

Appendix: Monotheism and Polytheism in Ancient Israel

It is a commonplace of modern biblical scholarship that Israelite religion prior to the Babylonian exile was basically polytheistic.¹ Many scholars argue that ancient Israelites worshipped a plethora of gods and goddesses, including Yhwh as well as Baal, El (if or when he was differentiated from Yhwh),² Ashtoret, and perhaps Asherah. Preexilic texts from the Hebrew Bible, according to these scholars, are not genuinely monotheistic; the first monotheistic text in the Hebrew Bible is the block of material beginning in Isaiah 40, which was composed during the Babylonian exile.³ Some scholars recognize the existence of a small minority of monotheists or protomonotheists late in the preexilic period, but stress that the vast majority of ancient Israelites were polytheists before the exile.⁴ Another group of scholars, however, argue that the exclusive worship of Yhwh as the only true deity was widespread in ancient Israel well before the exile, perhaps even well before the rise of the monarchy.⁵

In what follows, I hope to accomplish two tasks. I intend to show that the Hebrew Bible is rightly regarded as a monotheistic work and that its monotheism was not unusual for Israelite religion in the preexilic era. At the same time, I hope to explore the limitations of the term “monotheism” in light of the discussion in the body of this book and the review of the literature I carry out in this appendix. The polarity “monotheism-polytheism” has some explanatory value, because it helps us notice something we might otherwise have missed. At the same time, its explanatory value has been overestimated, because it obscures connections that transcend this polarity. I return to this second issue especially in my concluding remarks.

In order to understand why we can rightly label the Hebrew Bible monotheistic and also in what specific ways doing so is important, we need first of all to address two issues: how the term “monotheism” is best defined and the difference between asking whether ancient Israelite religion was monotheistic and whether the Hebrew Bible is monotheistic.

DEFINING MONOTHEISM

Much of the debate in scholarship about ancient Israelite monotheism is really a debate about terminology, rather than one about our understanding of the

ancient texts themselves. There are narrow and broad definitions of monotheism, and depending on which definition we use, we get very different answers to the questions at hand.

A narrow, common-sense definition of monotheism is the belief that one God exists and that no deities exist other than this one God. If we adopt this definition, we must conclude that the Hebrew Bible is not a monotheistic work, because it acknowledges the existence of many heavenly creatures in addition to Yhwh. Biblical texts refer to these creatures variously as “angels” (מלאכים – a few randomly chosen examples of the term include Numbers 20.16, 2 Samuel 24.16, 1 Kings 13.18, Zechariah 1.11–12, Psalm 78.49, Job 33.23), “gods” (אלהים – e.g., Psalm 82.6, 86.8; בני אלהים / בני אלים – Genesis 6.2; Psalm 29.1, 89.7; Job 1.6),⁶ and (collectively) “the council of holy ones” (קהל קדושים / סוד קדושים – Psalm 89.6,8). Several biblical texts portray Yhwh as surrounded by heavenly beings who attend Him or await His orders (e.g., 1 Kings 22.19–22, Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1, Zechariah 3, Job 1.6; a similar picture is assumed in Psalm 29 and Isaiah 40.1–2).

We may ask, however, how useful this narrow definition really is. After all, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all exhibit a belief in angels, beings who reside in heaven and who do not normally die. In the case of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, we can also note a belief in saints residing in heaven, (i.e., humans who died without any long-term effect on their continued existence and activity); similar beliefs are attested, albeit in a less formalized way in Judaism and Islam (especially in its Shiite and Sufi forms). Many Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that prayer can be directed to these beings with realistic hope of the prayer’s efficacy. An especially clear example appears in rabbinic literature: The rabbis regard the worship of the angel Michael as a forbidden form of worship (b. *Hullin* 40a, b. *Abodah Zarah* 42b, t. *Hullin* 2:6 [=2:18 in the Zuckerman edition]). As the talmudic scholar José Faur points out regarding this passage, the rabbis “considered Michael a benevolent angel who interceded with God on behalf of Israel. His existence was not in dispute, yet worship of him was considered idolatry.”⁷ The rabbis, who are usually considered to be monotheistic, acknowledged the existence of this heavenly being other than Yhwh and were concerned only that Jews should not worship him. In short, the narrow definition of monotheism is too narrow: If we use it, then the religion of the Hebrew Bible is not monotheistic; but then neither are Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, with the exception of a few highly philosophical forms of these religions that are historically late and have attracted few adherents.⁸

It is also possible to define monotheism more broadly: as the belief that there exists one supreme being in the universe, whose will is sovereign over all other beings. These other beings may include some who live in heaven and who are in the normal course of events immortal; but they are unalterably subservient to the one supreme being, except insofar as that being voluntarily relinquishes a measure of control by granting other beings free will. It is thus appropriate to term the

supreme being the one God and the other heavenly beings gods or angels.⁹ In this definition, it is not the number of divine beings that matters to monotheism but the relations among them. A theology in which no one deity has ultimate power over all aspects of the world is polytheistic (even if that theology knows of only one deity); so too a theology in which people pray to multiple deities because of a belief that multiple deities have their own power to effect change. A theology in which people pray only to one God in whom all power ultimately resides is monotheistic; so is a theology in which people pray to various heavenly beings to intercede on their behalf with the one God in whom all power ultimately resides.¹⁰

One might be surprised at a definition of monotheism that allows for the existence of many gods, but on further reflection one comes to understand that this definition is no less sensible than the narrow one. On the contrary, it is much more sensible. Let us imagine a theology in which there is one supreme being as well as many other beings who have some degree of free will and self-consciousness. These other beings may be mortal or immortal, or they may be both; that is, they may be able to achieve immortality after they die. In such a theology, it is clear that the supreme being is not alone in the universe and is not the only being who can have some effect on the universe. The fact that these other beings have free will constitutes a limitation, though a voluntary one, on the omnipotence of the supreme being. Now, according to the narrow definition outlined above, such a theology is to be classified as monotheism if these beings live on earth and are called “human,” but it is to be classified as polytheism if these beings live in heaven and are called “angels” or “gods.” The broad definition is more consistent and more usable: The theology I just described is monotheism, regardless of where these beings live. There is no reason that we should find the existence of subservient beings in heaven any more surprising in monotheism than the existence of subservient beings on earth. Consequently, it is this second and broader definition of monotheism I adopt in this book.¹¹

I should note two other terms: *monolatry* and *henotheism*. These terms can be defined in a number of ways.¹² They are sometimes used to describe religious systems in which people are permitted only to worship one deity even though the existence of other deities may be acknowledged. Thus we might define monolatry or henotheism so that it is a subset of polytheism. In that case, monolatrous worshippers believe that many gods exist and have real power, but the worshipper nevertheless remains exclusively loyal to just one of those deities. (In this definition, a monotheist is not a monolatrists.) Alternatively, we might define monolatry as a broad category that includes but is not limited to monotheism. In this case, monolatrous worshippers are exclusively loyal to one deity, whether or not they believe that deity is the only one with unalterable power. No consensus exists among historians of religion or biblical scholars concerning the use of these terms. I use the term in the second, broader sense. Thus a monolatrists as I use the term is either a *monotheistic monolatrists* or a *polytheistic monolatrists*. At the same time,

it is crucial to note that on a practical level it is often difficult to decide whether a particular text or practice represents monotheistic or polytheistic monolatry. When observing a monolatrous practice or reading a monolatrous prayer, we may not know whether a person prays only to one deity because she believes that deity to be the only one with real power or because she has some reason to prefer that deity over many other possible contenders for her worship. Further, in a culture such as ancient Israel, in which most people lived in small highland villages and had little contact with the wider world, it is not clear whether the distinction between monotheistic and polytheistic monolatry would even have occurred to many people; many peasants may have worshipped the only deity they ever knew without pausing to wonder whether other deities that mattered in fact existed.¹³

The term *polytheism*, then, can either refer to the worship of many deities (which is the typical form of polytheism) or to what I called polytheistic monolatry in the previous paragraph (a relatively rare phenomenon). For convenience, I use the term “polytheism” by itself to refer to the former sort of belief – that is, the worship of many deities.

ISRAELITE RELIGION VS. BIBLICAL RELIGION

The question “Is it really monotheistic?” needs to be asked separately for the Hebrew Bible and for ancient Israelite religion. The religious ideas of the former represent a subset of the latter (or, more likely, several closely related subsets).¹⁴ By analogy, we can note that the religious beliefs and practices of American Jews are one thing, whereas Judaism as prescribed by classical rabbinic literature is another, partially overlapping, thing. If we investigate the former, we might find that American Jews are a distinctive religious group when compared to other Americans but that a belief in God, faith in the resurrection of the dead, the weekly observance of the Sabbath, annual celebration of (for example) Shemini Atzeret, and restrictions on which foods may be eaten play little or no role in their religion, whereas for classical rabbinic Judaism (and for a small subset of American Jews) all these elements are of great importance. Similarly, it is possible that the vast majority of ancient Israelites were polytheistic, but that a small minority, whose writings are preserved in the biblical canon, were monotheistic.¹⁵

Consequently, in what follows, we need to ask two different questions. The first question is, “Were the ancient Israelites monotheists?” In answering this question, we can turn to evidence of two types: biblical data and archaeological data. The Hebrew Bible presents its own picture of the religion practiced by Israelites, and that picture contains useful information about them (even though, as with any primary source, the data it presents must be viewed critically). The findings of archaeologists are also crucial for anyone attempting to portray the religious reality lived by men and women in ancient Israel (even though the data that archaeology provides are much less explicit than the biblical data). The second question is, “Are

the documents found in the Hebrew Bible monotheistic?” Answering this question is a matter of investigating the religious practices and beliefs the Hebrew Bible *prescribes* rather than the practices and beliefs it *describes* (and often *proscribes*). For this second question, archaeological data may initially seem less significant, but here too the finds of archaeologists may shed light on the normative claims made by biblical authors.

WERE THE ANCIENT ISRAELITES MONOTHEISTS?

Biblical Evidence

As we turn to our first question, the data from biblical texts are clear and consistent: Biblical authors inform us that a great many Israelites – at times, perhaps even most Israelites – were polytheistic. This is true for the period in which the Israelites wandered in the desert, which is described in the Books of Exodus and Numbers; it is true for the earliest period of Israelite settlement in Canaan, which is described in the Book of Judges; and it is true through the period of the monarchies described in Kings. The Book of Judges narrates a repeating cycle of polytheistic worship by the Israelites, followed by punishment by Yhwh, forgiveness from Yhwh, and further polytheism on the people’s part. The Book of Kings puts tremendous emphasis on the polytheism of Israelites both north and south. Some kings (for example, Hezekiah and Josiah in the south, Jehu in the north) are portrayed as having been exclusively loyal to Yhwh, but quite a few (Manasseh in the south and Ahab in the north, to take two notorious examples) encouraged the worship of many deities in the temples they sponsored. Prophetic books dating from this era paint the same picture. The prophets excoriate Israelites north and south for worshipping Baal and various other deities, whose names some prophets do not deign to report, merely terming them “nothings” (אֵלִילִים).

It is important to emphasize that the biblical texts largely portray the Israelites as polytheists, because many modern scholars somehow assume that the biblical texts must have said that Israelites were monotheists. A depressingly large amount of scholarly writing on this subject consists of an attempt to debunk the Bible by demonstrating something the Bible itself asserts – indeed, something the Bible repeatedly emphasizes: that Israelites before the exile worshipped many gods. A particularly acute example of this tendency is found in the informative and thought-provoking work of the archaeologist William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*. To give but one illustration: Dever asks why the biblical authors do not discuss the many female figurines found by archaeologists in Israelite sites, which he understands to be images of a goddess. (I discuss these figurines on pp. 152–5 of this appendix.) He maintains that their failure to mention these figurines results from their deliberate attempt to suppress any reference to them: “They did not wish to acknowledge the popularity

and the powerful influence of these images.”¹⁶ In fact, however, biblical authors constantly acknowledge the widespread polytheism of Israelites, and they mention Israelite goddess worship specifically on a number of occasions (e.g., Jeremiah 7.18, 44.17–19). Israelite authors (rather like many later Jewish and contemporary Israeli authors) love talking about how awful their own people are; self-criticism, sometimes of an exaggerated sort, is one of the most prominent hallmarks of biblical (and later Jewish) literature. When Dever attempts to portray the Bible as whitewashing Israelite history, he fails to attend to the fact that biblical authors are in fact obsessed with tarnishing Israelite history. Although they do not always realize it, fine scholars like Dever or Ziony Zevit (to name just two recent examples) who argue that preexilic Israelites were polytheists seek not to overturn the biblical picture of Israelite religion but in significant ways to confirm it. On the other hand, scholars like William Foxwell Albright, Yehezkel Kaufmann, or Jeffrey Tigay who minimize the extent of preexilic polytheism reject the biblical picture as inaccurate or vastly overstated.

At the same time that the biblical texts bemoan what they regard as copious examples of Israelite polytheism, these texts also insist that two ideals were already present in Israelite religion from the earliest stages, however poorly those ideals were realized in practice. One was an ideal of monolatry (whether the texts intend a monotheistic or a polytheistic monolatry I discuss in the section on whether the Hebrew Bible endorses monotheism). The other was the ideal of *aniconism*, or the insistence that the Israelite deity should not be portrayed in pictorial or sculpted form. Biblical tradition dates these ideals to the very first moments of Israel’s existence as a nation – that is, to the revelation at Sinai, where the Israelites were commanded, “You shall not have any other gods besides Me; you shall not make yourselves a statue, any picture of what is in heaven above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall neither bow down to them nor worship them” (Exodus 20.3–4).

Archaeological Evidence

What of the archaeological evidence? Surprisingly, it is more mixed than the biblical evidence. Two types of archaeological data suggest that polytheism was extremely rare in preexilic Israel, though not unheard of, whereas a third type may suggest that Israelites worshipped a variety of deities – especially goddesses.

