not always purposefully trying to change society as they very often are concerned with their own persistence. In the face of structural opportunities, historical and sociocultural contingencies, and hostile reactions by other strata—especially elites—their assemblage and their survival can become something far more meaningful than initially intended and their foundational myth can become tied to something existential or moral; the drenching of their assemblage in affectual-moral loadings imbues the group with the capability of being “world changers” as it is contagious when harnessed correctly (Eisenstadt 1968).

The concrete. The ancient Israelites exemplify the idea of entrepreneurs and the process of entrepreneurship. First of all, they were not a unified cohesive bunch, though under the right

exogenous and endogenous exigencies several factions would unite, temporarily, to form a relatively singular collective force. Four collective interests can be discerned: political entrepreneurs trying to stabilize and legitimize their rule in the face of internal heterogeneity and geopolitical pressure (from Egypt and the various imperial states of Mesopotamia); prophetic circles that may or may not have been led by the titular heads of the prophetic books, but which were clearly real entities (Blenkinsopp 1995); priests, some carrying traditions from the north and some in the south as rivals trying to co-opt the northern traditions; and scribes who both served the religious and political actors, but in many cases were also linked to the prophets or the priests.

At least two points of continuity can be discerned. First, all three waves of entrepreneurs—and, members of each faction—articulated and legitimated their projects as *cultural projects* rooted in the *ideal interest* of preventing the pollution of the Judean religious center. This belief was premised on the very real collective trauma experienced when Assyria destroyed Israel, threatened Judah, and later, when this threat was realized by Babylon and Judah was destroyed. The basic interpretive frame, despite contextual changes, remained the same: the polity's apostasy needed cleansing and protecting (Abrutyn 2015a). Second, while factions favored some traditions over others, a normative pattern of editing, glossing, redacting, and manipulating the texts appears to have been adopted by the priests, prophets, and scribes—perhaps the latter being the key occupational link between the three groups. This normative innovation allowed flexibility, despite the conservative nature of writing (Goody 1986), while also preserving certain traditions as foundational. Hence, while the outcome, underlying interests, and broader contexts of each project were highly divergent in many respects, the cultural assemblage retained certain continuous features that allow us to consider the Israelites as

a singular case of religious evolution: The foundational mythos of the group—e.g., Exodus; Moses; the giving of the written law as more important than the oral law (Schniedewind 2004); the behavioral repertoires meant to re-enact and represent the foundational story, for instance the elevation of three holidays linked to this narrative (Assmann 2011): Passover meal and pilgrimage, Simchat Torah, and Sukkot; and, the communicative tools for interpreting and reinterpreting the law and the traditions (Levinson 1997)—*mnemographic hermeneutics* that made the meanings flexible over time and space.

Having considered what evolves (religious autonomy) and the principal actors driving the selection process, we can turn to some of the key elements of an institutional theory of evolution. Beginning with an elucidation of how sociocultural selection processes differ from their biological counterparts, allowing us to explore more deeply the connection between environment and entrepreneurial variation, and, of course, the link between agency and selection. After wading through these historical details, a more robust account of the cultural assemblage that gradually evolved over the course of two centuries or more will be presented.

FORCES OF SELECTION

One of the major advances made in neo-evolutionary thinking has been the elucidation of non-Darwinian selection processes, named by Turner (2010) after their sociological progenitor: *Spencerian*, *Durkheimian*, and *Marxian*. Whereas Darwinian evolution is natural selection working on phenotypes and the gene frequencies in a given population, these other three refer back to the purposive nature of social and cultural selection. Spencer's theory, as opposed to Darwin's, is premised on exigencies putting pressure extant structural and cultural solutions that drive new structure and culture. In some cases, existing solutions are ineffective, whereas other cases structure and culture do not currently exist and must be invented from scratch so to speak.

In either case, the driving force is *not* competition but the real or perceived need for solutions to real, imagined, or invented exigencies. Durkheimian and Marxian selection, like Darwinian, are driven by competition between groups over scarce resources, but retain a teleological character—something Darwin himself embraced. In the former, as population ecologists have shown, groups struggle for human and material resources in a given niche, with niches being capable of only holding a certain number and density of groups (Hannan and Freeman 1977); competition ensues, in which evolution is driven by (a) specialization, (b) diversification, (c) new niche formation, and, in rare cases, (d) extinction and potential niche collapse. The latter form of selection is similar, but is rooted in *new collectives* seeking to usurp a niche and institute a new set of organizational, normative, and symbolic frameworks through force and coercion. While the specification of these three types of selection present an important advance, Turner is not an historical sociologist and, as such, offers few distinct examples of cases in order to flesh out how these processes may operate. Though we cannot explore each process or any one in full detail, with the Israelites, we are in a position to specify some actual mechanisms.

