

The Old Testament and Insider Movements

by Harley Talman

The past several years have witnessed enormous controversy over the issue of the growing indigenous discipleship-to-Jesus movements within the world's major religious traditions. Within Christian mission discussions, these have been most commonly referred to as "insider movements." Despite the fact that a number of these movements were clearly initiated by the Spirit of God, some critics claim that these movements are merely the fruit of misguided Christian missionary strategies and without biblical or theological validity. This paper seeks to offer fresh perspective from an Old Testament theology of religions, so as to discover how theological foundations might inform our attitude toward these movements.

Before embarking on an exploration of biblical theology, we must remind ourselves that the Old Testament does not directly ask or answer the questions contemporary missiology is asking about the nature and validity of other religions. It does not even use a word for religion.¹ Nevertheless, biblical scholars have observed two contrasting elements in the OT's attitude toward the nations and their religions: particularism/exclusiveness/rejection versus universalism/acceptance/absorption. In our examination of the OT perspective on religions of the nations we will first look at the positive attitude.

Attitude of Absorption toward Other Religions

The argument of this section is as follows: *The image of God is still evident in humanity, despite the effects of the Fall. Thus, human cultures and religions will reflect this reality in some measure. The scriptures indicate that other cultures (which include their religions) do indeed provide many moral and spiritual insights and not just ignorance and error.² Evidences of religious influences on Israel's religion are unmistakable, and often acceptable, beneficial or useful as bridges to communication—even though they are not sufficient as sources of truth without the additional special revelation given directly by God through and to Israel.* Allow me to elaborate:

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Many aspects of openness to other religious influences are evident in the patriarchal period. First, elements of other religions are borrowed. While theologically liberal critics view these strictly as a human phenomenon of cultural borrowing, some conservatives may fear that this is suggesting syncretism. Instead, we are on more solid ground if we understand it to be God's intentional contextualization through Abraham and other patriarchs to present a culturally meaningful witness to the surrounding nations. Charles Van Engen maintains that God's covenant relationship with Israel was a contextualization aimed at bringing light to the nations.³ The Book of Genesis, as a whole, records God's promises and their fulfillment in order to more fully reveal him. As Goldingay explains,

The purpose of God's particular action in the history of Israel is ultimately that God, as the saving and covenantal God Yahweh, should be known fully and worshipped exclusively by those who as yet imperfectly know God as El.⁴

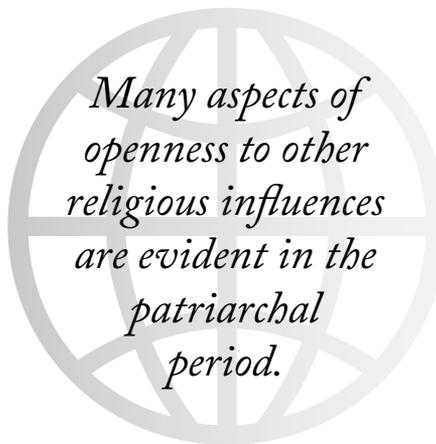
At the same time, the Old Testament infers that there are some constructive things that Israel could appropriate or learn from these religions.⁵

For example, it has been noted that the patriarchs worshipped at or near traditional Canaanite shrines, such as at Shechem (Gen. 12:6), Bethel (Gen. 12:8) Hebron (Gen. 13:18) and Beersheba (Gen. 21:33).⁶ In their early period, Israelites lived next to Canaanites in Shechem, even though the latter were Baal worshippers.⁷ Despite being immigrants from the desert, the patriarchs and early Israelites assimilated into the agriculturalist culture of the Canaanites, adopting their "language, architecture, farming, legal system, and values."⁸

Furthermore, the high god of other religions is viewed in certain passages as referring to the God of Israel, although not yet fully known. The Canaanite name for the high God, "El" was used for the

God of Israel.⁹ [This does not mean that the Canaanite conception of God was the same as the Bible's. I would view this as a divinely inspired appropriation. The sub-biblical Canaanite conception of El was redeemed and sanctified by attributing to it all of the attributes and acts of the God of Israel that are recorded in the Hebrew Bible]. Evangelical scholar Gerald McDermott asserts that Abraham's identification of El Elyon with Yahweh indicates that he considered that the priest Melchizedek [I do not think he would say this of the Canaanites in general] worshipped the true God, but by a different name.¹⁰ Goldingay states:

Apparently Abram and Genesis itself recognize that Melchizedek... serves the true God but does not know all



there is to know about that God. It is in keeping with this that Israel in due course takes over Melchizedek's city of Salem and locates Yahweh's own chief sanctuary there... Joseph and Pharaoh, too, seem to work on the basis that the God they serve is the same God¹¹ (see Gen 41:16, 39; and compare Pharaoh's giving and Joseph's accepting an Egyptian theophoric name and a wife who was a priest's daughter, 41:45).¹²

There are other absorptions as well:

The wilderness sanctuary of Exod 25–40 follows Canaanite models for a dwelling of El, in its framework construction, its curtains embroidered with cherubim, and its throne flanked by cherubim. Such adapting

continues with the building of the temple, the religion of the Psalter, and the ideology of kingship (divine and human). It continues in the oracles of the prophets, whose admission to the council of Yahweh is an admission to the council of El (cf. Ps 82) where they overhear El giving judgment, and in the visionary symbolism of the apocalypses. Occasional specific texts indicate concrete dependence (see Ps 104?). This is not to say that these institutions, ideas, or texts are unchanged when they feature within Yahwism, but that it was able to reach its own mature expression with their aid.¹³