The first sort of evidence comes from ancient Israelite inscriptions (that is, from what scholars call epigraphic evidence), and especially from the personal names they mention (that is, from what scholars call onomastic evidence). Ancient Semites often gave their children names that contain a statement about or prayer to a deity: Thus in Mesopotamia we know kings named “Esarhaddon” or “Ashur-aḥa-idin,” which means “[The god] Ashur has given a brother,” and “Nebuchudrezzar” or

“Nabu-kudurri-ušur,” which means “[O god] Nabu, protect my first-born son!” Ancient Israelites also gave their children names of this sort (known as “theophoric” names). Several decades ago, the biblical scholar Jeffrey Tigay studied theophoric names Israelites gave their children throughout the preexilic era, as evidenced not only in books of the Hebrew Bible but also in archaeological finds that mention personal names (such as letters, official documents, and personal seals).¹⁷ The results, at least for someone inclined to trust the picture the Hebrew Bible paints of consistent disloyalty to Yhwh, were surprising. From early monarchic times on (that is, centuries before the exile), personal names that mention the names of gods other than Yhwh are exceedingly rare. This finding suggests that worship of gods other than Yhwh may have been less common than the biblical texts would lead us to believe. The censures of prophets and scribes whose work is found in the Bible, Tigay surmises, must have exaggerated the extent of the problem they denounced.¹⁸ Similarly, Patrick Miller notes that, even outside the onomasticon,

The weight of epigraphic data from the ninth through the sixth centuries BCE testifies in behalf of the “Yhwh only” stream of Israelite religion, particularly but not only in the south. From the Mesha stele to the finds from Arad, Lachish, and Ramat Rachel, for example, Yhwh is the only named deity in Israelite inscriptions, and Yhwh’s name is mentioned over 30 times.¹⁹

The second sort of evidence comes from an extraordinarily thorough study of ancient Israelite art. Over the course of several decades, the Swiss scholar Othmar Keel built up a database of Israelite iconography, especially as evidenced by stamp seals. In ancient times, people pressed seals down over wax or clay to close a legal document that had been rolled up, thus protecting it from being tampered with, because one would have to break the seal to make any alteration to the document. These seals contained a short text (usually the name of the seal’s owner), some decoration, or (in the vast majority of cases) both text and decoration. Seals were used throughout the ancient Near East. (In Mesopotamia, they were usually rolled over the wax rather than stamped; hence the Mesopotamian seals are known as cylinder seals). Keel’s database includes more than 8,500 stamp seals from the area of ancient Canaan; some belonged to Israelites and some to Phoenicians, other Canaanites, and Arameans. Comparing the Israelite and non-Israelite seals, Keel and his student Christoph Uehlinger noted a startling pattern. Non-Israelite seals portray a wide variety of deities; often more than one deity is present on a single seal. But Israelite seals differ from non-Israelite seals in several respects. First, they tend not to portray more than one deity. This finding suggests that Israelites really did tend to obey the command, “You shall not have any other gods besides Me” (Exodus 20.3). Second, they almost never provide a picture of their deity; rather, the deity is represented symbolically, most often by a sun disk. This finding suggests that Israelites, already in the early preexilic period, tended to

obey the command, “You should not make any sculpted image or picture” of a deity (Exodus 20.4).²⁰ Evidence of polytheism in ancient Israel does crop up here and there, especially in the seventh century B.C.E, but much less frequently than in seals from other cultures. Other forms of art (statuary, graffiti on walls) provide similar evidence. Precisely as Israel begins to emerge in the highlands of Canaan at the beginning of the Iron Age, anthropomorphic representations of deities became vastly less common in those highlands, though they never disappear completely even in Israelite contexts.²¹

What would happen if we wrote a history of Israelite religion exclusively on the basis of the epigraphic, onomastic, and iconographic evidence made available by archaeological investigations, and not on the basis of the testimony of the Hebrew Bible? A comparison of Israelite and non-Israelite artifacts would show a pronounced difference between Israelite religion and the religions of other ancient Near Eastern peoples.²² With important exceptions, Israelites tended to pray only to one deity, whereas other peoples – at least those peoples for whom we have sufficient epigraphic, onomastic, and iconographic evidence to come to a conclusion²³ – prayed to many. In short, these kinds of evidence suggest that Israelites were largely monolatrous – though they do not allow us to decide whether their monolatry was monotheistic or polytheistic in nature.

Onomastic and iconographic data are not the only types of archaeological evidence available, however. Small statues of female figures have been uncovered from many ancient Israelite sites, and many scholars believe they demonstrate that Israelites worshipped a goddess or goddesses. These statues are found overwhelmingly in domestic settings (that is, in the remains of Israelite homes, sometimes in graves, but not in cultic sites or temples). Thus they may inform us especially about how religion was practiced in the ancient Israelite family, rather than about public or official cults sponsored by the king or by communal leaders. Three types of statues have been identified.²⁴

(1) A small number of figurines have been found in Israelite sites from the early Iron Age – that is, the thirteenth through eleventh centuries, the era in which Israel first began to emerge in the highlands in the center of Canaan. These figurines depict a frontally nude woman whose genital triangle and labia are portrayed very prominently. These figurines resemble Canaanite statues of goddesses from the Late Bronze Age, and there can be little doubt that, like their Late Bronze forebears, they represent a goddess who brings fertility. Statues of this kind from Israelite sites are rare, however, and Keel and Uehlinger emphasize that they disappear as we get further into the Iron Age (that is, when Israelite culture had solidified in central Canaan). The few found in the central areas of Canaan as late as the ninth century come from Philistine, not Israelite, sites. In light of these figurines, it is clear that some Israelites worshipped a goddess at the time of the Israelites’ appearance in Canaan, but this worship was relatively marginal and declined quickly.²⁵

(2) Figurines portraying a woman, usually clothed, holding a circular object have been found in Israelite sites from the tenth century on; most date to the seventh century. Scholars disagree about who this woman is and what she is holding. Dever argues that she is a goddess. Identifying the disk as a bread cake, he connects her with the worship of the Queen of Heaven condemned by the sixth-century prophet Jeremiah in 7.18 and 44.17–19.²⁶ Keel and Uehlinger, however, believe these figurines depict a human female worshipper; the disk, they suggest, is a tambourine such as those used by Israelite women in song (cf. Exodus 15.20, Judges 11.34, 1 Samuel 18.6). Thus these women are cult participants, not objects of a cult; they are human and not divine. In short, they do not provide evidence of Israelite worship of a goddess.²⁷ (Other scholars identify the circular object the female holds as a sun disk, in which case she is a solar goddess, but this interpretation has not met widespread acceptance.)

(3) By far the most common figurines – literally hundreds have been found – depict a woman with very prominent, often pendulous, breasts; unlike the figurines from the first category, however, these figurines do not display the woman's genitalia, prominently or otherwise. Instead, at the bottom of these figurines one finds a sort of pedestal that resembles either a tree trunk²⁸ or a woman's robe.²⁹ It seems clear that they are associated not with sexual fertility but with nursing and maternal care. In the eyes of the ancients, these pendulous breasts were associated more with nursing than with sexuality.³⁰ These figurines, made of terra cotta or clay, first appear in the archaeological record later than the first two types of figurines; most date to the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.³¹

What were the figurines in this third category? How did they function, and what did they depict? Keel and Uehlinger, who elsewhere highlight the monolatrous nature of Israelite worship, consider these objects to be representations of a goddess and hence of Israelite worship of more than one deity.³² If so, the polytheism they evince was quite widespread in the eighth and seventh centuries (a finding that dovetails perfectly with the testimony of eighth- and seventh-century prophetic texts from the Hebrew Bible). These objects were exceedingly common: The archaeologist Raz Kletter notes that they “have been found in almost every Iron Age II excavation in Judah,”³³ and Keel and Uehlinger point out that they were found in nearly half the private homes excavated in Beer-sheba and Tel Beit-Mirsim dating to that era.³⁴ Dever regards these figurines as talismans that worked magic, especially in difficult moments such as childbirth and caring for infants.³⁵ He sees this magical use as further evidence of Israelite polytheism, but here caution is called for. It is not clear that such a talisman in fact depicts a goddess; it is just as likely that it depicts a human female whose large breasts symbolize (or rather help engender through sympathetic magic) a woman's ability to give birth and to nurture. Indeed, the archaeologist and biblical scholar Carol Meyers points out significant differences between these

figurines and statues of goddesses known from ancient Canaan. Statues of the divine, she notes,

normally exhibit some symbols of divine identity in headdress, garb, pose, or attached object. One should be skeptical about identifying any of these terra-cotta statues or related clay plaques with goddesses at all, let alone with any specific goddess such as Ishtar, Anat, or Asherah.³⁶

If the iconography of these figurines clearly picked up on the iconography of other depictions of a goddess elsewhere in Canaan or the Near East, we could confidently identify the figurines as a goddess. However, Keel and Uehlinger point out that no transition from other objects to these objects is evident (a point that opposes their own conclusion that these figurines represent a goddess).³⁷ A scholar of biblical and Mesopotamian culture, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, makes the crucial point that these Israelite figurines differ from Canaanite ones because they “have no overt symbols of any goddess These pillars hold no divine insignia, wear no crowns, and carry no symbols of their power.”³⁸ Consequently, we should follow Meyers and the archaeologist and biblical scholar James Pritchard³⁹ in identifying these objects as representations of human females or of the concept of the female – and especially the maternal – in general. More specifically, Frymer-Kensky maintains that “they are a visual metaphor, which shows in seeable and touchable form that which is most desired They are a kind of tangible prayer for fertility and nourishment.”⁴⁰

Of course, if the objects depict human women (or depict their hopes to nurture) but are still used for magical purposes, we may still ask whether their magical use provides evidence of Israelite polytheism. A moment’s reflection will show that it does not. Within monotheistic religions, magic is often condemned (see, e.g., Exodus 22.17, Deuteronomy 18.10), but it is just as often practiced – by people who considered themselves (and were considered by others) loyal monotheists. Great rabbis, for example, have gained fame for producing amulets. Many rigorously religious Jews believe that unfortunate events in their lives result from having a defective *mezuzah* on their doorposts and can be reversed by repairing it. Beliefs of this sort permeate not only kabbalistic but also rabbinic literature. Some voices in Jewish tradition have condemned such beliefs and practices, but historically those voices have been marginal, and moreover subsequent Jews who practiced what to outsiders appears to be magic did not consider what they were doing to fall into the category that earlier authorities had censured.⁴¹ The reason for this is simple: Many classical Jewish texts, including the Hebrew Bible, accept the reality and effectiveness of magic, but forbid its use by Jews. (Similarly, when biblical law prohibits Israelites from eating pork, it does not intend to deny that pork exists.) For the Hebrew Bible, the use of magic does not represent an error but an act of rebellion against Yhwh, who is a more effective power than magic.⁴² Moreover, because most monotheistic authorities in antiquity and the Middle Ages

did not deny magic's reality or effectiveness, many monotheists at times practiced some magic, and they often managed to regard their actions as a complement to monotheistic worship rather than as an act of rebellion. If the figurines in this third category were in fact used as Dever suggests, then their owners may have been no less monotheistic than enormous numbers of religious Jews, Christians, and Moslems in the postbiblical world. Either we must exclude from the category of monotheism most of traditional Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – including not only popular forms of these religions but highly learned and academic forms as well (it is typically a scholar, for example, who produces amulets using highly specialized scribal and mystical learning), or we must acknowledge that use of these figurines in Israelite homes was compatible with monotheism. We should not discount the first of these possibilities. The example of these figurines suggests, among other things, that the polarity “monotheism vs. polytheism” is of less explanatory value than scholars have recognized; I return to this suggestion subsequently.

Asherah Worship in Ancient Israel?

Another possible indicator of Israelite polytheism from the archaeological record, which may receive additional support from biblical texts, should be addressed: the possibility that the goddess Asherah was popular among ancient Israelites.

As noted in [Chapter 2](#), a Northwest Semitic goddess named Asherah appears prominently in the late Bronze Age texts from Ugarit.⁴³ The term *ʾasherah* occurs often in the Hebrew Bible as well, but scholars debate whether it refers there to the goddess or to a cultic object consisting of a wooden pole or a tree. Because devotion to this goddess declined in the late Bronze and early Iron Ages, some scholars wonder whether most Israelites even knew of the goddess's existence. (The Ugaritic texts that discuss her date to the fourteenth through thirteenth centuries B.C.E. in the late Bronze Age and were unknown to the Israelites, who flourished in the Iron Age.) We saw in [Chapter 2](#) that the term *ʾasherah* in scripture usually refers to a wooden cult object, but in rare cases it clearly refers to the goddess, showing that at least some Israelites did know that this word was the name of a goddess.

Did Israelites worship this goddess? Two pieces of evidence are especially relevant: the eighth-century inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom and a tenth-century cult stand from Ta'anakh.

The inscriptions were discussed in [Chapter 2](#), where we saw that for grammatical reasons the term אֲשֶׁרֶתוּ (“His *ʾasherah*”) must refer to the cult object, not the goddess. Further, because no deity other than Yhwh is mentioned in those inscriptions, it seems most likely that the *ʾasherah* they mention was sacred to Yhwh rather than to Asherah. (We noted on pp. 46 and 49 that many zealously loyal adherents of Yhwh described in the Bible regarded this cult object as perfectly acceptable for a person who worshipped Yhwh exclusively; such an *ʾasherah* must have been devoted

to Yhwh rather than to any other deity.) Hence these inscriptions do not provide direct evidence of Asherah worship among Israelites – though the mere existence of a cultic pole of a type that had once been sacred to Asherah (as its name indicates) shows that Asherah worship must have played a role at some earlier stage in the religion of the Israelites or their immediate forebears.

The second piece of evidence comes from an unusually well-preserved cult stand dating to the tenth century.⁴⁴ (Cult stands were used in temples and other sacred sites to support bowls into which liquids or other gifts could be poured. Alternatively, it is thought, they may have been used for burning incense.) This cult stand was discovered in 1968 at Ta'anakh, a northern Israelite site located approximately five miles southeast of Megiddo in the Jezreel valley.⁴⁵ The Ta'anakh cult stand has four registers or levels (see Illustration 2). The lowest or first register depicts a female with prominent breasts and upraised arms that touch two lions, one on each side of her. The next register as one moves up depicts two bovine creatures who have human faces and wings. These mixed creatures are known in Hebrew as כְּרוּבִים or cherubs; like the cherubs mentioned by Ezekiel, those on the Ta'anakh cult stand have human faces, bodily features resembling those of bulls, and wings.⁴⁶ They stand on each side of an empty space in the middle of this register. The third register depicts the same two lions found on the bottom register, but this time, in between them we find a tree with three leafy branches on each side of the trunk; two goats, one on each side, eat the top set of leaves. The top or fourth register shows two spiral scrolls next to the remains of another cherub on each side. (These cherubs are partially broken, but the body and wings are clear from the side view, where their resemblance to the cherubs on the second register is clear.) In between the scrolls is an animal, probably a horse, on top of which sits a sun disk surrounded by rays of light.⁴⁷

Identifying the figures depicted on this cult stand is necessarily speculative, but scholars including Ruth Hestrin and J. C. Taylor have made the plausible suggestion that the first and third registers depict one deity (who is surrounded by lions in both cases), whereas the second and fourth registers both depict another deity (who is flanked by cherubs both times).⁴⁸ There is no question that the large-breasted figure on the first level is a goddess who is associated with fertility and especially with maternal roles. In the third register we find the same goddess, this time depicted as a tree. As we have seen, the term *ʾasherah* in biblical and rabbinic Hebrew refers to a sacred tree, pole, or grove; this and other evidence suggest that the goddess Asherah was associated with trees and could be represented iconographically by one.⁴⁹ Both because of the connection of the term *ʾasherah* with trees and because of the maternal role of Asherah (she is known as “mother of the gods” in Ugaritic literature), it seems clear that the goddess on the first and third level is Asherah.⁵⁰

What of the second and fourth registers, where we find cherubs flanking an empty space and a sun disk on top of a horselike creature? Cherubs are associated



2. The Ta'anakh cult stand. (Drawing: Ellen Holtzblatt)

throughout the Bible with Yhwh. According to many biblical texts, Yhwh rides on top of the cherubim (e.g., 1 Samuel 4.40; 2 Samuel 22.11; Ezekiel 9.3, 10.4; Psalm 80.2, 99.1). In the tabernacle the Israelites erected in the Sinai desert and in the Jerusalem temple, Yhwh sits above statues of cherubim (Exodus 25–26, Numbers 7.89, 1 Kings 6–7). Consequently, Taylor makes the brilliant proposal that the empty space surrounded by cherubs in the second level represents Yhwh, “the unseen God who resides among the cherubim.”⁵¹ The portrayal of this Israelite deity, after all, is insistently prohibited in biblical law (Exodus 20.4), and it is also exceedingly rare in the archaeological record (as Keel and Uehlinger point out).⁵²

In the top register, Taylor suggests, we again find Yhwh flanked by cherubs. This time, Yhwh is represented symbolically but not literally by a sun disk. The association of Yhwh with the sun is known from a few biblical passages, such as Psalm 84.10–12.⁵³ Two passages, 2 Kings 23.11 and Ezekiel 6.1–7, 8.16, depict sun worship in the Jerusalem temple. The Deuteronomistic historians and Ezekiel regard this worship with horror, but the worshippers they condemn probably did not see themselves as worshipping a foreign deity. Rather, they may have intended to bow down to Yhwh as a sun god. (Further, 2 Kings 23.11 attests to a connection between the sun and horses, because it speaks of King Josiah destroying both “the horses that the kings of Judah dedicated to the sun at the entrance to Yhwh’s Temple . . . and chariots of the sun”; this connection, also known among other sun deities, such as Helios, may explain why the sun disk in the Ta’anakh stand sits astride a horse.) The first section of Psalm 19 subtly polemicizes against equating Yhwh and the sun, arguing that the sun is merely one of many creatures who point toward the greatness of the deity who created them. This polemic indicates that some Israelites tended to regard Yhwh as the sun (after all, one does not argue against something that is not a real threat).⁵⁴ The association of Yhwh and the sun is also known from Israelite iconography.⁵⁵ In short, it seems plausible that the top register of the Ta’anakh cult stand portrays Yhwh on a symbolic level as the sun, thus exemplifying precisely the equation that 2 Kings, Ezekiel, and Psalm 19 find problematic.

