

HYBRIDIZATION VERSUS SYNCRETISM: A MORAL VIEW OF CULTURAL
TRANSLATION IN ISRAEL DURING THE EXILIC PERIOD AND HOW THAT RELATES
TO THE MODERN CHURCH

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ANEA 640: History of Mesopotamian
October 30, 2014

Abstract: Cultural translation is a common theme whenever one culture collides with another, and this is evident in every culture throughout history, but there is a difference between hybridization (acceptable adherence to new cultural norms) and syncretism (unacceptable adherence to new cultural norms). We in the church find ourselves in a similar situation to Israel in Exile in that we are living in a land somewhat devoid of religious truth. By using iconographical and textual (biblical and non-biblical) sources, this paper will seek to differentiate between the acceptable and unacceptable cultural practices that Israel either adhered to (before the Exile) or faced (during and after the Exile) as an example as to how we, in the modern church, may emulate the positives and avoid the negatives. Throughout all of this, a bare minimum can be understood, and discovering that bare minimum will advance the church today.

Keywords: cultural, hybridization, syncretism, translation, religious, modern, exile, god

It is no surprise that different cultures across different ages have different beliefs and different practices. In fact, we have come to expect this plurality to exist across time and space. When cultures collide, though, what we find is a sense of cultural translation—as if one culture says of the other, “Hey, I’ve never thought of trying it that way before.” Thus, each culture, even if enemies, sees in the other some aspect of intrigue, something that the one culture could correct or finds more pleasing or simply easier. These corrections come in the form of ideology, beliefs, simple agricultural practices, whatever the one finds interesting about the other.



Cultural translation is a normal part of societal evolution

Even today, in our world leading toward globalization, we see cultural translation, and in fact Western Society (the US and Europe) with its ever extending reaches into the rest of the world has become the hotbed for cultural translation, a societal conglomeration. In the United States, a country so bent on individualization and without a monumental history, it is quite easy to find Americans fascinated with the lives of those outside of their own borders. The simplicity of nomadism, the familial nature of tribalism, the honor system of ancient Japanese feudalism, and the ever intriguing plurality of “other” religions—these permeate American culture, and especially American entertainment.

In all of this, a question arises: if cultural translation is intrinsic in every society, how does the Christian guard himself from becoming more like the world and less like his Creator? To answer this, I would like to take the reader through a moral understanding of the two polar opposites in cultural translation (hybridization and syncretism), and then look to the ancient Israelites and their collision with ancient Mesopotamia as examples (both good and bad) for modern living.

In his book, *God in Translation*, Mark Smith discusses the changes of ideals from one culture to the next—never borrowed but always adapted for use within the new culture.¹ So, as bronze or iron implements are introduced into new cultures, we slowly see these tools change form for use within the new culture, even if that means eventually abandoning the original concept. This is true with every secular concept, including pottery, textiles, language, and more. If it is true in secular, non-cultic, ideals, how much more so in cultic and religious ideals which deal broadly with the mind practiced through the hands?

A perfect example of a religious translation is that of Astarte and her journey to become Aphrodite, occurring as a slow change and mixture (not a borrowing from) of the Phoenician Astarte, the local Cypriot fertility goddess, and the already existent cultural ideals of the early Greeks who voyaged to the Cypriot coast for trade. Although Aphrodite did not exist in Greek mythology before the Greeks landed on Cyprus, room for such a deity already existed, but not in its pure



Conical stone once worshipped as Astarte/Aphrodite on Cyprus

¹ Mark S Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2010).

Phoenician or Cypriot form. Greek mythology tells of Aphrodite being born in the foam of the Cypriot shore outside of Paphos, and so it was that the Greeks adapted (not adopted) the concept and created this myth. In this same way, a number of other deities can be traced across time and space, changing in form or worship as cultures evolve and coalesce with each other.

When we see this translation occurring in non-Hebraic instances, we must ask ourselves if this also occurs in Hebraic traditions? Jan Assmann, in his book *Moses the Egyptian*, argues that a certain “Mosaic Distinction” kept the Israelites from accepting non-Hebraic religious concepts—translation did not occur within pure Judaism as it did in the outside world.² While this could be argued from beliefs through text, cult through material culture tells a different story within folk religion. Archaeologically, the Israelites became intertwined in Canaanite religion, and even the historical books within the Old Testament detail this. Did cultural translation occur within Hebraic culture? Absolutely, but that isn’t the correct question to ask. The correct question is how much of this cultural translation was considered acceptable or unacceptable, and can we actually make this distinction Biblically?

