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“Zealousy”. A Shared Emotion to Divide Abraham’s Children

The zeal of Pinehas
The Alba Bible, fol. 127v

Emotional styles vary with time and place. Some cultures encourage passionate displays of feeling, others idealize “coolness” and the careful suppression of strong emotion. Specific emotions may become emblematic of collective value systems, moving in and out of fashion over the generations—consider the demise of national honour and pride in the political rhetoric of the “Great Powers” between the WWI and the 1990s, the importance of shame and guilt in post-war Germany, or how love burst from the affective sidelines of Victorian culture to dominate how modern Americans think about marriage and parenting. Similar processes are also at work in political and religious subcultures, often bound together by affective codes of their own—shared experiences of love, rage or shame—or the commitment to liberating themselves from undesirable mainstream emotions, be it guilt, hate or jealousy.

Emotional ideology also plays a vital role in the history of religion. In what follows, I show how the rivalrous emotions—envy and jealousy—gained a peculiar importance in the way both Christians and Jews came to feel about God and religious conformity. I argue that the Hebrew Bible ushered in an affective revolution by making envy and jealousy into holy emotions felt by God and his most devoted followers. As later generations of Jews and Christians processed these ideas, they created a shared emotional vocabulary

for inner-religious conflict, giving jealousy and envy a prominent role in the fight against apostates, heretics and one another. The result was a set of emotional responses that policed new borders between religious communities from both sides.

In modern English, we are used to describing experiences of this sort as religious "zeal" or "zealotry". But the history of jealous rivalry and zealous fanaticism are curiously intertwined in Jewish and Christian languages. In fact, the words "jealous" and "zealous" derive from one and the same Latin word, *zelus*, which in turn came from the Jewish and Christian Greek concept of *zêlos* (ζῆλος) and maps closely onto the main word for jealousy and envy in Biblical Hebrew (קנאה *qin'ah*). The same puzzling connection between "jealousy" and "zeal" exists in many other Christian and Jewish languages, both Romance (e.g. Italian: *geloso* and *zeloso*) and Germanic (e.g. German *Eifer* and *Eifersucht*). Although English speakers today tend to view "zeal", "jealousy" and "envy" as distinct feelings, most of the languages spoken by ancient and medieval Jews and Christians treat them as one and the same emotion—what we might, for want of a better equivalent, dub "zealousy".

Introducing the Rivalrous Emotions

To appreciate what makes Christian and Jewish attitudes to jealousy and envy so interesting, and so unusual, it's worth recalling why these emotions have such a poor reputation. Modern philosophers conventionally distinguish between "benign" and "malicious" varieties, and it's the latter that give envy and jealousy their bad name, associating them with hostility, spite, injustice and violence. The problem is not, of course, violence and hostility *per se*. Most societies, including any modern state in which you might be reading this, accept that extreme violence can be legitimate and justified in a wide range of situations, from policing, to self-defence, to warfare—to name only the least controversial. But ideologies of violence typically require a justification for the harm they condone. It is here that hostile envy and jealousy appear in a bad light, because their focus is on *other people's status or happiness* rather than on *moral norms* or *socially agreed codes of conduct*. Criminal behaviour may prompt powerful feelings of disapproval, but we don't call these "envy" or "jealousy"—instead we speak of "anger", "indignation" or "(out)rage".

Envy and jealousy, in their classic forms, are egotistical rather than moral. They arise when someone else's success, virtue or happiness makes us feel diminished by comparison. They are natural, often harmless and forgivable, but they are poor justifications for hurting other people. Unsurprisingly, then, the emotions typically associated with legitimate violence are different ones: *love* (of family or country), *fear* (of a major threat), or *anger* (at crimes, slights, dishonour). Although envy and jealousy are often claimed to be the *true* motive for all sorts of bad behaviour, the people who allegedly feel them rarely frame their own motives this way. When the situation gets serious, we prefer to mask our jealousy behind other, more acceptable emotions. Most languages have the vocabulary needed to stage that universal dialogue: "I'm so *angry* at what you've done"—"No you're not. You're just *jealous*!"