Positive aspects in other religions also allowed for Jewish borrowing from them for law, literature, and wisdom. The OT refers positively to wise men of Egypt, Phoenicia, and Edom; the Book of Proverbs reflects Israel's willingness to incorporate Egypt's wisdom literature (while rejecting its polytheism).¹⁴

Furthermore, the OT emphatically affirms the oneness of humanity and that all peoples are under his sovereign rule, even those under pagan viceroys. Thus, Jeremiah attributed the Babylonian king's conquest of Jerusalem to Yahweh (32:26–28). Despite his eclecticism, Cyrus, the king of Persia who is called "God's Anointed" (Isa. 45:1), declared that "the God of Israel" moved him to allow the Jewish exiles to return (Ezra 1:1–2).¹⁵ We frequently find the Prophets proclaiming Yahweh's universal purposes and sovereignty over the nations. Sitting at the center of the chiasmic structure of the Book of Daniel is Nebuchadnezzar's proclamation, "I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored the one who lives forever" (Dan. 4:34), emphasizing it as the book's central point.¹⁶ Likewise, Darius confessed Yahweh to be the living God and ordered all those in his kingdom to "tremble and fear before" him (Dan. 6:26–27). Large sections of the Prophets are aimed at non-Jewish people (e.g., Isaiah 13:1–23:18; Jeremiah 46–51, Ezekiel 25–32, Amos 1:3–2:3, Obadiah, Jonah and Nahum).

Even the messages of severe judgment imply God's concern for these peoples.¹⁷ However, the prophets did not only pronounce judgment on pagan nations, they heralded salvation, peace and blessing to Egypt (Isaiah), Moab, Ammon, Elam (Jer. 48–49) and other nations so that they will “know that I am the Lord” (Eze. 36:23). The Psalms similarly emphasize that God's blessings and salvation are not intended just for Israel, but for all the nations of the earth (67:2).¹⁸

Noble and genuine faith is evident among Abraham's predecessors (such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Job), his contemporaries (Melchizedek, Lot, and Abimelech), his successors (Rahab and Ruth), and holy “pagans” outside of Israel (Jethro, Naaman, the Queen of Sheba and others). These men and women seem to have been in right relationship with God.¹⁹

Others see the contribution of “pagan” religions on God's call upon Abraham as natural and necessary, in order to build upon, correct and purify it through further biblical revelation. Senior and Stuhlmueller elaborate:

A message is being flashed to us that religion is never a pure creation by God but a synthesis of the best under a new inspiration from God. . . . A new religious experience took place without the creation of a new religion. Abraham remained within the Canaanite religious system. Despite this system's proclivity to sexual excess in the Baal worship, Abraham recognized a dignity and a genuineness about it, and through its instrumentality he acquired his own religious language, style of worship, and system of moral values. In fact the “God of the Ancestors” appeared to Abraham at Canaanite holy places. Religious practices and even the perception of God's special presence evolved within the geography and politics of a local area. Only by first accepting the worth and authenticity of preexistent religions were biblical people able to purify, challenge, and develop them.²⁰

T*he OT's critical attitude toward religions cuts both ways. Biblical faith must not be seen as merely a matter of belonging to the “right” religion.*

Thus, we have seen much evidence of an OT attitude of appropriation of positive elements in pagan religions. This seems to reflect Yahweh's desire to communicate his message with maximum impact by using ideas, terms, forms, and elements that were already familiar to the audience. This should inform our view of insider movements as well.

Attitude of Rejection of Other Religions

In contrast to the OT's attitude of absorption is a strong exclusivist strand. Stuhlmueller refers to this dual process as “absorption and rejection.”²¹ In that vein, Goldingay declares:

Gen 1–11 suggests that the religions, like all human activity, belong in the context of a world that needs restoration to the destiny and the relationship with God that were intended for them, which God purposed to bring about through the covenant with Israel that culminated in the mission and accomplishment of Jesus.²²

Thus we find in the OT an emphatic judgment on the dark, deceptive, destructive and sometimes demonic character of the religions of the Canaanites and other neighbors of Israel. This included prohibitions on adopting pagan practices such as mourning rites, eating unclean creatures, the abominable acts associated with the pagan worship and covenant breaking by pursuing other gods.²³ During the Mosaic Period a distinct religion with its own rituals, priesthood and teachings developed. And although outside influences continued, through the Mosaic Law, Israel acquired the religious apparatus by which it could accept or reject these influences.²⁴

Even where there was a positive influence from outside the Hebrew

tradition, as in wisdom literature, it could not substitute for the knowledge of Yahweh that came through his unique dealing with Israel.²⁵ Other religions, observes Goldingay,

are not inherently demonic or merely sinful human attempts to reach God. . . . Yet they are not equally valid insights into the truth about God. They may provide a starting point and certain areas of common ground, but not a finishing point. They cannot tell us about the special and vital activity of God in Israel that came to a climax in Christ. . . .²⁶

All human religion is not only inevitably tainted by our wayward life in this earth, but can be the very means we use to keep at arm's length the God we choose not to obey. Religion can express our rebellion as well as our response. . . . Religion always has this duality or ambiguity, a simultaneous seeking after God our creator and fleeing from God our judge.²⁷

Kärkkäinen suggests that where we find the OT being critical of other religions, it “is not so much a general principle but rather a desire to purify religions and focus on their major task, that is, the worship of the true God of Israel.”²⁸ When religion in Israel suffered from similar defects, the prophets were equally strong in their condemnation.