Spencerian *Cultural* Selection: Disruption and Trauma

A recurring theme driving entrepreneurship was that of a sense of the sacred center being polluted because of continued apostasy (Abrutyn 2015c), the wrath of Yahweh or the supernatural leading to displacement, dislocation, and disruption, and the desire to transmit this shared collective trauma to legitimate projects rooted in creating new organizational, normative, and symbolic frameworks that prevented future apostasy and trauma. Though many evolutionary sociologists dismiss cultural or ideational factors as potential independent variables of evolution, the Israelite case cannot be divorced from the impact the northern kingdoms destruction left on all of the future entrepreneurs as either experienced and motivating or, in later waves of

entrepreneurs, as a warning or as an interpretive lens to understand contemporary events (Gottwald 1962; Smith-Christopher 2002). Indeed, research on psychological and collective-cultural trauma underscores the intense cognitive disruptive force it has on individuals, as well as its contagiousness (McCann and Pearlman 1990)—especially when trauma is predicated on a persistent existential threat that leads to actual dislocation. Moreover, collective trauma, like any cultural narrative, can be intensified and made accessible by intellectuals (Eyerman 2011), is generally about national identities being threatened, destroyed, or in need of radical change (1998), and can be blocked or “reversed” by re-interpreting the events as calls to positively reconfigure the social world (Smelser 2004).

As noted above, Israel was destroyed by Assyria in 722-1. Assyria had a scorched Earth imperial policy of meant to erase the cultural history and memory of the vanquished and forcibly assimilate them (Jonker 1995). One need only consider the trauma refugees face in the modern world to begin to understand what the northern Israelites who left before, during, or after felt as a collective and individually as home, land, and even family were erased. Moreover, in a time where similar events could not be viewed in the newspaper, TV, or internet, the shock would have lacked wider contextual meaning-making, and thus trauma would have been severe. Finally, the dominant frame for sense-making in the first millennium BCE would have been religious. Because the north and south were so close physically and, to some degree culturally, the existential threat Assyria posed would have reverberated throughout Judah and, for those who lived close to sacred sites like Bethel, it have been felt as deeply as their northern counterparts (Schniedewind 2004). In this sense, then, Assyria represented one of the most essential exogenous exigencies driving the evolution of the Israelite religion, as it not only drove a large contingent of refugees—many of which would have been classes of intellectuals carrying

human capital to the capital-starved south—but it also became a real potential threat to the south as Judah was suddenly thrust into the Assyrian geopolitical system.

The existential threat and the causal logic assumed by prophets, priests, and other important actors is clear in the prophetic tradition, which, exemplified by Hosea's "book," warns the people of following political leaders who ally themselves with foreign states instead of with Yahweh and who blame the fall of the north on Yahweh's wrath for apostasy (Blenkinsopp 1995). The reforms Hezekiah supposedly enacted would have been based on the fear of the south repeating the north's mistakes; the texts attributed to Josiah's much more radical reforms are clearly tied to preventing pollution and apostasy; and, finally, the experience of the exiles in Babylon would have easily made sense by drawing on actual events that had occurred not more than three generations prior and which were easily carried on scrolls. Indeed, during the Exile some of the most painful, emotional texts were written reflecting the sorrow some of the Exiles felt for losing their home and, more importantly, Yahweh's home (the Jerusalem Temple). Making sense of serious existential dilemmas, as Weber and others (Geertz 1966), is central to religious cultural systems and in the face of repeated events, the only interpretation would be that either the extant structure and culture were inefficacious, or that it was lacking altogether.

Spencerian *Structural and Cultural Selection: Hezekiah's Reaction*

While the existential problems were the symbolic-cognitive backdrop throughout, there were pragmatic problems that demanded politically expedient solutions; solutions that archaeology seems to point to as not existing in Judah. Three exigencies faced Hezekiah. First, the influx of refugees presented a major problem on many levels. For instance, between the end of the 8th and the end of the 7th century, the size of Judah continuously grew from 49.9 to 115.2 hectares, while Jerusalem alone expanded from 5 to 60 hectares with estimates of the population

exploding from 1,000 to 15,000 inhabitants (Liverani 2005). Estimates of demographic growth indicate that much of the explosion came from northern refugees overwhelming the southern population (Finkelstein 2013). Additionally, the north was more cosmopolitan and diverse, while the south was rural and homogeneous; alongside the growth in size and density came heterogeneity and more frequent and intense conflicts that local kinship mechanisms would be unable to resolve. Finally, while both populations shared some traditions, the northern refugees very likely brought with them texts that challenged local oral authority and would have to be integrated with southern religious systems (Fleming 2012). In particular, a portion of these scribes likely came from Bethel as it was located no more than 15 miles from Jerusalem (Schniedewind 2004) and appears to have been a holy site for northern Judeans (Smith 2004). Scholars believe that the oldest source materials would have been brought from this sanctuary including, among other things, parts of the Exodus narrative—which decenters the “birth” of Israel and Judah, and the Amos/Hosea traditions (Na'aman 2002).

