

Jewish History as the History of Jewish Civilizations

Introduction: The Problem of Jewish Continuity

The major theme of this book is that one of the best ways to approach the study of Jewish society and history—from its beginnings up to the contemporary scene in general, and Israel in particular—is by analyzing it as the history of a civilization.¹ I use the term *civilization* because I wish to stress explicitly that such concepts as “religion,” “nation,” and “people” are not adequate for an understanding of Jewish history, although, needless to say, they all refer to important aspects of the Jewish historical experience.

Even though throughout the ages the Jews have constituted a distinct religious community, with specific beliefs and patterns of worship, *religion* is inadequate to explain all aspects of their historical experience, because there is more to it than religion. Two examples will suffice at this juncture: The Jews’ ideological and metaphysical attitudes toward the land of Israel, from which they were exiled for so long, and the ways in which their relationship with other religions and nations were mutually defined cannot be explained solely in terms of religious belief, as we shall see in greater detail later on.

The same structure applies, in different ways, to such terms as *nation* and *ethnic group*. These terms are inadequate to explain the Jewish historical experience, because most of them refer to types of collectivities that have developed in the modern era. They easily cannot be applied (though in fact they often are, for lack of better terms) to the collectivities of earlier periods. Instead, terms like *tribal communities*, *holy community*, or *people*, in themselves quite vague, better denote the nature of the specific early Israelite and Jewish collective identity.

Similarly, because the modern Jewish historical experience is closely related to these older patterns, the modern terms, derived chiefly from the modern European experience, are not fully adequate for the analysis even of



the modern Jewish case. Later we shall see that for the same reasons we should not refer to the Zionist movement as just another modern national movement.

Though all these terms contain important elements of truth, their inadequacy becomes apparent when we attempt to explain the great variety of Jewish historical experience from the early Israelite era up to modern times, and above all when we consider what probably is the greatest riddle of the Jewish historical experience: its continuity through some three millennia.²

The external facts of Jewish history are well known. Jewish history emerged sometime in the middle of the second millennium before the Christian era (BCE). Its first decisive encounter was the conquest of the land or infiltration of Canaan by the Tribes of Israel, according to biblical tradition, and the leadership of Joshua, presumably already bearing the stamp of legislation attributed to Moses; and then the settlement of these tribes in Canaan. Such conquest, quite natural in those times in that part of the world, necessarily entailed a continuous encounter and conflict with their neighbors, the various nations or tribes that also had settled in that territory. This settlement was initially, in the period of the Judges, a relatively dispersed one, with the different tribes leading relatively separate existences, yet with some common sacred places, coming together to some degree in times of war, and maintaining some continuous common transtribal identity.

From the very beginning of this period the Israeli tribes were characterized by several special social characteristics, which we shall analyze in greater detail later on. At this stage of our discussion suffice it to point out that the most important of these characteristics were their relative profusion and the heterogeneity of social, economic, and cultural forms and elements of which they were composed. Most important among the latter, of course, were the priests and prophets who, as we shall see, had acquired some very outstanding characteristics that distinguished them from their seeming counterparts in neighboring societies.

In the tenth century BCE came the period of the monarchy established first under Saul, then David and Solomon. Attempts to centralize the cult took place and the First Temple was erected under Solomon. After the death of Solomon, under his son Rehoboam, the realm was divided into the two Kingdoms of Judah (composed mostly of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin) and of Israel (composed of the other ten tribes). These kingdoms were continuously involved in the international conflicts of the region, especially the conflicts between the great empires—Egypt, on the one hand, and Assyria and Babylonia, on the other—as well as various kingdoms in the north, such as the Aramaeans. When the Assyrians destroyed the Kingdom of Israel in 722, the ten tribes almost totally disappeared as a distinct cultural and political entity. The Davidic monarchy, the priestly cults, and the prophetic tradi-

tion in Judah with its center in Jerusalem faced ultimate destruction in 586. Large parts of the population, especially its leaders, were exiled to Babylon, and the dispersion to other lands, especially to Egypt, began.

Up to this point, the story, although very dynamic and to some degree dramatic, was not unique, and the Israelite nation would have disappeared from the face of subsequent history as did so many other nations in this region at that time. But they did not disappear, and in this they are unique. Large parts, and probably the more active leadership elements, of the population of Judah went to Babylon. Many of course remained there, but many of the exiles in Babylon kept the dream of returning to Zion. After the Persian conquests of Babylon under Cyrus (550–530 BCE) and later in 525 of Egypt by Cyrus's son Cambyses, they—or rather some of them—started to return to Eretz Israel and joined those who remained there in a state of decline. They came here first in rather small dispersed groups. Then under the vigorous leadership of Ezra and Nehemia they reestablished and reconstructed their religious and communal-political institutions, rebuilt the Temple, and forged a new national identity (yet one based on continuous reference to the former period and its symbols) and new political organizations. From this, a new, independent political entity emerged after the Hasmonean revolt. The external story of this period is very well known and needs no more than a brief recapitulation.