The near-universal taboo on envy and jealousy is also prominent in the Hebrew Bible, not only explicit in moral teachings—jealousy as "the rot of the bones" (Prov 14:30)—but also in the many bouts of competitive hostility which sunder families and drive acts of intimate violence. Recall the story of Joseph, a father's favourite whose grand dreams prompted his elder brothers to plot his murder, throw him down a well, and eventually sell him into slavery and fake his death (Gen 37). One of the emotions which drove Joseph's brothers was, we're told, jealousy or envy (biblical Hebrew has just one word,

קנאה *qin'ah*, for what some English speakers prefer to divide into two separate emotions). Here, as so often, the cause for jealousy is the success of a rival, here rival brothers, elsewhere rival wives (like Leah and Rachel, the sisters married to Jacob), rival tribes (the Israelites and Philistines) or men competing for the same woman. But it is with the competition between rival *gods* that the Hebrew Bible opened up the path towards a new and far more positive attitude towards jealousy.

How Jealousy Became Holy: Monolatry, Monotheism and the Bible

The most conspicuously jealous or envious character in the Hebrew Bible is YHWH himself, the God of the Israelites. In this, he is an emotional outlier among the deities of the ancient world. Not that other ancient deities didn't get jealous—they certainly did, as many Greek myths illustrate. But gods and goddesses of other peoples were stung to jealousy for very different reasons. Hera, for instance, gets jealous when her husband Zeus sleeps with mortal women; collectively, the Greek pantheon was prone to getting jealous when particularly remarkable humans seem to encroach on the glory or happiness which is the exclusive prerogative of the gods. But no other ancient deity was driven by "jealousy" to demand a total ban on the worship of other gods, as YHWH does in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:5, Dt 4:24). It is with good reason, then, that Exodus says that YHWH's very name is "jealous", highlighting his most unusual attribute (Ex 34□14). This expresses, in emotional terms, what is laid out more legalistically YHWH's covenant or treaty with the Israelites: that "whoring" with other gods is a perilous business. Again and again, the Bible describes how the Israelites lapse and turn to other gods, often led astray by foreign women bringing idols into Israelite homes. Having awakened YHWH's burning rage and jealousy, they suffer the bloody consequences.

But divine jealousy was not only felt by God. Recall what Phineas did in Shittim when the Israelites shacked up with foreign women and cut a covenant with a foreign god, Ba'al Peor. In the midst of a godsent plague, which had already killed 24,000, Phineas sees Zimri, an Israelite, with a Midianite woman. He takes up his spear and drives it through the couple where they lie (see figure 1, in a miniature from the 15th-century *Alba Bible*). A modern English speaker might describe Phineas as "angry", "enraged" or "indignant"—maybe also "fearful" of the consequences which Zimri's sin will have for the broader community. But when YHWH speaks to announce the reward for Phineas's spontaneous vigour, he praises him for "getting jealous with my jealousy among [the Israelites]" (Num 25:11: בקנאו את־קנאתי בתוכם *bqanʾo ʾet-qinʾātiy betoḥām*). Phineas's achievement was to act as YHWH's emotional proxy, policing his community on his God's behalf and averting the threat of collective divine punishment. Phineas is not the only biblical hero to appropriate God's jealousy. On Horeb, the prophet Elijah would boast of his "jealousy for YHWH", presumably in reference to his earlier incineration of the priests of Ba'al, an act which brought down the ire of the idolatrous monarchs Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kgs 19:10–14). A generation later the pious Jehu bids a bystander "come witness my jealousy for the Lord", before riding off to slaughter the house of Ahab, massacre the priests of Baal and pull down the temples of this foreign god to serve as latrines (2 Kgs 10:15–28).

Such biblical narratives, few though they were, seem to have given life to a new way of talking about the powerful emotions associated with piety for YHWH. The idea they created was "jealousy/envy *for God*", a feeling with a long resonance in Jewish and Christian emotionology, but with no clear equivalent in the pagan languages of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. Assyrians, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans perpetrated violence on a vast scale and worked out their own justificatory ideologies. But in none of these cultures did people explain or justify their violence as "jealousy" or

“envy”—never mind “envy *on God's behalf*”.