Taylor points out the basic pattern of the cult stand’s iconography:

Just as Asherah was portrayed “in person” and in symbol on the alternative tiers . . . respectively [that is, in anthropomorphic form on the lower register and by her symbol, the tree, on the higher one], so, too, Yhwh is depicted “in person” [on the lower of His two tiers] and in symbol [on the uppermost tier].⁵⁶

If Taylor is correct, the Ta’anakh stand points to a fascinating example of early Israelite religion. In this form of Israelite religion, we already see the refusal to portray Yhwh that is so characteristic of biblical religion. But this aniconic religiosity is not monotheistic or even monolatrous: The cult stand pairs Yhwh with the goddess Asherah. Many scholars have noted that such a pairing is not surprising. Asherah was the wife of El in Ugarit, and both the name El and imagery associated with him are attributed to Yhwh throughout the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁷ That some Israelites

loyal to Yhwh might assume that He had a wife, and that wife would be Asherah, is to be expected.⁵⁸ If this interpretation of the cult stand is correct, then we can state that, at least at an early stage of Israelite history and at least in the north, the goddess Asherah was worshipped alongside Yhwh.

Were the Ancient Israelites Monotheists?

Both the archaeological and biblical evidence give complex answers to the question, “Were the Israelites monotheistic?” Although the Hebrew Bible claims that the ideal of aniconic monolatry existed in the early preexilic period, it nevertheless claims that loyalty to this ideal was, to say the least, inadequate. On the other hand, much of the archaeological evidence (onomastic and iconographic data) suggests that most Israelites in the preexilic period worshipped only one deity. These data render plausible the biblical claim that the ideal of monolatry existed at an early period, but they shed doubt on the biblical claim that loyalty to the ideal was rare. By its very nature, these archaeological data cannot make clear whether that monolatrous worship was, strictly speaking, monotheistic or polytheistic. Other archaeological data (the pillar figurines) may support the biblical picture of widespread (non-monolatrous) polytheism among Israelites, especially in the eighth and seventh centuries – if we accept the suggestion that the figurines depict a goddess. But if these figurines depict a human female and were used in sympathetic magic, then they probably reflect monolatrous religiosity in domestic settings in ancient Israel. Other sorts of archaeological data (the tenth-century Ta’anakh stand; the tenth- through ninth-century figurines of a naked fertility goddess) clearly point to Israelite polytheism and more specifically to goddess worship at an early stage of Israelite history. In spite of their differences, both types of evidence allow us to speak of Israelite polytheism (whether it was rare or common, it clearly existed), and thus they allow us to note areas of continuity between ancient Israel and the cultures of its neighbors. At the same time, both types also allow us to speak of early preexilic Israelite monolatry as well, and thus to note areas of discontinuity between Israel and its neighbors.

IS THE HEBREW BIBLE MONOTHEISTIC?

The Hebrew Bible at once describes and proscribes polytheistic worship among ancient Israelites throughout the preexilic period. Its own religious ideals demand that the Israelites render to Yhwh exclusive loyalty – that is, these documents endorse monolatry. The question that faces us is whether the monolatry they intend exemplifies what I referred to earlier as the monotheistic variety or the polytheistic variety. Do they imagine Yhwh to be unrivaled among heavenly beings and in exclusive control of all powers in the universe? Or do they imagine Yhwh to be one among many deities, to whom, for a variety of historical reasons, the Israelites have pledged fealty?

Poor Evidence for Biblical Monotheism

The most familiar texts that emphasize that Israelites must worship only one God provide no data regarding this question. “You shall have no other gods besides Me,” Yhwh tells the Israelites at the opening of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20.3). Is this because the other gods have no power, or is it simply because Yhwh, having liberated the Israelites from Egypt, has first claim on the Israelites’ religious affections? The text gives absolutely no information that would allow us to answer this question one way or the other.⁵⁹ Other texts seem at first glance to support the idea that the Israelites were monotheistic, but they provide no real support when viewed in their own cultural context. “Who is like you among the gods, Yhwh? Who is like you, exalted in holiness, acknowledged as awesome, performing wonders?” Moses and the Israelites sing at the shore of the Reed Sea (Exodus 15.11; cf. 1 Kings 8.23; Isaiah 40.18; Jeremiah 10.6–7; Psalms 35.10, 71.19, 89.9). Such a verse sounds tailor made to answer our question, because it insists on an essential distinction between Yhwh and all other heavenly beings. Indeed, this line appears in various forms of Jewish liturgy (e.g., in the blessing after the *Shema* in the morning and evening services in rabbinic liturgy; in the Songs of Praise [*Hodayot*] from Qumran, 1QH 7:28), where it can be said to function in a genuinely monotheistic manner.⁶⁰ But a line like this does not always function that way. Other ancient peoples called a variety of gods incomparable. Language of this sort appears with great frequency throughout Sumerian and Akkadian liturgical texts.⁶¹ This is the case not only in prayers to the heads of pantheons such as Ashur in Assyria and Marduk in Babylon⁶² but to other deities as well:

[O lord, ra]diance of the great gods, light of earth, illuminator of the world
regions,

[O Shamash], lofty judge, creator of the above and below,

...

You alone are [mani]fest, no one among the gods can rival you.

(An Assyrian hymn to Shamash)⁶³

I implore you, lady of ladies, goddess of goddesses,

Ishtar, queen of all the inhabited world . . .

Irnini [=Inanna], you are noble, the greatest of the Igigi-gods, . . .

O Mistress, splendid is your greatness, exalted over all the gods.

(A neo-Babylonian prayer to Ishtar)⁶⁴

Warrior among his brothers, princely god,

Lord surpassing all the Igigi-gods,

Nergal, princely god,

Lord surpassing all the Igigi-gods!

(An Akkadian prayer to Nergal)⁶⁵

My lady, your divine powers are great divine powers, surpassing [(other) divine powers],

Nanshe, your divine powers are not matched by any other divine powers.

King An looks on with joy.

He who sits with Enlil on the dais of destiny determination,

Father Enlil, has determined your destiny.

(An early second-millennium Sumerian hymn)⁶⁶

A god might have been called the greatest or the only god because at a particular moment that god was of paramount importance to the worshipper.⁶⁷ Alternatively, prayers might indulge in exaggeration and flattery.⁶⁸ The Mesopotamian scribes who composed these verses and the worshippers who recited them were perfectly ready to say the same thing about another god the next day. Indeed, the hymn to Shamash was composed for the eighth-century king of Assyria, Assurbanipal, but that king did not hesitate also to call Nabu unparalleled among the gods:

[I sin]g your praise, O Nabu, among the great gods . . . I keep turning to you, O most valorous of the gods his brethren.⁶⁹

It goes without saying, of course, that Assurbanipal's primary loyalty was directed to neither of these two gods but to Assyria's own deity, Ashur.

Even in cases when it was appropriate to call a god the most powerful, such praise is not necessarily monotheistic. A god can be described as greatest while still being one of many powers in the universe. What is crucial for identifying monotheism is some indication that the expression of uniqueness is to be taken literally, some sign that the god being extolled is not limited by any other forces. Generally it is impossible to classify a statement of Yhwh's incomparability by itself as monotheistic or polytheistic. Only a larger context demonstrates that the passage is monotheistic, by showing, for example, that the deity lacks family, cannot be challenged by other gods, or assigned them their minor roles. Nothing like this appears in the poem in which Exodus 15:11 ("Who is like you among the gods, O Yhwh?") appears, so that we cannot cite it as an example of early monotheism in Israel. Such a verse could have been recited by a monotheistic monolatrist, by a polytheistic monolatrist, or even a nonmonolatrous polytheist.⁷⁰ (It is likely that some ancient Israelites who sang this line were monotheistic, whereas others were polytheistic.) The question at hand, then, is whether we can establish what the authors or editors of biblical texts meant when they included it in the Book of Exodus.

The same may be said of biblical texts that stress Yhwh's kingship over the gods, and perhaps even those that stress that Yhwh assigned other gods their roles:

For Yhwh is a great god,

And king over all the gods.

The deepest places on earth are in His hands,

And the tops of mountains belong to Him.
 The sea belongs to Him – He made it,
 And His hands fashioned the dry land.
 (Psalm 95.3–5)

All nations, clap your hands!
 Shout out to God with joyful voice!
 For Yhwh, the highest, the awesome One,
 Is the great king over all the earth.
 (Psalm 47.2–3)

For Yhwh is great and worthy of much praise;
 He is revered more than all the gods.
 For all the gods of the nations are nothings,
 But Yhwh made the heavens.
 (Psalm 96.4–5)

Bestow upon Yhwh, O you gods,
 Bestow upon Yhwh glory and might.
 Bestow upon Yhwh the glory of His name;
 Bow down to Yhwh as He reveals His holiness.
 ...
 Yhwh reigned at the time of the flood;
 And Yhwh will reign forever and ever.
 (Psalm 29.1–2, 10)

On the one hand, these verses stress Yhwh's omnipotence in contrast to the relative weakness of other deities, who (in the final example) are required to praise the one true God. But one might say something similar even about the high god in a polytheistic pantheon, and various ancient Near Eastern peoples in fact did so, for polytheists, too, can regard some particular deity as king.⁷¹ In *Enuma Elish* 4:3–15 the gods themselves sang to Marduk:

You are the most important among the great gods,
 Your destiny in unrivaled, your command is supreme.
 O Marduk, you are the most important among the great gods,
 Your destiny is unrivaled, your command is supreme.
 Henceforth your command cannot be changed,
 To rise up, to bring low, this shall be your power.
 ...
 O Marduk, you are our champion,
 We bestow upon you⁷² kingship of all and everything.
 Take your place in the assembly, your word shall be supreme.⁷³

One might want to take these lines literally and suggest that Marduk is being raised here to the sort of power we associate with a monotheistic God.⁷⁴ However, earlier

in *Enuma Elish* Tiamat had made the same promise to Qingu when she acclaimed him king of the gods in 1:153–58:

I make you the greatest in the assembly of the gods.
 Kingship of all the gods I put in your power.
 You are the greatest, my husband, you are illustrious,
 Your command shall always be greatest, over all the Anunna-gods.
 ...
 As for you, your command will not be changed, your utterance will endure.⁷⁵

Qingu's unchangeable command did not in fact endure: Like Tiamat, he died at the hand of Marduk. That the gods' guarantee of eternal power to Marduk is phrased in the same language as Tiamat's short-lived guarantee to Qingu suggests that we should read this sort of language with a grain of salt. This language is an exaggerated form of praise for whatever deity happened to be on the throne. As a result, we cannot be sure whether the fairly similar lines quoted above from the Book of Psalms are intended to posit an essential distinction between Yhwh and other gods.

Is it possible to distinguish between a monotheistic God who rules over the gods absolutely, on the one hand, and a polytheistic god who governs other gods without completely dominating them, on the other? One can imagine two models of divine kingship: a monotheistic one, in which members of a divine retinue praise the one God and carry out that God's wishes; and a polytheistic one, in which the king is first among equals, mightiest to be sure, but in control of the universe neither automatically nor permanently.⁷⁶ Conceptually, the difference between a monotheistic council and a pagan pantheon is clear: The divine retinue of the monotheistic god might be compared to the American cabinet, where secretaries of various departments carry out the president's policies and serve at the president's whim. The polytheistic pantheon resembles the British cabinet, where each minister may have an independent power base and in which all cabinet members, the prime minister included, may be dismissed at the whim of lower politicians in Parliament or (at least in theory) of a higher and more august, if otiose, authority.⁷⁷

On the basis of this distinction, it is clear that the pantheons of Canaan, Greece, and Mesopotamia were polytheistic. Each had a high god, but none of their gods would be called supreme or all powerful in the monotheistic sense. Even the high god or goddess could be seriously challenged, and indeed kingship did pass from one god to another, sometimes peacefully (from Enlil and Anu to Marduk, as described in the preface to Hammurapi's code),⁷⁸ sometimes violently (from Baal to Mot and vice versa in the Ugaritic *Baal Cycle* or from Tiamat to Marduk in *Enuma Elish*). But what of the biblical material? Because the vocabulary describing the divine retinue known to us from the Hebrew Bible resembles language

depicting the pantheon of Canaanite religion, and because the Israelite conception grew out of the Canaanite, one may question whether Israelite religion is monotheistic.

Similarly skeptical reasoning may even apply to the following passages from Deuteronomy and Micah:

Take care – for this is a life-and-death point – . . . lest you look up to the heavens and, seeing the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole host of heaven, you allow yourselves to be seduced to bow down to them and worship them – those gods, whom Yhwh your God allotted to all the peoples under the heavens; Yhwh took you, on the other hand, and led you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, so that you belong to Him, as His private possession, to this very day . . . You have been shown; indeed you know: Yhwh is God; there is none other than Him.

(Deuteronomy 4.15,19–20,35)

When the Highest One gave the nations their possessions,
When He divided humanity,
He established the boundaries of nations
In accordance with the number of the gods.⁷⁹
But Yhwh's nation is His property,
Jacob, His very own inheritance.

(Deuteronomy 32.8–9)

According to this conception, just as there were stereotypically seventy gods, so there were seventy nations,⁸⁰ each of which had its own god (this would have meant Ashur for the Assyrians, for example, and Marduk for the Babylonians, though Deuteronomy does not deign to mention these minor gods by name). But the high God Yhwh kept one nation as His own property, and it was their responsibility to pray only to Him.⁸¹ (The understanding of these verses I present here is hardly new; it was already set forth in detail in the twelfth century by Nachmanides in his commentary to Leviticus 18.25.⁸²)

The same idea underlies Micah 4.1–5. In the eschatological future that these verses imagine, individual nations still exist, and they still have conflicts with each other. These conflicts cannot be adjudicated by their own gods, who will not be impartial: Marduk would tend to side with Babylon and Ashur with Assyria, with warfare as the result (indeed, this is what happens in the preeschatological present). What will make the eschaton different is that all nations will acknowledge that Yhwh, the God dwelling on Mount Zion, is the ultimate authority, and they will travel there in order to receive judgments relating to international conflicts: “For legal ruling comes from Zion, and Yhwh’s oracle from Jerusalem” (Micah 4.2b).⁸³ Because conflicts will be resolved by a Security Council located on Mount Zion with a membership of One and an unsurpassed ability to ensure compliance, there will be no need for warfare, and swords will be turned into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4.3). Even great nations will accept God’s censure there

(Micah 4.2ab), and as a result it is clear that the entire world accepts the sovereignty of Yhwh in this eschatological future. But for Micah, the worldwide recognition of Yhwh does not mean that the gods of the nations are nonexistent, irrelevant, or unemployed: “For all the nations will take pride⁸⁴ in their own gods, but we will take pride in Yhwh, our God, forever” (Micah 4.5). Even in the eschaton, the other nations will relate primarily to their own gods, turning to Yhwh only when conflicts among them necessitate recourse to a higher authority. This passage from Micah makes especially clear the supreme position of Yhwh above other gods (as well as the unusually privileged place of Israel, which has the distinction of a personal relation to the supreme deity).⁸⁵

These passages from Deuteronomy and Micah strongly suggest a genuinely monotheistic worldview as defined above.⁸⁶ Whatever responsibilities the other gods have, they received them from Yhwh. In the event of conflict among various nations and hence among various gods, it is Yhwh who provides judgment. Ultimate power, in short, belongs exclusively to Yhwh.⁸⁷ Language as strong as this does not occur in Canaanite and Mesopotamian myth.⁸⁸ But it is at least imaginable that in a polytheistic system a high god would assign all the gods their responsibilities; indeed, in *Enuma Elish* 6:39–46, Marduk divides the gods into various groupings, and his ancestor Anshar proclaims Marduk the god whom the gods themselves must obey in 6:101–120. Thus the verses from Deuteronomy and Micah cannot on their own settle the issue.

