Destruction, Death, and Drama: Narratives of Religiocide in the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract

This article analyzes active strategies for dismantling religion and discusses their role in religion demise. The aim is to throw light on how the dramatic and violent narratives of religion demolition stemming from different religious groups factor into processes and understandings of demise. I focus on religious change in the Hebrew Bible, analyzing aspects of two narratives that thematize an active dismantling of religious practices: (1) the story of the competition on Mount Carmel between the prophet Elijah and the Ba'al prophets in 1 Kings 18, involving the prophet's mockery, denigration, and eventual killing of his religious opponents; and (2) the "reform" of King Josiah in 2 Kings 23 that involves the king instigating several different forms of destruction of religious objects and cult sites and the killing of priests deemed illegitimate. Analyzing how the dismantling activities are portrayed, I suggest that the dramatic narratives about dismantling religion form part of cultural memory in the Persian era, not in the eras they purport to depict. I discuss which roles dismantling strategies play in the narrative, and how they played a role in the identity building processes leading from ancient "Israelite" and "Judean" lived religion toward early forms of "Judaism" in the Persian era as performative group-internal communication supporting enclave characteristics. My key suggestion is that narratives about religion demolition should be taken into account in discussions of religious demise more broadly. Narratives of religion demolition are often spectacular, dramatic, and violent, and they can play important roles in forms of religious identity formation and cultural memory, especially by making apostasy appear risky within the in-group. Thus, they influence both processes of demise and understandings of religious demise in transformation processes.

Keywords

demise of religion – lived ancient religion – Books of Kings – Elijah – Josiah – Persian-era Judaism – memory – apostasy – iconoclasm – narrative

1 Introduction

While many religions have disappeared in the course of history – ancient Phoenician, Mesopotamian, Greek, and Old Norse religions, for instance – discussions of religious demise have been scant in the academic study of religions (Robbins 2014; de Jong 2016; Stausberg 2021 [this issue]), while the role of continuous adaptations and change in the production of religion form part of several recent perspectives (McGuire 2008; Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013; Rüpke 2018a, 2018b). As part of the endeavor to focus on religion demise and decline instead of continuity and persistence, I suggest that we also investigate the roles of discourses of demise and active strategies for religion demolition in transformation processes (Feldt 2020), and how religious demise is understood in various cultural contexts. This is important if we want to throw light on how the dramatic and violent narratives of religion demolition factor into processes of demise. I suggest that they can play roles in religious identity formation and group maintenance.

In this article, I discuss narratives of religious demise in the Hebrew Bible. This anthology of religious texts has often been seen as documenting decisive religious transformations.¹ Looking at religious demise as something that entails active strategies of dismantling, as well as narratives of demise, on the part of religious people, can arguably provide a fresh perspective. Focusing on active forms of dismantling, and on variable narratives and discourses *about* religion demise and demolition, enables a more nuanced study of religious transformation processes in ancient forms of Judaism, I suggest. Disappearance as well as persistence can be approached as “something people actively do, rather than as something that simply happens” (Robbins 2014: 13). It is also something people tell stories about.

In the present case, the change in ancient Israelite and Judean lived religion toward exclusive Yahweh-worship and book-oriented devotion involved active strategies for and narratives about dismantling the worship of other gods: delegitimizing discourses regarding their cult, devaluation of specific religious

¹ Especially with regard to transitions from “polytheism” to “monotheism,” both of which are infelicitous terms (Assmann 2004; Kratz and Spieckermann 2010; Feldt 2020).

media, iconoclasm, material erasure in the form of destruction of religious objects and sites, and the killing of religious personnel. I argue that the violent and spectacular narratives of singular moments of dismantling and changing religion into exclusive Yahweh-worship are later legends designed not to depict actual religious transformations, but, rather, they are performative in-group communication from the later Persian era. Lived Judean and Israelite/Samaritan religion, sacrifice-, and blessing-oriented cultic traditions that involved worshipping several gods alongside each other, was the most common form of religion before and after the exile and well into the Hellenistic-Roman era, next to the emerging Jewish forms of exclusive Yahweh-worship. Here, I analyze some of the means used for doing away with former religious practices and I discuss the roles that such narratives of religion demolition and discourses of demise could have.

2 Contextualizing the Hebrew Bible, the Formation of Judaism, and the Books of Kings

The scholarly consensus places the emergence of “Judaism” and the writing down and editing of the Torah after the Babylonian exile (ca. 587–539) in the Persian-Hellenistic era. In this era (as in most others; Neusner 2011), in emerging forms of Judaism, ethnic and religious aspects of identity were mingled.² The same situation applies to most ancient religions, from Egypt to Rome. Most scholars suggest that “religion” became an essential, and self-reflective, part of emic understandings of Jewish identity in the Persian-Hellenistic era, although assessments diverge on specific issues and moments.³ While significant changes regarding Judaism and conversion emerged in the 2nd century

2 Emerging “Judaism” was not an -ism; it is a matter of debate when we can speak of “Judaism” as a “religion” (Collins 2017: vii; see Davies 2011: 13). This does not mean that “Judaism” and “Jewish” texts, practices, etc. cannot be analyzed as a religion or as religious (Feldt 2020). For an overview of the discussions about the term *Iudaïos* in this era, see van der Toorn 2019: 15–18; Collins 2017: chapter 1; Eckhardt 2017; Davies 2011: 12–14; Mason 2007.

3 Judaism clearly qualifies as “religion” (by most up-to-date definitions; van der Toorn 2019: ix–xi, 1–20), and the related ideas, texts, and practices may then be called “Jewish,” even though the term *Ioudaïsmos* (which does not quite mean Judean religion but an active promotion of Judean ancestral tradition) first appears in writing in the 2nd century BCE. Cohen argues that a more religious understanding of what a Jew is appears in the 2nd century BCE; after this, we can speak of Judaism as an ethno-religion, rather than of “Judeans” with religious traditions (Cohen 1999: 70, 78–79, 104, 137; Davies 2011; Schwartz 1992). Schwartz and Davies have pointed to how we can see a self-conscious cultural and religious identity in 2 Maccabees where *hellenismos* is contrasted with *ioudaïsmos* (Schwartz 1992: 11; Davies 2011: 13).

