

## Evolutionary Psychology

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### Book Review

#### Judaism and Biology<sup>1</sup>

A review of Rick Goldberg (Ed.), *Judaism in Biological Perspective: Biblical Lore and Judaic Practices*. Paradigm Publishers, Boulder, CO, 2008, 264 pp., US\$89.00, ISBN 978-1-59451-563-7 (hardback).

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This work, a collection of original essays, is a valuable, if uneven, contribution to the growing study of religion from an evolutionary perspective. In introducing the book, editor Rick Goldberg begins with a question: “Does biological science really *disprove* religion?” (p. xi). He then claims that this work is distinct from other books on science and religion because it refrains from “dipping even once into this omnipresent, 150-year-old disputation” (p. xi). Then, one may wonder, why begin the Foreword by raising that very dispute? It may be, as Goldberg suggests, that he wants it to be clear what his book is not about; to warn the reader against bringing any unwarranted expectations to their reading. As Goldberg recognizes, any discussion that includes both religion and biology is liable to set off alarms and provoke a defensive reaction that may bias the reader, denying the book’s argument a fair hearing. And, in fact, this book is not about the conflict between science and religion, nor is it an attempt to use biology to disprove religion; neither does it present biology through a religiously-filtered lens. Rather the book does what Goldberg claims it is intended to do: “to introduce recent scholarship on human evolution to readers who have an ongoing interest in Judaism and/or the Jewish people” (p. xi). But there is, I believe, another reason to raise the specter of the science/religion clash, even when disavowed as it is here—it is an unavoidable implication of any project that brings biology to bear on religion.

This does not mean that one cannot discuss religion from a biological perspective without taking a stand on whether that perspective undermines religious belief or not. This book is a fine example of doing just that. It considers various aspects of Judaic practices and traditions from a biological perspective without making any judgment about their value or about the legitimacy of religious accounts of those practices and traditions. My point is that the very project of bringing evolutionary biology to bear on religion raises a series of questions that can challenge a religion’s own self-understanding. Now, evolutionary studies will raise different challenges to

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial processing of this review was handled by Todd K. Shackelford.

different religious traditions. Some, such as Buddhism (at least as that is understood by the Dalai Lama), may welcome a biological perspective as a valuable source of insight; others, such as evangelical Christianity, will see the deep incompatibility between a science-based approach to religion and a faith-based approach as an assault on its deepest values. In no case, however, can a biological account of a religious belief, practice, value, or tradition not raise the issue of how science impacts on a religious understanding.

Stephen Jay Gould attempted to draw a line between science and religion to mark out their proper spheres of authority, but that line is an illusion. Once evolutionary science developed the tools to begin delving into the mind there no longer remains any domain to which it is denied access. This does not mean that religion can be reduced to biology, or that biology can answer religious questions. It does mean that biology now has a proper place at the table when it comes to religious studies—whether it is welcomed or not. It may be true that science cannot tell us whether or not there is a God, or a soul, but science, particularly the cognitive sciences, has much to say about how beliefs are formed and processed—including beliefs about gods and souls. This cannot but impact on our understanding of religion.

We can see this in Goldberg's claim that one premise of his work is that "an evolutionary analysis of Judaism can reveal facets of interpretation not otherwise discernable" (p. xiii). For a tradition such as Judaism, in which interpretations of its history and texts and, indeed, interpretations of its interpretations, play such a central role, to introduce a new mode of interpretation is not simply an academic exercise carried out from a distance. It is to offer a new way to get inside the tradition, and even to participate in that tradition. One may, of course, assume a disinterested stance, as the contributors to this volume do, by and large, but that does not mitigate the practical implications of the interpretations offered. It may be Goldberg's recognition of the unavoidable practical implications of the essays he has collected (and contributed to—he is author, or co-author, of four of the 10 essays) that leads him to start the volume as he does. And as I have said, given the volatile nature of the subject, including a proviso of sorts at the beginning of such a work is not unwarranted.

However, I am focusing on this point because Goldberg seems to be doing more than issuing a proviso in order to prevent misunderstandings. He seems to be overly sensitive to the possibility that readers will come to this book with an agenda, so much so that I found myself wondering if he "doth protest too much." For example, he tells us that unlike much social science that pursues a "program of social advocacy," the method adopted in his book "contains a perspective without promoting an agenda"; and that the book aims to be "purely descriptive," with the authors intending "neither to praise nor disparage Judaism." He allows that readers may wish to "conjure up religious and social agendas," and offers that they are free to "discover them between the lines" (p. xiv). Does the suggestion that we may "discover" them between the lines perhaps reveal too much?