Second, not only would these refugees carry human capital capable of transforming the land into olive and grape farms, as well as other industry, there was an imperative to become indispensable to Assyria as a provider of some type of goods. Archaeology points to rapid economic growth which means all of the key evolutionary forces became present: complex divisions of labor, foreign trade, growth of markets and meta-markets, and the growth of impersonal exchange that required generalized law to regulate and coordinate these transactions. Finally, besides these latter two exigencies putting pressure on an underdeveloped polity and its lack of administrative complexity, the sudden need to deal with diplomacy and foreign entities would have multiplied these other pressure. Hence, in the confluence of economic, political, and demographic pressures—along with the metaphysical dilemmas that were premised on real

events—a sufficient case can be made that selection processes were activated; one could argue that a certain number of exigencies are necessary for evolutionary processes to emerge, but that remains an open question unanswerable in this analysis.²

What makes Spencerian selection so fascinating is that it is premised on both challenges and opportunities. Under pressure Hezekiah enacted several cultic reforms meant to centralize governance (2 Kings 18-20; Isaiah 36-39; Albertz 1992), and left his mark in the expansion of administrative apparatus—e.g., the number of public buildings went from zero in the 8th century to over 4000 in the 7th (Liverani 2005). In addition, he began the process of legitimizing his claims to authority as found in the works attributed to Solomon which Hezekiah purportedly authorized his “men” to collect and anthologize (Proverbs 25.1). It is important, however, to keep in mind that these reforms were driven by political entrepreneurs and their interests more so than religious entrepreneurs (Chavel 2015). Yet, Hezekiah empowered a group of religiously-oriented actors whose normative and symbolic efforts would eventually become the basis of future entrepreneurship and, unanticipated by Hezekiah, the creation of an autonomous religious sphere shaped by a singular deity (Smith 1971 [1987]; Blenkinsopp 1995; van der Toorn 2007).

From Spencerian to Marxian Selection

Sometimes Spencerian evolution is less about creating new solutions and more about the powerful trying to resolve some of their own dilemmas and, unintentionally, being the purposive selective force by choosing one group’s assemblage over another. In the Hezekian example described above, we see a political entrepreneur selecting some actors and their cultural

² While viable solutions were generated, an important caveat about evolution must be highlighted. No solution is perfect or guaranteed to work. The fact that Babylon would destroy Judah a few generations ago is often overlooked because the Exilic community emerged with much of the cultural assemblage intact. It is equally plausible, as was the case of many groups deported—like the Philistines—that the cultural assemblage could vanish when physical territory was lost and assimilatory pressures imposed. Hence, the Israelites were “successful” in so far as they continued to survive, which causes us to consider their assemblage, but also reminds us how important chance and contingency are.

assemblages over others, which presents a different selection mechanism: *elevation* (Verkamp 1991). On the one hand, Hezekiah chose the northern literate refugees over their southern counterparts, allowing him to engage in a concerted state craft policy. On the other hand, because of political dynamics, elevation may set off other selection processes; generally, Marxian, as political power is a reward in itself and choosing winners over losers often accelerates social transformation. His choices created *secondary selection pressures*, in that he alienated southern priests and prophets who worshiped Yahweh as well as those who were comfortably with polytheism.

Consider, then, that upon Hezekiah's death, however, his son Manasseh chose a different political strategy: he rolled back the reforms his father had instituted and returned to a syncretic polytheism. In doing so, he would have ousted the most ardent religious entrepreneurs from his father's court, and like many other kings chose those loyal to his administration. This act would have the double consequence of frightening the ideologues who truly feared Yahweh's wrath while also threatening the livelihood of Yahwist priest, prophet, and scribe as temples during this time period acted not only as ritual sites, but also as the principal banks (Lang 1983). Competition in the form of Ba'alistic priests and temples would have been a material threat as much as an ideational one. Furthermore, archaeological and biblical evidence point to a relatively ascendant middle-upper class that likely benefit from Hezekiah's isolationist policies. This new group, like all groups, would seek to legitimize their claims to privilege and power, and many biblical scholars believe that they were the material base of the Yahweh-alone movement in Judah (Smith 1971 [1987]); a fact perhaps attested to in Micah's (chap. 1) speech to "the people."³ Whether or not they were supporters of the newly unemployed priests and prophets,

³ It is beyond the scope of this paper, but Biblical scholars intensely debate when monotheism was "invented." It is very unlikely that monotheism existed before the Exile and, quite frankly, besides some elite religious groups, it

these economic actors would have been alienated by Manasseh's financial policies which would have created hardships through heavy taxation for Assyrian vassalage (Blenkinsopp 1995; Finkelstein and Silberman 2006).