(Maccabean period), John Collins suggests that we can see aspects of Judaism as an ethno-religion already in the Persian era (Collins 2017: 18–19; Cohen 1999: 104). Karel van der Toorn agrees that Jews “had a cultural tradition that included religious beliefs and practices” also before the term *Ioudaïsmos*⁴ (van der Toorn 2019: 17) was used in writing. This cultural tradition did not belong only to Judeans;⁵ van der Toorn lists several features that suggest that the ethnic group encompassed by the designation “Jewish” included both Samaritans and Judeans (2019: 17), which is also in line with the Hebrew Bible’s description of the “the people.”⁶

Situating 1 Kings 18 and 2 Kings 22–23 in the Persian era (as many do, see Pakkala 2010; Na‘aman 2020), I suggest that the religion demolition aspects of the narratives mark a step in the direction of the formation of a “Jewish” identity,⁷ as they involve ideals of what it takes to be a proper member of the group (“the people”) and these involve more than ethnic traditions and kinship. I refer to the people addressed by these texts in the Persian era as either “Jews” (as a natural component of what is commonly called 2nd Temple *Judaisms*; see Davies 2011: 12–14), or as “the people” because that is the primary way that the texts refer to them. This group encompassed both the Northern (Samaria) and the Southern (Judea) kingdoms. I refer to the pre-exilic, historical religious traditions as “pre-Jewish” lived religion. We do not have any extensive direct textual sources for pre-exilic traditions,⁸ but they were likely a set of temple- and sacrifice-oriented religious traditions focused on obtaining blessing and fertility similar to what we see elsewhere in the ancient Near East, in the Levant, and in the broader Mediterranean area in this period (Uehlinger 2019; Stavrakopoulou 2016; Stern 2006).⁹ Importantly, these lived religious traditions

4 See note 3.

5 For that reason, it does not make sense to fully change our nomenclature to “Judean” as some have suggested (contra Mason 2007).

6 Thus, I do not replace the term “Jewish” with the term “Judean” in this article. Note that a lived Yahweh-religion can also be documented in the Levantine area, one that did not speak of “one people” or involved ideas of “Jewishness” (see the Al-Yahudu and Mount Gerizim inscriptions). Next to it, we find from the Persian period onwards, in some elite segments, ideals of what could be called “Jewishness.”

7 Even as cultural and ethnic aspects did remain embedded in a historical community shaped by ethnicity and geography (Collins 2017: 19).

8 The Hebrew Bible texts reflect pre-exilic oral traditions to some extent, but they do not offer unequivocal event-historical information (cf. Uehlinger 2019). I look at our text in the historical context of Persian-era Yehud, as a source for a form of emerging monolatric “Judaism.”

9 The term “Israelite religion” is also problematic, because the term should also include “Judean” religion. Moreover, lived religion in the ancient Levant did not involve Yahweh-monolatry, so “Yahwism” as a term for lived religion would be misleading. For descriptions and analyses of the religion idealized in the Hebrew Bible, we can use the term “Hebrew Bible religion.”

continued to be common practice both before and after the exile. Pre-Jewish lived religion involved the worship of several different gods, only one of which was Yahweh, and stratification and diversity in the practice of religious tradition between the elites and the broader population must be assumed. It is possible that ideas of monolatric Yahwism emerged at some point and in some elite segments before the exile,¹⁰ but we cannot know. It is likely that the exile/forced migrations were catalysts for the religious transformations that led to the emergence of Judaism and the textualization of the Hebrew Bible (Pakkala 2010). Nevertheless, these religious changes did not decisively manifest themselves before the 2nd century BCE and the Maccabean era (167–160 BCE).

The time period in which scholars assume our texts were written down – 5th–3rd centuries (ca. 400–250 BCE¹¹) – was an era of Persian dominance of the Levantine region, taking over after Assyrian and Babylonian imperial interests in the Western Levant. Toward the end of the 7th century BCE, the Babylonian Empire expanded and took the place of the previous imperial structure, the Neo-Assyrian Empire, both of which had involved a series of rebellions on the part of the small states of Israel and Judah and several elite exiles.¹² The most devastating attack, which left Jerusalem and its temple destroyed, was when the Babylonians struck Jerusalem and Judah in 587; in this attack, the first temple was destroyed, and an elite segment of the population forced into exile in Babylonia. When the Persians took over in 539, the exiled were allowed to return and some of them did indeed do so (Stordalen 2014: 187). In the Hebrew Bible's narratives, the falls of the two kingdoms, of Jerusalem, and the destruction of Yahweh's temple, are framed as Yahweh's just punishment for apostasy and illegitimate forms of worship on the part of the people and the kings (Sweeney 2007: 224). The catastrophe of the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile is an object of intense reflection throughout the Hebrew Bible in many text types and its influence can hardly be over-estimated (Meyers 2011; Pakkala 2010: 208–209; Poulsen, Høgenhaven, and Power 2019). The exile forms a background for the demands to worship Yahweh exclusively, to uphold the Torah and its commandments. The consensus is that the Hebrew Bible was written down and edited into its final form

10 “Yahwism” could be used as a term for any pre-exilic religious traditions that placed Yahweh in a central position, and of which we may see aspects in the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

11 See Edelman and Ben Zvi 2013: xii–xiii; Na’aman 2020.

12 The manifold reflections on the exile within the Hebrew Bible suggest that the exile had a formative impact on the religious ideas and ideals of the Hebrew Bible, even though many of the deportees did not return from the exile but stayed on in Mesopotamia; cf. the gradual creation of a “Jewish” diaspora.

after the exile, during the Persian-Hellenistic era; this also goes for our texts which are taken from the Books of Kings or Former Prophets (Collins 2017: 21–61; Davies 2011; Kratz 2010, 2015: 52).