Syncretism vs. Hybridization

Cultural translation is that process by which one culture adapts ideals from others, whether secular or religious, and this encapsulates the whole of the process, but it tells nothing of the morality within. To understand this, starting with a high view of the scriptures,³ we must

² Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

³ I write this for those who already hold a high view of the scriptures, as there is not time nor space within this paper to argue for a high view. This paper should be understood from within this assumption.

learn to recognize that there are two poles to cultural translation within Hebraism: syncretism, which represents a negative blending together of paganism (outside religions) with pure Yahwism (biblical Judaism),⁴ and hybridization,⁵ which can be understood as a positive adaptation of cultural advantages.



“Of Yahweh and His Asherah” inscription

Concerning syncretism, which is the more well known of the two, we see within Israel an adaptation of paganism throughout her history. Beginning at the Golden Calf experience at Sinai, we see the Israelites adapt non-Hebraic cultic traditions in order to worship the one-true God. This shouldn’t be understood as adopting paganism, as cultural translation never purely adopts another practice, but this should be understood as Israel adapting these foreign concepts in order to worship in a way they believed would actually work. This is how syncretism occurs—how wrong practices creep into worship. When one culture collides with another, the practices that are considered dominant typically win out over the others. This is true of secular ideals, and it is that

⁴ I use the terms “pure Yahwism” and “biblical Judaism” to differentiate from a common folk-religion. By “pure” and “biblical” I refer to what evangelicals accept as the true, complete religion of the Old Testament—what Moses taught and the prophets attempted to bring the people back to. These phrases can only be understood within an Evangelical framework.

⁵ For this term, I am in debt to Dr. Rodrigo Silva and his talk at the Horn Museum Lectureship Series dated November 17, 2014 titled “In a Strange Land: How Judaism Adapted and Survived in Dura Europos, Syria.”

much more so in religious ideals, thus it is easy to see how the Israelites could so easily adapt outside concepts. It wasn't because they were "bad" people, but that they were normal people seeking an easy fix; they were searching for a way to make things work within their newly adapted socio-economic climate.

The perfect example of syncretism within the Old Testament, even better than the quick Golden Calf highlight I just gave, is the folk religion leading up to and then after the Mt Carmel epic. In this story, we find Elijah the prophet battling with the prophets of Ba'al and Asherah. The battle itself was Yahweh's attempt to once and for all show the Israelites that what they were doing was wrong, and that Ba'al wasn't who they thought he was, but this battle represents a competition between two "pure" religions.

Leading up to this encounter, and since the time of Jeroboam, there had been a serious mixture of cultic practice in the northern kingdom of Israel. Jeroboam had adapted (not adopted) Ba'alistic features of worship in an attempt to create northern worship centers that could compete with Jerusalem. He wasn't trying to throw Yahweh "under the bus," but he was watering down what God had commanded within Levitical law. The kings who would come after him are all said to have followed after the sins of Jeroboam, meaning that they continued this syncretistic approach to worshipping Yahweh.

Enters the Ahabite parenthesis. Ahab was said to have been more wicked than any king who came before him, for although he followed after the syncretistic worship of Jeroboam, he also "married Jezebel the daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians. Then he worshiped and bowed to Baal" (1 Kgs 15:31). The Phoenician princess Jezebel came to Israel, bringing with her the religion of her people; in fact, it was at this time that Phoenician Ba'alism became a state-

sponsored religion, as opposed to Jeroboam-style Yahwism.⁶ The Phoenicians are well known for having carried Ba'alism with them every where they went, even influencing the myths of Zeus, Jupiter. The Phoenicians tended to be somewhat missionary-like in their religious ideals, and this came to Israel through the person of Jezebel. Another feature of Phoenician religion was that within the mythology of Ba'al, there was a coup where Ba'al overthrew the god El. In a round about way, El is often associated with Yahweh,⁷ and (although conjecture) it was possible that Jezebel saw the Israelites as worshipping an outdated deity—as if we today would find an individual still worshipping Zeus. Although we find many, many examples of Yahweh being associated with Ba'al in the archaeological record (such as the epithet Yahweh and his Asherah), what we have at Mt Carmel is a battle between Pure Yahwism (Elijah) and Pure Ba'alism (Phoenician Ba'alism) before a people who worshipped a syncretized god (Jeroboam-style Yahwism). After the battle, after Yahweh established Himself as the only true God, the people quickly fell back into a mixture of religion and even Jehu who “eradicated Ba'al worship in Israel” (2 Kgs 10:28; what I call Phoenician Ba'alism) brought back not pure Yahwism but Jeroboam-style Yahwism, as it is said that Jehu “did not repudiate the sins which Jeroboam” (2 Kgs 10:31), which ultimately led to the North's downfall.