Consequently, the OT's critical attitude toward religions cuts both ways. Biblical faith must not be seen as merely a matter of belonging to the “right” religion (though the full range of biblical truth is indispensable for true worship—John 4:23–24). God is not partial in his critique of religions. There is great danger when the people of God enjoy a false peace at having “arrived”²⁹ or forget the possibility that other religions may have something to teach them.

Old Testament Criteria for Judging a Religion or Religious Tradition

Two fundamental criteria for assessing other religions stand out in the OT. The first was whether its adherents feared God—even if they lacked the fuller revelation possessed by Israel. As stated earlier, Abraham inferred that Melchizedek and Abimelech feared God (albeit by a different name) and Moses similarly viewed Jethro.³⁰ Of course, God's ultimate purpose was always that all might know him more fully:

In dealing with the ancestors of Israel, the living God, later disclosed as Yahweh, made an accommodation to the names and forms of deity then known in their cultural setting. This does not thereby endorse every aspect of Canaanite El worship. The purpose of God's particular action in the history of Israel is ultimately that God, as the saving and covenantal God Yahweh, should be known fully and worshipped exclusively by those who as yet imperfectly know God as El.³¹

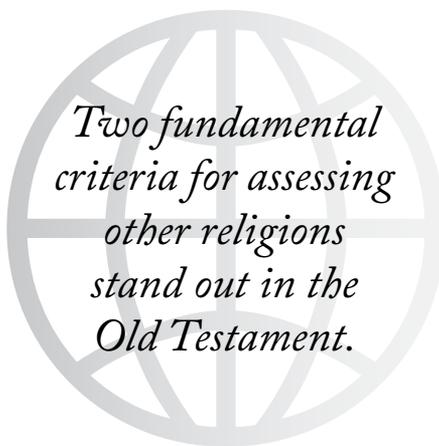
The second standard was the pursuit of righteous behavior—what kind of morality did religion result in? Goldingay asserts:

What Elijah (and Yahweh) so vehemently opposed was not merely the worship of the wrong God (or rather of a no-god), as focused on Mount Carmel, but the hijacking of the whole social, economic and legal ethos of Israel by the religious vandalism of Jezebel's Phoenician Baalism, as focused in the Naboth incident (1 Kings 21). The struggle was not simply over what was the right religion, but over what was a right and just society for Naboth to live in. Baal religion undegirded, or at least imposed no restraint on, the way Ahab and Jezebel treated Naboth. It could be argued, therefore, that the moral, social, and cultural effects of a major religious tradition do give us some grounds for a discriminating response to it, though this can be as uncomfortable an argument for Christianity as a cultural religion as for any other.³²

These two criteria, fearing God and pursuing righteous living were expressed in the OT by "conversion." There were two different forms of conversion: non-proselyte and proselyte.

Non-Proselyte Conversion in the Old Testament

God's plan since the time of Abraham has been to bless all of the nations, peoples and families of the earth (Gen. 12:3). His redemptive program focused on Abraham's descendants, Isaac, Jacob and the nation of Israel who were to serve as a "light to the nations." There was no clear or specific command to engage in proselytism, and thus for many centuries the Jews did not send



out any evangelists or missionaries. Yet even this attracting power and purpose of Israel's light did not necessarily have proselytism and religious cultural conformity in mind. For conspicuously absent from the Old Testament is a call for the nations to follow Israel in observing the Mosaic Law.³³ Accordingly, the prophet Amos pronounces judgment on other nations on the basis of their treatment of human beings, but when the prophet condemns Judah and Israel, the covenant becomes a standard of judgment. A principal reason is because the Law was the covenantal expression of its national religion, the legal code of Israel's theocratic government. God's purpose for giving the Law was not to create a world religion,

but to reveal his identity, character and ways to the nations through his dealings with Israel as it lived in covenantal relationship with him through the Torah. Thus, Israel would be a "light to the nations," showing them that they too could enjoy the presence and blessing of Yahweh by acknowledging him as supreme and treating people according to the moral standards reflected in the Torah (Isa. 2:2–4).

As mentioned earlier, the OT affirms the faith of people of faith who were outside of the stream of Abrahamic revelation, such as Melchizedek, Abimelech, and the Queen of Sheba. Jethro, the priest of Midian, rejoiced in God's great deeds through Moses, but returned home without joining Israel. The message of Israel's prophets pronounced judgment on the surrounding nations for their sins of idolatry, injustice, oppression and wickedness, but nowhere do we see a call for them to adopt the Jewish way of life and system of worship prescribed in the Law of Moses. A case in point is YHWH-fearing Naomi who exhorts Ruth to return to her own people and god; Ruth has to persuade her mother-in-law to allow her to go with her to join Naomi's people and worship her God.³⁴ Even the prophets sent to Israel's enemies (Obadiah to Edom, Jonah to Nineveh and Nahum to Assyria) do not call for adopting the religion of Israel or temple worship in Jerusalem. The Lord commissioned Jonah to preach repentance to the Ninevites lest they perish, but there is not a hint that proselyte conversion was required for them to be "saved." Repeatedly, we hear that God's purpose for the nations was that they "know that I am the Lord" (Eze. 36:23) which demanded that they, like Israel, recognize his supremacy and "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). The details of what this would look like in each nation were not spelled out,³⁵ but it may be implied that to the degree Israel showed its light to the

nations, they were to abide by the ethical principles exemplified in the Torah. In the eschaton, Isaiah (2:2–9) pictures the nations coming to God’s temple to learn “his ways” (the standards of morality that God requires of people).³⁶