3 Dramatic Demises in the Books of Kings

The first narrative chosen for analysis – 1 Kings 18 and the story of the contest between Elijah, the Yahweh-prophet, and the 450 Ba'al prophets – has played an important role in understandings of the core of Hebrew Bible religion as “monotheistic” and exclusive. It has also been understood to reflect real tensions between the Canaanite or Phoenician cults of Ba'al and Yahweh-cult in the Northern Kingdom of ancient Israel, and that Yahweh-worshippers were successfully reducing the widespread worship of Ba'al (Rusak 2008: 29, 41).¹³ Instead, this analysis argues that the narrative is a postexilic legendary narrative, in which the negative, delegitimizing rhetoric related to the Ba'al prophets functions as a discourse of demise used to strengthen the in-group, in addition to the narrative of fantastic elements that emphasizes Yahweh's powers and the brutal killing of the opposing prophets, and it addresses the audience's own lived religion in the past and present.¹⁴

This discourse of demise that rests on a memorial identity narrative does not involve a view of what is framed as “other” religions as explicitly false (as in secondary religions) or nonexistent (as in some understandings of “monotheism”), but it frames the other gods as impotent and weak and their worshippers as ridiculous, and it encourages material erasure. This narrative and discursive undermining of other gods and their worshippers does not bring about religion demise in and of itself, but it contributes to religious changes by charting a first aspect of the development of a new religion type, namely secondary/utopian/universal religions. Yet, the primary function of such a memorial narrative, for any listener or reader in the in-group, I suggest, is that it demonstrates the violent consequences of the worship of other gods. Thus, such a

13 An ancient Near Eastern storm and fertility god, well known from Ugarit, Phoenician sources, and the Hebrew Bible (Day 1992), where he is Yahweh's primary competitor, as reflected in many texts that mention the people worshiping Ba'al: Num. 25:1–9, Deut. 4:3, Ps. 106:28, Hosea 9:10, Judg. 2:11, 1 Kings 16:31–33 and many others.

14 For a more detailed analysis of this perspective, see Feldt 2020. In lived religion both before and after the exile, Yahweh and Ba'al were the same type of storm- and war gods; see Weippert 1997.

story of an *imagined* religiocide (Stausberg 2019),¹⁵ that is, involuntary religion loss in terms of brutal religious repression, can work as an immunization strategy against following other gods. By this I mean that it deters members of the in-group from worshipping other gods and accordingly, it strengthens the group. In this case, the religion demolition discourse did not function to stop Ba'al worship but should rather be understood to represent Persian-era ideological interests and new, postexilic identity formation processes. The archaeological record shows no distinction between Israelites and Canaanites in the 9th or 8th centuries BCE (Kratz 2015: 17, 32–33, 39), but as Na'aman has recently argued, Phoenician influence in Samaria and widespread Ba'al worship characterized the Persian era (Na'aman 2020). I suggest, then, that the dramatic narrative is an attempt to heighten the stakes and make the worship of other gods, and nonexclusive Yahweh-worship, not only undesirable but also frightening by highlighting violence. Slow processes of change are thus narratively reframed as singular, spectacular, and violent events.

The other narrative chosen for analysis here – 2 Kings 23 – has also played a large role in discussions of transformations in Hebrew Bible religion. It presents the correct worship of Yahweh as aniconic monolatry and this has been seen as the very essence of biblical religion. Much research revolves around questions of the newness of the religious practice and beliefs introduced here: monotheism, cult centralization, idol-criticism, exclusivity, and law-based religion (Feldt 2020). The story of the cultic purge of the pious King Josiah is set in the era just before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and the exile. The chapter portrays a series of active strategies for destroying the worship of other gods. These strategies could – if acted out – indeed bring about religion demise in a violent, top-down manner. Here too, however, the strategies are embedded in a memorial identity narrative for use in the in-group, and the narrative reflects Persian era interests. Consequently, I suggest that the demolition discourse contributes to immunizing Yahweh-worship and strengthening the in-group's sectarian qualities. Such a dramatic narrative of religion destruction can play a role in religion demise in a broader perspective. I return to this discussion after the analyses.

Using perspectives from studies of apostasy, oblivion, and demise, my focus is on the narratives as authored by a religious elite in the Persian era, as performative and literary religious texts that reflected and affected religious

15 Michael Stausberg has used the term religiocide in his reflections on religion demise, comparing religiocide to language loss and genocide (2019). I refer to legendary narratives about such events; hence, *imagined* religiocide.

understandings in Persian-era Samaria and Yehud and for Judeans living in the “Jewish” diaspora. What is important is that in the Persian era, these dramatic stories and the radical actions of the characters of Elijah and Josiah were considered meaningful and important for Judeans and “Jews,” who understood these narratives of the people’s past and its religious activities as significant for their identity.

4 Apostasy, Oblivion, and Active Demise

The demise of religions as an under-studied topic (de Jong 2016; Robbins 2014) can be related to studies of apostasy and leaving religion.¹⁶ Recently, Larsson, Enstedt, and Mantsinen (2020) have pointed out how the study of leaving religion is also a neglected topic. As they suggest, the process of leaving often entails remembering what was left behind, and the former position can be a source of anger (2020: 3); leaving a religion can have social costs and entail grief or threats from the previous in-group (4). In a study of apostasy from Islam, Göran Larsson has emphasized that “the question of apostasy is often closely related to control, power and authority over theological interpretations” (Larsson 2018: 221). As Larsson demonstrates, it is in some contexts extremely costly to leave religions, due to threats of violence. Since apostasy can be understood as an individualized form of religion demise – no religious demise occurs without members defecting – Larsson’s insights can be useful in this study of religion demolition strategies and religion demise narratives in the Hebrew Bible. As Larsson points out, it is important for the academic study of religion to ask, “under what circumstances, when and why the question of apostasy becomes an important trope to evoke” (218). Criticism and a negative rhetoric about specific cults or religious groups often come from people who have left those specific religious groups, just as it is important to think about how new religious identities are constructed on the basis of how people relate to their pasts (Larsson, Enstedt, and Mantsinen 2020: 4–5). We can rephrase Larsson’s question from the quote above and ask under which circumstances, in ancient forms of Judaism, did it become important to evoke discourses of and strategies for dismantling the worship of other gods? As the material selected here consists of narratives of cultural memory, written down

16 Some of the perspectives used here (especially with regard to memory theory) overlap with Feldt 2020.

and redacted in the Persian-Hellenistic era, let us turn briefly to theories of cultural memory.