With the fall of the Persian Empire in 330 BCE and the rise of the Hellenistic monarchies in the Middle East, the Jewish people developed a much stronger confrontation with the new expanding civilizations. The Jewish communities in general, and that in Eretz Israel in particular, became increasingly entangled in the political struggles of the region. At the same time Jewish settlement expanded beyond the Temple city-state of Jerusalem, with the consequent possibility of confrontation between the Jews and the Hellenistic, and later also Roman, rulers.

This culminated in the second century BCE in the first dramatic encounter with the Seleucid King Antiochus IV, giving rise to the Hasmonean (Maccabean) revolt and the Hasmonean theocratic monarchy in which the office of High Priest and ruler (ethnarch-Nasi) were combined. This dynasty lasted till about the middle of the first century BCE. It was characterized, especially during the reign of Alexander Iannai (Ianneas) (103–76 BCE) and his successors, by a policy of far-reaching expansion, bringing the Jews into continuous encounter with both various local populations and the “super powers.” During Alexander Iannai's reign an intensive civil war broke out, led by groups of the Pharisees. After his death Judea became strongly entangled in the Roman expansion in the Near East and Roman-Parthian wars. The end of the Hasmonean dynasty came about 37 BCE, when Herod, the son of the Edomite adviser to Hyrcanos, Alexander's son, was



declared King of Judea by the Romans and reigned till 4 BCE as a Roman client—and as a secular king.

Under Herod's successor the kingdom was divided among his three sons, and in year 6 of the Christian era (CE) the Roman government assumed direct rule in Judea—a change even welcomed by those more religious sectors of the Jewish population who strongly opposed the reign of a non-Jewish king. This direct subjugation to the Romans was interrupted under the brief reign of Herod's grandson Agrippa (41–4 CE), a friend of the Roman emperor Caligula. Agrippa attempted to reestablish some sort of a unified Jewish monarchy and on the whole was accepted by most sectors of the Jewish population. But with his death a continuously growing tension developed between the Roman procurators and the Jewish people, as well as increasing division within the latter, giving rise to the great war or rebellion against the Romans (66–7 CE), the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, and loss of political autonomy. and the move of the Sanhedrin under the leadership of Rabbi Yohanan Ben-Zakai, the leader of the Pharisees, to Yavneh.

But the period of the Second Temple did not only see the emergence and crystallization of a new independent political entity. It was also a period of great cultural transformations. The Prophets, so predominant in the period of the First Temple, gradually disappeared; the priests, at least in the beginning of this period, became much more predominant; kings from priestly families emerged and also, perhaps most important, some entirely new types of leaders, based to a large degree on new traditions of learning as well as a multiplicity of sects.

Externally, the Jewish nation continued its encounters with mighty pagan Empires and nations, and also with a new type of civilization, the Hellenistic, and with the Hellenistic and Roman Empires whose claims to some universal validity were rooted not just in conquest or the mightiness of their gods but in their philosophical and legal traditions. At the same time there was great internal cultural creativity, giving rise within the Jewish nation to many new religious, cultural and social visions. One of them, connected with Jesus, was destined in the form of Christianity to reshape the whole course of history in the West and later in the world.

The combination of internal and external turbulence culminated, as we have seen, in the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the loss of political independence, and, ultimately, dispersion. At the same time a new institutional mold emerged that evinced rather special frameworks of civilization, religion and collective identity despite loss of independence and continuous dispersion. Later on these continuous frameworks were to be confronted with Christianity, then Islam, as the dominant religions in most of the lands in which the Jews lived.

These developments created a situation in which the Jews were not just a national or religious minority in some "alien" environment. They became

such a minority in civilizations whose historical roots and basic premises were closely interwoven with Jewish history and faith, which not only developed historically out of the Jewish fold, but for whom continuous Jewish existence always constituted an ideological challenge and an ambivalent and negative reference point, for whom the Jews' adherence to their faith and mode of life was not just curious and strange, but an ideological threat to the very legitimacy of their own civilization.

