

the revolt against Assyria, was not *per se* an act of rebellion, then it is perhaps now necessary to think again about the degree of influence and authority that was carried by *Urdeuteronomium*, and more particularly by the people behind it, and to reassess its place among the causes of the reformation. But here we begin to go beyond the scope of the present study.¹¹⁰

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VI

ASTRAL BELIEFS IN JUDAH AND THE ANCIENT WORLD

Whilst a growing number of scholars, as has been seen, are putting forward criticisms of Östreicher and his more extravagant followers, there are as yet only a few who would deny completely the presence of officially imposed Assyrian cults in Judah. As the various recorded aspects of Judaeen paganism come to be recognized as non-Assyrian, there is an increasing tendency to resort to a statement that the astral gods, particularly the Host of Heaven, represent the Assyrian official presence. It is argued that this must be the case, since the many references to the worship of the Host of Heaven, the record of the worship of the Queen of Heaven and the possible allusion to astrology in the Old Testament are all limited to the period of Assyrian domination; and it is well known that there was plenty of astral learning in Assyria. This argument often represents a retreat to a gap in our knowledge, for the Host of Heaven is never defined or illustrated by examples and could therefore be any group of star-gods, Assyrian or otherwise. The argument from limitation to the Assyrian period is open to the same kind of criticism, for it could also be applied to other material from any book of the Assyrian era or its aftermath.¹ In view of the weakness of these generalized arguments, it seems fitting to re-examine the assertions that the astral gods were Assyrian and that their worship was officially imposed.

From Jer. 7.17-18; 44.16-19 we learn that the Queen of Heaven² was worshipped in Judah at the end of the seventh century. This goddess has been identified with the Moon³ and the Sun,⁴ but is most commonly thought to have been the Babylonian Ishtar, one of whose titles, *Šarrat Šamē*, means precisely 'Queen of Heaven'.⁵

However, there were other goddesses in the ancient world who held this title. For example, the Hurrian Hebat, who was identified with the Hittite Sun-goddess of Arinna, was known as Queen of Heaven,⁶ and on an Egyptian stele from Bethshan Anat is called 'Lady of Heaven, Mistress of All the Gods'.⁷ Therefore the name Queen of Heaven itself cannot be allowed to prejudice the discussion in favour of identification with the Assyrian goddess and it can hardly be taken to indicate that her cult was part of an obligation laid on Judah by her overlord.

There are a number of archaeological finds which show that the Palestinian mother-goddess in her own right had astral attributes before the time of Assyrian domination. They are all of the same artistic quality and the crudeness of some of them may suggest a popular, rather than a priestly origin. A roughly hewn, asymmetrical, six-pointed star was found on the wall of one of the rooms of the temple of Anat at Megiddo,⁸ and this, together with the Bethshan stele, would seem to indicate that Anat, who is now well known from the Ugaritic texts as a fertility goddess active in the restoration of Baal, was sometimes regarded as an astral deity. Confirmation for this conclusion would appear to come from a plaque found at *Tell es-Šāfi* in the Shephelah on which is depicted the figure of a typically Palestinian mother-goddess (possibly Anat, but this cannot be certain) with an Egyptian Hathor hair-style, holding a serpent in each hand. Two stars, a hexagram and a pentagram, are impressed in the field or background.⁹ The same motif of a star in the field is to be seen on a votive altar from Gezer, which is roughly contemporary with the *Tell es-Šāfi* plaque, belonging to the period of the monarchy.¹⁰ In the foreground is a lion being slain, and on its shoulder is imprinted a second star.¹¹ Perhaps this second star should be identified with the 'King Star' (*mul*LUGAL), Regulus, which stands on the shoulder of the astral lion, the constellation Leo.¹² The antiquity and importance of the astral lion in mythology and art is now well attested,¹³ and although Regulus itself is not a particularly outstanding star, being the faintest of the first magnitude, it commands a position of some eminence standing, as it does, on the shoulder of the Lion. It was also closely related by its position on the zodiacal belt with the summer solstice,¹⁴ and was therefore associated with one of the major stages in the annual cycle, and hence with fertility. Thus it would have been natural to associate Leo with the mother-