The biblical presentation of the past is deeply ideological and performative for religious identity formation. It commonly offers a picture divergent from the historical, religious realities of ancient Israel and Judah, and so scholars have turned to analyses of biblical views of the past, using perspectives from theories of memory (see, e.g., Edelman and Ben Zvi 2013; Feldt 2019a, 2019b, 2020). Theories of collective and cultural memory focus on the social frames of memory, and on the mediation and textualization processes involved (Halbwachs 1925; A. Assmann 1999; J. Assmann 1992), where the term “cultural memory” is used to highlight the latter processes. Several memory studies emphasize the crucial role of forgetting and amnesia, and how forgetting is not a failure that commemorations seek to counter, but an active process, an actively produced condition (Plate 2016). Paul Connerton (2008) has offered a useful summary of types of forgetting. His list counts seven types of forgetting: “repressive erasure; prescriptive forgetting; forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity; structural amnesia; forgetting as annulment; forgetting as planned obsolescence; forgetting as humiliated silence” (2008: 59). Here, types 1 (repressive erasure) and 3 (forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity) are the types immediately relevant.

In type 1, material objects are programmatically destroyed by those in power, in order to cast certain persons or events into oblivion. In the stories of the prophet Elijah and King Josiah, destruction is centrally placed in the narratives of the people’s past and helps structure how the people should behave in the future. Thus, erasure and active forgetting form part of current identity formation discourses at the time of textualization. Thus, we are also dealing with Connerton’s third type of forgetting, namely the type that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity, where people discard memories and material memory culture in the service of the formation of a current identity.¹⁷ These Hebrew Bible stories are narratives that actively shape cultural memory of the past, not to paint an accurate picture of it, but to affect a contemporary audience in terms of both remembering and forgetting, in order to form religious identity.

17 Connerton focuses on implicit and gradual forms of forgetting, while I focus on forms of forgetting that are more explicit, active, and modeled as sudden.

5 Scenes of Religiocide in the Deuteronomistic History: Violence and Spectacle in the Books of Kings

With the case studies of 1 Kings 18 and 2 Kings 23, we find ourselves in the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH),¹⁸ a textual segment that presents an overarching national and ethnic identity narrative for the people.¹⁹ This narrative of ethnogenesis spans from the end of the people's legendary wanderings in the desert and their entry into the promised land, the time of conquest and the rule of the judges, to the kingdom of David and Solomon, and through the events of the two states of Israel and Judah, over the fall of the kingdom of Israel in 722, ending with the destruction of the first temple and the sack of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587, where the elite was taken into exile. In this national epic, the actions of the kings and the people are continually evaluated in view of the exile and the fall of the two kingdoms; redactional comments and evaluations referring to exile (the events of 722, 597, and 587) abound throughout (see, e.g., 1 Kings 8:46; 9:1; 21:20–22; 2 Kings 17:23, etc.; Pakkala 2010). The understanding of the catastrophe of the final exile in 587 as Yahweh's just punishment on the people frames and pervades the editorial interests in the national epic from Deuteronomy to the end of 2 Kings (Sweeney 2007: 2–3; Meyers 2011; Na'aman 2020). In brief, the key reasons for Yahweh's punishment were that the people did not worship Yahweh exclusively and did not follow his commandments. Archaeological data confirm that the situation after the exile of 587 was more or less similar, in as much as iconic cult for several different deities, including Yahweh, was widespread in the region (Jensen 2017; Na'aman 2020) and among diaspora Jews as well, and that exclusive Yahweh-worship and a common "Jewish" identity only emerged gradually (van der Toorn 2019).

The way of life of this ethnic group – "the people" – that encompasses both Northern and Southern Kingdoms, both Samaria and Judah, is destroyed in the events of the final demise of 587. These events are framed as catastrophic and

18 The DtrH has been edited more than once, but also in the Persian era (Stordalen 2014: 187). Recently, scholars have questioned the existence of the DtrH, so perhaps we should speak instead of an editorial layer dependent on Deuteronomy in the future. I leave this discussion for further study.

19 "The people" is a literary and religious construct addressing a diverse group that did not necessarily see themselves as one people who were supposed to worship only one god; hence the emphasis in the texts on trying to affect the audience in that particular direction (see, e.g., Feldt 2012a). This included a denigration of their lived religion practices.

destructive (Blenkinsopp 2013: 256–257; Ben Zvi 2019: 8–9) several times in the DtrH, for example in 2 Kings 17:²⁰

And they rejected His statutes and His covenant which He made with their fathers, and His warnings with which He warned them. And they followed vanity and became vain, and went after the nations which surrounded them, concerning which the LORD had commanded them not to do like them. And they forsook all the commandments of the LORD their God and made for themselves molten images, even two calves, and made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal.

So the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight; none was left except the tribe of Judah. Also Judah did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the customs which Israel had introduced. And the LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel and afflicted them and gave them into the hand of plunderers, until He had cast them out of His sight.