A famous example of that purpose being fulfilled is found in the case of Naaman the Syrian. His healing from leprosy (2 Kings 5) provides an example of non-proselyte conversion. The witness of a captured Israelite servant girl leads Naaman to the king of Israel and then to the house of Elisha. The prophet is determined to demonstrate the power and grace of God. The result is that Naaman declares his new faith that “there is no god in all the world except in Israel.” He asks for two mule-loads of dirt so that he can build an altar to the Lord, in keeping with his vow that he will not offer a sacrifice or burnt offering to other than Yahweh. (While YHWH can be worshipped anywhere, Scripture also supports the notion of sacred space. Exodus 20:24 legislates that altars be constructed of soil, *’adamah*, the same word that Naaman uses. Whether Naaman knew this is not important, for biblical characters often “know” more than they actually know.³⁷ “The petition to get earth of Israel indicates the clear intention to worship YHWH alone,” observes Daniel Baeq³⁸ and indicates that Naaman had no intention of being a “secret believer.” (It would have been well nigh impossible to keep his faith a secret, given the visible proof of his miraculous healing, his entourage’s hearing of his vow, the mules carrying dirt, and then a constructed altar.) But neither does Naaman consider participating in Jewish religious rites in Jerusalem’s temple. As Baeq suggests:

More likely, he would have offered up sacrifices in the most reverent and worshipful way he knows. Certainly the likelihood of his generating syncretism was there, but more likely, because the material that made up the altar was from Israel, he would never

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forget that he is, in fact, worshipping God. That altar would represent no being other than YHWH, the God who searches the hearts of men, the God who would accept his sacrifices.³⁹

However, returning to his country, people and job will entail fulfilling his duties as the king’s top general—one of which was to escort the king into the temple of Rimmon. With the king leaning on his arm, Naaman must assist him in bowing in worship and for this Naaman asks “forgiveness.” Some, like Timothy Tennent, interpret this request for “forgiveness” as springing from Naaman’s feelings of guilt for what both he and Elisha “knew was wrong.” But Baeq shows how “the symmetrical structure of his petition explicitly showed that his bowing did not have the same meaning as his master’s bowing, which was described as “worshipping”... Rimmon. If he does not attach a pagan spiritual meaning to his form of bowing, it should not be interpreted as an act of idolatry.”⁴⁰

Naaman’s confession made clear his complete faith that only the Lord is God, as he swore full allegiance to and exclusive worship of him. So it appears to me that Naaman is not asking for permission to engage in an act of idolatrous syncretism. In assisting the king to bow, he must bow with him—but Naaman’s bowing is not one of worship of the idol. As Baeq explains:

Naaman knows that as the commander of the army and a notable and powerful official, he is unable to excuse himself from all the state functions, which usually entailed religious rituals. Thus, rather than trying to hide what he would be required to do, he is earnest and honest before Elisha, voluntarily informing Elisha of an unavoidable, inevitable activity in his home land. The fact that he even brought up this subject strongly indicates that Naaman had already considered the

future and foreseen what serving YHWH would entail in his home country. In essence, Naaman is explaining to Elisha that even though he has to physically bow down before the idol, he is not worshipping the idol.⁴¹

Thus, the best interpretation of Naaman’s request for “forgiveness” was that he was seeking “understanding” from Elisha.⁴² As Frank Spina concludes:

The new convert wants to make sure Elisha realizes that, appearances aside, under no circumstances are his actions to be taken as sincere acts of worship...⁴³

His request is not for advance pardon of actual sin, but for the potential for misunderstanding based on mere appearances. This explanation is more convincing to me than suggesting that Elisha gave tacit approval for syncretistic idolatry—for that was the one thing that the prophets of Israel did not permit. That Elisha was not at all troubled by Naaman’s requests is evident from his reply: “Go in *shalom*.”

But regardless of how one interprets the significance or meaning of this concession, many Christians today would have acted differently than Elisha, had they been in his place. Many of us⁴⁴ would have insisted that Naaman avoid even an appearance of syncretism by joining our community of faith, becoming a Jewish proselyte through covenantal circumcision, and living according to the true religion of God (the Mosaic Law). That Elisha does not even suggest this option indicates to me divine sanction for God’s saving deeds being made known to the nations by non-proselyte converts, such as Naaman.

Was Naaman an Insider?

It is somewhat anachronistic to refer to Naaman as an “insider” as defined by insider movement proponents, since he preceded the church age,

and life under the lordship of Jesus Christ. However, even though we lack sufficient information to be certain, Naaman might have illustrated the two key characteristics of an insider (as defined by Lewis in 2009⁴⁵):

1. *Pre-existing families and social groupings develop into fellowships of believers as they become followers of Christ; so the pre-existing community becomes the church, rather than a new social group being created or “planted” as a church.*
By not becoming a Jewish proselyte and instead returning to Aram, he could have remained within his pre-existing social network, his household, which could have become his “church.” (In the ancient world, members of a household normally followed the faith of its head. Moreover, we know for sure that his wife’s servant-girl was a believer in Yahweh, and it seems likely that Naaman’s servants who encouraged and witnessed his healing, would have also believed).
2. *The believing families in insider movements remain inside their socio-religious communities by retaining their God-given birth identity while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.* By fulfilling his duty as the king’s adjutant, it appears that he could retain his identity as a *member* of his socio-religious *community* (even though he did not retain some of the fundamental tenants of what we would call the “religion” of his socio-religious community). Remaining part of this community would not have been possible had he joined the socio-religious community of Israel.⁴⁶