Manasseh used the state's apparatus to suppress Yahwists, and their sympathizers, likely emboldening them and reaffirming their commitment to Yahweh and to each other. Consequently, groups with varying political and religious interests coalesced around their desire to more radically reconfigure Judean society to both prevent the pollution Manasseh had returned to the societal center and to protect their own material interests. It is at this point that political entrepreneurship began to blur with religious entrepreneurship, as the latter were temporarily freed from their political duties and would likely focus on intellectual activities. Shortly after Manasseh's death, his successor was killed and replaced with Josiah, a nine year old boy. As Marx would predict, group conflict and evolution is very often driven by violence that allows one group to impose its vision of reality on others. On Josiah's 18th birthday, he ordered a cleaning of the Temple upon which the high priest Hilkiyah "found" a "lost" scroll, the ink on which was probably not yet dry when it reached the young king (Lang 1983). The scroll contained a set of forgotten laws presumably written by Yahweh's own finger and given to Moses (Ex. 31.18); most scholars believe it was the core of Deuteronomy (12-26), which calls for centralization of the polity and religious sphere in to Temple through reforms of sacrifice among other things (van der Toorn 2007). It was likely written during Manasseh's reign or during the earliest years of Josiah's reign, and represented a clear plan to justify the reform of Judah and Jerusalem in the image presented by the three major factions—priests, prophets, and

would not have gained currency with the masses until much later. However, many scholars believe that there was a loosely connected group of actors, overlapping with the priests, prophets, and scribes we are interested in, who were Yahweh-aloneists. Though they did not deny the existence of other gods, they would have seen Israel and Judah as intimately tied to Yahweh alone (see the books of Hosea and Amos for instance).

scribes; all of whom were represented in the story in Kings (22:8-20), indicating their likely participation in the creation of the text and the enactment of reforms.

Having “defeated” the polytheists, and having placed a young, impressionable boy on the throne who could be molded until ready to act on their behalf, the second wave of entrepreneurs had succeeded where the previous one had failed. In part, it was because they were accorded the freedom to innovate during the interim period away from the political center. As Michels’ (1911 [1962]) reminds us, the business of running an organization—even the state—is a conservative endeavor based on routine and pragmatic decision-making. A new entrepreneur was able to draw from the previous institutional project, operate away from the daily mundane reality of polity, and create something new because they feared what existed was diametrically opposed to their material and ideal interests.

A Final Puzzle Piece

Before we turn our attention to the cultural assemblage and why it was successful in ancient Israel and, eventually, as the underlying core of Judaism, it is worth examining one final key piece to sociocultural evolution: structural and symbolic independence (Abrutyn 2009). Abrutyn argues that institutional autonomy, and therefore institutional evolution, is most likely to happen when entrepreneurs are given some degree of freedom or independence from structural and symbolic constraints. These freedoms afford temporary space to innovate, articulate new frames, work to mobilize and coalition build, and gain a perspective only actors on the margins can acquire. The Israelite case provides clear examples of the various ways independence is created.

In Hezekiah’s time, northern refugees were freed from their political and cultic responsibilities. As such, they could choose what they were dogmatic about, and were likely far

more open to synthesizing older traditions with newer ones to create more plausible explanations for why Yahweh did what he did, as well as how to claim the south was the true bearer of Yahwism. In elevating these actors to help resolve his political exigencies, Hezekiah *authorized* their institutional projects; while this new position would have constrained their organizational, normative, and symbolic innovation, it would also intensified their claims to carrying special knowledge and skills and would have given them a new type of structural and symbolic freedom to be entrepreneurial (Eisenstadt 1964). A similar independence occurred during Josiah's reign, only this time the entrepreneurs acted boldly, and used Josiah to further their interests. It was also fortuitous that for the first time in Judean history, Assyria was no longer a threat, which meant state building and cultic innovation were totally free from international interference. Finally, though we have not examined it in detail, the exile was perhaps the ultimate example of how independence can be a powerful conditions of sociocultural evolution: in Exile, religious entrepreneurs were freed from political and cultic duties; in Van Seters' (2000:117) words: "*The pillars on which the identity of the people rested - king, Temple, land - had been knocked down.* It was necessary to invent a new identity." They were intellectuals, carrying past traditions in written and oral form, and facing a massive existential crisis (Smith-Christopher 2002); in addition, Babylonian pressures for assimilation were seductive, and thus they also faced the siphoning off of human, material, and communal resources. In these open spaces, some of the most amazing poetry (cf. Lamentations), prophesy (Isaiah 45-55), and reimaging of what a reconstituted Judean society could be (Ez. 40-48) occurred. To create autonomy, it would seem one needs to experience the what it feels like to have freedom in order to rethink what may be possible.