The stories of Phineas and Elijah would inspire many Jews and Christians to form new ideas about the very nature of jealousy and envy. Some Greek philosophers, like Plato, criticized and rejected the jealous gods of traditional Greek mythology as fictions of the poets, misleading because they presented the gods as immoral and wicked. Jewish and Christian philosophers, unwilling to deprecate scriptural descriptions of YHWH, exerted themselves to discover the *good side* of envy and jealousy—that is, to understand how the jealousy felt by YHWH in Scripture was a virtue rather than a vice. From disputes ascribed to Rabbi Gamliel in the Talmud, to the writings of Origen of Alexandria, to *Bamidbar Rabba*, to the Scholastic theologian Thomas Aquinas, pious thinkers defined divine jealousy as a virtue, either a necessary concomitant to *love* or a form of moral *anger*. Since God’s violent jealousy at Israel’s behaviour was often understood through the metaphor of a jealous yet loving husband, righteously thrashing his wife for her serial adultery (see, e.g. Ezekiel 16), this had a significant knock-on effect for the way Christian and Jewish cultures reflected on jealousy in marriage and romance. And, when it came to the ideology of sacred violence in the name of God, Jews and Christians also developed a shared emotional template, giving “jealousy” a prominent role in the monotheist’s emotional repertoire. It was in this latter guise that holy “jealousy”—what in modern English is usually known as “zeal”—burst out at moments of internal division among those who, in later centuries, claimed to be the children of the Israelites.

Jewish and Christian Jealousy: Pious Jealousy and the Division of the Community

According to the Books of Maccabees, the Hasmonean revolt, in which the Judeans rose up against the ruling Macedonian dynasty of the Seleucids, was sparked off by an impious monarch’s shocking command: let the Judeans repudiate their ancestral customs by sacrificing to foreign gods on pagan altars. As a rallying cry, the resistance movement used “jealousy (*zêlos*)” for the Law of Moses, invoking the examples of Elijah and “Phineas the Jealous/Zealot” (τὸν ζηλωτὴν Φινεές, 4 Macc 18:12, cf. 1 Macc 2:26–7, 50, 54, 58). Tellingly, the first person killed by the “jealous” rebels was not the foreign occupier, but the first Judean who broke ranks: a coward who caved to the pressure and sacrificed to his God’s rivals (1 Macc 2:23–4).

The association of “jealousy” with theologically inspired revolution returned some two centuries later, during another Judean uprising, now against Roman occupation. A group of resistance fighters identified themselves as the “Jealous Ones” or “Zealots” (*zêlôtai*, Josephus *War* 2.651). Their choice of name indicates that they, too, laid claim to the mantle of Phineas: both his burning passions and his right to use lethal violence against apostates, that is, those whom they deemed to have abandoned the ancestral laws. The title was also claimed by others. A generation before the Judean uprising against Rome, one of Jesus’s followers, Simon, had borne the sobriquet “the Jealous” (or “the Zealot”, Acts 1:13, 22:3, Luke 6:15, Matt 10:4). Although there is no account of how he earned the name, a distinct possibility is that he, like Paul, had earned a reputation for persecuting the community he later joined.

In fact, the early followers of Jesus showed a certain pride in stirring up such feelings among their compatriots. In his earlier life, the Apostle Paul, a diaspora Jew from Tarsus (today in southern Turkey), was apparently inspired by “jealousy for the law” to approve the stoning of Jesus-followers like Stephanos for challenging the Law of Moses (see Acts 22:3, cf. 6:14, 8:1, 22:20; Gal 1:14; Phil 3:5-6). Years later, as a disciple of Jesus after his vision on the road to Damascus, Paul was himself attacked in Jerusalem by a crowd who were

“jealous for the law”, incensed by the news that Paul had been preaching “apostasy” (specifically, the abandonment of circumcision, Acts 21:20–21). Paul’s letters denounce this pious jealousy as misplaced, since it was based on ignorance of the *true* meaning of Israelite law, which, Paul explained, points not towards specific ritual behaviour—the Sabbath, circumcision, dietary laws, etc.—but instead towards Jesus Christ (Rom 9–11, esp. 10:2). Paul claimed that his critics profoundly misunderstood the law they claimed to follow, and hence that their jealousy was ill-founded. This idea of a misguided Jewish “jealousy” became a trope in early Christian literature, used to explain Jewish hostility towards the earliest apostles (Acts 5:17, 13:45, 17:5).