Socio-religious Community Versus Religion

The difficulty in differentiating between a “religion” and “socio-religious community” has proven to be an insurmountable difficulty for many critics of insider movements: “How can someone

be a Hindu follower of Christ when Hindus are idolatrous polytheists and believe in reincarnation?” This response reflects an “essentialist” view of “world religions” that defines them and their adherents by a monolithic set of basic beliefs and practices in contradistinction to other religions.⁴⁷

While the essentialist view is often assumed, contemporary research in the field of religious studies seriously challenges this view. For example, Heinrich Von Stietencron asks, “Why is ‘Hinduism’ so difficult to define? This is because we always try to see it as one ‘religion.’ Our problems would vanish if we took ‘Hinduism’ to denote a socio-cultural unit or civilization which contains a plurality of distinct religions.”⁴⁸



A 19th century British census report from the Punjab testifies: “It would hardly be expected that any difficulty or uncertainty should be felt in classing the natives of the Province under their respective religions. Yet, with the single exception of caste, no other one of the details which we have recorded is so difficult to fix with exactness....”⁴⁹

Dietrich Jung expresses similar sentiments about Islam:

I have asked myself why Islam is so frequently represented in the holistic terms of an all-encompassing socio-religious system. How is the persistence of this specific image of Islam to be explained against all empirical evidence? Having worked and

lived in various Muslim countries in the Middle East and beyond, I have been confronted with so many different Islams. No scholarly erudition is required to see the enormous variety.... Why, so the mind-boggling question, do then so many Muslims and non-Muslims nevertheless retain this essentialist image of “true Islam” in their minds?⁵⁰

This sociological or cultural perspective accounts for the diversity in the history, beliefs, practices, and customs in the various religious traditions. It calls for us to speak in the plural (Christian traditions, Hindu faith traditions, and Islams) or in particulars (Algerian Berber Tijaniyya Sufi Islam).

Contemporary NT scholars tell us that the same was true of first century Judaism. J. Andrew Overman states, “So varied was Jewish society in the land of Israel during this period, and so varied were the Jewish groups, that scholars no longer speak of Judaism in the singular when discussing this formative and fertile period in Jewish history. Instead we speak about Judaisms. In this time and place there existed a number of competing, even rival Judaisms.”⁵¹

Matthew’s Gospel reflects one of these Judaisms. He did not view the break from the synagogue as a break from Judaism, but more akin to the Qumran community’s self-perception of itself as the “true Israel.” Matthew’s Judaism had a different center (Jesus rather than Torah), a different view of the will of God (the kingdom of God rather than the nation) and different leadership (the apostles in place of the unfaithful synagogue establishment)—but he still perceived the followers of Jesus as within Judaism [whereas we view them as Christians].⁵²

A sociological perspective helps explain how Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews or others outside of traditional “Christianity” may be regarded as members of their socio-religious communities, even though they do not adhere to

certain beliefs or practices of a religion (as prescribed by textbook definitions). Often even atheists can be considered part of such a socio-religious community, as long as they do not forsake it by becoming proselytes to a different socio-religious community.

Hence, given the frequency of such diversity within a given religious tradition, it is quite feasible for a movement of Christ followers inside it to retain an affiliation within that tradition that is distinctively different from other groups (due to its biblical character). It needs to be mentioned that such diversity is also evident among various insider movements. Sometimes even within the same geographical area, they do not look, act, interrelate or self-identify monolithically.

Proselyte Conversion in the Old Testament

Conversion in the OT was not essentially a change to another religion (i.e., proselytism), but rather the conversion of the person to faith in the God of Israel. Nevertheless, proselytism was one way in which faith in the God of Israel was expressed.

God's stated intent was for Egypt to know that he was the Lord and serve him. Some of the fruit of God's mission through Moses was the "mixed multitude" that joined Israel's exodus. These would become "proselytes," becoming members of the covenant nation (formalized with their participation in circumcision with the Israelites in the wilderness). Thus the proselyte model of conversion does have a valid place in redemptive history. But at least in the case of the Egyptians and Edomites, the Law stipulated that only in the third generation could children of foreigners integrate into the community of Israel, "the assembly of the Lord" (Deut. 23:9). Moreover, the Midianites (Num. 10:29ff) joined Israel while retaining their identity, of whom the Kenites (Jud. 1:16; 4:11) dwelled among the Israelites in

This provides New Testament substantiation for the non-proselyte conversion model that is followed in insider movements.

Canaan. Non-Israelite aliens dwelling with Israel were to participate in feasts and Sabbath and abstain from drinking blood, but to participate in Passover, they had to be circumcised (Ex. 12:48–49). All of this points to a degree of religious inclusion without religious conversion (becoming a proselyte).⁵³ Thus, it appears that non-Jews could affiliate with Israel either as "god-fearers" (who were not required to abide by the Law in its entirety) or as proselytes (who entered by circumcision, baptism, temple sacrifice and Torah observance, yet even the latter could never regard Israel's patriarchs as their fathers).⁵⁴

Two of the most notable proselytes are Rahab and Ruth who made the God and people of Israel their own. In contrast to women who were unaffected by it, circumcision was a major obstacle to proselyte conversion for men. Even so, sources outside of the OT testify to the fact of proselyte conversion, as it required Gentiles to become Jews through ritual baptism, as purification from their pagan past. However, there is scant evidence for significant numbers of conversions to the religion of Israel in its early period.