And it is not only in the Foreword that we find his concern that we understand the book's intentions. Goldberg provides a brief introduction to each of the essays he did not author, and I must say I found this one of the book's weaknesses. For these editor's introductions do not merely clue us in to what the essay is about, they give us the editor's take on how we should respond to the essay. For example, in his introduction to "The Fertility of Prominent Men in the Bible and Ancient Middle East," by Laura Betzig, Goldberg tells us that "Betzig astounds us with her conclusion" (p. 42). I have to admit, I was not astounded by Betzig's conclusion, based on her review of the Bible and other Ancient Near Eastern texts, that "In Darwinian terms, 'the strongest and most vigorous men' raised 'a greater average number of offspring'" (p. 54). This

essay provides a wealth of textual evidence to support this claim (while also making some unjustified assumptions about what was not mentioned in the texts) but is that conclusion going to astound anyone familiar with sexual selection, or with history? It is no more astounding for being labeled so by Goldberg, and in any case, I prefer to draw my own judgments rather than being primed by the editor.

Even more troubling is Goldberg's introduction to David Barash's essay, "Intrafamily Conflict in the Bible and Biological Theory." Goldberg reassures us that Barash's intention is not to "trivialize or degrade these biblical characters." Well, why would we assume he might do such a thing? Does Goldberg think that his readers will fail to realize this for themselves as they read Barash's essay? He then informs us, that "to the contrary, the Bible remains vital and theologically accessible...due to its honest, three dimensional portraits of venerated individuals and families" (p. 62). According to whom? This is not a point made by Barash (nor is it appropriate to the analysis he presents), so it is Goldberg editorializing—and while he is the editor, this type of opinion is out of place in a book presented as an objective, academic analysis of Judaism.

As I read this volume, and in particular Goldberg's contributions to it, it became clear that this is not a "purely descriptive" project (even if such a thing were possible), nor does it lack an agenda. Goldberg admits as much in his Preface, where he writes, "My intention is to bridge, where possible, the deep chasm between Darwinism and the religious principles/behaviors of Judaism" (p. ix). This implies that there are points of compatibility between the two, but it also implies there may be points of incompatibility. Yet, the intention of the book is to make the connections between Darwinism and Judaism, that is, to focus on the points of compatibility. This is an agenda—a perfectly respectable one, even an important one. But it does give to the book a certain perspective—despite Goldberg's protests to the contrary. His editorializing in the Foreword and throughout the book strives to make the point that Judaism is amenable to an evolutionary analysis without being threatened as a religious tradition, and if any other conclusion is drawn, if anyone sees this perspective as critical of religious belief, as undermining textual authority, or being reductionistic toward Jewish traditions, well, that is the reader's fault for being agenda-driven.

Recognizing this agenda also helps to make sense of some of Goldberg's choices. The first section of the book is entitled First Principles. "First Principles" of what? Judaism? Religious studies? Evolutionary psychology? No. Although he does not state so, we can see that these first two essays are first principles of Goldberg's position that Judaism is compatible with a biological perspective. Neither of these first two essays ("Judaism's *Yetzer* as a Biotheological Construct," by Goldberg; "Jewish Knowing: Monism and its Biological Implications," by Michael Satlow) sheds any new light on Judaism by applying a biological perspective. Rather, they seem to be making the argument that Judaism has an intimate connection with the natural world, and so is rightfully open to biological analysis. If that is a point that you need to have argued, then these two essays will be important to putting you in the right mindset to read what follows.

Again, there is nothing wrong with advocating for the position that there are points of compatibility between religion and biology—in fact, I believe that position to be correct. Nor is there anything wrong with wanting to focus on the points of compatibility, rather than points of conflict—that is an editor's right. But Goldberg treats that editorial choice as if it is a necessary condition for a biological study of religion, and it is not. This results in a somewhat distracting

feel to the book. However, it does not negate the value of this book, which at its best, demonstrates the value of bringing an evolutionary perspective into religious studies.

After the introductory First Principles, the book is organized into three sections. The first, Biblical Lore and Biological Theory, looks at Biblical texts with the eye of an evolutionist. Aside from the contributions by Betzig and Barash, there is also an article by Melvin Konner, “Toward a Sociobiology of the Jews: Sexual Selection, Circumcision, and the Centrality of Texts in a Coevolutionary Framework.” This piece ranges widely over several topics. The thread that ties them all together is Konner’s contention that the principle of sexual selection can be a fruitful lens for studying aspects of Judaism, whether the issue is mating patterns in the Bible, the adaptive advantages of circumcision or the co-evolutionary effects of endogamy. Whether the conclusions Konner draws, or the speculations he engages in, ultimately are born out by further research is an open question. Still, his application of sexual selection to these varied practices raises some very intriguing possibilities about the interplay between Judaic beliefs and Judaism’s bio-cultural evolution.