There were two poles to the continuity of Jewish civilization: first, the development of international and cultural frameworks and social networks that made possible the continuity of the Jewish people and civilization in a situation of dispersion of Jews in many lands; and second, the strong, ambivalent attitude of the "host" civilizations, reciprocated by a parallel ambivalent attitude among the Jews toward these civilizations. These poles shaped the course of the Jewish history of exile.

The riddle of this continuity begins at the end of the First Temple period. Alone of the many exiled and dispersed peoples of antiquity, including those of the Kingdom of Israel (Samaria), the people of the Kingdom of Judah, having been exiled to Babylon after the destruction of their Temple and kingdom, returned to their homeland. There they established, albeit in a new pattern, their particular way of life and religion and their political and collective identity, defining themselves as a continuation of their earlier pre-exilic period.

The continuity of the Jews after the destruction of the Second Temple is an even greater enigma, although in a sense the Jews—and Christian and Muslim civilizations—have accepted it as a given. Obviously this was more than just the continuity of a small religious sect, although even in such terms it would be unique.

It is possible of course to speak of the continuity as that of a "people." But what kind of people has no territory, only memories or hopes of return to a territory, and a strong political orientation, but no autonomous or independent political entity or political-territorial continuity?

These examples—many more could be given—illustrate that certain elements of the Jewish historical experience transcend the categories of religion (taken as merely a system of belief and worship), nation, and ethnic group. It seems to me that the term *Jewish civilization*, as I define it in this book, is the most appropriate rubric for our purposes.

The Civilizational Approach to Jewish History

The term *Jewish civilization* also is appropriate because it helps us examine critically some prevalent views of the nature of Jewish historical



experience, which have been extremely influential in modern historiography and social science. I shall refer to only two such views: one, rather unsympathetic—some would say even anti-Semitic and certainly anti-Zionist—is that of the eminent British historian Arnold Toynbee;³ the other view—earlier, much more “philo-Semitic,” even sympathetic to the beginnings of Zionism—is that of the great German sociologist Max Weber.⁴

Both scholars analyzed the Jewish historical experience from a comparative perspective that can best be called *civilizational*. Toynbee used this term advisedly: civilizations constituted the basic units of his comparative historical analysis. Weber used the term *world religions*; his analysis focused on the systems of belief and worship prevailing in these religions as well as on the ways in which some aspects of such systems shaped the institutional contours and historical experience of the societies in which they become predominant and institutionalized.

Toynbee did not deny that the Jews constituted a civilization; indeed, he included them in his monumental, though often criticized, *Study of History*.⁵ Max Weber included his brilliant “Ancient Judaism” in his *Sociology of Religion*, in which he analyzed the great or world religions: Judaism, the religions of China (Confucianism and Taoism), Hinduism, Buddhism, and Protestant Christianity.⁶

Thus both Toynbee and Weber indicated—or at least intimated—that the best way to explain this historical experience is by comparing it with those great civilizations that were closely linked with religions but cannot be understood solely on the basis of patterns of belief or worship. These civilizations constituted something more complex than religious communities or belief systems: the construction of the way of life of entire societies; that is, the organization of their ways of life in some distinct way according to some vision or premises. Both Toynbee, explicitly, and Weber, implicitly, were talking in terms of civilizations.

It is true that they both saw the Jewish historical experience as exceptional. Both were perplexed by the riddle of Jewish continuity, and both were naturally influenced, though in different ways, by the Christian view of a radical break between the earlier biblical Jewish experience and the later, post-Christian one.

Toynbee characterized the exilic rabbinic Jewish civilization as a fossilized civilization. According to him, its fossilization was manifested above all in its exclusive emphasis on law and ritual, and in its almost total self-segregation from other civilizations.⁷

Weber claimed, on similar grounds, that after the period of the Second Temple the Jews became a religious community, as distinct from a political one, or a full world religion or civilization. They also became, almost of their own volition, a pariah people, that is, a segregated group, ritually unclean

and of low economic status, with the concomitant loss of their civilizational momentum.⁸

It seems to me that Weber and Toynbee were correct to apply the civilizational perspective to the Jewish case, but erred in characterizing its uniqueness from a comparative civilizational point of view. They erred in their implication that the post-Christian Jewish historical experience ceased to be civilizational in the full meaning of this term, as explicitly or implicitly used by them. Consequently they were unable to explain the riddle of the continuity of the Jewish historical experience.