Later in the Hellenistic period Jewish missionaries actively pursued the proselytizing of Gentiles.⁵⁵ While such Jews sought to make god-fearers into proselytes, Jesus did not. He never required anything of Gentiles beyond simple faith. In his method of mission, his Jewish disciples remained Jews (but did not adhere to the false teachings of the religious establishment); Samaritan believers remained Samaritans (but now offered true, spiritual worship to the Father through the Savior of the world—John 4); and Gentile followers remained Gentiles, as Jesus' witnesses to what "great things God had done for them" (Mark 5:19). As

we all know, after an intense struggle, the church eventually followed the model of Jesus in not requiring Jewish proselytism of Gentiles (Acts 15). Noteworthy for this study is how the apostle James validated what they saw happening on the ground by quoting from the OT (Amos 9:11–12 LXX): "in order that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name..." (Acts 15:17–18). James concluded that if the Gentiles were bearing God's name, then they were necessarily included in the people of God as *Gentiles*. This provides NT substantiation for the non-proselyte conversion model that is followed in insider movements.

Implications of this Study for Insider Movements

There are several implications that the OT attitude of openness toward other religions has for insider movements among non-Christian religious communities. Factors supporting insider movements include:

- The recognition that God created all peoples and that human diversity reflects the will of God. Moreover, religions do not save—not even Israel's [nor ours]—only God does. This should temper our temptation to follow the paradigm of proselyte conversion which requires the adoption of identity and forms belonging to our Christian religious tradition.
- OT openness provides a counterbalance to the exclusivist approach that other peoples are excluded from a relationship with God and their identity should be eliminated. Although YHWH chose a particular people to be participants in the story of his revelatory and saving acts, belonging to this

socio-religious group was insufficient apart from a right response to him. Likewise, not belonging to this socio-religious group did not preclude others from making this story their own and becoming a chapter in it. In fact, religions may provide a “starting point for people on their way to recognizing that the definitive acts of God are found in the story of Israel that comes to a climax in Jesus.”⁵⁶

- The significance of religion in Israel was not as a set of beliefs and practices for all to follow, nor in the number of its distinctive features, nor as a comparison with other religions. Rather, it was its testimony to God and his acts. As Goldingay affirms:

Israel’s significance lay in its status as witness to the deeds of the living, active, saving God. This is the repeated thrust of Isa 40–55: written in the context of overbearing religious plurality, the prophet did not encourage Israel to compare its religion with the Babylonians⁵⁷ and feel superior, but directed their thoughts to the acts of Yahweh in its actual history and declared, “You are Yahweh’s witnesses.”⁵⁸

Likewise, what validates insider believers is their bearing witness to their community of what God in Christ has done for them and for the world.

- Furthermore, other religious traditions can even enrich our own spiritual life and worship.⁵⁹

At the same time, OT exclusivist attitudes toward other religions, call for an approach of duality.

- The Old Testament’s attitude toward other religions “apparently varies not only with the nature of the religion, but also with the nature of the power and the pressure exercised by its adherents, but both openness and guardedness seem to feature in all contexts”⁶⁰—as they must in

insider movements. Thus, where a socio-religious tradition exerts more negative pressure on the insider community, greater resistance and rejection to it will be needed.

- The OT’s dual stance toward other religions provides a foundation for insider approaches today,⁶¹ with negative features of other religions being rejected, and positive aspects emulated. “Along-siders” testify that this is in fact what they observe happening as insider believers seek to remain within their socio-religious community of their birth. As they evaluate their religious heritage, they retain the good and reject, reinterpret or relegate the bad. More specifically,



1. They can *retain* anything that is compatible with the Bible.⁶²
2. They *reject* those elements of religious teaching that contradict the Bible (such as Jesus did not die on the cross, the Bible has been corrupted, Jesus is not the Savior, or salvation is by works).
3. They *reinterpret* aspects that can be redeemed. For example, Muslims might continue to fast during Ramadan, no longer to earn salvation, but to pray for the salvation of their community. Those who continue the practice of ritual prayer would do so according

to Jesus’ instructions (Matt. 6:5–15), making whatever adjustments they deem necessary to “worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23–24).

4. They *relegate* (diminish or marginalize) the role that any previous religious authorities or writings had over their lives.⁶³
- Furthermore, an approach of duality should be reflected in each insider movement’s identity (i.e., they should have a dual identity). The first Jesus community retained their identity within Judaism, while adopting a second identity as members of a renewal movement (the Way) that was a sub-group of their corporate Jewish identity. Published evidence of the dual, hybrid and multiple identities among Muslim Followers of Christ living in Islamic communities is provided by Jens Barnett.⁶⁴ Dudley Woodberry, regarded as the leading authority on insider movements, maintains that all insider movements do end up with some kind of dual identity.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate possible theological foundations that would support insider movements. After becoming acquainted with the historical origins and a definition of insider movements, an Old Testament theology of other religions revealed dual attitudes of acceptance and rejection. We also determined that the OT’s two fundamental criteria for assessing religions was their promotion of the fear of God and the pursuit of righteous living and that this could be expressed in “conversion.” Two types of conversion were found in the OT: non-proselyte and proselyte. Naaman fits the non-proselyte model and illustrates conversion in the insider paradigm.

Critics of insider movements holding to an essentialist view of religion cannot

reconcile the idea of followers of Christ remaining within a non-Christian socio-religious community. But we saw that contemporary scholarship argues against the essentialist view in favor of the cultural view of religions. The diversity inherent in the cultural view of a socio-religious tradition makes feasible the existence of a sub-group of Christ followers within it who develop a dual identity: one is socio-religious identity that reflects their affiliation with that socio-religious tradition; a second is a spiritual identity (as Christ followers) that is distinctively different from the larger group.