Konner’s article pairs nicely with Barash’s analysis of intrafamily conflict in Biblical texts from the perspective of parental investment theory. This theory, stemming significantly from the works of Robert Trivers, and “derived entirely from theoretical genetics” allows us to see into the many family conflicts “so characteristic of individuals in the Bible” (p. 64)—characters such as Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, to name only a few. Barash effectively demonstrates that the Bible is a rich source of case studies in family dynamics, as understood from an evolutionary perspective. That evolutionary studies can help us to see into the family conflicts in the Bible is, I believe, a noteworthy fact. As Barash says, “it is fascinating and deeply significant that so many insights from modern evolutionary biology had been prefigured and played out at the behavioral level in the biblical texts thousands of years ago” (p. 81).

The question of whether any of these Biblical figures is historical or not, or whether any of the conflicts actually occurred, is in this regard not relevant. That these stories, which were originally transmitted in oral form, and then went through revisions and additions as the texts took shape over a millennium, end up presenting characters and situations that so consistently fit with evolutionary theory speaks, in my view, to the power of our evolved psychology to shape and give contour to our expectations and intuitions, in this case, specifically in regards to family relationships.

In the next section, entitled Inheritance for Intergenerational Success, Goldberg proposes that the Jewish practice of regulated periods of conjugal separation within marriage, *niddah-tvilah*, may contribute to long-term reproductive success (“Biosocial Regulation of Husband and Wife”). I am not in a position to determine if this thesis is correct, nor is Goldberg, as it requires a good deal of speculation on how this religiously endorsed period of sexual abstinence was actually followed by Jews throughout their history. However, this is a constraint on any attempt to analyze the historical impact of behavior, and it is a pitfall that particularly threatens evolutionary psychology, raising the charge of creating “just so stories.” Goldberg does an admirable job of trying to avoid such a charge by connecting his hypothesizing, whenever possible, to empirical data on human sexual cycles and hormonal variations. This results in a plausible scenario in which the practice of *niddah-tvilah* may have maximized reproductive opportunities, and promoted parental investment.

This theme of a religious practice affecting the evolutionary direction of a culture is picked up by the other contribution to this section. In “Traditionalism and Human Evolutionary

Success: The Example of Judaism,” Craig Palmer, Lyle Steadman, and Goldberg set out to explore the impact of cultural traditions on a group’s long-term reproductive success. This is an important approach that too often is left out of evolutionary accounts of behavior, but one which is particularly apt to an evolutionary study of religion. The authors point out that while “today’s social science has sought to make ‘tradition’ an antiquated phenomenon” for many observant Jews, but not just for this group, traditions play a central and organizing role in the life of the community (p. 145). An evolutionary account of human behavior that does not address the function of traditions misses not only a significant portion of human behavior, but a distinctively human practice. The authors do a nice job of placing tradition in an evolutionary context, arguing that traditions function to both identify the group and promote within-group cooperation. Traditions that serve these functions tend to be passed on, as the groups that practice them flourish. An important insight that the authors stress is that the specifics of any particular tradition need not have a practical function, rather it is the very fact of having a communally shared tradition that serves to promote group cohesion (p. 153). Absorbing this lesson would ward off many misplaced criticisms of evolutionary accounts of behavior

Having set out this evolutionary context, they then use it to consider the impact traditionalism has had on Jewish culture throughout history, concluding that traditions can be viewed as “a recipe for communal maintenance” (p. 154). This is a sound conclusion that allows a wealth of cultural practices to be connected to ultimate evolutionary ends. There is a tendency among some to see culture as a force divorced from, or even opposed to, biological theories of behavior. In this essay, Palmer, Steadman, and Goldberg effectively show that no such divorce is warranted, and indeed much can be gained from understanding culture as another means for effecting goals ultimately grounded in evolutionary processes.