But, if Paul dismissed the “jealousy” of his fellow Jews, this did not lead him to renounce the rhetoric of pious jealousy. Instead, he put it to work against rivals within the new Jesus-movement. Confronted by other apostles preaching “different Jesuses”, Paul made exactly the same move: he dramatizes his own “jealousy for God” (2 Cor 11:1-6), inscribing this emotional logic in texts which would become foundational to later Christians. In the figure of Paul, a Jewish follower of Christ, we see Judaism and Christianity co-producing holy “jealousy” as *the* emotion of pious fidelity to God and divine law. Here, at this big-bang moment, the emerging identities of Jew and Christian give “zealousy” a unique role in the policing of the religious community and in creating the borders between acceptable and unacceptable practice or belief. Though they differ in their application, Hellenistic Jews and Christians were talking the same emotional language. This was a uniquely monotheistic feeling which they had jointly introduced into the Greek language—one which would have sounded incomprehensible to their pagan contemporaries.

The Ambivalence of Jealousy in Jewish and Christian Culture: Vice and Virtue

All this gives jealousy an unusually complex moral profile in Jewish and Christian discourse, one quite unlike anything found in the literature written by their ancient neighbours. In the language of the monotheists and monolatrists, jealousy referred both to the supreme social vice and the ultimate religious virtue. The challenge was to tell the two varieties apart. The difference between the virtuous jealousy felt by God or Phineas and the vicious jealousy of Joseph’s brothers might seem quite clear in theory. But in practice they regularly collapsed into one another. For a start, both were called by the same word (*zêlos* in the idiosyncratic Jewish Greek of the Septuagint and New Testament, *zelus* in later Christian Latin). More importantly, they were felt in precisely the same situations of religious rivalry. The Christian apostles preaching to the Jewish community of Antioch were the direct competitors of the local Jewish leaders, and the latter could be expected to feel envy or jealousy at their growing popularity. Paul, likewise, was one of many apostles preaching different ideas about Jesus. The news that his congregation had been flirting with these other “super apostles”, as he sardonically calls them, probably made him jealous in the normal sense of the word. But this wasn’t what Paul meant when he proudly proclaimed his “jealousy” and profiled himself as a latter-day Phineas: Paul was claiming to be inspired with a divine jealousy at the “idolatrous” abandonment of the true Christ whom he preached. This is what makes Jewish and Christian jealousy so confusing. Within these communities, every party to a religious dispute framed their own hostility as an outpouring of holy “jealousy”, in imitation of Phineas; but they also claimed that their rivals were driven by the wicked jealousy of a disinherited sibling, maliciously attacking the father’s favourite. Indeed, Christians told the story of Joseph as a prefiguration of the story of how Christ (≈ Joseph) was betrayed by the Jews (≈ his jealous brothers: see Matt 27:18, Mark 15:10, Acts 7:9). “Jealousy” was no longer just an accusation hurled at one’s enemies—it was also a

badge worn with pride.

What we have seen in ancient Judaism and nascent Christianity would set the tone for late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Jews and Christians continued to imagine inner-religious conflict and competition as an outpouring of "jealousy"—both holy and wicked—between those who claimed the inheritance of the Israelites. In Christian thought, the emotion gained a particular connection with the fight against heretics, who were deemed to teach false doctrines on the nature of Christ. Heretics were often dismissed as being "merely jealous" of their more devout contemporaries, splitting with the true Church as soon as they were passed over for ecclesiastical promotion. But jealousy was also the emotion which drove (self-proclaimedly) "orthodox" Christian to oppose heretics. To cite Cyprian, the third-century bishop of Carthage, "we who accept the spirit of God ought to have the jealousy for divine faith by which Phineas pleased [God]". When Firmilian, Cyprian's contemporary, criticized Pope Stephanus for baptizing heretics, he used the example of Jewish jealousy to generate a perverse leverage: *even the Jews*, Firmilian says, felt more jealousy towards the Christian apostles than the allegedly orthodox Stephanus does towards Christian heretics. Firmilian thereby emphasized the structural similarity between the Jewish relationship to Christians and the "orthodox" Christian relationship to "heretical" Christians. And, like Cyprian, he imagined holy jealousy as a form of theologically inspired rage towards a member of the community poised to turn down the wrong path and divide God's people.

