

**Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi**  
***Goy: Israel's Multiple Others***  
***and the Birth of the Gentile***

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The Hebrew Bible's 416 references to the *goyim*, the foreign nations, underscore the theme of Israel's standing among the gentiles as one of its central concerns, both in terms of Israel's immediate present and, in later biblical literature, in terms of the coming eschatological age. While the biblical prophets speak of these *goyim* as people who, like Israel, have the potential to live in a state of divine favor by acknowledging Israel's God, the rabbis would later use the word *goy* not to denote a foreign nation but a foreign gentile individual, and one who represents the paradigmatic Other. The complex history behind this shift is the subject of Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi's outstanding recent study, *Goy: Israel's Multiple Others and the Birth of the Gentile*, which argues that the rabbis constructed a binary between the Jew and the non-Jew which did not exist in the biblical and post-biblical Second Temple periods. Reading midrashic stories regarding rabbis and gentiles which other scholars have seen as illustrating the very blurring of these boundaries, Ophir and Rosen-Zvi argue that the rabbis sought to establish firm lines in order to separate their community from others by establishing a clearly defined Other.

According to Ophir and Rosen-Zvi, the widespread presumption that the foreign nations are capable of entering a state of divine favor is first called into question in Ezra-Nehemiah, which links inherent impurity to the "people of the lands" who came into conflict with the Judean returnees from Babylonia. While the authors of Ezra-Nehemiah view the Judean returnees as holy and able to be purified, these outsiders were considered inherently impure and defiled. During the few centuries that followed, most Jewish writers would not make use of this distinction or speak pejoratively of the *goy* as a generic, gentile Other. Instead, authors such as the writer of the second century BCE Letter of Aristeas highlight the distinct separateness of the Jews and at the same time acknowledge that all of the nations

among the gentiles are likewise separate and distinct, a concept which is taken for granted in the writings of Philo and Josephus. By recognizing the unique character of every nation, these authors do not conceive of the *goy* as a paradigmatic non-Jew, since such a paradigm assumes an essential sameness of the gentiles. While some Second Temple texts, like Greek Esther, do present Israel as clashing with all other nations, these texts leave little room for placing a foreigner into the category of *goy*. Even texts which speak of individual foreigners as coming into conflict with individual Jews do not construct generalizations about the foreign nations.

Paul first transformed the concept of nations (*ethnē* in Greek) from peoples distinctive in their ethnic and geographic identities into a collective “mass of individuals” who, upon entering the Christian community, are both no longer gentiles as before and yet at the same time are called to identify themselves as non-Jews (p. 164). These individuals are linked to one another in the process of *Christianismos*, by which they become believers in Jesus Christ and members of this new covenantal community (pp. 168–170). This process, in turn, led to the diminishment of *ethnē* as a differentiating marker and gave rise to a new binary between Christians and non-Christians. The rabbis would likewise establish and stabilize a binary between Israel, as both the collective and the individual, and the *goy*, as both the collective and the individual. This new binary would allow the rabbis to construct a framework for self-reflection, since “the gentile’s perspective is the only human point of view that is external to halakhic law and from which [halakhic law] can be grasped as a whole” (p. 243). As God receded into the background of rabbinic discourse, the *goy* became the means by which the rabbis “turned discourse into a mechanism for the production of proliferative, multiple, distinctions, in which the gentile pays a decisive...role” (pp. 243–44).

This is a remarkably well-researched study, but some questions remain. I did not see, for instance, a fully developed response to Christine Hayes’s views that the Israel-goy binary was synchronic rather than diachronic and that some aggadic texts serve to blur, rather than to define, these boundaries. I also wondered why Ophir and Rosen-Zvi did not more fully treat examples of individual gentiles in Second Temple literature who stand as foils against or as ambassadors of the Jewish people, such as the figure of Achior in Judith 5–6, and whose roles might serve to enhance or complicate their thesis. Furthermore, the authors label texts as universalizing / particularizing and generalizing / individualizing, introducing categories that were not used by Jews in the Greco-Roman world and that buttress a sharper dichotomy than actually existed. I therefore wonder whether the term “mutation” (p. 18) should be used when contrasting rabbinic treatments of the *goy* with earlier ones. Because the authors’ argument hinges on Second Temple sources and the absence of a binary *goy* paradigm, I expected a more expansive treatment of these sources and a developed argument that the absence of a term denotes the absence of a cultural concept.

What the authors have achieved here is an extraordinarily complex and impeccably researched analysis of early Jewish conceptions of gentiles. I am certain that Ophir and Rosen-Zvi’s book will serve as an exceptional resource for any scholar interested in how Jews in the Second Temple and rabbinic periods cultivated their

religious identities. The footnotes alone make a major contribution, demonstrating the authors' familiarity with scholarship on all subjects relating to their topic.