2 Kings 17:15–16; 17:18–20 NAS²¹

The final collapse of the main institutions of pre-Jewish traditions – the monarchy and the temple – must indeed have represented a decisive turning point forcing radical transformations of temple-based state religion (Pakkala 2010: 201, 207–208, 230–231).²² These later events are used, in the DtrH, as an interpretative lens through which to rewrite the people's earlier ethnic history. In this “national epic,” known in Jewish tradition as the Former Prophets, an epic that evidently played an important role after the exile, we can see how it is essential for the authors and redactors to present exclusivist Yahweh-worship as rooted in Israel's pre-exilic ethnic history and introduced in violent and dramatic episodes by exceptional male heroes. Yet, pre-Jewish lived religion was not Yahweh-exclusivist; the people worshiped other gods alongside Yahweh in several different ways. We can also see that it is important to the authors/redactors to instruct their contemporary, Persian-era readers and listeners on how to dismantle and destroy the worship of other gods.

20 Ben Zvi underlines that the most important thing about Josiah for the Persian-era literati was that he carried out these cultic changes with the knowledge of the coming destruction (2019: 10).

21 NAS refers to The New American Standard Bible (NASB) (NAS [1977] and NAU [1995]).

22 Lack of institutional support is often a factor in religion demise (Stausberg 2019).

6 1 Kings 18: Exclusivity, Delegitimization, Violence

The narrative of Elijah's contest with the Ba'al prophets forms part of a larger segment of the DtrH, namely the regnal account of King Ahab ben Omri of Israel, that is, 1 Kings 16:29–22:40 (Sweeney 2007: 205, 221). King Ahab of the Northern Kingdom is evaluated very negatively by the authors and redactors of the DtrH and the narrative of his rule encompass the legends of the prophet Elijah and his opposition to Ahab's rule (208). The narrative positions the lone Yahweh-prophet, Elijah (whose name means *Yahweh-is-my-god*) in a religious competition with 850 Ba'al and Ashera prophets in front of the entire people of Israel,²³ in effect a contest of magicians. Via a story of a fantastic event (Feldt 2012: 243–255), the narrative of 1 Kings 18:16–46 focuses on Yahweh's demonstration of power vis-à-vis the silence and absence of the god Ba'al (Ashera prophets are mentioned in v. 19, but then vanish from the story). The terms of the confrontation are related to the ability of the respective deities to set fire to a sacrifice (but ultimately to bring rain). The narrative presents Yahweh as the clear winner, bringing fire to the sacrifice drenched in water, as well as rain to end a long drought (see 1 Kings 17). Ba'al and Yahweh are thus competing gods with similar functions within equally blessing-and-sacrifice-oriented religious traditions.²⁴ Viewed from the perspective of the demise of religions, this story contains several strategies for discrediting and dismantling the worship of other gods:

- (1) *A discourse of exclusivity*: The narrative presents the question of which gods to worship rhetorically as a question of either-or; the people can only worship either Yahweh or Ba'al (1 Kings 18:21). In practice, this discourse becomes a contest between the two gods; the people must choose to worship either Yahweh or Ba'al: 1 Kings 18:22–24, 25–39.
- (2) *A delegitimizing discourse* in relation to the other gods, as in 1 Kings 18:18 (in which reference is made to *habbē'ālīm* ("the Ba'als") and to Ashera, and in 1 Kings 18:27, in which Ba'al is ridiculed.
- (3) *Violence* against/murder of the ritual specialists of Ba'al, as in 1 Kings 18:40. The first strategy forms the premise for the narrative of 1 Kings 18:16–46 by framing the religious field in terms of exclusivity, as a question of either-or. Elijah stages a meeting with a group of surprisingly compliant Ba'al and

23 See 1 Kings 18:19 where 450 Ba'al prophets and 400 Ashera prophets are mentioned, after which the Ashera prophets disappear (1 Kings 18:20–46).

24 The segment of 1 Kings 18:40–46 could be one of the oldest strata of the text and it could be considered that the lived (Yahweh-Ba'al worshipping) religion is here replaced by a new Yahweh-religion in which Ba'al is reframed as an "other" god.

Ashera prophets (Kissling 1996: 105), but it is coded as religious competition: the premise staked out by Elijah (1 Kings 18:21) is that Israel can worship only one deity – the one who wins Elijah’s competition of setting fire to a bull sacrifice. The people are silent (1 Kings 18:21), perhaps not sure which deity to worship, or baffled by such terms. King Ahab agrees to the competition (Tonstad 2005: 253), which is set up to give numerous advantages to the Ba’al prophets (Sweeney 2007: 228; Na’aman 2020): they choose their bull first, they start first, and they are more numerous (1 Kings 18:25). The answer given by Yahweh, who responds dramatically in a fire that consumes both offering, wood, stones, the dust, and the water, is contrasted with the silence of Baal: “but there was no voice, no-one answered, no attentiveness” (*wě’ên-qôl wě’ên-’oneh wě’ên qāšeb*) (18:29).²⁵ Elijah’s words of mockery and ridicule in v. 27, where he asks the prophets, who have already been imploring their god since morning, to shout a little louder, suggests that Ba’al has withdrawn because he had an errand to run or because he has fallen asleep. The narrative frames Elijah as vindicated by the counterintuitive fire of Yahweh, but Yahweh also does not speak (see the narrator in vv. 26, 29). The people then proclaim “Yahweh – he is the god; Yahweh, he is the god” (*yhwh hû’ hā’elohîm, yhwh hû’ hā’elohîm*) (18:39). The fantastic event leads to a moment of enthusiasm; Yahweh’s demonstration of power leads to a surge of loyalty to him, unity in the people, and humiliation for the royally sponsored polytheistic cult. Elijah, then, in an act of excessive and macabre violence, singlehandedly slaughters all the Ba’al prophets; a transgressive act both in terms of its nature (slaughter of humans) and its extent: for one person to murder that many people is extremely violent and also improbable, verging on the fantastic.²⁶