Christian Zealousy and Islam in The Emirate of Córdoba

Over the span of a decade, in the mid-ninth century, the Umayyad authorities of Córdoba decapitated some fifty Christians, most of them for unprovoked blasphemy against the prophet Muhammed. The events deeply divided the Christian community. As more and more Christians embraced a premature death, many Christian moderates, including most of the Church hierarchy, condemned these outpourings of anti-Islamic vitriol as a needless threat to the community's delicate existence in Umayyad lands. But some sprung to the defence of the blasphemers, praising them as martyrs for their unswerving devotion to Christ. Two, in particular, set about turning the blasphemers into heroes, and encouraging others to follow their path: Paul Albar and his friend, the aptly named Eulogius. In a letter to a northern Spanish Bishop, Wiliesindus of Pamplona, Eulogius summed up the dramatic events like this:

> Some priests, deacons, monks, virgins, and laymen—suddenly armed with the jealousy of divinity—descended into the forum to repel the enemy of the faith, detesting and cursing that nefarious and wicked prophet of theirs.

Although Albar and Eulogius waver between describing Muslims as "pagans" and as "heretics", it was obvious to them, as to most Christians with any knowledge of Islam, that the followers of Christ and Muhammed were laying claim to the same monotheistic tradition associated with the protagonists of Hebrew Scripture. Early Muslims, who acknowledged Christ as a prophet but rejected Trinitarian Christology, were viewed by many Christians as latter-day disciples of the Christian heretics of prior generations, like Arius or Nestorius. Albar and Eulogius often treat Muhammed as a heresiarch and borrow freely from the heresiological playbook: they berate timid Christians who prefer criticizing their co-religionists to fighting the infidel. They draw unflattering comparisons between these frigid, carping souls and the brave martyrs who burned with an unquenchable divine jealousy (or "zeal", as modern English would call it). And they showed that the executed heroes were following in the footsteps of Elijah and the Apostle Paul by imitating "the jealousy of Phineas" (*zelum Finees*).

By insisting that Islam was the proper object of Christian jealousy and hatred, Albar and Eulogius implicitly recognized the kinship between the two groups. And, fascinatingly, they seem to have assumed that the Muslims felt just the same way: they present Muslim hostility towards the executed Christians as being driven both by jealousy of Christian wealth and by "the jealousy/zeal of *their* faith", that is, Islam. The embattled Christian authors assumed that, as disciples of the Antichrist, Muhammed's followers felt a "diabolical jealousy" (*zelus zabolicus* or *zelus diaboli*) against Christians, one reminiscent of that allegedly felt by the Jews of Antioch towards the Christian apostles. By encouraging theological "jealousy" towards Islam, and projecting it onto the Muslims themselves, Albar and Eulogius recognized the special proximity between the two groups and presented their battle as part of the eternal Christian struggle against internal dissidents. This fictive "Muslim" jealousy, concocted by Albar and Eulogius, was co-produced by the interactions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims and the "special relationship" they enjoyed.

Jewish and Pagan Jealousy in *Sefer Yosippon*

The discourse of pious jealousy can also be seen in later Jewish sources—another example of the convergent evolution of medieval Jewish and Christian thought, while elaborating a shared biblical inheritance. In the Mishnah, the Aramaic word קנאין *qanna'in* ("jealous people" or "zealots") describes a band of young men who use wooden clubs to beat Jews for various crimes, including theft, intercourse with "an Aramean woman" (exogamy?) and participation in Temple liturgy in a state of ritual impurity (m. San 9.6). Here, too, Phineas retained a particular connection with zealousy: the Babylonian Talmud has him remind a surprisingly forgetful Moses that the Oral Torah instructs "jealous people" (קנאין *qanna'in*) to strike anybody who fornicates with a gentile woman (b. San 82a). But Phineas's reputation was far more ambivalent in the Jewish tradition than in the Christian sources we have so far seen: the connection with vigilante violence gave him a bad name among those who took a critical view of such extra-judicial aggression.