A closer look at some of the historical evidence will show the inadequacy of both views, whatever elements of partial truth they may contain. Of course it is true that ritual, prayer, legal exegesis, and communal organization were the major arenas of Jewish cultural activity from the loss of political independence (broadly speaking, from late antiquity) through the Middle Ages and early modern period. But there were other arenas as well. We need mention only philosophers like Maimonides and Saadya Gaon, or mystics like the Kabbalists of the early Renaissance, to see the inadequacy of viewing Jewish civilization as fossilized.⁹ The mere fact that there were important philosophers, mystics, and the like among the Jews in the Middle Ages is not the point. What is of crucial importance are three closely interrelated aspects of their activities.

First, these were not isolated or marginal figures. Their activities constituted an integral component of Medieval Jewish cultural creativity. Hence, we see that this creativity was not limited to the field of laws and rituals—a field that, full of different orientations and tensions, itself was constantly changing and developing. Moreover, like some of the Jewish poets of the Spanish period who created a vast secular poetry, of a kind unknown in Jewish life until the modern times, most of these scholars usually also were engaged in talmudic exegesis, again attesting to the close if often tense relationship between these different areas of Jewish cultural creativity in this period.

Second, all these activities and studies—and sometimes the more ritual and legal ones as well—were not tightly enclosed in the framework of the Jewish community, but constituted a part of the general Medieval cultural scene. This is true not only of such towering figures as Maimonides, but of almost all of them—philosophers, mystics, and to some degree legal scholars. They often wrote in Arabic; they had close relations with non-Jewish scholars; and the scholars of the three monotheistic civilizations often provided mutual reference points for one other. Moreover, these scholars' definition of what is specifically Jewish, Christian, or Muslim frequently emerged from the continual controversies among them. Such controversies



usually were not just academic exercises; they bore the hallmarks of heated and intense intercivilizational or interreligious competition.¹⁰ Needless to say, most Jews, like most Christians, did not participate in these activities; however, the activities of these scholars and the disputations among them greatly affected, not only many aspects of the daily life of their communities, but often also their fate in the countries in which they lived.

Truly enough, and this is our third point, these relations were not always very amicable—to put it mildly. The history of persecutions, expulsion, and martyrdom—*Kiddush Hashem* (“Sanctification of the Name”)—is too well known to require full documentation here. Also familiar are the disputations between Jewish and Christian (and to a lesser extent Muslim) scholars, usually staged by the authorities—kings or the Church, in order to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian religion.

Although the stories of the persecutions, attempts to convert the Jews, and disputations are indeed very well known, we may not always be aware of their full implications for Toynbee’s view of Jewish civilization as fossilized and Weber’s view of the Jews as merely a religious community and a “pariah people.”

The term *pariah people* derives from the analysis of Indian society and refers to the Untouchables beyond the caste system, who are outcast, ritually segregated, and of low economic status (although in many ways Weber went beyond these connotations). Although these connotations do indeed apply to some degree to the Jews in the Middle Ages, the analogy with India is poor at best. We do not find there disputations aimed at public confirmation of the superiority of the Brahmins. Brahminic superiority was never questioned; above all it needed no active affirmation by the pariahs.

The very existence of these dispositions indicates that this was not the case with respect to the relations between the Jews and their “host” civilizations. Otherwise these host civilizations would not have needed to keep proving their superiority, nor would they have constantly attempted to convert the Jews.

These illustrations also indicate that Weber and Toynbee’s view of a change in the nature of the Jewish historical experience after the rise of Christianity was not fully shared by the Jews’ host civilization—even if, politically speaking, the official Christian (and to some extent also Muslim) position denied Judaism a status equivalent to that of the host religion.

To give one illustration, Weber stressed that after the period of the Second Temple the Jews became a purely religious, a political community, in contrast to Christianity’s development into a dominant political religion or full world religion. As we shall see later, the contrary is true—at least with respect to the first period of Christianity. Here it suffices to point out, as both I. F. Baer and Arnaldo Momigliano have indicated, that there always has

been a political component to the Jewish collective identity, although it was not the only one. This component frequently was couched in highly meta-physical terms and claimed to have universal significance.¹¹

All these illustrations demonstrate the inadequacy of the views of Toynbee or Weber of the nature of the Jewish experience. Moreover, they show the inadequacy of analyzing the Jewish historical experience solely or mainly in terms of religion, people, nation, or the like. Although, let me reiterate, all these terms designate important components of this experience.