Recently, Nadav Na’aman has argued convincingly that 1 Kings 18:19–40 is a late, Persian insertion into the account of King Ahab (Na’aman 2020). Considering how this narrative, by means of drama and violence, shows how the worship of other gods is dangerous, I think we must discuss the functions of this narrative of demise for the Persian-era audience. The defeat of the Ba’al prophets and their subsequent deaths certainly make for a threatening atmosphere. The people’s unanimous cheer for Yahweh, and the silence and compliance of the Ba’al prophets, verge on the unbelievable; these aspects lend further support to the impression of a late legendary narrative (thus also Na’aman 2020). After the bloodbath, Elijah tells Ahab to eat and drink, passing directly from fantastic event over violent bloodbath to eating a meal. The narrative paints a dramatic picture of the necessity of exclusivity in the religious

25 All translations are my own, except otherwise noted.

26 On this term, see Feldt 2012b.

field, while the blessing-oriented goal remains the same (rain). This exclusivity entails a violent, imagined religiocide, epitomized in the connection Elijah, the radical Yahweh-exclusivist, establishes between sacrifice, slaughter, and rain, and which Yahweh, who does send the rain, confirms.

While it could seem as if the changes narrativized here are about a lone, exclusivistic prophet, it is important to emphasize that the goals of religious practice have not changed: Ba'al worshippers and Yahweh-worshippers agree that the desired interaction with their gods relate to issues of blessing and protection: the key concern here is ending the drought, bringing rain. Nevertheless, the narrative attempts to present a religious field structured by exclusivity. As is consensus knowledge (Jensen 2017; Kratz 2015; van der Toorn 2019; Na'aman 2020), exclusivity did not structure the religious field in the Persian-Hellenistic era, nor in the pre-exilic eras.²⁷ Considering the narrative's character as a performative religious text aimed at influencing an in-group addressed as "the people" in the Persian era, we must consider the role of the violent and spectacular religion demolition discourse in this light. Addressing an in-group in the postexilic era, the religion demise discourse can be seen as a strategy for strengthening the group against dissolution by making the worship of other gods seem not only ridiculous (the delegitimizing discourse), but also frightening (the excessive violence). The murder of the Ba'al prophets is an extreme act that likely induces fear in the audience against leaving the in-group, because it shows what could happen if you worship other gods, or Yahweh in combination with other gods.

The story anchors exclusive Yahweh-worship in Israel's national past, in a combination of Connerton's strategies of oblivion – repressive erasure and forgetting constitutive in the formation of new identity. The text also presents exclusivist Yahweh-cult as an issue to be settled between the people and the deity – any potential mediators are presented as either illegitimate (the king), legendary-fantastic (Elijah) (Feldt 2014), or absent (cult officials). The type of organization reflected in our narrative thus fits Mary Douglas's classical *enclave culture* relatively well (Douglas 1978, 2001: 42–82);²⁸ here, sharp boundaries between the in-group and out-groups are important to maintain

27 The text depicts Ahab as a Ba'al worshiper, but contrary to Elijah in this narrative, Ahab clearly did not see Ba'al-cult as incompatible with Yahweh-cult, as his sons bear the Yahwistic names of Ahaziah and Jehoram.

28 Mary Douglas's well-known theory of human organization suggests that humans organize according to two basic principles: group and grid. The group can be more important than the individual (+group), or the other way around (–group); a differentiated network can be important (+grid), or not (–grid). The +group/–grid-constellation suits sectarians well (Douglas 2001: 42–82).

and exclusion is the primary sanction. Therefore, the stakes of apostasy are high. This feature also suits Persian-era developments in formative Judaism well (Cohen 2014; Collins 2017). The very next chapter, 1 Kings 19, follows up on the violent consequences of apostasy from exclusive Yahweh-cult, when Elijah wanders into the desert because he fears for his life. King Ahab has told Queen Jezebel about the murder of the prophets. Her reaction is this:

Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time."

1 Kings 19:2 NAS

The exclusivity framework has carried through to the Ba'al-worshipping queen and "the other side" thus responds in equally violent ways. This means that there is now considerable risk involved in apostasy on either side. Next, when Yahweh asks Elijah what he is seeking in the desert, Elijah answers:

I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, torn down Thine altars and killed Thy prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.

1 Kings 19:14 NAS

Upon hearing this, Yahweh instructs Elijah toward further violence. The two kings and the prophet he is to consecrate are meant to further the murdering and violence:

And it shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him.

1 Kings 19:17–18 NAS

The extreme violence in these narratives that is so closely connected to the exclusivity frame strengthens the enclave-structure of the in-group and makes apostasy or defection seem dead-serious and risky. Even though situated in the past, the deity provides clear legitimization of and support for the exclusivity-based violence by bringing rain and ending the drought in 1 Kings 18, and again verbally in 1 Kings 19, as seen in the quotes above. The continued necessity of exclusivity and the high risk of apostasy in relation to Yahweh-worship is

communicated clearly to the Persian-era audience of the text. Moving to the next narrative, we see a similar pattern of a lone, male hero making dramatic and violent religious changes in an exclusivity frame.

7 2 Kings 23: Destruction, Desacralization, Death

The narrative of this chapter of the Deuteronomistic History tells of how King Josiah established a binding covenant between Yahweh and the people that they would follow the commandments of a book that had been found in the temple (2 Kings 22). The new terms of engagement with Yahweh involved doing away with all kinds of cult practices now deemed illegitimate. A large portion of 2 Kings 23 thus concerns the dramatic and violent dismantling of those religious practices, objects, and cult sites that are found illegitimate in light of the covenant. Actions that dismantle religion – objects and sites of worship and the killing of specialists – play a decisive role in what is framed as a pivotal moment of religious transformation from a polytheistic and iconographic cult, in which Yahweh was worshiped along with several other gods – Ba'al, Asherah, the sungod, and others – in the Jerusalem temple, at cult sites in Judah and Samaria, toward an exclusivist and book-oriented Yahweh-cult centralized in the Jerusalem temple. The text very explicitly foregrounds the violence and drama of religion destruction in this memorial narrative of the people's pre-exilic past.