Far closer interactions between Hellenistic Jewish, Latin Christian and medieval rabbinic ideas of holy jealousy emerge in *Sefer Yosippon*, an anonymous work of Jewish history written in the tenth century, probably in Southern Italy, which took much of its narrative material from Christian Latin sources and wrote them up in biblicizing Hebrew. *Sefer Yosippon* knows jealousy (or, to be more precise, the Hebrew emotion of קנאה *qin'ah*) as the feeling which divides brother from brother—setting Antipater against his siblings Aristobulus and Alexander (*SY* 54 / נד)—and stings foreign princes to envy the wealth of Solomon's Temple (*SY* 76 / עו). But it is also the emotion that spurred ancient Hebrew heroes to fight for their nation, law, and God: *Sefer Yosippon*, reworking Christian versions of Second Temple Jewish sources, has Mattathias Maccabee invoke the example of Phineas who "was jealous with the jealousy of God" (קנאו קנאת אלהיכ, *SY* 16 / טז) and describes how the Jewish rebels of the first century fought the Romans with hearts full of "jealousy, anger, fury, and rage" (וימלא לב ארבעת הבחורים קנאה וכעס וחימה וזעם, *SY* 80 / פ).

Sefer Yosippon also gives jealousy an interesting role in driving *foreign* peoples to fight for *their* gods, further extending the projection of "jealousy" onto religious opponents which we saw in Albar and Eulogius. The Persians who attack the prophet Daniel in *Sefer Yosippon* are not only jealous of him because he was the king's favourite (SY 4 / ד); they were also, in a mirror image of the Hebrews, driven by jealousy for *their* own idols (בקנאתם אשר קנאו לפסיליהם, *SY* 6 / ו). This seems to be a newcomer to the Hebrew

tradition: the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic sources never have foreign gods getting jealous of YHWH, or foreign peoples getting jealous on behalf of their gods. People might well get indignant if their holy sites and shrines are attacked (cf. Judges 6:25–32), but their emotion is never imagined to be "jealousy" on behalf of a foreign god, jealous because his rivals are being preferred. That was the emotional habit only of YHWH and those who claimed the monotheistic inheritance of the Israelites. The new idea that *every* people's martial religious devotion was "jealousy" for their god(s) appears to have been a medieval Christians and Jewish co-production. "Jealousy" has now become an emotion felt by all parties to religious conflict of any sort. Step by step, medieval Jews and Christians were getting closer to an emotion which we might describe as generic religious "zealotry".

Conclusion

This article is not an aetiology of violence, or even of religious violence. Almost every ancient society had its ideologies of violence which condoned beating, exclusion, enslavement, or killing, whether in specific situations or on larger scale, in the treatment of slaves, minorities or enemies. But, even if violence was a common denominator in the ancient world, the ideologies that grew up to distinguish justified from unjustified violence varied greatly from society to society, as did the emotional paradigms associated with its proper deployment. It is here that the emotional vocabularies of Jewish and Christian thought stand out from others, by giving the rivalrous emotions—jealousy and envy—a central role in pious violence in the name of God.

Every language comes with its inherent folk-taxonomy of the emotions, carving our feelings into chunks of different shapes and sizes. Affective experiences at the cornerstone of one culture may go unnamed in another, helping them escape unnoticed, or lumping together a wide range of experiences which other languages oblige their speakers to distinguish. Early medieval German, to take just one example, had no word that corresponds neatly to the English idea of romantic "jealousy" (people talked instead of "loving hate" or "suspicious anger"). For speakers of many modern European languages, there is an obvious and categorical difference between the Philistines' *envy* of Isaac's greater prosperity, the religious *zeal* felt by Phineas towards Zimri, and the very human *jealousy* of Joseph's brothers, because their father loved him most of all. But in biblical Hebrew, and the many Jewish and Christian languages that evolved in dialogue with it and with each other, these were different facets of the same basic emotion, what I have dubbed "zealousy", which has no straightforward equivalent in modern English. It was an emotion which emerged from the charged interactions of ancient and medieval Israelites, Jews and Christians. Although they knew it by different names, it had a very similar semantic shape in many of the languages they spoke, including Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and the early Romance vernaculars. In dialogue with one another, they gave jealousy a remarkable prominence in the emotional experience of religious conflict, one which has left deep tracks in the languages we speak today.

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