Micah’s contemporary Isaiah imagined the future somewhat differently. In Isaiah’s vision of the eschaton, all nations, including even Israel’s archenemies, Assyria and Egypt, will have a direct covenantal relationship with the supreme deity; this is evident in Isaiah 19, especially verses 18–25, in which Isaiah describes Egypt’s relation with Yhwh using precisely the same language used in the Hebrew Bible to describe Israel’s relation with Yhwh. It is for this reason that Isaiah’s version of the prophecy found in Micah 2.1–5 does not include the final line concerning the ongoing relationship between the nations and their gods; see Isaiah 2.1–4. For Isaiah, the other gods are indeed irrelevant, and therefore he repeatedly calls them אֱלֹהִים (no-gods); see Isaiah 2.8, 18, 20; 10.10, 11; 19.1, 3; 31.7.⁸⁹ Micah, in contrast, never uses this term. Isaiah’s perspective can, I think, genuinely be called monotheistic. But the question remains: Is Isaiah typical or exceptional within the Hebrew Bible? Can we find evidence of genuine monotheism throughout the Hebrew Bible, or is it limited to this one corpus and perhaps a few others?

*Strong Evidence for Biblical Monotheism: The Contribution
of Yehezkel Kaufmann*

The Bible’s descriptions of Yhwh’s incomparability, might, and kingship, we have seen, do not necessarily suffice to show that the Bible’s authors and redactors were monotheistic (the example of Isaiah notwithstanding; we must admit the possibility

that Isaiah's perspective is atypical of biblical literature on this point). Two sorts of evidence, however, can demonstrate the monotheism of these authors more generally: first, the consistent differences between biblical depictions of other gods and Canaanite and Mesopotamian depictions of gods, and second, the different ways these literatures describe the relationship of their high gods to the world. My reasoning in the next several paragraphs largely follows the still unsurpassed discussion of this issue by Yehezkel Kaufmann.⁹⁰

The divine retinue we know from the Hebrew Bible differs from those of Canaanite, Mesopotamian, and Greek literature, because lower beings never successfully or even realistically challenge Yhwh in the Hebrew Bible. An enormous number of the texts describing relationships among the gods in those cultures narrate conflicts in which a high god is either seriously threatened or (more often) overthrown. At the beginning of the Akkadian *Atrahasis* epic, the lower ranking Igigi gods revolt against the higher ranking Anunnaki gods. The first half of *Enuma Elish* tells the stories of two successive revolts by younger gods against older ones. In the first, the primordial deity Apsu is killed, but his wife Tiamat survives, so that power is dispersed between the older deities led by Tiamat and younger ones led by Ea and his father Anu. In the second, an even younger god, Marduk, succeeds in killing his great-great-great-grandmother Tiamat and is acclaimed king by his fellow younger gods. The Ugaritic *Baal Cycle* describes the conflicts of a relatively young god, Baal, with his peers Yam (whom he kills) and Mot (at whose hands he dies, only to be brought back to life when his sister Anat kills Mot). In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Kronos violently usurps the kingship of his father Ouranos, only to be deposed by his own son Zeus.

Especially revealing in these texts are the scenes of fear and trembling in the councils of the gods. In *Atrahasis* 1:13–95, the lowly Igigi genuinely frighten mighty Enlil. The older and younger gods are terrified of each other in *Enuma Elish* (see 1:57–8; 2:5–6, 49–52; 3:125–9; 4:67–70, 87–90, 107–9). The same is true in Ugaritic literature. Yam's demands provoke real dismay at the council of El.⁹¹ As a result, these narratives intimate that the battles these gods and goddesses fight are real struggles; none of the deities involved knows the outcome in advance, because both sides have genuine power. The same can be said when deities join the fray in the *Iliad*; to whatever extent the ultimate result of the war was foreordained, it was because of a power greater than the gods and not because of the power any particular god displayed on the battlefield.

The divine council depicted in the Hebrew Bible is something else altogether. In Psalm 29 and Isaiah 6, the divine retinue exists to praise Yhwh, not to battle Him. In Genesis 1.26, they are informed, but not really consulted, regarding the creation of humanity.⁹² In 1 Kings 22, Isaiah 6, and Isaiah 40,⁹³ the retinue is called on to relay Yhwh's messages. It is significant that in these three last texts (and also in Zechariah 3) a human being sits in on the council's meeting – a circumstance that underscores the fact that humanity and the gods/angels are basically on the same subservient

level in Hebrew scripture, linked with each other in their ontological difference from Yhwh.⁹⁴ (This ontological similarity of humanity and the gods becomes apparent also in Psalm 8.6⁹⁵ and in Psalm 29.1–2, in which humans call out to the gods to praise Yhwh, just as humans call on each other to praise Yhwh in most psalms of praise.⁹⁶) To be sure, a member of the divine council even engages Yhwh in debate in Job 1, and Yhwh rebukes that same member of the council in Zechariah 3. But never do members of the court revolt against Yhwh or coerce Yhwh. Further, occasional humans also engage God in debate and even succeed in convincing (but not forcing) God to reconsider the divine plan – specifically, Abraham in Genesis 18 and Moses in several texts, including Exodus 32 and Numbers 14. Any one of the passages cited in this paragraph might not require a monotheistic interpretation on its own (with the exception, I think, of Genesis 1); it is possible that each describes a high god consulting with lower ranking peers rather than an ultimate power consulting with ontologically subservient beings. But the contrast between all these passages and a similar selection from Canaanite, Mesopotamian, or Greek literature is telling.⁹⁷ Even a large sample of the biblical literature fails to turn up any examples of genuine struggle on Yhwh’s part against those who rise up against Him.

To be sure, several texts do famously describe a conflict between Yhwh on the one hand and the Sea and his helpers on the other: the most famous examples include Isaiah 27.1, 51:9–11; Habakkuk 2.8–9; Psalm 74:13–15, 89:6–14; and Job 26:5–13. As many scholars note, these passages use terms that also appear in the Ugaritic myth in which Baal defeats Yam or Sea.⁹⁸ The biblical texts differ from their Ugaritic parallels, however, in crucial respects. They describe a doomed revolt against a deity who was already in charge, a revolt Yhwh puts down without any difficulty. These passages lack any real drama, for they convey no sense that Yhwh was required to engage in real exertion to suppress the insurrection. Baal and Marduk, Zeus and Kronos toil to attain an exalted status; Yhwh had that status to begin with and retains it with ease.⁹⁹ Further, several of these biblical texts downgrade the status of Sea from deity to object. The word *yam* can be a personal name, as it is in Ugaritic, where it refers to the god Yam (Sea), but it can also be a noun, simply meaning “the sea.” By prefacing the definite article to this word, Psalm 89.10 and Job 26.12 make clear that *yam* refers to an object, not to a person, because the definite article does not attach to personal names in Hebrew. The texts describing Yhwh’s conflict with the S/sea in Isaiah, Habakkuk, Psalms, and Job remind us of the older myth in order to make clear us precisely what story is *not* being told: to wit, a genuine theomachy.¹⁰⁰

In any of these biblical passages, it is difficult to imagine Yhwh, confronted by any other being, smiting his thigh and biting his lip, like Anshar in *Enuma Elish* when he hears of Tiamat’s war plans.¹⁰¹ Yhwh never feels threatened by a workers’ revolt to the point of bursting out in tears, like Enlil in *Atrahasis*.¹⁰² Nor can one imagine Yhwh being intimidated into agreeing to another being’s demand

by threat of violence against Yhwh,¹⁰³ in contrast to El in the Baal texts.¹⁰⁴ In sum, in spite of the similar language that describes Yhwh's council and various pagan pantheons,¹⁰⁵ their resemblance hardly shows that their respective theologies are identical. In almost no biblical texts is there any sense that Yhwh's authority, like Tiamat's or Enlil's, El's or Baal's, is contingent.¹⁰⁶

Nor are we told that Yhwh ascended at some point in time to the role He has throughout the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰⁷ It is important to stress this point, because without it one could formulate a facile argument that Yhwh is merely another high god like Marduk, Baal, or Zeus. From the point of view of the history of religions, Yhwh does resemble these high gods in that we can note that ancient texts attribute to Him powers, epithets, and areas of responsibility originally connected with other gods. Thus the biblical portrait of Yhwh combines imagery and titles that Canaanites had associated with two distinct gods, El and Baal,¹⁰⁸ just as *Enuma Elish* applies to Marduk imagery and titles associated with both Anu and Enlil.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, in Ugarit the relatively young god Baal takes over areas of responsibility originally belonging to his father Dagon and his predecessor El. Nevertheless, as the German scholar Erich Zenger points out, a crucial difference emerges when we compare these cases. The Mesopotamian and Canaanite texts tell us that the high god took over that role at some point in time, but Yhwh was the high god from the opening verses of the Hebrew Bible's narrative.¹¹⁰ In the Mesopotamian and Canaanite texts, the primary sources themselves tell us that the high god received another god's office; thus (to take one example) the opening lines in the prologue to Hammurapi's Laws announce that Anu and Enlil have raised up Marduk to leadership of the gods.¹¹¹ As a result, Babylonian texts can speak of Marduk (and, for that matter, Sin and Nabu and Ishtar and even temples of these deities) as possessing what they call "Enlil-status" and "Anu-status" (both of which are usually translated as "authority").¹¹² These texts openly describe one deity taking over the functions of another because from their point of view both gods exist, even if practically speaking Marduk is the one who primarily matters for the present. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, scholars have to work to notice how Israelites applied to Yhwh vocabulary once associated with other gods. The biblical texts themselves do not reveal this theological background because as far as they are concerned this theological background does not exist. The biblical texts' very failure to acknowledge the theological background provides evidence of their monotheism.

Kaufmann emphasizes a further difference between the gods of pagan religions and the position of Yhwh in the Hebrew Bible.¹¹³ The pagan gods were created or born from something prior to them. Mighty Marduk is a child to Ea; Baal is Dagon's son. The earliest, ill-fated Mesopotamian gods of *Enuma Elish* arose from the mingling of sweet and salty waters (that is, of Apsu and Tiamat). All the gods to whom hymns and sacrifices are offered are younger than the world itself. The regnant gods never belong to one of the earlier generations of beings

who have entered the world. In *Enuma Elis*, Apsu and Tiamat give rise to Lahmu and Lahamu, who generate Anshar and Kishar; they beget Anu, whose son Ea kills his great-grandfather Apsu; and it is Ea's son Marduk who kills Tiamat to gain dominion over the cosmos. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Gaia (Earth) mates with her eldest son Ouranos (Sky) to produce the generation of Titans, of whom the youngest was Kronos; Kronos, plotting with his mother against his father, achieves dominion by castrating him; he then maintains control by eating his own children, the generation of the Olympians; his son Zeus is saved, however, and grows up to lead the Olympians in warfare against the Titans, whom Zeus eventually imprisons in Tartarus, whereupon he gains sovereignty. What is striking here is not only the recurring motif of conflict nor even the prevalence of patricidal and matricidal themes, but the youth of the gods who are described as currently holding power.¹¹⁴ The gods in charge of the world (including even a creator god like Marduk) are part of creation rather than older than it, for all these gods had a moment of origin; the world once existed without them. Similarly, the gods who had once been in charge have a moment of departure; the world now exists without them. But in Hebrew scripture, the world never exists without Yhwh. Of Yhwh's origins we know nothing. There are no stories of this deity's birth to another god or generation from earlier matter. Even though most biblical texts assume that matter existed before the creation of the world as we know it,¹¹⁵ we are never given reason to doubt Yhwh's control over matter, whether in its primordial form or as it now constitutes the universe.¹¹⁶

Kaufmann emphasizes the special importance of the relationship between Yhwh and matter, and, more broadly, between Yhwh and other forces in the universe.¹¹⁷ In polytheistic theologies, the gods are subject to matter and to forces stronger than themselves. The gods' power was great, but that power largely derived from their ability to manipulate matter through special techniques, especially the use of language and ritual. Thus Ea/Enki and Belet-ili use incantations to create humanity in *Atrahasis*.¹¹⁸ These same techniques, which are usually termed magic, are available to humanity as well. Of course, human beings' mastery of these techniques pales in comparison to that of the gods, but the difference is one of quantity rather than one of quality.

Consequently, we can say that in Mesopotamian religion, there exists a realm of power independent of, and greater than, the realm of divinity. It is for this reason that in some Mesopotamian texts, humans attempt to ward off evil without turning in any significant way to the gods. In texts such as the *Namburbi* rituals, it is the powers inherent in the stuff of the universe that humans attempt to control. In omen literature such as *Šumma izbu*, humans attempt to gain access to information about the future by attending to unusual events or by examining entrails of animals slaughtered for this purpose. Such information seems to be a part of the complex and intricately interconnected structure of the cosmos rather than information inscribed into the universe by the gods. A particular oddity might be present in the

liver of a calf not because a god put it there to warn humanity of a coming famine but because that particular oddity happened to correlate with crop failures for reasons beyond our understanding. The role of the gods, when they are mentioned in texts of this kind, is merely to aid the humans in accessing those powers, which transcend even the gods' realms but were better understood by the gods than by humans.¹¹⁹

The same idea is articulated more explicitly in classical Greek sources. A proverb cited by Herodotus states, "None may escape his destined lot (μοῖραν), not even a god."¹²⁰ Essentially the same proverb is quoted in Plato's *Laws* 5.741, which uses the term "necessity" (ἀνάγκη) rather than "destiny" or "fate" (μοῖρα). The character Prometheus states baldly in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* 515–20 that Zeus is less powerful than the three Fates (Μοῖραι) and the Furies (Ἐρινύες), who are the controllers of necessity (ἀνάγκης). Thus Walter Otto can assert,

Sometimes it is said that the gods "can do all things," but a glance at the stories of the gods shows that this is not to be taken literally. Their oneness with nature would of itself contradict their ability to do all things. In a desperate situation men do not hesitate to say that even the gods could be of no help. When Nestor expresses the wish that Telemachus may succeed, with Athena's help, in mastering the suitors, Telemachus answers: "I dare not let myself think of it. Even though the gods themselves willed it no such good fortune could befall me" [*Odyssey* 3:228]. However we may explain the impotence of the gods in these special cases, there is a fixed limit to their power, a basic "so far and no farther." . . . In the *Odyssey* Athena herself says: "Death is certain, and when a man's fate (Moirā) has come, not even the gods can save him, no matter how they may love him" [*Odyssey* 3:236] . . . [The gods] themselves sometimes avow that they are subject to destiny's decree. This decree is not only withdrawn from the gods' sphere of authority once and for all; it is essentially different from the functions of the gods.¹²¹

Fate when personified is usually associated with the pre-Olympians. Hesiod tells us (*Theogony* 217) that Fate is the daughter of Night,¹²² indicating that Fate is older than Zeus and the gods who are his siblings and children.¹²³ Like matter itself, then, Fate precedes the gods. The relationship is not completely straightforward; Hesiod also tells us that the fates can be described as Zeus' daughters (see *Theogony* 904), and Homer has Penelope claim that the immortals have appointed a fate for everything on earth (*Odyssey* 19:592). Penelope's comment suggests that the gods have some control over fate, at least where decrees regarding mundane matters are concerned.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, Hesiod and Homer do not contradict themselves in their varied portrayals of the complex relationship between the gods and fate; rather, they both acknowledge the great power of the gods, which can on occasion decree a fate, even as they make clear that ultimately the gods themselves are subject to its decrees and cannot overturn them even when their own favorites are concerned.¹²⁵

The Hebrew Bible presumes an entirely different sort of relationship between divinity and powers present in the cosmos. Yhwh's will is never frustrated by forces of nature, by matter, or by other gods. Only in one area can Yhwh be thwarted: by human free will.¹²⁶ This exception results from Yhwh's own decision to create beings with their own ability to choose for good and for ill. Yhwh's single limitation in the Hebrew Bible is self-imposed, but the limitations on the gods in polytheistic texts are often the result of forces beyond themselves. To be sure, Kaufmann may have overstated the undetermined nature of the divine will, but his thesis, slightly modified, can still stand. Although Yhwh is not subject to outside forces in the manner that Enlil and Baal are, Yhwh nonetheless is a person and thus subject to His own emotion. Consequently, Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit modify Kaufmann's claim of Yhwh's irrevocable will. They point out that

the God of the Bible is free from nature and fate, but he is not free from emotional tendencies. In modern terms we would say that he is free of physics and biology, but not of psychology. . . . In recognizing that God is independent from the world in terms of nature and fate, Kaufmann discovered a deep and important distinction between paganism and the monotheistic religions There is, however, an emotional interdependency that involves God in a complex relationship with the world This dependency is not a causal subjection like the subjection of the gods to nature and fate in myth, and so Kaufmann's significant distinction remains intact.¹²⁷

The Hebrew Bible's distinctive account of the relationship between divinity and powers inhering in the cosmos stands behind its rejection of the entire category of magic. The nature of this rejection needs to be carefully described, however, if we are to avoid misunderstanding it. The authors of the Hebrew Bible did not regard magic as nonsense. Like everyone else in the ancient world, these authors believed that magic was real: Human beings could use specific language and particular behaviors to gain access to powers inhering in the universe. The biblical authors believed that these powers were limited, however, because Yhwh was in no way subject to them. (Contrast the devastating effect of incantations on Tiamat or Qingu in *Enuma Elish*.¹²⁸) Consequently, biblical authors rejected magic in one specific and limited sense: They insisted that followers of Yhwh should not use it (for example, in Exodus 22.17 and Deuteronomy 18.10), not because magic did not work, but because using magic was an act of disloyalty toward the God whose power outshone it.¹²⁹ Examples of magical practices among followers of Yhwh, it follows, are not from the biblical point of view indications of polytheism; they are rather indications of sin. (Similarly, an Israelite or a Jew might eat pork, but this does not demonstrate that this person is a polytheist; rather, he or she may be a monotheist who is missing the mark.)