The Presupposition of a Civilizational Perspective— Culture, Ontology, and Social Dynamics

For all these reasons, then, the civilizational perspective seems to have the best potential for explaining the Jewish historical experience. What is meant by civilizational as distinct from religion or people or nation? As already indicated in the introduction, civilization, in the sense used here, entails the attempts to construct or reconstruct social life according to ontological visions that combine conception of the nature of the cosmos, or transmundane and mundane reality, with the regulation of the major arenas of social life and interaction—the political arena or authority, the economy, family life, and the like. Although in the history of humankind civilizations and religions were very closely interwoven, at the same time many religions have been only a part or a component of civilizations and not necessarily the most central component. This distinction, which can be found clearly in many preliterate and archaic societies, even those of the ancient Near East, becomes clearly visible in the “great” Axial Age civilizations, in the monotheistic religions and civilizations; however, in some places they constituted religious working within the framework of other civilizations. The clearest illustration of such a case is the fate of Buddhism and Confucianism in Japan, where Buddhist (and Confucian) beliefs and cults thrive, but without a distinct civilization, creating as Buddhism did in Southeast Asia or Confucianism in China, Korea, and Vietnam. In Japan these cults and belief systems operated within the framework and basic premises of a distinct Japanese civilization. Similar illustrations can be given from the history of the expansion of Islam or Christianity. At the same time these illustrations attest to different people being able to belong the same civilization, especially one of these “higher” civilizations.¹²

Such civilizational perspective is based on several assumptions. The first is that, as already implied, it is important to distinguish analytically between, on the one hand, those aspects of these religions that constituted components of the basic cultural or premises of these societies and, on the other hand, those aspects that from a later “secular” perspective could be



designated as specifically religious, above all patterns of belief, rituals and worship.

The second assumption is the recognition that such premises grounded in ontological vision are of great importance for understanding many central aspects of institutional processes. The definition of any institutional complex, be it of the state, political institutions, or class formation, cannot be taken for granted, by defining them in terms of political power or political and administrative activities of the different, seemingly universal, political, and administrative agents, or in terms of universal status differences and the relative strength of different classes or various interest groups within a society.

In addition to these variables or aspects of the institutional processes—the importance of which nobody could deny, of course—it is of central importance to analyze the very definition and evaluations of the respective institutional arenas (the state, the economy, the family, and so on) in the broader context of the civilizations in which they develop and within which they also necessarily change through the historical experience of their respective societies. Thus a civilizational perspective strongly emphasizes the interrelations of the cultural and institutional aspects of the historical experience of different peoples, the interrelation between ontological visions or conceptions of the world, on the one hand, and the major arenas of institutional life patterns of social stratification on the other.¹³

The first crucial aspect of this interrelation is the formulation, on the basis of such visions and beliefs, of the fundamental conceptions of ontological visions and premises about the nature of social life, authority, and the like. The second aspect is the attempt to implement these premises in social life—or, in sociological parlance, to institutionalize them in specific ways. Thus, in greater detail, and in somewhat abstract and theoretical terms, the first component of a civilization is the formulation, promulgation, articulation, and continuous reinterpretation of the basic ontological vision of a society or sector thereof, its basic ideological premises, and its core symbols. The second major aspect of the interrelation between ontological visions and institutional formations and dynamics is the symbolic and ideological—i.e., cultural—definition of the different arenas of human activity in general and the political arena in particular.¹⁴

Culture mediates in the definition of sex, growth, and aging; mental and physical capacities; and the importance of time. It mediates definitions of the major arenas of social activity as well, specifying the ground rules that regulate social interaction and the flow of resources. Such definitions and regulations construct the broad contours, boundaries, and meanings of the major institutional formations and their legitimation and shape the major contours and boundaries of the major institutional arenas. First of all, culture structures the boundaries of major collectivities and the symbols, their cen-

ters and center-periphery relations; patterns of political authority; the modes of dominance and organization, and economic formations of structuring of social hierarchies; conceptions of authority and its accountability; various forms of conflictual behavior and challenges to authority; and the structure and symbolism of the different manifestations and movements of protest.

The impact of such premises and their institutional derivatives on institutional formation is effected through the activities of major elite groups and influential persons, especially through the various processes of social interaction and control that develop in a society. Such processes of control—and the opposition to them—are not limited to the exercise of power in the “narrow” political sense; they, as even sophisticated Marxists have stressed, are much more pervasive, activated not only by class relations or “modes of production.” Rather, they are activated by the major coalitions of elites in a society, who have different cultural visions and represent different types of interests.

In connection with these ontological visions and their respective transformation into basic premises of the social and political order, these elite groups tend to exercise different modes of control over the allocation of basic resources in the society, thus shaping many crucial aspects of institutional formations and social life in their respective societies.