As seen in Jeroboam-style Yahwism, syncretism is, then, this adaptation of immoral pagan practices from non-Hebraic cultures into Pure Yahwism, or as we might call it today

⁶ Note, 1 Kgs 16:29 describes the 450 prophets of Ba'al and the 400 prophets of Asherah “eat at the table of Jezebel,” a phrase indicating that the crown supported these prophets. On the converse, the prophets of Yahweh (it is unknown whether syncretized or pure Yahwism) had been rounded up and killed (1 Kgs 16:13).

⁷ In Gen 14:22, Abraham is quoted as saying, “I raise my hand to the Yahweh, El Elyon, Creator of heaven and earth, and vow [...]”

Biblical Christianity. Syncretism is seen throughout Israel's history and runs into our modern church today. In fact, perhaps we can separate Biblical Christianity from American or Western Christianity, and I think we can argue that American or Western Christianity is found in every denomination of the church. This is evidenced from non-Hebraic, or pagan, characteristics of some modern New Age beliefs within the church, including adaptations from cultic practices and beliefs of the far east.⁸ Contrary to some opinions, this is not easily evidenced through simple material culture such as dress and lifestyle, which are simply aspects of amoral hybridization.

Hybridization can be understood as positive changes within the culture, yet amoral (or other than moral) in nature. These are the simple cultural adaptations such as the use of certain metals, ways of cooking, styles of dress, etc. The issue at hand, though, is the question of how can we separate syncretism from hybridization in everyday lifestyle. In our modern beliefs, the issue can be rather difficult.

Take for example the biblical prescription against transvestism in Deuteronomy 22:5, which reads: "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor should a man dress up in women's clothing, for anyone who does this is offensive to the Lord your God." Although hybridization

⁸ In a Pew Research study, titled "Eastern, New Age Beliefs Widespread: Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths" (Dec 2009), we read: "Many [Americans] blend Christianity with Eastern or New Age beliefs such as reincarnation, astrology and the presence of spiritual energy in physical objects. And sizeable minorities of all major U.S. religious groups say they have experienced supernatural phenomena, such as being in touch with the dead or with ghosts." See: <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2009/12/multiplefaiths.pdf>

has changed our style of clothing from the time this law was written, this law still applies today though with modern clothing practices in mind.⁹

Interestingly enough, in every society throughout history, from the ancient world¹⁰ to Ecuador's Waodani Indians,¹¹ there has been an obviously male (to them) and obviously female (to them) distinction in clothing; even in secular terms there is a distinction in clothing practices—male and female. Different cultures have developed these styles separately across the globe, an example of cultural evolution/hybridization, and each of these cultures determine what their individual distinctions might be.

Yet, if any of these societies accepted transvestism as an appropriate style of dress, the issue moves from simple hybridization to syncretism—an adaptation of unacceptable cultural norms that stands in direct opposition to the scriptures. Determining what a given culture in the past has as its distinction is quite easy, but modern practices can be a bit trickier. In a New York Times fashion article, Ruth La Ferla quotes Karlo Steel (a partner in Atelier, a progressive men's store) as saying, "Today the more successful designers are the ones that try to bridge the gap

⁹ I argue that this law still applies as it is a Universal Principle that can be applied to all peoples of all cultures of all times, as there is no evidence within the text to limit the command with specific applicatory fashion. Since male and female is a biological distinction, and as transvestism is said to be an abomination to God in this text, by its very nature it continues to be that throughout time and space.

¹⁰ For an example of cross-dressing in the ancient Sumeria, see: Daniel Reisman, "Two Neo-Sumerian Royal Hymns" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1969), 151–52; 168-169. A rather interesting Neo-Sumerian hymn "Hymn to Inanna" (fourth kirugu, verse 60) describes a male prostitute who is "adorn[ed] with women's clothing." Rather than show a specific style of masculine or feminine clothing, this hymn acknowledges that the ancient Neo-Sumerians at least had a division between male and female dress.

¹¹ Steve Saint, "Thatched Huts and G-Strings," in *End of the Spear* (1st ed.; SaltRiver, 2005), 71-84.