One final contrast between genuine polytheistic literature and the Hebrew Bible is arresting. Although the Hebrew Bible mentions the existence of other gods, those other gods never appear in biblical narrative as independent actors.¹³⁰ The

gods of other nations may be real; their authority over those nations, according to texts like Deuteronomy 4.19–20 and 32.8–9, is genuine. But these gods are never sufficiently important to appear as characters with their own names.¹³¹ It is within the realm of the imaginable that Moab's Kemosh is one of the members of the divine council portrayed in 2 Kings 22 or that Assyria's Ashur is among those called on to shout out Yhwh's praises in Psalm 29. Nevertheless, the biblical text portrays them only as part of an anonymous mass. Never do other nation's deities interact with Yhwh or contact human beings on their own in biblical narrative. Even the few apparent exceptions to this rule are instructive: Kemosh is described as a real actor twice, in Numbers 21.29 and Judges 11.24. In both cases, it is not the biblical narrator who speaks; rather, Israelite characters in the narrative mention this foreign god when addressing a foreign audience (in the former, anonymous bards address the Moabites; in the latter, Jephthah addresses the Ammonites).¹³² 2 Kings 3.27 is the closest the Hebrew Bible comes to acknowledging real power from another god; even this verse, which describes a rite of child sacrifice performed by a Moabite king, does not give the name of the god and does not state that it was that god who dictated the final outcome of the events. One of the crucial texts that acknowledges the existence of these beings, Deuteronomy 4, not only refuses to give us their names but refrains from applying the term "god" to them at all, so that these beings are removed from the realm of the sacred or numinous and are reduced, as Georg Braulik notes, to mere secular or profane beings.¹³³ The single exception, Braulik rightly notes, in Deuteronomy 4.28 in fact proves the rule that applies to this chapter: That verse refers to "gods made by human hands . . . who cannot see or hear or eat or smell."

What I have constructed in this section may be regarded as an argument from silence: It is the absence of several crucial elements found in the polytheistic religions of Israel's neighbors that leads me to conclude that the Hebrew Bible exemplifies monotheism and not merely monolatry. In regard to any one text, such an argument lacks validity. We cannot say definitively that Exodus 15.11, or Exodus 20.2–3, or Psalm 96, on its own, is a monotheistic text. But when we examine a wide variety of biblical texts from several different genres (narrative, law, prophecy, prayer), the consistent omission of polytheistic themes is indeed revealing, and in such a case an argument from silence is legitimate. Here a caveat is necessary: We cannot enter the head of every Israelite who uttered or heard these texts. Were there worshippers of Yhwh who understood some of these texts in a manner we can term polytheistic monolatry or even garden-variety (non-monolatrous) polytheism? Is it possible that the first Israelite to have composed or uttered one of these lines intended the passage such a way? No doubt the answer to these questions is yes. Some texts within the Hebrew Bible can be understood in a polytheistic fashion if one so chooses. But the fact that the Hebrew Bible as a whole fails to attest any examples that must be read in a polytheistic fashion justifies the conclusion that this anthology is indeed a monotheistic one.

MONOTHEISM, POLYTHEISM, AND OTHER POLARITIES

In spite of the similarities of language, poetic style, narrative structure, and ritual program so manifest between biblical documents and other ancient Near Eastern texts, a scholar who attends to large amounts of texts from both sets of cultures cannot but be struck by the failure of the former to display a host of motifs repeatedly present in the latter. Moreover, it is precisely the strong similarities between these corpora that make the absence so striking. The motifs in question center around the issue of how the cosmos and its powers relate to divinity. Attending to these motifs, we can identify two types of thinking in these bodies of literature. In one, which may be termed polytheism and is present in the vast majority of ancient Near Eastern texts, divinity is subject to the cosmos and its powers, even if it excels at manipulating those powers. In the other type of thinking, which may be termed monotheism and is present in biblical texts, divinity is not subject to the cosmos and its powers, except when divinity voluntarily limits its might to allow freedom of action for some of the creatures it has fashioned.

The crucial question addressed here, then, is one of distinction: Are there respects in which the Hebrew Bible differs fundamentally from its environment? Biblical scholars in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century tended strongly to stress discontinuities between Israel and its surrounding cultures, and this overpronounced tendency left subsequent scholars wary of this question, but a past obsession with this theme need not lead us to slight its importance. Biblical religion does in fact distinguish itself from other religions of the ancient Near East in its perception of one God as the exclusive creator of a world over which that God has complete control. It is precisely for this reason that we should take note of the striking similarities in the concept of divine embodiment and divine selfhood between Mesopotamian and Canaanite texts and parts of the Hebrew Bible, similarities that span the border separating the former from the latter.

At the same time, noting an element that distinguishes biblical religion from the religions of Canaan, Greece, and Mesopotamia should not blind us to other possible distinctions, which we might miss if we simply lump Canaan, Greece, and Mesopotamian religion under the broad category "polytheism." It is just as important to ask what (if anything) makes a given polytheistic religion distinctive, what elements link certain polytheistic religions to each other and not to others, or what elements link a polytheistic religion and a monotheistic one. For example, one might argue that Canaanite and Sumerian polytheisms share significant features that are largely lacking in Assyrian and Babylonian religions; these include a stress on fertility and repetition, and the vulnerability or even mortality present in the realm of the divine. (I venture to suggest, in fact, that Canaanite and Sumerian religions are deeply Eliadian, whereas Assyrian and Babylonian religions are considerably less so.)

A major concern of this book has been to note what we might term theological isoglosses (that is, sets of shared elements linking some theologies together in contrast to others) that defy the basic polarity between monotheism and polytheism. On one side of the divide that has concerned us stand Greek polytheism and the various monotheisms of ancient Israel's priestly and deuteronomic schools, of medieval Jewish philosophy, and perhaps of Protestant Christianity. On the other side, the polytheisms of Mesopotamia and of the Northwest Semites stand alongside the monotheisms of some Israelites (especially those reflected in J and E texts), of various forms of kabbalah, and perhaps of Catholic and Orthodox forms of Christianity.

In this appendix I have attempted to show that the term "monotheism" can be meaningfully employed in discussing Israelite religion: This term has explanatory power that helps us see how Israelite and especially biblical religion differs crucially from its environment. Nevertheless, this book as a whole also suggests that the polarity between monotheism and polytheism is of less explanatory value than many students of religion have tended to suppose, or at least that it can obscure connections of great interest that cross over that division.¹³⁴ It is meaningful to note that a kabbalist in the thirteenth century C.E. is a monotheist, whereas a worshipper of Marduk in the early first millennium B.C.E. is a polytheist – but it is also meaningful, and perhaps much more revealing, to note that they are much closer to each other in their understanding of the nature of divinity than they are to many other monotheists and polytheists, respectively. As much as this work argues that the terms "monotheist" and "polytheist" are useful starting places for a historian of religion, it also shows that they are no more than that.¹³⁵

rabbinic literature or the frank admission that the rabbis and medieval authorities were not monotheists, as noted already by Abraham of Posquières (in his glosses on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Hammadda*⁶, *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 3.7), on which see Harvey, 69–74. An even stronger Jewish critique of this aspect of Maimonides' system appears in Wyschogrod, *Body*, xiv–xv, who rejects Maimonides' thought in this regard as simply non-Jewish.

80. A more linguistic aspect of Maimonides' critique remains a relevant critique of the fluidity model: to wit, his assertion that "to predicate a positive attribute to God is a violation of God's simple unity, because it assumes a complexity of a subject and his predicate, a complexity of substance and attribute or substance and accident" (as Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 110, summarize it). On the other hand, as Halbertal and Margalit go on to note (110), this view "leads Maimonides to the exclusion of the possibility of any linguistic description of God." Thus the linguistic critique of theological talk in general is in no way specific to the fluidity model, but applies, I think, to all human religions and religiosity except as practiced by the rarest of philosophical virtuosi.
81. Mark Smith, *Origins*, 93.
82. The opening line of the poem, "Patmos," in Hölderlin, 2 vols., 173.
83. Lorberbaum, *Image*, 102. See the similar reflections in Bloom, *Jesus*, 131.
84. Similarly, we saw at the end of [Chapter 1](#) that the gods of archaic and classical Greece had nonfluid selves and only a single body, but this did not render the religion of the Greeks monotheistic.
85. Cf. the comment of Wyschogrod, *Body*, 101: "If it is man as man who is to have a relation to Hashem, if man is not to cease being man in spite of this relation, then Hashem must be able to enter space and to be near man wherever he is. And not only near man but in man, or more specifically, in the people of Israel." See also the statement of Moshe Greenberg in a somewhat different context, discussing the dialogue between God and humanity: "The first condition of such dialogue is God's willingness to adjust himself to the capacities of men, to take into consideration and make concessions to human frailty" (Greenberg, *Understanding*, 93–4).

APPENDIX: MONOTHEISM AND POLYTHEISM IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

1. In regard to bibliography concerning monotheism and polytheism in ancient Israel, see Ecclesiastes 12.12. In this note and the notes that follow I cite only a few representative examples of the positions at hand. For the view that pre-exilic Israelite religion was not monotheistic, see, for example, Bade, "Monoyhwhwismus"; Fohrer, *History*, 172; Morton Smith, *Palestinian*, 42; Morton Smith, "Common Theology," 147; Zevit, *Religions*, esp. 648–52, 668–78, 690; Gerstenberger, *Theologies*, e.g., 215–18, 274–5, 279; Dever, *Did God*, 294–7.
2. On the question of El's differentiation from Yhwh, see especially Mark Smith, *Origins*, 48–9, 140–3, 155–7. See also Albertz, *History*, 1:76–9 (and cf. 1:97), who argues that El and Yhwh were the gods of two separate groups of what came to be known as Israelites at the very beginning of the Iron Age; as these two groups merged as early as the twelfth century, so did their gods. For the opposite argument (to wit, that Yhwh was originally an epithet of El and that the deity known by this epithet emerged as distinct in Israel), see Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 65–75.

3. See, e.g., Stolz, "Monotheismus," 178–82, and Vorländer, "Monotheismus," 84–113, esp. 93 (Vorländer claims that both the event of the exile and the alleged exposure to Zoroastrianism engendered Israelite monotheism; on the latter, see especially 103–6). A variation on this idea is found in Braulik, "Das Deuteronomium und die Geburt," esp. 131–49, who argues that true monotheism first emerges in exilic passages in the Book of Deuteronomy.
4. Mark Smith, *Early*, 152; Mark Smith, *Origins*, 149–94; Dever, *Did God*, 287 (contradicting the view he presents on 295).
5. E.g., Albright, *From Stone Age*, 157–72, esp. 171–2; Barr, "Problem"; Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:221, 224–5; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:203–11 (who recognizes that monotheism developed slowly out of monolatry in the preexilic period and that we cannot pinpoint any one moment at which monolatry gave way to monotheism); Halpern, "Brisker"; Petersen, "Israel"; Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 83–107; Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 277–81, 323–49, 354–67 (concerning which see further the references in n.21 in this chapter); Schenker, "Monothéisme," 447–8; Miller, "Absence," 202–3, who argues that Yhwh had absorbed the powers of all other deities at an early point in Israelite history, even though worship of deities other than Yhwh persisted. Lohfink, "Zur Geschichte," 22–5, acknowledges that "theoretical monotheism" or strict monotheism appears only in the exilic era, but argues that an exclusive focus on one God, under whom all other heavenly beings are anonymously subservient, appears already in the period of the monarchy and perhaps before. As we see later, this latter sort of belief can sensibly be termed monotheism, and in fact there is little evidence that what Lohfink calls "theoretical monotheism" existed even in the exile or in most forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to this day.

Of particular interest is Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:221–685, esp. 255–85, which receives particular attention in what follows (on critics of Kaufmann, see especially nn.90, 106, and 125 later). It is worth comparing Kaufmann's massive and original treatment of this issue with Albertz, *History*, esp. 1:62–4, 150. Like Kaufmann, Albertz emphasizes that the exclusivity of the relationship with Yhwh stems from the earliest periods of Israel's existence, before it settled in Canaan, and that widespread polytheism was a development of the later monarchic period, especially prominent in royal and upper-class circles. It is fascinating to note the similarity of Albertz's understanding of this issue to Kaufmann's (whose work, stunningly, Albertz never cites). Both see an ancient norm of worshipping Yhwh exclusively, which deteriorated especially among the upper classes in monarchic times. The two share another characteristic: Both these historians of Israelite religion engage in projects that, in their grand scope and their intense focus on a particular issue, are very close to biblical theology. (On Albertz's connection to biblical theology, see his own comments in 1:12, 17; Albertz, "Religionsgeschichte Israels statt Theologie"; and Barton, "Alttestamentliche Theologie." On Kaufmann's role as a biblical theologian, see Sommer, "Dialogical," §1a, and Schweid, "Biblical Critic.") Nevertheless, differences are also evident, especially because Albertz recognizes complexities and ambiguities that Kaufmann does not address. Albertz notes that the identity of Yhwh with the god worshipped in family piety was not always a given; the deity of family piety was not necessarily distinguished from Yhwh, but the average Israelite did not necessarily pause to identify the family deity with Yhwh either (see Albertz, 1:95–9, 187). Albertz's work provides an outline of a more nuanced version of Kaufmann's thesis regarding monotheism. For this reason, it is deeply unfortunate that Albertz never addresses the work of the most important historian of Israelite religion in the twentieth century.

Another scholar who seems to have arrived independently at a definition of monotheism essentially identical to Kaufmann's is Schenker, "Monothéisme"; like Albrecht, however, he never mentions Kaufmann.