Taking Stock

In sum, the Israelite case provides us with specific examples of how Spencerian and Marxian processes work. What we see is that purposive creation or recombination are typical of meso and macro-level evolution, and very often power relations facilitate and constrain what is selected and what is not; a point, incidentally, made by Eisenstadt (1964) but generally ignored by most neo-evolutionary theorists. A more robust and empirically useful theory for an historical sociology is one that identifies the intersection between exogenous and endogenous exigencies, entrepreneurs capable of and trying to deal with these exigencies, and the extant structure of power that either authorizes and accelerates entrepreneurship or stymies it. Evolution itself, then, occurs on at least two levels. First, there is the effort to construct cultural assemblages in the face of exigency and their probability of being reproduced across time for the group that carries them. Second, there is the effort to construct autonomous institutional spaces that formalize the reproduction of these assemblages across time *and* space, as the legitimation of entrepreneurs as elites allows them to use various mechanisms of control to impose their vision on greater proportions of society. We turn now to an overview of the cultural assemblage, its continuities and discontinuities in hopes of identifying some generalizable aspects that make some assemblages more likely to promote group survival and affect institutional evolution.

THE ISRAELITE SOURCES OF SOLIDARITY

The core of each entrepreneur's project was aimed at reproducing the cultural and structural supports for sustaining the group's existence, realizing its goals, and, by extension, acting as the caretaker of the whole Israelite society. In considering the analysis above, and in anticipating the evidence presented below, we can conclude that there are three highly generalizable qualities defining the Israelite project when taken as a whole that may inform other entrepreneurs in other cases: (1) a flexible normative pattern of developing and disseminating

culture, (2) a focus on carving out and protecting an institutional center, and (3) efforts to resolve conflicts between members. In addition, one unique feature which proved to be essential to the survival of Judaism and Jewish people for over 2,000 years *sans* political autonomy: (4) portable symbolic and normative mechanisms ensuring reproduction regardless of geographic constraints. All four of these aspects promoted solidarity among current members, presented plausible, appealing reasons for new members to join, and were capable of incorporating some external elements into the system without polluting the center. In turn, these assemblages proved successful by ensuring the continued flow of material and human resources to the entrepreneurial center, while dealing with the existential issues humans drawn to religion or, for that matter, any institutional sphere seek resolutions to.

Symbolic

At the heart of the Israelite innovations was a gradual, but complete and total re-imagination of what the *center* of society could be. All societies have a real, physical center (or set of centers), and a cognitive center (Shils 1975; Abrutyn 2014b); the two often overlap. The center acts like a group's "center of gravity" [comprised of its] system of authority...beliefs about the history and nature of the society, its relationship to certain ideal or transcendent entities or values, its origin and destiny" (Shils 1975:36-7); it fulfills the need symbolic creatures, such as ourselves, have for "an image of their world which gives meaning to major events of existence and which explain why things happen and why some things are better than other things" (ibid. 38). The center is both a warehouse and repository of cultural and material things, the "home" of entrepreneurs firmly entrenched in their positions, and the nerve center that facilitates and constrains the production and distribution of resources—including people. Up until 5,000 years ago, the center was inextricably linked to kinship; even in chiefdoms. With political evolution, a

dual-center society emerged in which a sharp distinction between the local village and the city-state grew salient (Liverani 2005; Abrutyn 2013a). The constitution of society, where polity was autonomous, looked very similar across cases (Yoffee 2005); that is, there were limitations to how political elite legitimated their rule, how the cosmos and the mundane were conceptualized and linked, the mechanisms available to integrate and regulate disparate populations, and so forth. Hezekiah attempted to replicate extant political strategies, while unwittingly giving the northern and southern religio-cultural entrepreneurs the freedom to symbolically and normatively innovate given the intense selection pressures and politically expedient needs. Building a center was at the heart of the first wave of entrepreneurs under Hezekiah, and with earnest, the second wave during Josiah's rule; the latter of which sought to make the Jerusalem Temple the only legitimate place to sacrifice, which, for agrarian folks, meant a lot. In Exile, the need for a new center grew ever more pressing: on the one hand, the exiles had to reconcile how to commune with Yahweh *sans* physical center (temples were the literal home of deities), while on the other hand, many remained hopeful of a return and thus had to intellectualize how to reconstitute a new Judean center.

Building a center. All centers require a foundational myth; a story of collective identity. While Exodus is considered an older oral tradition, it became central to the Josian project and, even more so, the exilic community because it imagined a time without a center, the construction of a portable center, and a story of integration. The Deuteronomistic history, which likely began begin debated and written right before Josiah or during his reign, was capable of transporting “the exiled community...into a situation of origin” (Van Seters 2000:117). Hence, the religio-cultural entrepreneur at work can be called the “Deuteronomic” entrepreneur, as the three different circles of intellectuals appear to have been central to the production of those “lost”

scrolls and, thereby, at the forefront of the effort to “create a unified, centralized, essentially homogeneous cult and to assert the authority of Jerusalem, simultaneously political and religious, over all of Judah and Israel” (Levinson 1997:62).