The second type of OT conversion was the proselyte pattern. Though it was uncommon in early Jewish history, it became prominent during the later Hellenistic period. But Jesus opposed the proselytizing of Gentiles (as well as Samaritans); his only requirement for them was simple faith. By Acts 15 the church opted for the model of Jesus in not requiring Jewish proselytism of Gentiles. This decision was rooted in the theology of the OT (Amos 9). Hence, the NT favors the non-proselyte conversion model that is followed in insider movements.

Lastly, implications of this study for insider movements were offered. The OT's attitude of acceptance sanctions the appropriation of prior cultural forms and identity that enrich spiritual life and worship. What truly matters is the Jesus community's witness to what God has done in Christ. But OT exclusivist attitudes call for an approach of duality: negative features of other religions must be rejected (or reinterpreted or relegated), but positive aspects can be retained. Duality should also be expressed in identity: in socio-religious identity, as well as a spiritual identity (being in Christ and his Body).⁶⁶ **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Kwesi A. Dickson, *Uncompleted Mission: Christianity and Exclusivism* (Maryville, NY: Orbis, 1991), 7.

² John Goldingay, "How Does the First Testament Look at Other Religions?" 2–3. This is an expansion and revision of a paper written for the Tyndale Fellowship Conference on Religious Pluralism in 1991, revised in light of comments by Christopher J. H. Wright as respondent and published under both names in *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism*, Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce W. Winter (eds.), (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991), 34–52; 2nd ed., (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 43–62. Page numbers in the book differ from those in the paper that I accessed at <http://campusguides.fuller.edu/content.php?pid=190354&sid=1671168>

³ Charles Van Engen, *God's Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 102–103.

⁴ Goldingay, 4.

⁵ Goldingay, 4.

⁶ Goldingay, in contrast, asserts that "the ancestors' words and deeds do not imply the belief that other peoples in Canaan have no knowledge of God, though the ancestors do seem to establish their own places of worship, near those of the Canaanites, rather than making use of Canaanite sanctuaries," p. 3.

⁷ Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis*, p. 355, cited in Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 17.

⁸ Senior and Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 18.

⁹ Goldingay, 7. The name "Baal" ("owner") might also have been appropriated, but it seems that his status as a lesser deity was a main cause for its being rejected, as worship of Baal implied worship of other gods than Yahweh.

¹⁰ Gerald McDermott, "What If Paul Had Been from China? Reflections on the Possibility of Revelation in Non-Christian Religions." In *No Other Gods Before Me: Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, John G. Stackhouse (ed.), (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 18–19. Of the same persuasion are Goldingay, as well as Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

¹¹ This could not be said of the Pharaoh of Moses' time.

¹² Goldingay, p. 3, elaborates: "Yahweh roars from Zion" (Amos 1:2); indeed, "El, God, Yahweh" shines forth from Zion (Ps. 50:1). A similar implication emerges from Abraham's calling on God as Yahweh El Olam in Gen. 18:33. El Olam appears only here as a designation of Yahweh,

but comparable phrases come elsewhere to designate Canaanite deities. Such Canaanite texts also more broadly refer to El as one who blesses, promises offspring, heals, and guides in war, like Yahweh.

¹³ Goldingay, 5.

¹⁴ Dickson, 20.

¹⁵ Dickson, 16–17.

¹⁶ R. Torpin, "Lessons from a Study of Daniel," unpublished paper, February, 2012.

¹⁷ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 40.

¹⁸ Kärkkäinen, 40.

¹⁹ Clark Pinnoch, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 92. We cannot be sure that all of them obtained full knowledge of all revelation that had been given, but the latter ones may have been regarded as righteous under the terms of the Noachic covenant.

²⁰ Senior and Stuhlmueller, 18.

²¹ Senior and Stuhlmueller, 17.

²² Goldingay, 2.

²³ Dickson, 11–14. This last reason was the primary factor in the injunctions against intermarriage with non-Jews.

²⁴ Senior and Stuhlmueller, 18.

²⁵ Goldingay, 2.

²⁶ Goldingay, 2.

²⁷ Goldingay, 3.

²⁸ Kärkkäinen, 47.

²⁹ Senior and Stuhlmueller, 20.

³⁰ Kärkkäinen, 49.

³¹ Goldingay, 4.

³² Goldingay, 8.

³³ Note in Amos 1 and 2, these nations are judged on the basis of treatment of humans, but when the prophet comes to Judah and Israel, the covenant becomes a standard of judgment.

³⁴ Homer Heater in email to the author, July 28, 2012.

³⁵ Perhaps the legal and religious life of the Gentiles would be analogous to a comparison of codes of law in two countries today, many of the moral demands of the law are the same (prohibiting murder, theft, etc.), but dissimilarities reflect their different contexts and cultural values. Some later Jews (as in the Talmud) viewed the Gentiles as being under the Noachic covenant.

³⁶ The NET Bible (Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C., 2005): footnote 11, 1265.

³⁷ Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story*, Grand Rapid, MI: Eerdmans, 2005, 86.

³⁸ Daniel Shinjong Baeq, "Contextualizing Religious Form and Meaning: A Missiological Interpretation of Naaman's Petitions (2 Kings 5:15–19)," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 27:4 (Winter 2010), 200.

³⁹ Baeq, 203.

⁴⁰ Baeq, 204.