goddess, and this may well be the explanation of the scene depicted on the Gezer altar. The star in the field is probably, after the pattern of the *Tell es-Šāfi* plaque, the symbol of the mother-goddess who is seen to accompany the Lion of summer, her astral companion. This conclusion is supported by a bronze plaque from Ras Shamra on which the mother-goddess is portrayed standing on the back of a lion which has a star imprinted on its shoulder.¹⁵ The mother-goddess, as well as caring for the crops of the soil, cares also for the beasts of the field; she is the *πότνια θηρῶν*,¹⁶ as symbolized by her association with the Lion, the constellation of mid-summer.¹⁷

It may now be safely concluded that the mother-goddess was associated with some star or planet very early in the history of fertility religion in Palestine. She was represented as an astral deity at Ugarit, Megiddo, Gezer, Bethshan and *Tell es-Šāfi* before the time of Assyrian domination and it is in no way surprising to discover that, perhaps because of an association with the King Star, Regulus, she was known in Palestine as the Queen of Heaven. It is therefore preferable that she should be seen in a wider context than officially imposed Assyrian cults in seventh-century Judah.¹⁸ Indeed, it can hardly be maintained that her cult belonged to any scheme of official religion, for it was located, not in the Temple or any other kind of state sanctuary, but in 'the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem' (Jer. 7.17; 44.17). Her worship was local and popular, without priesthood or sanctuary, and must be ranked with common superstition and the thousands of mother-goddess plaques from archaeological sites throughout Palestine.¹⁹

If the conclusion is correct that the cult of the Queen of Heaven was part of the vulgar religion of the day, it must be equally correct to see the cult of the Host of Heaven in the same setting. If it were true that the worship of the Host of Heaven 'came in with the Assyrian domination as part of the obligation of subject states to the empire',²⁰ there would surely have been some trace left in the Old Testament of the adoption of the kind of astral beliefs that were particularly prominent in Mesopotamia, but there is nothing to indicate that it is possible to differentiate between the beliefs about the heavenly bodies held in Israel and in ancient Near Eastern paganism generally.

Whilst it seems that the serious study of mathematical astronomy in Mesopotamia was a development of the Persian era,²¹ the

Assyrians, Babylonians and Sumerians had for long been interested in the celestial bodies. They had begun to assemble some observational information²² and had accumulated an extensive collection of astrological lore.²³ They also personified some of the more outstanding heavenly bodies as gods; the Moon was personified as Sin, the Sun as Shamash and Venus as Ishtar. With the passage of time the anthropomorphic aspects of these gods increased in importance and the corresponding heavenly bodies came to be recognized as their symbols.²⁴ But whilst other aspects of these gods came very much to the fore – for example, Shamash was also god of justice and Ishtar goddess of fertility and war²⁵ – Sin, Shamash and Ishtar continued to be the deities of the Moon, the Sun and Venus respectively. Some of the other gods had secondary astral associations; for example, Nergal, god of the underworld, pestilence and war, was associated with Mars, and Ninurta, god of war and fertility, with Saturn.²⁶ The stars and constellations were often regarded as numinous and powerful in magic and astrology and could be invoked in prayer.²⁷ Observation of the stars and planets therefore played a not inconsiderable role in Mesopotamian religious circles. Whilst there are inevitably some similarities between these Mesopotamian beliefs and what is known of Judaeon star-worship, the differences are also considerable. In particular there is little evidence that the people of Judah showed any interest in the kind of astrological observation that stood as the very centre of Mesopotamian astral beliefs. As far as it is possible to determine from the sources available, Judean astronomy was largely limited to seasonal observation, probably for calendrical and agricultural purposes,²⁸ and there is only one verse in the Old Testament (Jer. 10.2) which could suggest the influence of Mesopotamian astrology during the seventh century BC, but even there the allusion is by no means clear.²⁹