There are several such elite groups and centers of influence in a society. The political elites deal most directly with the regulation of power. Others articulate the models of cultural and of social order and the solidarity of the major groups. The structure of such elite groups is related closely to the basic cultural orientations prevalent in a society; in other words, different ontological visions.

The modes of control exercised by such coalitions combine the structuring of the basic ontological visions of societies with the control of several central aspects of the flow of resources in patterns of social interaction. Such control of the flow of resources is focused on the regulation of the access to the major institutional markets (economic, political, cultural, etc.) and positions, the conversion of the major resources among these markets, the patterns of investment and distribution of such resources in space and time, and the regulation of such spatial and temporal organization of the resources and of their meaning.

A central link connecting these two aspects or dimensions of control—that is, the construction of the basic assumptions and premises of society and the regulation of flow of resources—is the construction and regulation of the flow of different types of information, especially of that information crucial to the continuity of social life, of social order.

Therefore, in more general terms, the structure of such elite groups is closely related, on the one hand, to the basic cultural orientations prevalent in a society; that is, different types of elite groups bear different types of orien-



tation or visions. On the other hand, and in connection with the types of cultural orientations and their respective transformation into basic premises of the social order, these elite groups tend to exercise different modes of control over the allocation of basic resources in the society. At the same time, the very implementation or institutionalization of such premises, together with the construction of a social division of labor, generates movements of protest and processes of change.

No institutional formation, no system or pattern of social interaction whether micro or macro sociological, however, is, or can be, very stable. The very processes of control, symbolic and organizational alike, through which such patterns are formed also generate tendencies to protest, conflict, and change.¹⁵

Because every social order always contains a strong element of dissension regarding the distribution of power and the values upheld, no institutional system is ever fully "homogeneous", in the sense of being accepted either fully or to the same degree by all those participating in it. Even if, for very long periods of time, a great majority of the members of a given society identify to some degree with the basic premises and norms of a given system and are willing to provide it with the resources it needs, other tendencies that develop in connection with the processes analyzed earlier may give rise to change in the initial attitudes of any given group to the basic premises of the institutional system.

Therefore, there exists the possibility that "antisystems" may develop within any society. Although antisystems often remain latent for long periods of time, under propitious conditions they also may constitute important foci of systemic change. That such potential antisystems exist in all societies is evinced by the potential in all of them for themes and orientations of protest, as well as of social movements and heterodoxies that often are led by different secondary elite groups.

Such latent antisystems may be activated and transformed into processes of change by several processes connected with the continuity and maintenance, or reproduction, of different settings of social interaction in general and the macro-societal order in particular. The most important of these processes are (1) shifts in the relative power positions and aspirations of different categories and groups; (2) the activation in the younger generation of the potential rebelliousness and antinomian orientations inherent in any process of socialization, particularly in those who belong to the upper classes and the elite groups; (3) several sociomorphological or sociodemographic processes that change the demographic balance among different sectors of the population; and (4) the interaction between such settings and their natural and inter-societal environments, such as movements of population or conquest.

The crystallization of these potentialities of change usually takes place

through the activities of secondary elite groups who attempt to mobilize various groups and resources to change aspects of the social order as it was shaped by the coalition of ruling elite groups. Although such potentiality for conflict and change are inherent in all human societies, their concrete development—their intensity and the concrete directions of change and transformation they engender—vary greatly among different societies and civilizations. They differ according to the specific constellations within them of the forces analyzed earlier; that is, the different ontological visions, different types of elite groups, patterns of the social division of labor, and political-ecological settings and processes.

These constellations shape the different patterns of social conflict, social movements, rebellions, and heterodoxy that develop in different societies, as well as the relation of these movements to processes of institution building. They shape the direction of institutional change, the degree to which changes in different aspects of the institutional order coalesce, and their consequent transformation patterns.

The Axial Age Civilizations

All these formulations may sound rather abstract and general—as indeed they are. I therefore shall proceed to some more concrete illustrations and analyses, the starting point of which is the place of Jewish civilization among the so-called Axial Age civilizations.¹⁶

The term *Axial Age civilizations* was used by Karl Jaspers to describe those great civilizations that developed during the first millennium before the Christian era: in China in the late pre-Imperial and early Imperial period, in Hinduism and Buddhism, and much later, beyond the Axial Age proper, in Islam. The distinctive characteristic of these civilizations was the development and institutionalization of basic conceptions of a tension, a chasm, between the transcendental and the mundane order.