Example of modern clothing designed to “bridge the gap” between the sexes.

between the sexes rather than drive a wedge between them.”¹² Thus, it is quite possible that the modern American populace is inadvertently accepting a blurred distinction of gendered clothing. Social memory may render examples of “women wear dresses” and “men wear slacks,”¹³ but if one gives a number of average American

Evangelical Christians money and freedom to go and purchase a new wardrobe, more likely than not both sexes will return with slacked outfits with distinctions between them that each of the purchasers would individually identify as purely female or purely male in form. Furthermore, if the slacks were exchanged for those of the opposite sex, the purchasers would more than likely have an contention with wearing them. In conclusion, then, although determining the difference between hybridization and syncretism in general may not be difficult, determining practical applications in modern living may prove prove a bit more so.

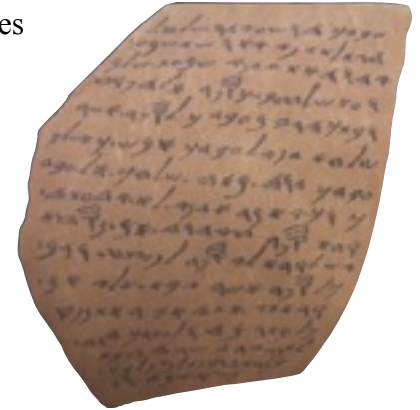
Post Exilic Culture

Now that we have understood cultural translation and its two poles, syncretism and hybridization, the question remains what do we see in ancient Israel after the Exile?

¹² Ruth La Ferla, “It’s All a Blur to Them,” New York Times, November 18, 2009, 17, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/19/fashion/19ANDROGYNY.html?pagewanted=2&r=2>.

¹³ A simple test of this social memory can be seen in three examples: ask the average American to draw a “stick family” with the typical result having a “mother” in a dress, ask the average American to choose the correct restroom using only bathroom symbols, and ask the average American how the typical male transvestite could dress to look like a woman.

Speaking of hybridization, one of the influences upon the Israelites was in the form of a language shift from Hebrew to Aramaic. We know from the Lachish Letters that Hebrew was used in communications before the fall of Jerusalem, and 2 Kings 18:26 also confirms this—this being the incident where the Assyrian ambassadors were asked to speak in Aramaic so that the commoners couldn't understand.



Lachish Ostrakon #3

After the return, during the Persian Era, archaeologists find no Hebrew documents and only a few early Hebrew seals and stamp impressions, showing “that Hebrew was not used in everyday life by people who could write or use written documents.”¹⁴

As Aramaic was the lingua franca of the Near East, used in diplomacy and trade throughout the known world, upon leaving the Levant the language acted as a stressor to the Israelites—it became a need for the common man to learn the language in order to communicate. Therefore, it wasn't until the Babylonian captivity that the common Israelites were influenced into adopting the language as their own. As one can imagine, Aramaic was already being used in communication between Israelite officials and outside administrations before the captivity (as seen in 2 Kgs 18:26), but within the state there was no need for an additional language. As noted, “There can be little doubt that Hebrew was superseded by Aramaic as the commonly spoken language in Judah during the Persian era. [Though], Hebrew was still in use in religious circles

¹⁴ Ingo Kottsieper, “‘And They Did Not Care to Speak Yehudit’: On Linguistic Change in Judah during the Late Persian Era,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.*, ed. Oded Lipschitz, Gary N. Knoppers, and Rainer Albertz (Eisenbrauns, 2007), 109.

and in the realm of the temple.”¹⁵ Aramaic became the dominant common language in Judah, being used even at the time of Christ.

In addition to a shift from Hebrew to Aramaic, and though Hebrew continued in use as a religious language even with the production of new religious texts, certain Persian loanwords can be found in the Biblical text. These loanwords represent a number of governmental/secular terms like “satrap,” “palace,” “treasurer,” or “sheath,” “garden,” “dainties.”¹⁶ Interestingly, no religious Persian loanwords are found in the Biblical text, lending credence to examples of hybridization and not of syncretism.

Naturally, these changes then included governmental changes. Israel was no longer a monarchy as in years before. No longer was there a davidic line with claim to divine investiture. Now, Judah was politically reorganized as a Persian satrapy—a semi-autonomous province of another administration. This meant changes all around, including coinage. Coins with Aramaic inscriptions and the head of a Persian king have been discovered dating to this period, supplying more examples of hybridization in act.