All foundational stories require rituals that represent the past and which plunge actors into the ongoing, but invisible sacred time (Assmann 2011), allowing the ritualist to come into contact with the center, and therefore the ultimate ground. The center is often the space that is chosen as it was a site of *hierophany*, or where humans came into contact long ago with the sacred. For the Israelites, this would have been Mt. Sinai where Moses came face-to-face, so to speak, with Yahweh. The Deuteronomists had no misgivings that Jerusalem was located at Mt. Sinai, but they must have seen the story of Yahweh giving Moses the law (Ex. 24.3) as an opportunity to reconstruct the center and, like gravity, pull all sorts of resources towards them. First, they linked the discovered scrolls to the Exodus story—the term “the book the covenant” appears twice in the entire Hebrew Bible, in Exodus 24.7 when Moses writes down Yahweh’s laws, and in 2 Kgs. 23.2, which is the story of the discovered scroll. Second, they sought to inject pragmatic ritual to disrupt the lived reality of the people, and force them to come to the temple. In Deut. 12, sacrifice is prohibited everywhere *but* the Jerusalem temple. In Deut. 16.11, 14, the Passover feast—which most scholars believe was a local family ritual—was elevated to a national holiday, synthesized with the Feast of Matzot (a pre-existing, unrelated national festival), and turned into an annual pilgrimage whose completion was commanded. In a heterogeneous society held together by supra-kin institutions, the function of pilgrimage, as Turner (1973) noted, is to strip away local ties and identity, thrust the participants into *liminality*, and create a new *communitas* (Smith 1997). Inventing new practices that were tied to the need to sacrifice as the principal means of communicating with the supernatural would have had a dual-

function (Levinson 1997): on the one hand, it gave the urban priesthood a monopoly over the most intimate ritual exchange between the (regional) supernatural and the laity. On the other hand, it subtly reconfigured the symbolic landscape of Judah, pushing the local to the margins and elevating the center to a new position.

Meanwhile, the Exodus story, through annual re-enactment, came to be the national foundational story. This would allow the Deuteronomists to further graft new symbolic frameworks onto the cultural assemblage. For one, it appears as if they sought to elevate textual authority, and therefore their expertise, but also Yahweh's portability, over oral authority. In Exodus 24, Moses strangely ascends Mt. Sinai three times. The first time, he comes down and reads Yahweh's law like a prophet would (24.3); the second time, he reads the words and then writes them down in "the book of the covenant" (24.7); the third time, Moses ascends (24.12-18) and several chapters later, we are told Yahweh writes the law with his own finger (31.18). This document would be placed into an Ark, which becomes a vessel of Yahweh apart from a Temple or other physical boundedness. The law, the ark, and the actors authorized to interpret and read it become hallowed; a portable sacred center, capable of thrusting one into the sacred temporal waters through weekly (Sabbath) ritual; moreover, in Exile, the idea that every father is responsible for telling the Exodus story annually to his children (as Passover, without a central Temple becomes meaningless as a national holiday, but can impart a national, space-less identity through the family), makes the father and the child vessels of the sacred. It localizes Yahweh in not only the law and the ark, but the very family and, even, the individual soul itself.

Just how revolutionary this was is sometimes hard for contemporary people to fully grasp, as the phenomenological aspects of pre-capitalist religions seem a quaint relic. In the earliest religions, each tribe, village, and clan was assigned a deity or ancestor tightly linked to

the cosmology of the people—or, the origins of the universe. With the rise of the first cities, this pattern was duplicated on a larger scale with city temples serving as the *literal* home of the deity. The sanctuary was his or her home, the priests his or her caretakers, the temple's land the god or goddess' source of subsistence, and sacrifice the act of feeding and watering the gods. The cynical modern may dismiss this as either foolishness or subterfuge on the part of a priestly class bent on protecting its interests. But, there is no reason to not believe this is how people understood the relationship between the mundane and supramundane. As such, monotheism was something difficult to imagine nearly as much as a decentered deity like Yahweh would eventually become.

It has long been noted that money acts as a generalized symbolic medium of exchange that reduced the physical, social, and cultural distance between people; that is, it standardized, formalized, and made divisible economic exchanges across political spheres and across great distances (Abrutyn 2015b). The decentering of Yahweh had the very same effect: it generalized the exchange of *sacredness* and *piety*, the media of religious exchange (Abrutyn and Turner 2011). In doing so, it expanded and extended the moral community beyond Jerusalem, Judah, or an ethnic/tribal network. The law, for instance, was only important so far as it was, in Stark's (1999) words, the "terms of exchange" with Yahweh; Passover made greater sense knowing Yahweh had no real home, but traveled where the Ark and the law travelled; and, Yahweh's ubiquity could, eventually, be understood as commensurate with a personal soteriology that linked the soul to the sacredness.