6. The term בני אלהים / בני אלים can mean "sons of God," "sons of the gods," "sons of [the high god] El," or "members of the class generally known as gods." Linguistically, any of these is legitimate, but the last is most likely.
7. Faur, "Biblical," 14–15. On the worship of angels among Jews, see also Jerusalem Talmud *Berakhot* 9:7=12a.
8. Cf. the astute remark of Propp, "Monotheism," 454–5 n.42: "For the ancient world, functional definitions of 'monotheism' and 'polytheism' are more useful than philosophical definitions: 'monotheism' is monotheistic behavior. Apparently, apart from the minds of philosophers and mystics, there is no such thing as monotheism; compare William James's obiter dictum, '[polytheism] has always been the real religion of common people, and is so still today' (*The Varieties of Religious Experience* [New York: New American Library, 1958, 396])." The definition I use differs from Propp's (who does not distinguish between monotheism and monolatry), but I find his critique of purist definitions of monotheism quite on target.
9. For this definition, see, e.g., Barr, "Problem"; Petersen, "Israel," 97. So also Faur, "Biblical," 4. Cf. the similar remark of Morton Smith: "Worship of several deities is compatible with monotheism – one has only to believe, for example, that the supreme ('true') deity has created beings inferior to himself but superior to men and has ordained that men should worship them. This belief is expressed in Deut. 4.19 and 32.8" (Morton Smith, *Palestinian*, 165 n.11). See also Schmidt, *Faith*, 379, and Labuschagne, *Incomparability*, 148. Fohrer, *History*, 103, suggests an identical description of Israelite religion, though he does not term such a belief system monotheism; so too Lohfink, "Zur Geschichte," 22–5. This view of biblical religion is hardly a new one. Already the thirteenth-century rabbinic commentator Nachmanides acknowledges that the "other gods" whom Israelites are forbidden to worship include real beings who have real power over other nations (though not over Israel, which constitutes God's personal property). These other beings, Nachmanides explains, are termed "gods" in biblical literature; they are also called "angels." Their power stems from their appointment over specific nations, though at some point Yhwh will depose them and take direct control over the whole earth. See especially Nachmanides' commentary to Exodus 20.3 (to the words, עַל פִּי, especially his discussion of the first sort of idolatry, which is worship of real gods with real, if limited and derivative, power), and also his commentary to Leviticus 18.25. On Nachmanides' understanding of biblical monotheism, see Goshen-Gottstein, "Other Gods."
10. The scholar of African religions E. Bolaju Idowu has termed this sort of monotheism "diffused monotheism"; that is, a type of belief in which God assigns certain tasks to other heavenly beings, whose power or authority comes solely from God. On the applicability of this notion to biblical studies, see Nili Fox, "Concepts," especially 331. Fox's own suggestion (344) that biblical/Israelite religion represents "diffused monolatry" rather than diffused monotheism is marred by two problems. She never explains how the former differs from the latter, and she fails to distinguish between Israelite religion and its subset, biblical religion, mixing evidence from both arenas in a manner that smooths over differences that, we see later, are quite revealing.
11. For a kindred attempt to employ the term "monotheism" in a more flexible way that reflects the realities of lived religions (in particular, those of the ancient Near East),

see the very important work of Schenker, “Monothéisme,” esp. 437. Schenker succeeds in viewing monotheism from within the religious world of the ancient Near East. Consequently, he is sensitive to how monotheism looks as it emerges from the world of polytheism. Schenker’s definition is essentially identical to my own: “Monotheism must not be defined exclusively in terms of being and non-being. It suffices that a god should be of a nature or a degree so different from all other gods that this deity transcends them in a manner analogous to the transcendence of the gods in relation to human beings” (437–8). Schenker sensibly refers to this sort of monotheism as “a monotheism of transcendence which encompasses polytheism” (448): It is a monotheism of transcendence in the sense that the one God is qualitatively different from all other beings, whether heavenly or mundane, and it encompasses polytheism because it acknowledges the existence of other heavenly beings.

12. The discussion of these and other terms in Petersen, “Israel,” is especially helpful. After reading through the secondary literature, in which various terms are used in multiple ways and such terms as “practical monotheism,” “latent monotheism,” and “implicit monolatry” are introduced, one tends to agree with Petersen that “this use of a vocabulary does not appear to have resulted in significant conceptual clarity” (98). This is particularly so in the otherwise helpful essay of Halpern, “Brisker”; he repeatedly makes much of the contrast between monolatry and henotheism, neither of which terms he defines.
13. This circumstance, it must be admitted, points to the wisdom of Propp’s decision to define monotheism on the basis of behavior and therefore not to distinguish between monotheism and monolatry, which I do not do here. See Propp, “Monotheism,” 454–5. See also Nili Fox, “Concepts,” 343, who notes that the difference between radical monolatry and radical monotheism in ancient Israel may have been relevant only to an intellectual and not the average Israelite.
14. The crucial nature of the difference between these two questions is stressed quite helpfully by Morton Smith, *Palestinian*, e.g., 42. The conceptual model provided by Morton Smith is tremendously important, regardless of what flaws might mar his conclusions.
15. It should be noted that I do not employ the terms “elite” and “popular” religion to describe biblical and Israelite religion, respectively; the distinction I draw is a different one entirely – or, to speak more frankly, the distinction I draw is a real one. There is little reason to doubt that the Bible portrays, among other things, popular religion. As William Propp notes, legal and prophetic texts in the Bible support the interests of small farmers or peasants, not wealthy landowners (Propp, “Monotheism,” 548); these texts and also narrative texts are often skeptical of royalty as well. On the limited nature of the elite vs. popular distinction for the study of ancient Israel, see further Propp’s astute comments on 550. This is not to say that such a contrast is never useful; Ugaritic written material, in contrast to biblical material, demonstrably reflects the concerns of an elite group in an urban setting. But the contrast is surprisingly inappropriate when applied to Israelite texts.
16. Dever, *Did God*, 184.
17. Tigay, *You Shall* and, more briefly, Tigay, “Israelite Religion.”
18. Tigay, *You Shall*, 178–80. Cf. Propp, “Monotheism,” 549: “Taking biblical claims of rampant heresy literally is somewhat like envisioning a thriving covenant at Salem, Massachusetts.” For a discussion of the reasons biblical authors overstated the extent of

Israelite polytheism, see especially Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 659–62, 667–72. At least one of the reasons suggested by Kaufmann cannot be correct. Kaufmann argued that the biblical authors were so unfamiliar with real polytheism that they erroneously attributed to polytheists the belief he calls fetishism – that is, the idea that gods and goddesses really were present in idols; indeed, that the gods were the physical objects themselves. Many scholars who criticize Kaufmann note that he overlooked the possibility that the biblical authors engaged in satire in these descriptions. Even more importantly, the Mesopotamian *mīs pī* and *pīt pī* texts published after Kaufmann completed his work show that both Kaufmann and the scholars who criticized him were wrong to assume that the biblical descriptions were inaccurate (for a discussion of these Mesopotamian texts, see [Chapter 1](#)). On the basis of these texts, we now know that the biblical authors in fact understood the attitude toward cult statues correctly: The neighbors of the Israelites did believe a deity was present in a *šalmu* – though, as I argue in Chapter 1, they did not believe that the deity was exclusively present in the statue. Thus we now know two things that neither Kaufmann nor his critics knew: (1) Ancient Near Eastern polytheists were not fetishist (because they did not completely identify the god and the statue), though they did regard the god as literally present in the statue. (2) The biblical authors did not think their neighbors were fetishists; rather, they likely understood their neighbors’ ideas about divine presence in a statue and represented it fairly accurately, if mockingly. It should further be noted that Kaufmann’s mistaken idea that the Israelites believed their neighbors to be fetishists is hardly central to Kaufmann’s thesis about the prevalence of Israelite monotheism; it is perfectly possible to reject this specific claim of Kaufmann’s while accepting his larger thesis.

19. Miller, “Absence,” 198 n.2.
20. This finding is in accord with the conclusion of Mettinger, *No Graven*, 145. There Mettinger discusses the Israelite aversion to images in the larger context of Northwest Semitic religions, which displayed similar characteristics, though to a lesser degree, already in the Bronze Age. Consequently, Mettinger concludes, “Israelite aniconism is as old as Israel itself and not a late innovation. The express prohibition of images is just the logical conclusion of a very long development” (145). For a further defense of this thesis, see Mettinger, “Aniconism”; Mettinger, “Conversation”; Hendel, “Aniconism”; and Lewis, “Divine Images.”
21. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, which was first published in German in 1992. I have summarized information especially from Chapters 5–9. On the decline of anthropomorphic representation of deities early in Iron Age Israel, see especially the useful summary in 173–4 (but note exceptions to this tendency, 306–16, 341–9). On monotheism and monolatry, see especially 277–81. On the emergence of greater polytheistic tendencies in the late preexilic period, see 323–49; on a reaction to this development and a greater stress on avoiding any portrayals of the deity, even symbolic ones such as a sun disk, see 354–67. Uehlinger, incidentally, later recanted these conclusions, arguing that preexilic Israelite religion was thoroughly polytheistic; see Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic.” The treatment of the evidence in the earlier work remains the more convincing. See the critique of the later work of Uehlinger in Mettinger, “Conversation,” 278–81.
22. See the similar conclusion in Propp, “Monotheism,” 546–51.
23. Concerning Moabites, Edomites, and Ammonites, we have too little evidence to make any firm conclusions. However, it is perfectly possible that their religions might be

similar to that of ancient Israel: They may have prayed primarily to one particular deity. Cf. Mark Smith, *Early*, 24–6.

24. This helpful classification follows Dever, *Did God*, 176–9.
25. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 164 and 202, and cf. Dever, *Did God*, 176–7.
26. Dever, *Did God*, 177–9. Mazar, *Archaeology*, 501–2, similarly identifies them as goddesses, specifically Ashtoret.
27. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 164–6.
28. So Dever, *Did God*, 179.
29. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 332.
30. See Meyers, *Discovering*, 162, and Dever, *Did God*, 187.
31. For a comprehensive review of these figurines, see Kletter, *Judean Pillar-Figurines*, with a review of literature in 10–28 and 73–81. For the chronological and geographic distribution of these extremely common figurines, see 40–8.
32. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 333–6. A similar conclusion is reached in Kletter, *Judean Pillar-Figurines*, 76–81, who tentatively identifies the figurine as depicting Asherah for magical purposes. Mazar, *Archaeology*, 501–2, does not distinguish between these figurines and those in the previous category, regarding both as depictions of Ashtoret.
33. Kletter, *Judean Pillar-Figurines*, 10.
34. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 328.
35. Dever, *Did God*, 187–8; see the similar conclusion in Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 333. Kletter, *Judean Pillar-Figurines*, 77, 80–1, also regards the figurines as having a magical purpose, though, he stresses, one that was likely part of rather than opposed to Yhwhistic religion.
36. Meyers, *Discovering*, 162.
37. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 329. Contrast the clear continuity, albeit with specific areas of innovation, between the naked figurines (from category one) with Late Bronze Canaanite figures; see Keel and Uehlinger, 163.
38. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 159.
39. See James B. Pritchard, *Palestinian*, 83–7.
40. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 159. Kletter, *Judean Pillar-Figurines*, 73–4, criticizes the theory that the figurines represent human females, but his criticisms are not convincing. He notes that the heads of the figurines are uniform and lack individuation, a circumstance that “hints that they symbolized the same figure, and not many individual women” (74). But Pritchard, Frymer-Kensky, and Meyers do not argue that each figurine represents a different particular human woman. Rather, they argue that the figurines represent human mothers in general, as a class. Raz further argues that the absence of a prominent pubic area argues against the fertility interpretation, but as Dever has noted, the prominent breasts and absence of a vulva indicate that the figurines represent a nursing mother rather than a pregnant or nubile woman. There are many sorts of fertility, and these figurines direct our attention to what happens after birth, not immediately before pregnancy. Finally, Raz maintains that “seeing the Judean pillar figurines as mortal women cannot constitute a full explanation, since it does not answer the question of what the meaning of such figurines was” (74). This point, however, in no way undermines the identification of the figurines as portraying mortal women; it only reminds us that this identification is only part of a full interpretation. In fact Frymer-Kensky does go on to answer the question of how these human figurines functioned when stating that they are tangible prayer for nourishment. Similarly, the

notion that they are talismans or artifacts used for the purpose of performing sympathetic magic provides precisely the sort of explanation of a human figurine that Raz calls for.

Similarly, van der Toorn, “Israelite Figurines,” 54, rejects the idea that these figurines were amulets, but the only reason he gives for this rejection is the fact that they were found in many different settings, not only in domestic ones. Why their widespread diffusion should somehow argue against the interpretation that they were amulets is not explained. He goes on to argue (59) that they were imitations of cult statues found in temples purchased by pilgrims for use at home or as souvenirs. In fact, the lack of continuity with any known statues of goddesses in the ancient Near East militates against this highly speculative thesis. A further problem with van der Toorn’s discussion is his failure to distinguish clearly among the various sorts of female figurines found in ancient Israelite contexts; he tends to discuss figurines as a homogeneous category, noting in an indiscriminate manner motley characteristics that fit his thesis. Because the three types of figurines are in fact quite distinct in terms of shape, iconography, date, geography, and setting, characteristics of one type cannot be used to argue anything about another type.

41. It is significant that some halachic sources not only condemn magical practice but also need in particular to denounce the use of biblical verses, Torah scrolls, *tefillin*, and *mezuzot* for magical purposes – a circumstance that demonstrates not only that Jews practiced magic but that they practiced magic as part of what they considered rabbinic Judaism. See Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, *Sefer Madda*⁵, *Hilkhot ‘Abodat Kokhabim* 11.12 and *Sefer Ahabah*, *Hilkot Mezuzah* 5.5; Joseph Karo, *Shulḥan ‘Arukh Yoreh De’ah* 179.8, 10, 12 and 288.15.
42. On the sin of magic as rebellion, see Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 106.
43. See [Chapter 2](#), with bibliographic references in n.31.
44. For descriptions of the stand and its four registers, see especially Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 157–60; Dever, *Did God*, 151–4, 219–21. The stand was discovered in 1968 in excavations directed by Paul Lapp; see Lapp, “1969 Excavations,” 42–4.
45. Judges 1.27 claims that Ta’anakh was not conquered by Israelites in the earliest stage of Israel’s presence in Canaan (that is, in the thirteenth or twelfth centuries), but both biblical and (independently) archaeological evidence make clear that Ta’anakh was an Israelite site by the tenth century. According to 1 Kings 4.12, Ta’anakh served as an administrative center for Solomon in the eleventh century. On the archaeological evidence, see Mazar, *Archaeology*, 333 (who in fact finds reason to reject the biblical date and dates the Israelite entry to the early Iron Age; on the discontinuity between Late Bronze Canaanite and early Iron Israelite strata there, see also Glock, “Taanach,” 4:1432). Consequently, there is little reason to view the stand as indicative of Canaanite rather than Israelite religious culture (contra Hestrin, “Cult Stand,” 75–7, and Tigay, *You Shall*, 92–3).
46. See the description in Ezekiel 1.5–11. Ezekiel identifies this creature as a כרוב in 10.15.
47. For a defense of descriptions of viewing the animal on the fourth level as a horse, see Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 158, and Taylor, *Yhwh*, 30–2 (contra Hestrin, “Cult Stand,” 67, esp. n.7, and Lapp, “1969 Excavations,” 44, both of whom view it as a bull).
48. See Hestrin, “Cult Stand,” 67–71 and 74, and Taylor, *Yhwh*, 28–37.
49. The association of a goddess and a tree flanked by goats who eat its foliage goes back to the late Bronze Age; see Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 56–7, 125–7. For a convincing linkage