We should probably take a moment here to discuss what happened to the people. If the reader has ever experienced a life changing event, think of that now for that is what happened to the people of Judah. 586 BC was earth shattering for them. Their world was flipped upside down. They believed that their God would always be there, and that God would never allow His

¹⁵ Ingo Kottsieper, “‘And They Did Not Care to Speak Yehudit’: On Linguistic Change in Judah during the Late Persian Era,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.*, ed. Oded Lipschitz, Gary N. Knoppers, and Rainer Albertz (Eisenbrauns, 2007), 117.

¹⁶ Aren Wilson-Wright, “The Nature of Persian-Hebrew Language Contact in the Achaemenid Period” (presented at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA, 2011), 1–5.

temple to fall. Even when the prophets warned them what would happen, they didn't believe it. Then it happened—Jerusalem fell, the temple was destroyed, and the people taken from their homes.

One of the major changes that occurred because of the Exile was actually a return to God. Charles Carter notes: “The exiles developed, and to some extent maintained, a particular religious and social identity as a result of their experience,” pointing out that this identity was developed out of oppression and their minority status.¹⁷ Basically, the returnees had seventy years to think about what they had done wrong while living in opposition to the lifestyle that God had commanded. It was during exile that Kings was written, with the purpose of warning the people what had led them away in the first place.

So, in a very real way, hybridization took place because of the Judahites time spent under Babylonian and then Persian influence, but syncretism actually shrank to nothing.¹⁸ Where Yahweh was at one point compared to Ba'al, now we have a radical shift to protect Judaism and Torah.

Because of this push for a more pure religion, another influence captivity had on the Israelites was the formation of the synagogue. Though we cannot place an exact date on its

¹⁷ Charles E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period: A Social and Demographic Study* (A&C Black, 1999), 49.

¹⁸ I should note that there is a modern attempt to show syncretism in Judaism in the form of influences from Persian Zoroastrianism. Edwin Yamauchi very easily refutes this in his book *Persia and the Bible* where he points out the very late appearance within Zoroastrianism of the beliefs that are considered to have influenced Judaism—hundreds of years after the return. So, in all actuality, it is much more likely that Judaism actually influenced Zoroastrianism rather than the other way around. See: Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Baker Publishing Group, 1997).

formation, several options can be given ranging from before to long after the Exile,¹⁹ we can at least say that “we see in the exilic period the beginnings of a development”²⁰ that led to the synagogue. While away from home, there had to be some way that the Jews could correct their mistakes—they needed to learn all they could about Torah. This would eventually lead to the formation of synagogues in every major city around the world.

So what we find in ancient Israel before the exile appears to be an attempt to keep the culture pure, but not the religion. The Israelites were particular about appearing holy, but they weren’t all that interested in actually doing what needed to be done how it was prescribed.

On the converse, after the exile, we find normal hybridization occurring, but syncretism is pushed out in favor of an attempt of religious purity. While little hints of syncretism here and there can surely be found if searched out, on the whole the people of God very truly sought Him.

The Modern Church

In the modern church, many of us, like Israel of old, want to appear holy, but sometimes we don’t like doing what needs to be done “how” it was prescribed. Sometimes those pesky



Example of Modern Sanctuary

Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 24-26.

²⁰ Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.*, *Studies in Biblical Literature* no. 3 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 203.

religious ideas get in our way of the life “we” want to live. So we change them. We add a bit of this or that, just to make it work better. We allow our socio-economic climate to interpret the text for us, without a real interest in what God actually wants us to learn. Unfortunately, this occurs without anyone even realizing it—just like it did to Israel before the Exile.

While examples of hybridization or syncretism in the modern church are many, the battle the Evangelical Christian faces today is differentiating the two. On one hand, doctrinal positions are hammered out against what might be considered mere issues of hybridization (e.g., issues without any clear Scriptural prohibition), while on the other hand, issues of socio-economic syncretism go wholly ignored (e.g., issues where economic or political ideals find faulty/eisegetical biblical support).

Though difficult to determine, as followers of God, it is our duty, as in Ezra’s day, to cleanse the community from syncretistic ideals but also to release ourselves from doctrines based on false assumptions of simple hybridization. In the end, this means a change in the way the modern Christian thinks, but an adherence to Biblical Christianity. It means creating a Biblical minimum in which the believer can live his life as a part of the greater community, no matter what socio-economic society that believer lives in.

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