Normative (Internal) Change

While these symbolic innovations would prove fruitfully advantageous for different groups of Judeans carrying and espousing these traditions at various times in the long, slow

evolution of Judaism, there may be no innovation more central to the flexible nature of the ancient Israelite religion than the *hermeneutical* techniques instituted by the Deuteronomic entrepreneur. As Levinson argues

The concern of the authors of Deuteronomy was not to explicate older texts but to transform them. Neither “interpretation” nor “exegesis” adequately suggests the extent to which Deuteronomy radically transforms literary and legal history in order to forge a new vision of religion and the state (1997:15)...The authors of Deuteronomy employed the Covenant Code...not merely as a textual source but as a resource, in order to purchase the legitimacy and authority that their reform agenda otherwise lacked. The reuse of the older material lent their innovations the guise of continuity with the past and consistency with traditional law. The authors of Deuteronomy cast their departure from tradition as its reaffirmation, their transformation and abrogation of conventional religious law as the original intent of that law (ibid. 21)

The radical nature of this innovation cannot be overestimated. Not only did the symbolic efforts *disrupt* the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic reality of the ordinary Judean through the prohibition of non-central sacrifice, the imposition of a new calendar of festivals with prescriptions and proscriptions, and the creation of a new legal code rooted in *textual* authority and not the older oral authority, but the normative innovations altered the way the various entrepreneurial factions worked together and understood their roles. To be sure, the competitions and rivalries did not subside, as Ezekiel’s efforts to invent a clear division of labor with winners and losers among the Temple and country priests indicate.⁴ Yet, it appears that all the factions continued to approach the written traditions in the same manner, even as some became codified

⁴ Without a doubt, an even more fine grained approach could elucidate Durkheimian processes which, for example, would have been present in the competition between northern and southern Yahwist priests. Eventually, this tension would be resolved by specialization: Ezekiel’s (40-48) Exilic treatise on the “ideal” Judean society gives Zadokites—or southern priests who supposedly trace their inherited office to David’s high priest Zadok—a monopoly over the Jerusalem Temple, sacrifice, and the central cult. Conversely, the country “Levites” or northern priests whose roots go back to the time of syncretic worship are entrusted with local pastoral care and education (Knohl 2005). In this sense, an organizational solution with normative foundations specifies what each group’s specialized functions are. To further illustrate how evolution is not as linear as many presume, one need only look several centuries ahead after Ezekiel’s organizational solution: the Zadokites, who many believe became the Sadducees were wiped out by the Romans in the first century CE while the country Levites, who were the antecedents of the Pharisees, survived and would become the Rabbinate (Neusner 2004).

while heterodoxies emerged around other scrolls that had not yet found their way to the center.

Moreover, this was one of the first instances in which a religious entrepreneurs tried to “*effect major transformation* of all spheres of life—culturally, politically, theologically, judicially, ethically, and economically” (Levinson 1997:16), nor through force, but through a radically new approach to writing, interpreting, and glossing. “Both the technique and the boldness of this hermeneutical transformation are remarkable. Such studied concern with textual authority, not to mention the immense meditation upon the law that it presupposes, is astonishing in seventh-century Israel” (ibid. 46). As scholars of cultural memory note, writing externalizes collective identity, memory, and experience (Olick 2008; Assmann 2011). The technical aspects, thus, cannot be denied. But, this transformative effect also shaped the very normative framework that future entrepreneurs in the Exile and far beyond would use: the *sacred* texts—often thought of as immutable—became open to reinterpretation to make sense of changing environmental conditions, and when the “canon” was closed and the Hebrew Bible formalized, the Talmud and other texts continued the tradition of dialectics between the living religious elite as well as between the living and long dead entrepreneurs. Thus, the portability of the sacred and the re-centered/decentered Jerusalem cult and Temple were essential to understanding the evolution of the Israelite and later Judaic religion, but not without understanding the radicality and flexibility of the normative framework that came to facilitate and constrain the further development, transmission, and application of said symbolic innovations. In a sense, when the Rabbinate emerged sometime in the early centuries CE, the community could literally segment and disperse around the world, while each Rabbi and his community remained anchored by the annual *re*-presentation of the foundational myth in the Passover, the reading and re-reading of the Pentateuch, and the belief that Yahweh traveled wherever the laws were followed. Despite this,

the flexibility of textual authority and its handmaiden, the hermeneutical techniques, lent each specific Rabbi the power to bend much of the religious symbols to the specific environmental conditions his community faced. What could be more evolutionarily advantageous, to a group with no political anchorage, than a religious doctrine capable of being both rigid and centered *and* flexible and decentered?