- of this sort of tree specifically with Asherah, see especially the brilliant interpretation in Hestrin, “Lachish,” and Hestrin, “Understanding,” and the summary of her work in Dever, *Did God*, 225–8. See Keel and Uehlinger, 72–4, who nevertheless hesitate to make this identification specifically in regard to the Ta’anakh stand.
50. See especially Hestrin, “Cult Stand,” 67–71; Taylor, *Yhwh*, 28–9; and the very clear summary in Dever, *Did God*, 220–1.
 51. Taylor, *Yhwh*, 29–30, contra Hestrin, “Cult Stand,” 74–7, who attempts to identify this deity as Baal, on the basis of her identification of the animal in the top register as a bull (an identification that is mistaken; see n.47 earlier). A careful review of the evidence by Hadley, *Cult*, 169–76, supports Taylor’s thesis.
 52. Some scholars argue that the Israelite prohibition on making images of Yhwh is a late, seventh-century development. However, T. N. D. Mettinger conclusively demonstrates the antiquity of the aniconic cult (that is, the absence of physical representations of Yhwh in human or animal form) in ancient Israel and to some degree among Northwest Semites generally, though programmatic aniconism in the sense of an absolute rejection of such representations crystallized only among Judeans in the sixth century. See the literatures cited in n.20 in this chapter. In light of this demonstration, Taylor’s reference to the tenth-century hesitation to portray Yhwh physically is well grounded.
 53. On the association of Yhwh with the sun, see Mark Smith, “Near Eastern Background”; Mark Smith, *Early*, 115–24; Janowski, “JHWH und der Sonnengott” (with a extensive review of the secondary literature on 192–9); and especially the comprehensive evaluation of artifactual and textual evidence in Taylor, *Yhwh*, 24–91 and 92–256, respectively.
 54. Nahum Sarna, “Psalm XIX,” argues that Psalm 19 polemicizes against worship of a sun god who is separate from Yhwh – that is, against a form of apostasy. In light of the work of Smith, Janowski, and Taylor cited in the previous note, however, it becomes clear that Psalm 19 argues not against foreign influence or apostasy; rather, it takes issue with the tendency of many Israelites to view Yhwh as the sun god. See further my remarks on the psalm in Sommer, *Psalms 1–30*, §19, and the critique of Sarna in Mark Smith, “Seeing God,” 178 n.28.
 55. See, for example, the eighth-century Judean seal of אֱלֹהֵי עֶבֶר אֶחָד (Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods*, 275 illus. 273), in which a sun disk wearing a crown is flanked by *seraphim* or serpents (cf. Isaiah 6.1–7). See also the horse figurines carrying a disk that may be a sun disk (discussed in Keel and Uehlinger, 343–7).
 56. Taylor, *Yhwh*, 33 n.4.
 57. See the classic treatment by Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 44–60. See also the discussion of El’s relation to Yhwh in L’Heureux, *Rank*, 49–70, and Mark Smith, *Origins*, 139–48.
 58. This is also the conclusion of Hadley, *Cult*, 206–9, and of John Day, “Asherah (*JBL* Article),” 392–3.
 59. Consequently, by the narrow definition of monotheism favored by many scholars, this commandment on its own cannot be termed monotheistic, though it is clearly monolatrous – as has often been noted; see, e.g., Müller, “Gott,” 136–7.
 60. On the different meanings of this line in different liturgical contexts, in some of which it attests monotheism, in others polytheism, see the astute observations of Mark Smith, *Origins*, 50.
 61. Labuschagne, *Incomparability*, 34–66. On statements regarding gods’ incomparability, see also Morton Smith, “Common Theology,” 138–40, and Petersen, “Israel,” 96 with further bibliography.

62. See, e.g., the prayers to Ashur in Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:699 and to Marduk in 2:704–5, 726, 727, 729, 737.
63. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:710.
64. Translation from Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:503. A nearly identical first-millennium version also exists; see 2:503. Similar language appears in the much older Agushaya poem praising Ishtar; see Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:83.
65. *Ibid.*, 2:613.
66. Translation by Wolfgang Heimpel, in Hallo and Younger, *Canonical Compositions*, 531. Another translation is found in Jacobsen, *Harps*, 142, who dates the text to the Ur III period. This is a particularly revealing example: The initial lines quoted earlier insist that Nanshe's power is incomparable, which might lead one to think of her cult as monotheistic, but the next several lines make clear that she is subject to gods more powerful than she, who allotted powers to her.
67. See Gottlieb, "El," 163. On monolatry in Mesopotamia, see Van Selms, "Temporary," who demonstrates that worshippers in the ancient Near East sometimes limited themselves to the worship of a single god for a specific time; and see also Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 87–8, and cf. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 62–3.
68. See Morton Smith, "Common Theology," 139.
69. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:712.
70. Contra, e.g., Halpern, "Brisker," 88.
71. On the particular similarity between biblical and Babylonian conceptions of Yhwh and Marduk, respectively, as king of the gods, see Mark Smith, *Origins*, 51, and cf. the highly perceptive and original insight of Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 244 n.9.
72. The verb Foster translates here as "We bestow upon you" in Akkadian is *niddinka* (from the root *nadānu*), precisely equivalent to the verb קָבַח (from the Northwest Semitic root קִבַּח), which I translate as "Bestow!" in my quotation from the similar context in Psalm 29.1. For the Akkadian text, see Talon, *Enuma Eliš*, 51.
73. Translation from Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:371.
74. For further literature relating to this possibility, see n.15 in [Chapter 1](#).
75. Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:153.
76. Regarding this question, cf. the useful formulation of Whybray, *Heavenly*, 56.
77. The second-to-last line of Psalm 29 might be seen as confirmation that Yhwh's rulership belongs to the first of these two models, because Yhwh's control is described as permanent: "Yhwh was enthoned at the flood, and Yhwh has reigned eternally as king." But it is possible that the text intends a jussive verb – that is, rather than MT's וַיִּשָּׁבַח we might read וַיִּשָּׁבֶח. This form could be a regular prefix ("Yhwh will reign/Yhwh reigns") or a short prefix/jussive ("Let Yhwh reign forever"). If the latter, the text uses phrasing that could logically be used of a god who is not all powerful; indeed, this sort of phrasing might even be applied to a mortal king (cf. 1 Kings 1.31).
78. Roth, *Law Collections*, 76.
79. My translation follows the old text preserved in the Septuagint and 4QDeut^b 9; cf. the related reading in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. See especially the helpful discussion of the issues here and in 32.43 in Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 513–18.
80. On the stereotypical use of the number seventy here and its wider context, see Mark Smith, *Origins*, 55, and cf. 48–9.
81. For the concept in Deuteronomy, see also 29.25.

82. On Nachmanides' reading, see Goshen-Gottstein, "Other Gods." Interestingly, Nachmanides arrived at this interpretation even without the text of Deuteronomy 32.9 preserved in the Septuagint and 4QDeut^b mentioned in n.79 in this chapter; of course, Nachmanides based his reading on the MT, which reads "in accordance with the number of the children of Israel" rather than "in accordance with the number of gods." What was a possible reading for him is even stronger in light of the Septuagint and Qumran texts. For a similar reading of these verses, see Schenker, "Monothéisme," 438–41, who astutely notes that by praying to their own gods, the other nations also give glory to Yhwh, who assigned those gods to them and commanded them to pray to those gods.
83. On הורה in the sense of "ruling" (precisely equivalent to the later Hebrew-Aramaic term פסק), see also Deuteronomy 17.8–11, Jeremiah 18.18, Haggai 2.11–13, and Malachi 2.7.
84. Hebrew, הלהך בשם; I understand this phrase following the LXX translation of הלהך בשם as κατακαυχῆσονται (from κατακαυχάσμαι = to boast, be proud of, exult in) in Zechariah 10.12.
85. Further, as Schenker, "Monothéisme," 442, points out, the other gods really exist, but they exist only in some limited time frame, whereas Yhwh alone exists forever.
86. More specifically, they exemplify what E. Bolaju Idowu calls "diffused monotheism" (on which see n.10 in this chapter) and what Adrian Schenker calls "a monotheism of transcendence which encompasses polytheism" (on which see n.11).
87. The same is true of the many passages in the Pentateuch, Kings, and prophetic literature in which Yhwh sends foreign armies to punish Israel. Yhwh assigns roles to other gods, including that of punishing Israel. This becomes explicit in Isaiah 9.5: "Woe to you Ashur, rod of my anger . . ." The word אשור here refers not just to Assyria but, quite possibly, to the god Ashur, who serves as Yhwh's מלאך – hardly an unusual role for a foreign god.
88. Anu and Enlil appoint Marduk ruler of Babylon and of the whole world in the preface to Hammurapi's law code (Roth, *Law Collections*, 76); similarly, Anu, Enlil, Ea, Belet-ili, and Ninlil acknowledge the sovereignty of Ashur in a seventh-century Assyrian prayer (Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2:700). But this does not indicate that Anu and Enlil in the former case or Anu, Enlil, Ea, Belet-ili, and Ninlil in the latter are the sole gods worthy of adoration; on the contrary, this act represents their retirement from active duty. Further, neither they nor the new king they appoint goes on to appoint the other gods and goddesses over their respective dominions.
89. The theology found in these passages and others in First Isaiah is highly integrated and self-consistent. The question of whether the text of Isaiah 1–33 dates to the eighth century or later is irrelevant to the point I am making about the integrated monotheistic theology in this textual corpus. My phrasing in the body reflects my judgment that there is no reason to suspect that these chapters contain any material that needs to be dated later than the eighth century, with the possible exception of a few verses here and there as well as chapters 24–27 and a small part of [chapter 14](#). See further my remarks in Sommer, "Is It Good," 322–3 and nn.2–4 there.
90. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:221–85, and cf. 1:286–417. Individual points that Kaufmann makes in arguing for the early dating of biblical monotheism have been critiqued, sometimes justifiably (see n.18 in this chapter). Other issues, such as the place of magic or myth in Israelite religion, have been stated in a more nuanced form. (See in particular Uffenheimer, "Myth," who prefers to speak of "biblical monotheistic myth" [p. 135] and to examine its differences from pagan myth rather than claiming that the Hebrew Bible

lacks myth. A similar approach is found in Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 67–107.) Further, one can fault his refusal to acknowledge exceptions to his generalizations and his consequent attempt to interpret crucial evidence in a forced manner. (See for example his treatment of Elephantine [1:679–82], and his discussion of prophecy in Mari in Kaufmann, *Religion*, 215 n.1.)

Nevertheless, Kaufmann's fundamental insight about the real nature of the distinction between polytheism and monotheism (to wit, the relationship between God and the world) and the absence of the former in biblical texts remains compelling. On the validity of Kaufmann's essential claims regarding the distinction between Israelite and other ancient Near Eastern conceptions of divinity, a distinction that involves God's freedom from nature and fate, see especially the comments of Halbertal and Margalit 71–8 and 104. See further Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 5–6 and *passim*; Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 107–11. On the critique of Kaufmann in Levenson, *Creation*, see n.106 later. For an eloquent restatement of Kaufmann's approach that is at once deeply sensitive to the Mesopotamian evidence and theologically nuanced, see Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 83–107.

91. See KTU 1.2.i.21–25. The placement of this material in various reconstructions varies. For Pardee's translation, see Hallo and Younger, *Canonical Compositions*, 246b; and see Mark Smith, "The Baal Cycle," 99.
92. On the existence of a heavenly council in the background of the P creation account, see the references in n.64 in [Chapter 3](#).

Some scholars object to the idea that Genesis 1.26 implies a divine council was present at the creation because the idea that God would consult with other divine beings at the creation conflicts with the major thrust of the creation account in Genesis 1, which is that God created the world by Himself (so Cassuto, *Genesis*, 55–6). In fact, God is not described as consulting them but simply as informing them of his decision. Indeed the next verse pointedly states that God created humanity – and whatever beings God addressed in 1.26 have no role. These verses do not portray any group efforts or deliberation. Verse 26 deliberately emphasizes the contrast to the polytheistic (especially Mesopotamian) creation stories that serve as the backdrop and foil for Genesis 1. By alluding in 1.26 to the motif of group action that appears in other creation accounts, the text highlights the absence of the motif more acutely than it would have done by leaving out mention of it altogether. (The same logic underlies the reference in 1.21 to God's creating the **הַתַּיִמִּים** [as opposed to God's fight with Tanin]; it may also underlie the description in 1.9–10 of God's creation of **הַיָּמִים** [as opposed to a fight with Yam], and the reference in 1.2 to God's wind hovering over the impersonal **תְּהוֹם** [as opposed to a fight with Tiamit in which winds are wielded against her as a weapon]. For more on this aspect of the rhetoric in Genesis 1, see Childs, *Myth and Reality*, 42–3.) Further, Garr, *Image*, 203–4, points out that in verse 26, God says to the angels, "Let's **עָשָׂה** a human," using a less restricted word for creation. But in verse 27 God makes humanity on God's own – and the verb is **בָּרָא** now, a verb used exclusively with the subject God in the Hebrew Bible (as noted already by Melammed, "Linguistic," 1 n.1). Further, Garr points out that though God says "Let's make humanity in *our* image (**בְּצַלְמֵנוּ**)" in 26, God makes the humans "in *His* image (**בְּצַלְמִי**)" in 27. (The last point is also made by Bird, "Male and Female," 144 n.51).

93. On the existence of a divine council in Isaiah 40, see Cross, "The Council of YHWH in Second Isaiah."

94. This sort of differentiation, in which Yhwh is on one side and humans and other gods are on the other, is crucial for any sensible definition of monotheism. On the importance of this sort of differentiation, see also Schenker, "Monothéisme," 438.
95. On Psalm 8.6, see especially Targum, Radak, and LXX.
96. For this motif, see also Psalms 103.20–22, and 148.1–3, where we find the phrase "angels" rather than "gods."
97. One might argue that I put too much emphasis on *Enuma Elish* in my reasoning. Saggs rightly points out that *Enuma Elish* "is not necessarily to be taken as incorporating an account of a standard Mesopotamian view of cosmic creation." Other accounts existed, and not all of them involved conflict among the gods (Saggs, *Encounter*, 62–3). Nonetheless, what is significant in the contrast I draw here is the prevalence of the motif of theomachy among the polytheistic cultures of the ancient Near East and the eastern Mediterranean, as well as the absence of real struggle among divinities in the Hebrew Bible. The consistent pattern that emerges from comparing various Israelite and non-Israelite texts does demonstrate a fundamental theological difference between the Hebrew Bible and its environment.
98. The bibliography is of epic proportions. See especially John Day, *God's Conflict*, as well as Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 112–44 (and, on the relationship between Baal and Yhwh more generally, 145–94). A helpful review of the main primary texts is provided by Loewenstamm, *Evolution*, 240–57.
99. Cf. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 423. It is possible that in some lost Israelite texts a story with a genuine struggle was once told (see Cassuto, "Epic," 1:69–109, esp. 80–97), but what concerns me here is the biblical portrayal of Yhwh, not speculation about texts that may once have existed and disappeared. The single biblical exception may be Psalm 82, if one follows the reading suggested by scholars including Mark Smith, *Origins*, 155–7. According to this reading, which is based on the sound judgment that the word אֱלֹהִים in verse 1 stands in place of the tetragrammaton (because the tetragrammaton has usually been replaced with אֱלֹהִים in Psalms 42–83), Yhwh is not the same person as El in this poem. In this case, Psalm 82 describes the rise of the young god Yhwh to supremacy in the council of the older deity El, who is effectively given the role of god emeritus. On the other hand, if Yhwh/*Elohim* in this text is the same individual as El (or if the term עֲדַת אֵל is simply a frozen expression meaning the divine council, as argued by Mullen, *Divine Council*, 230), then another reading is possible, according to which Psalm 82 depicts not Yhwh's ascent to power but the moment in which the human believer comes to understand Yhwh's universal dominion. For a sensitive presentation of this reading, see Tsevat, "God and the Gods in Assembly," and see the brief presentation of this reading in Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 61–2. Against the sort of reading represented by Smith, see the remarks of Schenker, "Monothéisme," 443.
100. Similarly, one might object to my argument here by noting that Yhwh fights against other gods in the Exodus story. Indeed, the biblical narrators specifically present the Exodus events as a battle between Israel's deity and the gods of the Egyptians (Exodus 12.12, 18.11; Numbers 33.4). But the motif of struggle so prominent in the Mesopotamian and Ugaritic texts is absent in the Exodus story. The biblical narrative shows that Yhwh had no need to (as it were) break a sweat in defeating the Egyptian gods. The conflict was drawn out over some ten plagues not because the Egyptian gods were successful in slowing Yhwh down, but because God wanted to prolong the Egyptians' suffering so that His own victory would appear all the more impressive (see Exodus 14.4, 17–18).