⁴¹ Baeq, 203.

⁴² Baeq, 204.

⁴³ Rebecca Lewis, "Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 26:1 (Spring 2009): 16.

⁴⁴ This surmising of mine may be due to my being the product of a Western individualistic culture. One colleague noted that most Christians are now from the collectivist south and said that those he knows are much more sympathetic to the pressures that lead other collectivists to continue going along with certain things as they go through a process of redefining them internally.

⁴⁵ Rebecca Lewis, "Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 26:1 (Spring 2009), 16.

⁴⁶ Homer Heater finds in 1 Kings an ironic parallel in the case of Obadiah (email to author, July 28, 2012). Obadiah faithfully followed the Lord, even while serving in the court of Ahab and Jezebel, the arch-promoters of idolatrous worship and persecutors of God's prophets. Yet he remained part of the same socio-religious community (Israel), but rejected Ahab and Jezebel's form of "religion."

⁴⁷ Jan-Erik Lane and Svante O. Errson elaborate: "In the essentialist approach to religion, the emphasis is placed on its core ideas. The core of a religion is a set of beliefs or values which are in some sense fundamental to the religion in question, at least in the eyes of its virtuosi. It may be a controversial task to specify this core, but often religions have key sources from which one may distil its core beliefs or values. However, one may have to be content with laying down a variety of core interpretations of a religion since these will have been interpreted differently at various times. For instance, Christianity received a number of authoritative interpretations when it was established as a state religion, but this did not prevent it from later splitting into several core sets of beliefs and values. The same process has taken place within Islam." *Culture and Politics: A Comparative Approach* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 147.

⁴⁸ Heinrich Von Stietencron, *Hindu Myth, Hindu History: Religion, Art and Politics* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 228.

⁴⁹ Denzil Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Panjáb Taken on the 17th of February 1881* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1883), 101.

⁵⁰ Dietrich Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Essentialist Image of Islam* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2011), 1. For additional challenges facing essentialist approaches to describing Islam, see Ronald Lukens-Bull, "Between Text and Practice: Considerations in the Anthropological Study of Islam," *Marburg Journal of Religion* 4, no.2 (December 1999), 1–10.

⁵¹ Cited by Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Ethical Decision Making in Matthew 5–7* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 5.

⁵² Talbert, 5–6, expressing the position of NT scholar Anthony J. Saldarini.

⁵³ Dickson, 25–26.

⁵⁴ Emil Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 161, cited by Dickson, 27.

⁵⁵ The zeal of the Pharisees in traveling "land and sea to make one convert" (proselyte) (Matt. 23:15) may have been a reference to this. But others see this as an attempt to convert Jews to the stricter Pharisaic traditions of *halakah* (Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 115.

⁵⁶ Goldingay, 6.

⁵⁷ Although Isaiah did exhort the exiles of Israel to depart from Babylon and return to Palestine ("Depart, depart, go out from there; touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her; purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the Lord" —52:11). The apostle Paul cited this in 2 Corinthians 6:17 (as did Isaiah) to warn against participation in idol worship; biblical sanctification should include forsaking anything that defiles. However, this verse is frequently cited by critics to argue that insiders should leave their non-Christian socio-religious community. However, associating with unbelievers should not be equated with participation in evil. Paul's instructions to the Corinthians in regard to non-association with immoral people meant that they should separate from immoral believers, not from immoral unbelievers, "for then you would have to go out of the world" (1 Cor. 5:9–11). This lends support to insiders living godly lives while remaining amidst unbelievers in their communities. In this Paul followed the

teaching of the Lord Jesus who did not seek his followers' withdrawal from the world, but their protection from evil/the Evil One ("My prayer is not that you will take them out of the world, but that you will keep them from the Evil One" John 17:15). This duality reflects the tension between what Andrew F. Walls calls the "Pilgrim Principle" and the "Indigenizing Principle" of the Gospel ("The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture" in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 7–9.

⁵⁸ Goldingay, 11.

⁵⁹ Dickson, 61–66.

⁶⁰ Goldingay, 9.

⁶¹ Goldingay, 14.

⁶² This is not to say that all Jesus followers will arrive at the same understandings of what the Bible teaches (e.g., Calvin allowed only what was explicitly permitted in the Bible to be used in worship; Luther and Zwingli rejected only what the Bible forbade).

⁶³ Adapted from John J. Travis who uses "reassess" in place of "relegate."

⁶⁴ Jens Barnett, "Conversion's Consequences: Identity, Belonging, and Hybridity amongst Muslim Followers of Christ" (M.A. thesis, Redcliffe College, August 2008).

⁶⁵ Woodberry has stated this on many occasions, as well as in an email message to the author, February 29, 2012.

⁶⁶ This study has attempted to at least show that non-Israelites in the OT could be saved without becoming Jewish proselytes. It has not attempted to specify exactly what they had to believe or practice in order to be saved. For example, the OT is not entirely clear whether or not non-Israelites had to believe in/worship YHWH alone for salvation. Some theologians do not believe Nebuchadnezzar was saved, even though he recognized the supremacy of the God of Israel, because he did not offer exclusive worship to him. (Note that the same could be said of Solomon and Gideon). Another question is whether they could in some sense be saved even if they did not know YHWH, a corollary to the contemporary issue of whether some who have not yet heard of Christ could be saved because of what he has done. But these issues are not central to insider movements where disciples of Jesus proclaim salvation through Christ while remaining in their non-Christian socio-religious communities. The possibility of the salvation of those communities apart from the gospel of Christ is not in view.