The final section, Costly Signaling (Handicap) Theory and Jewish Life, begins with a brief overview of that theory by Amotz Zahavi, one of the principle theorists of the handicap principle. This useful introduction is followed by “Making Biological Sense of Judaic Sacrificing,” by Goldberg. This is a fast-paced excursion through a variety of Jewish practices, some obviously of a sacrificial nature, others less obviously so, presented as examples of the handicap principle at work. There is much to be said of bringing the handicap principle to bear on religious practices—and Goldberg highlights numerous examples—but there is also the danger of seeing handicaps everywhere, and Goldberg slips into this mode, as well. Goldberg seems to equate all sacrificing with handicapping, regarding any sacrificial gift as a wasting of resources. It may be so at times, but sacrifice can also serve other purposes—e.g., a tradition that brings the group together, an act of reciprocation for the deity’s protection, an offering of penance for violation of a moral or religious norm. Religious practices are complex, and it is not necessary, or possible, to find one over-riding model to explain them all.

This view is shared by the final contributor, Richard Sosis, who writes, “I am skeptical that any lone theory can explain all of the extraordinarily diverse beliefs and behaviors that fall under the umbrella that we call religion” (p. 213). While recognizing this constraint, Sosis is confident in the power of signaling theory to shed valuable light on a variety of religious beliefs and practices. He sets this out in his essay, “Why are Synagogue Services so Long?: An Evolutionary Examination of Jewish Ritual Signals.” Sosis, of course, has done some of the most important experimental work on religious communities and signaling theory, and with his essay this book concludes on a high note.

Sosis introduces us to the basics of signaling theory and then uses that theory to provide an explanatory context for what he calls the “three B’s”—behaviors, badges, and bans (he later

adds a fourth B, belief). He argues convincingly, in my view at least, that the practices, prohibitions, and requirements of religion function as signals to identify who is in the group, and so is a reliable partner in the cooperative ventures so crucial to group living, and who is not, and therefore a risk to group solidarity. In addition to establishing group identity, and promoting group solidarity, these costly signals may also serve to signal mate quality: “they signal to potential mates that one has access to collective group resources and mutual insurance benefits” (p. 204).

I found his discussion of the function of belief a welcomed addition. There is a trend in the field of religious study to downplay the significance of religious beliefs, preferring to focus on practice, communal solidarity, and the lived experience—all of which are vital aspects of what we call religion. However, I am of the opinion that beliefs do matter, and matter significantly. Sosis highlights the role of beliefs in allowing behaviors, badges, and bans to “operate as effective signals” (p. 208). A consequence, if not explicit function, of many religious practices is to effect the internalization of beliefs. Internalizing religious beliefs, for example beliefs in supernatural agents, is important for it “makes the perceived payoffs for religious performance, in which supernatural punishments or rewards ensure that the religious performance is profitable, the real payoffs” (p. 211).

After establishing the theoretical foundation for understanding religious behavior, Sosis applies this model to contemporary Jewish practices, including lengthy synagogue services. Such a service that strains the patience of its participants is an example of a costly signal of commitment. The time and discomfort occasioned by such practices is not readily born by those trying to fake commitment to the group and so bearing with them serves as signals of reliable partners in social action. They also function to enhance actual commitment to the group. Sosis points out, as he has established in other studies, that groups that demand more of their members tend to have higher retention rates than more lenient groups.

Near the end of his essay, Sosis raises a question that serves as an appropriate coda to this volume: do we really need an evolutionary model? He concedes that much of what he has said about religion did not “necessarily need to be derived from an evolutionary model of signaling” (p. 222); economists have contributed much to such an analysis. And we can look back over the other essays in this book and argue that theories from sociology, psychology, historical-criticism, etc., have also led to similar interpretations of religion. So, why an evolutionary model? Sosis effectively argues that an evolutionary signaling theory offers a better explanation for religious behavior than a purely economic approach can offer, and I would argue that this point can serve as a broader defense of an evolutionary approach.

An evolutionary approach to religion is not necessarily at odds with the interpretations offered by other disciplines (although it might often be so), but evolutionary theory allows us to develop an account of the origin, the history, and the persistence of religious practices that goes beyond simple descriptive accounts—it provides an explanatory schema that is rooted in the most solidly grounded theory of life that we have—one that is supported by a wealth of evidence and which is empirically testable. Evolutionary psychology allows us to develop a theory of religion that can provide insight into how we came to have minds susceptible to religious concepts, and how the structures of our evolved minds have given contour and color to the richness of human religious history. This is a relatively new approach to religion, and so is susceptible to all the growing pains and missteps of any new field, and Goldberg’s volume bears signs of this. But the study of religion from an evolutionary perspective also has the potential to

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radically alter, and I believe deepen, our understanding of religion. Goldberg's volume bears witness, as well, to this potential, and as such it is a worthy addition to this blossoming field.