The principal, religion destructive actions of 2 Kings 23:4–20 involve various forms of removal and erasure – burning, crushing, pulverization, cutting – of religious objects. The actions involve forms of cultic defilement of ritual sites, objects, and spaces, via contact with graves, human bones, or via disposal of matter in spaces considered unclean, low status, or liminal.²⁹ The king also murders unwanted ritual specialists. The narrated actions unfold according to an ever-widening spatial scheme, where the king first throws out cult objects in the temple in Jerusalem and desacralizes cult sites in Judah (vv. 4–14), after which he moves to the Northern Kingdom (vv. 15–20), signaling the unity of the land as given by Yahweh as consisting of both Samaria and Judah. All traces

29 For Bethel and Kidron as illegitimate and/or impure places in DrTH, see, e.g., 1 Kings 11–12 and 15 and note that human bones and corpses are severely polluting in the Hebrew Bible. Josiah's actions challenge families and father-houses maintaining the burial sites (Stordalen 2014: 193). In Chronicles, the hero is instead Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29–30). This could also be a sign that the story is fictional, because it indicates that “the historicity of the event was not evident to the Chronicler. It is much easier to move imagined events around in reconstructions of the past than historical ones” (Handy 2016: 75–76).

of iconic worship of Yahweh along with other deities in a polytheistic setting in the Jerusalem temple are removed and destroyed, thus effectively indicating that polytheistic and iconic Yahweh-cult was widespread, normal practice, in the Jerusalem temple as well as at other cult sites in Judah and Israel.³⁰ This also involves removing and destroying cult objects and structures and rendering the sites ritually impure, gathering Judean ritual specialists in Jerusalem and killing the ritual specialists from the Northern Kingdom. Let us have a more detailed look.³¹

In 23:4, the king orders the high priest, the priests of the second order, and the doorkeepers to remove all objects made for the worship of other gods in the temple, for Ba'al, Ashera, the host of heaven, and to burn them in the valley of Kidron, taking the ashes to Bethel. In 23:5, the king himself removes or exterminates (the pronoun shifts back to the 3rd-person singular, *šābat* in hiphil) the *kēmārīm* – ritual specialists – who had made sacrifices on the high places of Judah and near Jerusalem, the ritual specialists of Ba'al, the sun and moon, the constellations, and the host of heaven. The king then removed *hāʾašērāh* (23:6), that is, “the Ashera.” Probably, and most obviously, this refers to an iconic representation of the goddess, likely in the form of a statue, that is here taken out of Yahweh’s temple in Jerusalem. This passage shows that Yahweh’s temple had been used – and/or was imagined to function – as an arena for polytheistic Yahweh-worship. The Ashera is then brought to the Kidron valley, burned and crushed, and the ashes thrown on graves, making it ritually impure. The king also tears down the room in which clothes for Ashera were woven (23:7). He pulls down (*nātaš*, qal) various structures (23:7, 8, 12 – rooms, high places, altars), several times disposing of the dust in the liminal Kidron valley. The term for imposing ritual impurity or acting to defile an object or a site (*tāmēʾ* piel) is used (23:8, 10, 13, 16) with regard to high places and other places of ritual activity deemed illegitimate. The king restricts access to Yahweh’s altar in Jerusalem for the priests of the high places (23:9). In several other instances, the king actively defiles objects, spaces, and structures by bringing them into contact with human bones or impure matter (23:14, 16). The story culminates with the king’s macabre murder of all the priests of the high places, for which the term “slaughter” (*zābaḥ*) is used (23:20).

The majority of chapter 23 (vv. 4–20) is thus spent on acts of ferocious and violent desacralization and destruction, primarily of cult objects, but also, in an extreme but uncontested act of violence, the slaughter of the Northern ritual specialists (v. 20). Spending so much attention on violent destruction in a

30 Polytheistic Yahweh-cult was normal also at Elephantine (van der Toorn 2019).

31 The following section overlaps somewhat with the analysis I have published in Feldt 2020.

legendary narrative suggests to the text's recipients that elimination of such objects, practices, and people is necessary (Feldt 2020). This element in the memorial narrative likely stimulates reactions of fear and horror in relation to iconic cult and religious objects made for other gods (Feldt 2020). It also makes apostasy and defection in the in-group an undesirable possibility. A clearly negative discourse about other gods is seen especially in v. 13, in which we have several repetitions of words for detested, disgusting things and abominations, and in v. 24 a series of religious practices are evidently regarded very negatively. Such extended emphasis suggests that the erasure type of forgetting is made part of the new identity. The religion dismantling strategies in 2 Kings 23 can thus be summed up as:

- (1) Material erasure: Removal, destruction, and desacralization of cult objects, paraphernalia and personnel: 1 Kings 23:4–16, 19–20
- (2) Delegitimizing discourse: 1 Kings 23:13, 24, 26
- (3) Murder of the ritual specialists of the other gods: 1 Kings 23:20
- (4) An implicit exclusivist frame: Yahweh can only be worshiped alone.

The narrative ends by having Josiah institutionalize these events in cultural memory, as he demands that the entire people celebrate Pesah according to the new, book-based exclusive terms of engagement with Yahweh (1 Kings 23:21–24). The new Pesah is intimately connected to the preceding violence:

But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, this Passover was observed to the LORD in Jerusalem. Moreover, Josiah [exterminated]³² the mediums and the spiritists and the teraphim and the idols and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, that he might confirm the words of the law which were written in the book that Hilkiah the priest found in the house of the LORD.

2 Kings 23:23–24 NAS

As we see here, the new Pesah celebration anchors the exclusivity frame and its intimate connection to violence against nonsanctioned forms of alternative religion firmly in cultural memory and idealizes it. Albeit legendary and set in the past, it nevertheless communicates that exclusivity and violence are connected. Here, too, we observe a sectarian-style group formation in which apostasy is made very risky.