The conceptions of a basic tension between the transcendental and the mundane order developed primarily among small groups of “intellectuals,” the elites in general, and the shapers of models of cultural and social order in particular. Ultimately, these conceptions were institutionalized in all these Axial Age civilizations; they became the predominant orientation of both the ruling and many secondary elite groups, fully embodied in their respective centers or subcenters, transforming the nature of the political elite groups and making the intellectuals into relatively autonomous partners in the central coalitions. Thus the diverse groups of intellectuals were transformed into more fully crystallized and institutionalized ones, often into clerics, whether the Jewish prophets and priests, the Greek philosophers, the Chinese literati, the Hindu Brahmins, the Buddhist Sangha, or the Islamic Ulema.



The development and institutionalization of such a conception of a basic tension, of a chasm, between the transcendental and the mundane order and the search to find ways to bridge that chasm, to implement some components of a transcendental vision in the mundane world, in all these civilizations, gave rise to attempts to reconstruct the mundane world according to the appropriate transcendental vision, the principles of the higher metaphysical or ethical order. The given mundane order was perceived as incomplete, often as faulty and in need of at least partial reconstruction according to the conception of how this basic tension could be resolved, how the transcendental visions are to be implemented in the mundane world. Among the most important, institutional derivatives of such ontological vision were the tendencies to the construction of distinct civilizational frameworks and distinct types of conceptions of accountability of rulers.

Some collectivities and institutional arenas were singled out as the most appropriate arenas for the institutionalization of the required resolution of the tensions between the transcendental and the mundane. As a result, new types of collectivities were created or seemingly natural and “primordial” groups—like tribes, territorial or kinship groups—were endowed with special meaning couched in terms of the perception of this tension and its resolution. The most important innovation in this context was the development of “cultural” or “religious” collectivities—such as Christian, Islamic, or Confucian—as distinct from ethnic or political ones. In these collectivities there tended to develop—albeit in different degrees in different civilizations—a strong insistence on the exclusiveness and closure of such collectivities and the distinction between inner and outer social and cultural space defined by them. This tendency became connected with attempts to structure the different cultural, political, and ethnic collectivities in some hierarchical order; and the very construction of such an order usually became a focus of religious ideological and political conflict.

Closely related to this construction of special civilizational frameworks, in all these civilizations, a far-reaching restructuring took place of the relation between the political and transcendental orders.

The political order as the central locus of the mundane order usually has been conceived as lower than the transcendental one and therefore had to be reconstructed according to the premises of the latter. The rulers usually were held responsible for implementing this restructuring of the political order. Consequently, it was possible to call a ruler to judgment in the name of some higher order to which rulers are accountable.

At the same time, the nature of the rulers was transformed. The God-King, the embodiment of cosmic and earthly order alike, disappeared, to be replaced by a secular ruler, in principle accountable to some higher order. Thus the conception emerged that rulers and the community are accountable

to a higher authority—God, Divine Law, the Chinese conception of the Mandate of Heaven, and the like. The first and most dramatic appearance of this conception was in Ancient Israel, in the priestly and prophetic writings. A different conception of such accountability, an accountability of the community and its laws, appeared in Ancient Greece. In fact, this conception appeared in different forms in all these civilizations.¹⁷ Concomitant with the emergence of conceptions of accountability was the development of autonomous spheres of law and conceptions of rights, relatively distinct from ascriptively bound customs. Closely related to these changes in basic political conceptions was the far-reaching transformation of the conceptions of human personality. The interpersonal virtues such as solidarity and mutual help were taken out of their primordial frameworks and combined, in different ways, with the modalities of resolving the tension between the transcendental and the mundane orders. This generated a new set of internal tensions within human personality; and through the appropriate reconstruction of the personality the chasm between the transcendental and mundane orders could be bridged and salvation attained. This was closely connected with the development of conceptions of the individual as an autonomous entity, often out of tune with the political order.

The general tendency to reconstruct the world with all its symbolic-ideological and institutional repercussions was common to all the post-Axial Age civilizations. But their concrete implementation, of course, varied greatly. No one homogeneous world history emerged nor were the different types of civilizations similar or convergent. Rather, a multiplicity of different, divergent, yet continuously mutually impinging world civilizations emerged, each attempting to reconstruct the world in its own mode, according to its basic premises, and attempting either to absorb the others or consciously to segregate itself from them.