101. *Enuma Elish* 2:50.
102. *Atrahasis* 1:167. Rabbinic literature not infrequently portrays God as weeping; see, e.g., b. *Berakhot* 59a, b. *Ḥagigah* 5b, *Pesiqta deRav Kahana* 15.4. Even in these rabbinic texts, however, God weeps not because God feels threatened by some greater power or because God has been defeated by one, but because God has punished Israel, for whom God retains (in spite of divine anger) abiding love. (On the suffering of God in rabbinic literature, see especially the magnificent collection of sources and discussion in Heschel, *Torah min Hashamayim*, 1:68–93, available in English with additional notes in Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 108–26; see also Eyali, “God,” who stresses especially the role of Jewish-Christian polemic in encouraging the rise of these motifs. On divine weeping specifically in rabbinic literature and its connection with ancient Mesopotamian tropes, see the thorough discussion in Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 160–73.) On the limits of monotheistic myth among the rabbis, see further the crucial reservations of Fishbane, 212–13; In the end, creatures remain creatures and God remains in charge.
103. Granted, God can be moved to action by prayer, but this is somewhat different: No threat against Yhwh is made. Even Moses’ demand to be relieved of his job and his life if need be (Numbers 11.20), though a threat, is not a threat directed against the life, safety, or power of Yhwh.
104. See El’s capitulation to Yamm in KTU 1.2.i.30–38 (in Pardee’s translation, Hallo and Younger, *Canonical Compositions*, 246b; in Mark Smith, “The Baal Cycle,” 100–1), and also El’s capitulation to Anat’s threat of violence in KTU 1.3.v.19–29 (Pardee in Hallo and Younger, 254b; Smith in Parker, 105).
105. On the similarities, see Mark Smith, *Origins*, 42–61; Mullen, *Divine Council*, 117–20; and Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 42–8.
106. All this is not to deny that some or many Israelites might have imagined Yhwh feeling vulnerable or intimidated as Anshar, Enlil, and El are. There may even be hints of such a view in the Bible here and there. Yhwh does seem to feel threatened by humankind in Genesis 11.6 (an obscure verse in any event), and perhaps in Genesis 6.1–4 (among the most obscure verses in all scripture). Both of these are from J (on J’s tendency to portray Yhwh’s act of creation, and hence Yhwh Himself, as flawed; see Knohl, *Divine Symphony*, 37–49). Even these verses, however, do not regard any other force as superior to or mightier than Yhwh. Further, when reading any of the narratives that give a sense that some being or force opposes Yhwh, we need to recall that we are in fact reading a narrative – that is, a text with a plot and hence, by definition, with conflict. If there is to be a monotheistic narrative, it is inevitable that this narrative will give some sense that the one God’s power is limited or at least challenged. As Propp points out, “In any culture, we must distinguish between mythology, where gods’ powers are limited for plot purposes, and cult, where gods are lauded as virtually omnipotent” (Propp, “Monotheism,” 566 n.142).

Levenson, *Creation*, 8–9, argues against Kaufmann’s reading of the passages in which sea creatures fight against Yhwh, pointing out that some of them (in particular Psalm 74.12–17) do not make clear that they describe a revolt rather than a genuine themachy. Nonetheless, the contrast between the biblical passages taken as a whole and the Mesopotamian or Canaanite passages as a whole remains striking. Even in verses such as Genesis 6.1–4, Genesis 11.6, and Psalm 74.12–17, God succeeds in thwarting the will of the other beings permanently, which is much more than Tiamat or even Enlil can say.

Levenson, *Creation*, *passim*, esp. 11–25, further argues that many biblical passages attest to the biblical belief that God did not in fact vanquish chaos at the outset of creation. Each of his arguments demands attention.

(1) Levenson maintains (11–13) that passages like Isaiah 51.9–11, in which the prophet calls on God’s mighty arm to wake up and defeat chaos as it had done of old, show that those adversarial forces “were not annihilated in perpetuity in primordial times” (12). In fact, however, the adversaries in these passages are not primordial, semidivine monsters but human beings (usually the Babylonians) who have attacked Jerusalem. The existence of the current adversary, then, does not show that the mythic forces of evil still exist; rather, it reflects Yhwh’s sovereign decision to give human beings free will and the power to use it for good and for ill. As we see later, this represents the primary limitation on Yhwh in the Hebrew Bible, but we must note that it is a self-imposed limitation and one that Yhwh can easily thwart if Yhwh so chooses.

(2) In Job 40.25–32, God does not crush Leviathan but imprisons him. “The confinement of chaos,” Levenson points out (17), “rather than its elimination is the essence of creation, and the survival of ordered reality hangs only upon God’s vigilance.” Here again, however, the persistence of chaos results from Yhwh’s own decision, not from any limitation on Yhwh’s power.

(3) Levenson’s disagreement with Kaufmann is smaller than one might initially think. Levenson acknowledges “the inevitability of the defeat of Yhwh’s adversaries” so that the faithful Yhwhist must “wait patiently and confidently for his master’s reactivation of his infinite power to deliver. The benevolent, world-ordering side of God may be eclipsed for a while, but it can never be uprooted or overthrown” (21). In this case, Levenson’s understanding of the biblical picture of God is ultimately the same as Kaufmann’s, but Levenson describes the theology in a more nuanced way. We might sum up Kaufmann’s view thus: *The biblical God is omnipotent*. We can sum up Levenson’s view thus: *The biblical God can choose to be omnipotent. Indeed, the biblical God chose to be omnipotent at creation, and biblical authors are confident that one day God will choose to be omnipotent again. Meanwhile, they acknowledge that they live in a deeply imperfect world*. Levenson’s reading of the biblical material is influenced by certain strands of rabbinic and kabbalist thought (concerning which see n.102 earlier) and also by the reality of the world we inhabit; it is also a more accurate and subtle description of biblical theology. But ultimately his view of divine omnipotence and Kaufmann’s are congruent.

107. As indicated in n.99 earlier, Mark Smith’s reading of Psalm 82 would belie this claim. On the effects of his reading of Psalm 82 on Kaufmann’s argument, see Levenson, *Creation*, 6–7. On the other hand, the current context in the Hebrew Bible pushes the reader toward the reading found in Tsevat and Levenson, even if Smith’s reading may better reflect the intention of the author of the psalm (and this claim itself is open to question).

108. See, for example, Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 40–60 and 145–94.

109. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 244 n.9.

110. Zenger, “Jhwistischen Werk,” 50–1. Significantly, Zenger is speaking here specifically about the J text – which some scholars would point to as a premonotheistic text. His point is equally strong for all other biblical texts that describe Yhwh in terms borrowed from other ancient theologies. Zenger does not apply the term “monotheism” to J, describing it rather as “unpolemically monolatrous” (53). He regards later expansions

of J (which are largely identical with what classical source critics call E) as “polemically monolatrous” and dates true monotheism to the sixth century. The reasoning behind this use of terms, apparently, rests on several assumptions: One is that ideas evolve in a straightforward and largely unidirectional manner, so that texts that come after J must be more advanced, and true monotheism can emerge only at the end of a long process that scholars must reconstruct. The second is that a text can only be termed monotheistic if it specifically denies the existence of other gods; for Zenger, monotheism must always be explicitly polemical. For this reason, he dates true monotheism to the sixth century. In fact, however, a monotheistic text need not deny the existence of other gods, and it is doubtful that sixth-century texts such as Deutero-Isaiah do so. Further, Zenger’s assumption that a monotheistic text must specifically attack polytheism would render a great many Jewish, Christian, and Muslim texts nonmonotheistic. If we jettison the evolutionary assumption and the extraordinarily narrow definition of monotheism that Zenger employs, we can readily conclude that J is a monotheistic text.

111. See the Laws of Hammurapi, Prologue, i.1–26. For text and translation, see Roth, *Law Collections*, 76.
112. E.g., Marduk has Enlil-status or authority in the Prologue of the Code of Hammurapi cited in the previous note. For further examples involving Marduk, other gods, and temples, see *CAD*, volume 1, part 2, 150–2 (s.v. *anūtu*), and volume 7, 85–6 (s.v. *illilūtu*).
113. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:245, 419–22.
114. These tendencies are found, with various permutations and in differing versions even within one mythological corpus, not only in Greek, Canaanite, and Akkadian but also in Sumerian and Hittite mythology. See Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 41–2.
115. So Weinfeld, “God the Creator,” 123–4.
116. On the nature of the divine realm in polytheistic texts as embedded within the material world, see what amounts to a restatement of Kaufmann’s position in Uffenheimer, “Myth,” 141–2. See also Fishbane, “Israel,” esp. 50–7. Cf. Fohrer, *History*, 79, who notes that Yhwh does not act within the cycle of nature to be indistinguishable from it (as is the case, for instance, with Baal and Mot); He can interrupt that cycle.
117. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:245, 447–8. See also Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, 86.
118. See the *Atrahasis*, Assyrian recension I:iii (Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:188; Dalley, *Myths*, 16).
119. In the last several sentences I follow Saggs, *Encounter*, 131–3, who argues that the Mesopotamian omen literature was at its core nontheistic: The omens did not reveal the will of a god who was communicating with humans; rather, they reflected the extraordinarily complex and interconnected structure of the universe itself. “The omen thus represented not a god’s decision upon a situation but rather a recognized correlation between past and future phenomena. The gods came into the matter only as the divine beings able to intervene to cut the web” (132). In contrast, Bottéro emphasizes the religious and god-centered nature of divination; see Bottéro, *Religion*, 170–85. Bottéro notes that before performing some omens, the human practitioners would beseech the gods, which suggests that gods could inscribe a message into the object utilized for the omen. Saggs argues that these passages are late theistic additions to what was basically a nontheistic literature. He points out that the deities invoked in these occasional passages remain remarkably lacking in specific or personal characteristics. Both Saggs and Bottéro provide intelligent readings of the texts at hand, which result from

the fact that both understandings of omen literature obtained in various places and times. Nonetheless, the presence of the understanding Saggs demonstrates indicates a fascinating contrast between Mesopotamian polytheism and the religion of biblical texts (though not the religion of all ancient Israelites): At least at times, the powers inherent in matter are thought of as independent of divinity in the former but not the latter.

120. Herodotus, *History* 1.91.1. Translation from Godley, *Herodotus*, 1:117.
121. Walter F. Otto, *Homeric Gods*, 263–4. See also Guthrie, *Greeks and Their Gods*, 130, and Henrichs, “Moirā,” 8:340–3, esp. 342.
122. In 217, Night gives birth to two females, Fate (Μοίρα) and Doom (Κῆρα); in 211, Night had given birth to two males with similar names, Destiny (Μόρον) and Ruin (Κῆρα).
123. Walter F. Otto, *Homeric Gods*, 267.
124. Thus Henrichs can describe Zeus as being at times the “Führer der Moira,” Henrichs, “Moirā,” 8:342. See also Lloyd-Jones, *Justice*, 5, who insists that Zeus is in fact stronger than fate, but his attempt to evade the evidence of lines such as *Iliad* 16:439 is not convincing.
125. In light of the material discussed in this and the previous paragraphs, I cannot agree with the critique of Kaufmann in Mark Smith, *Origins*, 12 and 201 n.70. Smith writes, “There is little, if any, evidence for an independent order having mastery over the deities in either Ugaritic or Mesopotamian mythologies” (12). In fact, the facts Kaufmann emphasizes – the mortality of gods; their youth in comparison with the universe itself; their use of magic, a technology available to humans as well, to effect change in the world – clearly denote the existence of an independent order in both mythologies. Smith’s protest notwithstanding, the realm of the gods in both Ugaritic and Mesopotamian literature is deeply embedded in the world of matter, a circumstance that differs from what we find in the Hebrew Bible as a whole. Smith further asserts, “No idea of such an independent order of ‘fate’ exists in ancient Middle Eastern mythologies. Ugaritic lacks a word even approximating this notion, and Akkadian *šimtu*, usually taken to mean ‘fate,’ refers to a ‘determined course’ that can be changed” (12). It is true that the Greek thinkers articulate this idea with reference to the terms Μοίρα and ἀνάγκη, whereas Akkadian texts do not use *šimtu* in the same way. Nevertheless, in the narrative and ritual contexts described earlier, Akkadian texts make clear the gods’ subservience to forces greater than themselves. The same idea is expressed differently in Greek and Akkadian literature, and this difference of expression is hardly surprising. As a rule, what Greek thinkers state in abstract terms ancient Near Eastern thinkers convey through concrete examples (on this difference, see Geller, *Sacred Enigmas*, 6; for an Akkadian example, see Geller, “Sound and Word Plays,” 1:63–70, esp. 65–6). Thus the contrast Smith draws merely points to a typical difference between intellectual expression in these cultures, not to the absence of this concept among Babylonian and Assyrian thinkers.
126. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 247. This is the case not only in parts of the Hebrew Bible usually viewed as monotheistic (e.g., priestly and deuteronomic literature) but throughout – for example, in J, as noted by Zenger, “Jhwistischen Werk,” 41–2, who points out that in J “Yhwh’s ‘opponents’ are not gods but humans or socio-political institutions. J identifies the root of all evil in Genesis 1–11 as humanity’s striving to draw itself away from its dependence on Yhwh as the *primum agens*.” Zenger also points out (p. 40)

that already in J (as in Deutero-Isaiah, we might add) the sources of evil and chaos are traced back to Yhwh, a circumstance that shows what I would term the monotheistic nature of this source.

127. Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 72–3.
128. *Enuma Elish* 4:60–2; 4:153. Tiamat and her henchman Qingu, too, use spells to fight their foes, less successfully, as it turned out – but these spells gave the gods cause for great fear: see 1:153; 2:39; 4:71–72, 90.
129. See the similar point in Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 106, who rightly note that the Bible regards magic, like the worship of foreign gods, as a form of rebellion. For the biblical authors, both magic and the worship of foreign gods were acts of disloyalty, but they were not necessarily errors – that is, they did not necessarily involve an appeal to nonexistent forces.
130. Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 1:276.
131. A similar point appears in Lohfink, “Zur Geschichte,” 25, who notes that in pre-exilic Israelite belief, there were other gods, but biblical texts portray them as nothing more than anonymous members of Yhwh’s court. God’s real partners, Lohfink rightly notes, are human beings, not the insignificant beings who surround Yhwh in heaven. Though Lohfink does not term this belief monotheism, he nevertheless avers, “At the same time, it is indeed an understanding of God that has left typical polytheism behind” (25). See further the similar point in Zenger, “Jhwistischen Werk,” 49.
132. The same is the case for several other cases in which foreign gods are mentioned: Israelite characters in these verses are always addressing foreigners or speaking mockingly. See Propp, “Monotheism,” 553 n.73.
133. Braulik, “Das Deuteronomium und die Geburt,” 142: “Sun, moon, and stars, and thus the whole heavenly host, were reduced to a merely ordinary (as opposed to sacred) status.”
134. In a similar vein, Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 180–6, argue quite plausibly that the metaphysical or ideational differences separating many forms of monotheism and polytheism are limited, whereas the real difference between them is a matter of practicalities of worship. See further their comments on the various ways of drawing the boundary between the categories of nonpagan and pagan on 241 and 250.
135. On the problematic, or at least limited, nature of the category “monotheism” see also Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 58; Mark Smith, *Origins*, 51, 154; and Gerstenberger, *Theologies*, 275. For a supple view of the relation between monotheism and polytheism, see also Schäfer, *Mirror*, 2–3, who regards monotheism and polytheism as poles on a spectrum, along which actual religions manifest themselves in “a wide range of possible combinations and configurations” (2), and who speaks of “movements back and forth between polytheism and varying degrees of monotheism” (3). On the notion of a continuum rather than a strict separation between monotheism and polytheism, see also Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 104.

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