32 I have used the stronger translation that is in my assessment more in line with the text's content. The NAS translation uses "removed."

In this narrative too, the extended emphasis on the violent and dramatic demise of polytheistic Yahweh-cult at the hands of lone, male heroes likely speaks into the Persian-era situation, in which an elite attempted to mold a new, “Jewish” identity for the group they called “the people,” who according to the elite authors of these two narratives were supposed to worship Yahweh exclusively. In both narratives we have thus seen how Connerton’s first strategy of forgetting (repressive erasure) and the third strategy (forgetting in the service of forming a new identity) play together intimately. As legendary stories (Pakkala 2010; Na’aman 2020),³³ we must therefore consider Elijah and Josiah’s gruesome actions and the imagined religiocide narratives as communication to a later, Persian-era audience, in which it formed part of a demarcation of religious identity and assisted in forming an enclave-type organization.

8 Concluding Reflections

I have suggested here that studies of religion demise should investigate not only the disappearance and death of religious traditions, but also the dismantling strategies that religious actors actively use, as well as religious discourses of religion demise and narratives of religion demolition. Analyzing two selected stories from the Hebrew Bible that arguably partake in a discourse of religion demise, this article has shown that an exclusivity framework, delegitimizing discourse, the destruction and desacralization of cult objects and cult sites, and murder of the ritual personnel of other gods are active strategies for dismantling religion that play important roles in Hebrew Bible narratives about the religious transformations that led to the formation of Yahweh-exclusivism and Torah-oriented devotion. These transformations have often been described by scholars as a passage from polytheistic cult to monotheistic belief, or from religions of blessing to religions of salvation, and they have been written back into the people’s pre-exilic past (as in Sweeney 2007; Auld 1994).

This article has argued that these two narratives should be understood as Persian-era fictions that via narratives of cultural memory helped cultivate a new “Jewish” identity that involved an imagined violence against what was regarded as illegitimate cult practices. Notably, those cult practices were the normal, “lived religion” practices of the group in question. The key transformations regarding the emergence of exclusivist Yahweh-worship are here closely tied to an active, in-group cultivation of a negative attitude to the worship of

33 Leuchter notes, even within the story itself, Josiah’s actions do not accomplish much and shortly after he is killed by pharaoh Necho at Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29; Leuchter 2016).

other gods, and the worship of Yahweh with other gods, a delegitimizing discourse as well as an idealized violence against the cult personnel of other gods. This discourse of religion demolition functions, I have suggested, as in-group communication that support a sectarian type group. To answer our question of under which circumstances it became important narratively to imagine the destruction of nonexclusive Yahweh-worship, these are issues that suit Persian-era developments well. These religious discourses of delegitimization and the active dismantling of religion feature in legendary and fantastic stories that are not historical sources for actual, past demise events, but narratives of cultural memory, designed to form religious identities. Therefore, we can suggest that the exclusivity frame in combination with excessive, but imagined, violence signals that apostasy is risky.

On this basis, we can speculate that the active religion dismantling strategies and narratives could contribute to the immunization strategies of religions by helping to reduce the risk of apostasy. Religion demolition stories could also play a role in the death or survival of different religions/religious groups, as they form part of an internal communication designed to make members stay in the group. Sosis and Bressler (2003) and Atran (2016) have discussed theories of costly signaling in religions, discussing whether costly-to-fake religious rituals, along with other factors, can promote intragroup cooperation by making free-riding difficult. My analyses suggest that it could be fruitful to investigate iconoclasm, demise discourses, and violent narratives of religiocide in relation to costly signaling theories of religion, because it seems likely that religious groups that cultivate active strategies for and narratives about the delegitimization and destruction of other gods, cult objects, and personnel, thus make apostasy and defection from the in-group extra risky by evoking fear. Active strategies for religion demise and narratives of religiocide may thus contribute to persistence and cohesion in an in-group, also by means of the exclusivity frame.

As we have seen, the ancient observers of religious transformations in emerging Judaisms in the Persian era adopted dramatizing perspectives on what was in reality long-term processes. The authors and redactors of the Hebrew Bible ascribed major changes in the people's religious traditions and forms of devotion to singular, exceptional, male heroes such as the prophet Elijah and King Josiah, writing the religious demolition of pre-Jewish Samarian and Judean lived religion and the emergence of Yahweh-exclusivism back into the pre-exilic era, even as those religious forms continued to exist. They also adopted narrative plots that heightened the spectacular and dramatic feats of male individuals, thus making them memorable and tellable, anchoring them firmly in cultural memory as important points of orientation in the people's

national epic. Using spectacular and dramatic scenes, they significantly moved their cultural formation in a new direction, toward a new type of religion using a book as the authoritative medium and which focused on Yahweh-exclusivity, but which also required an encompassing and total, emotional devotion combined with iconoclasm and the rejection of previous religious practices (Feldt 2020). However, the goals involved did not change at this point, as the focus was still on blessing and protection in this world.

Caution is necessary when we research religious narratives of demise. In our case, the perspectives of the performative religious texts do not depict actual, sudden instances of religious transformation; they do not necessarily concern a real demise of the worship of other gods but a question of group-internal communication. Reading the stories as religious communication, we must analyze how they frame and observe the people's past and how they employ narrative and religious strategies to affect their audiences in particular ways. This suggests that we must take into account, in discussions of religion demise, what the effects of stories about dramatic and violent religion demise on the group reading and hearing them can be.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the members of the research group "The Demise of Religions" for providing helpful comments on these ideas, and Michael Stausberg in particular for including me in the group. I thank the Centre for Advanced Study, Oslo, and the Norwegian Academy of Sciences and Letters for a generous grant. I am also grateful to Prof. Armin W. Geertz for valuable discussion of the topic, I thank Michael Stausberg for his expert editing, Jan N. Bremmer and the peer reviewer for useful comments.

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