It would be beyond the scope of this discussion to analyze either these differences or to attempt to explain them—all this has to be left to further publications. It might be worthwhile, however, to point out that some of the most important sets of conditions that provide the clues to understanding these different modes of institutional creativity are given in the way the premises of these civilizations are crystallized and institutionalized in concrete social settings. Two such sets of conditions can be distinguished. One refers to variations in the basic cultural orientations, in the basic ontological visions of the respective civilizations with their institutional implications. The other set of conditions refers to different concrete social arenas in which these institutional tendencies can be played out.

First of all, among the different ontological visions are crucial differences in the very definition of the tension between the transcendental and



mundane orders and the modes of resolving this tension; for the implementation of the transcendental vision. There is the distinction between those cases in which the tension was couched in relatively secular terms (as in Confucianism and classical Chinese belief systems and, in a somewhat different way, in the Greek and Roman worlds) and those cases in which the tension was conceived in terms of a religious hiatus (as in the great monotheistic religions and Hinduism and Buddhism). A second distinction, within the latter cases, is that between the monotheistic religions in which God was conceived as standing outside the universe and potentially guiding it and those systems, like Hinduism and Buddhism, in which the transcendental, cosmic system was conceived in impersonal, almost metaphysical terms and in a state of continuous existential tension with the mundane system.

Another major distinction refers to the focus of the resolution of the transcendental tensions—in Weberian terms of salvation, or to put it in more general terms, the focus or the arena of the implementation of the ontological visions with its strong emphasis on the chasm between the transcendental and the mundane order. Here the distinction is between purely this-worldly, purely otherworldly, and mixed this- and otherworldly conceptions of salvation or implementation of the ontological vision. It probably is no accident that the “secular” conception of this tension was connected, as in China and to some degree in the ancient world, with an almost wholly this-worldly conception of implementation of the ontological vision, that the metaphysical nondeistic conception of this tension, as in Hinduism and Buddhism, tended toward an otherworldly conception of emphasis, whereas the great monotheistic religions tended to stress different combinations of this- and otherworldly conceptions of salvation, seen in the activities oriented to the “otherworld” as well as to the mundane world as the major arenas of implementation of their respective ontological visions.

Another set of cultural orientations that are of special importance to the ordering of the broader ranges of solidarity and connecting them with the broader meanings generated by the transcendental visions can be distinguished. First, of central importance here is the degree to which access to the central attributes of cosmic or social order is given directly to the members of any social category or subcategory—kings, priests, scholars and the like—enabling them to act as mediators between these attributes and the broader groups.

Second is the nature of relations between the attributes of cosmic and social order and the basic attributes of the major primordial ascriptive collectivities—like tribes or kinship or territorial groups. Here three possibilities can be distinguished. One occurs when the access to these broader attitudes is vested entirely within some such ascriptive collectivity. The second one occurs when there is a total distinction between the two. The third possibility

arises when these respective attributes are mutually relevant and each serves as a referent of the other or a condition of being a member of the other without being totally embedded in the other. Such a partial connection usually means that the attributes of the ascriptive collectivities are seen as one component of the attributes of salvation or, conversely, that the attributes of salvation constitute one of the attributes of such collectivities.

The different combinations of these two sets of cultural orientations have been most important in shaping the broad institutional contours and dynamics of the different post-Axial Age civilizations. But the concrete working out of all such tendencies depends on the second set of conditions—the arena for the concretization of these broad institutional tendencies. These conditions included, first, the economic structure of these civilizations (although they all belonged to economically relatively developed agrarian or combined agrarian and commercial societies). Second, they varied greatly according to their respective political-ecological settings: whether they were small or great societies, whether they were societies with continuous compact boundaries or with cross-cutting and flexible boundaries. Third was their specific historical experience, especially in terms of encounters with other societies and in terms of mutual penetration, conquest, or colonization. The interplay among the different constellations of the cultural orientations analyzed earlier, their carriers, and their respective visions of restructuring the world and the concrete arenas and historical conditions in which such visions could be concretized has shaped the institutional contours and dynamics of the different Axial Age civilizations. The subsequent courses of world history, and their systematic exploration, should be the objects of further systematic analysis.

We now turn to an analysis of the initial premises of the ancient Israelite civilization, the seedbed of Jewish civilization, and on the basis of this analysis support our claim that the best way to look at the Jewish historical experience is to analyze it as the history of a civilization in the way which we defined it here and not only as a history of a people, religious, ethnic, or national group. Indeed, the very fact that all these terms can be applied to the analysis of the Jewish historical experience indicates that none of them is sufficient. Moreover, it seems to us that only if one looks at this experience in civilizational terms may one begin to cope with the greatest riddle of that experience, namely, that of its continuity.