DISCUSSION

The first thing that becomes clear, in the discussion of conditions and innovation, is that sociocultural evolution—on some levels of social reality—is Lamarckian-like; that is, new cultural variants, symbolic/normative/organizational frameworks, structural compositions, or whatever causes qualitative physical, temporal, social, and symbolic transformation is rooted in the purposive efforts of entrepreneurs. By no means are entrepreneurs in full control over the evolutionary trajectory, and as the case elucidated above implies the initial entrepreneurial project may not even be the final “author” of evolution as it may be adopted, co-opted, or synthesized by future entrepreneurs. In addition, unintentional consequences of early successes as well as the tendency for organizational goals to clash with greater success further muddy the linearity of entrepreneurship. Yet, it is ultimately the efforts of groups, shaped by their motives and interests, their “understanding” of the social and cultural dilemmas pressing against the group, their articulation of frames that both attack extant structural and cultural solutions while promoting their own, and their skill and chance in finding opportunity windows that allow them to gain purchase of necessary resources for mobility. And it is only with this mobility that they gain the ability to reconfigure the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic landscapes in ways that qualitatively transform the phenomenological experience, flow of resources, and mechanisms of integration and regulation for a significant proportion of the population; and,

effectively, drive the evolutionary process.

In the face of heterodoxic, heterogeneous competition, the scribes, prophets, and priests could have just as easily broken down into warring factions. The very fact that the finished product we have today reflects the compromises made between these different groups, even when one loses—such as the prophets whose charismatic authority rested on the power of oral traditions and which was negated in the Deuteronomic period by the elevation of textual authority. At the center of these compromises, to be sure, were sociological forces working to generate solidarity: on the one hand, external forces such as Assyrian/Babylonian threats, the spectacular political and military failure of the north, and the reversal of Hezekian reforms created common enemies in a Simmelian sense, while on the other hand, the growing monolatrous belief in Yahweh—expressed so fervently in Hosea and Isaiah—served as a socioemotional and moral anchor in the Durkheimian sense. These extrinsic and intrinsic forces assuaged whatever clash of interests, permitting a “politics of responsibility.”

Underlying these conclusions is one simple fact: Yahwism, which would later become the monotheism of Judaism, did *not* evolve to integrate an urban, heterogeneous population as many cognitive psychologists maintain (Norenzayan 2013), as a psychoanalytic father-substitute as evolutionary psychologists argue (Kirkpatrick 2005), or as a byproduct of our neuro-architecture (Atran 2002). In fact, when we look at the specific process, Yahwism evolves as Durkheim would have predicted, and interaction ritual theorists have demonstrated (Collins 2004): Yahweh became the socioemotional and cultural anchorage of a politico-religious movement in its most desperate moment as a way of sustaining its membership, reducing differences between competing factions, and as an intangible reward for drawing non-members into the entrepreneur’s orbit.

One final point might be made: the near-constant disruption of entrepreneurial projects served as both a catalyst for continuous evolution and a safeguard against inertia that may have led to the “extinction” of the Israelite innovations. It was the destruction of Israel that drove the initial response; the loss of power following Hezekiah’s death doubled-down on this motivation; and, if this analysis were to continue temporally, we would find numerous disruptions preventing the full institutionalization of the Israelite religion in a way that would make it a conservative force—e.g., the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, the Exile, the return and the struggle for hegemony, Greek and then Roman imperialism, and the second Diaspora to name a few (Neusner 2004). Indeed, an historical contingency such as this underscores the need for analysis of specific cases to better construct general theories of sociocultural evolution: each religion, regardless of what aspect one believes to be ubiquitous and, therefore, *a priori* adaptational, evolves under different conditions, pressures, and agentic motives and interests and, thus, these adaptations are arrived at from different paths. As such, their cause is *not the same* as their consequence or contemporary function (or, for that matter, our imposition of contemporary scientific interpretations of their contemporary function).

CONCLUSION

In short, then, the case of the ancient Israelites demonstrates the advantages of a group-level selection for understanding some historical cases, as well as for making evolutionary theory more accessible and useful for historical sociologists. It was argued that (1) institutional spheres, or the macro-level structural and cultural spaces patterning large swaths of individual, collective, and clusters of collectives goals, actions, emotions, and attitudes, are the unit of evolution—that is, they are the “survivor machines” of cultural assemblages that benefit one or more groups and which allow these groups to reproduce their own cultural patterns; (2) institutional entrepreneurs,

or specialized collectives who successfully garner structural and symbolic independence, are the motors of evolution as innovators and as forces that reconfigure the physical, temporal, social, and symbolic space as they pursue their own goals and, often, collectively-oriented interests; (3) cultural assemblages, or the frameworks containing collective memories, plausible cosmologies, behavioral repertoires, and communicative devices created and carried by entrepreneurs and inscribed into institutional centers are the unit of selection. Evolution, at some levels then, is purposive, multi-directional (because of the reactions of other strata to entrepreneurs), and multi-linear (because of historical and sociocultural contingencies). Moreover, it rarely unfolds as a unified, coherent project. The Hezekian entrepreneurs were working with different conditions and contexts, and therefore interests from those in exile.

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