On the other hand, there can be no question that the Sun, the Moon and perhaps Venus were worshipped in Judah, but the mere existence of such cults cannot by itself be regarded as evidence of Assyrian influence, for these phenomena had their equivalent gods amongst almost every one of Israel's neighbours. None the less, it can hardly be doubted that in this age of vassal-dom Assyrian influence must have contributed much to the upsurge of the astral cults in Palestine. It may have been because of Assyrian influence that Manasseh erected altars in the Temple

courts to the Host of Heaven (II Kings 21.5) and that cultic vessels were dedicated to their worship in the Temple itself (II Kings 23.4). And yet there is little reason to believe that these deities honoured in the Temple were in any way different from the Host of Heaven whose cult is otherwise said to be mainly local and popular. The devotees are known to have worshipped on the roofs of houses (Jer. 19.13; Zeph. 1.5), on the local *bāmōt* (II Kings 23.5) and in the villages of Judah (Deut. 17.2–3).³⁰ Thus, whilst there is evidence that the star-cults were given royal support, the general impression remains that these (including the cults in the Temple and precincts) were little more than popular, local manifestations of the kind of superstitious astral religion which was found almost everywhere in ancient Near Eastern paganism. The influence of such astral beliefs from amongst Israel's more immediate neighbours has already been noted several times³¹ and can hardly be questioned, particularly if the Deuteronomist's statement can be trusted that *all* Israel's neighbours (*kōl hā'ammim taḥat kol-haššāmāyim*) were in some respect star-worshippers and that the influence of each and every one of them, not just of the Assyrians or the Babylonians, was to be feared in Judah (Deut. 4.19).

Astral gods were widely venerated in Southern Arabia and, although the evidence is not so extensive, it seems that similar cults were also to be found in Northern and Central Arabia.³² In the southern region in particular the supreme triad was the Moon-god, the Sun-goddess and Venus, who bore different names in different localities.³³ Amongst other stars and planets held in honour were Sirius, Canopus, Leo, the Pleiades, the Hyades, Mercury, Saturn and Jupiter.³⁴ Each of these astral bodies was believed to have an earthly counterpart, a *jinn* or demon, who inhabited plants, trees, rocks, etc. Athtar (Venus), the supreme god of all South Arabia, was a god of irrigation and fertility,³⁵ and a late, though questionable, tradition suggests that child sacrifice may have been offered to him.³⁶

At the head of the official state pantheon of the Hittites stood the 'Sun-goddess of Arinna, Queen of the Land of Hatti, Queen of Heaven and Earth'.³⁷ Her husband, the 'Storm-god of Hatti', took second place, but in the local cults he was often chief deity.³⁸ There were also several further Sun-gods and -goddesses,³⁹ and a Moon-god, Arma, with whom various other lunar deities were

identified, was worshipped particularly in the south-eastern region of Asia Minor.⁴⁰ It is not known whether Ishtar, who appears both as a god and a goddess, retained an astral aspect amongst the Hittites, but this seems not improbable, considering the Mesopotamian background from which 'she' originally came.⁴¹

In Egypt the Sun reigned supreme. The head of the Heliopolitan pantheon was Atum, creator of the gods and men,⁴² identified with the Sun-god, Re, one of the oldest of the gods of Egypt.⁴³ The most extensively worshipped was the god Amun, head of the Theban pantheon, also identified with Re.⁴⁴ The chief lunar deity was Thoth, god of learning, measuring and time, with whom were identified the lunar gods, Khensu and Aah.⁴⁵ Moon-worship, however, never attained much importance and faded before the might of the Sun, just as did the cults which associated the stars and the major constellations with gods.⁴⁶

The mythological texts from Ras Shamra have shown that the Ugaritic pantheon included a series of astral deities. The Sun-goddess, *špš*, daughter of El, 'light of the gods' and messenger of the gods, assists Anat in the restoration of Baal, thus playing her part in the cycle of fertility.⁴⁷ Likewise, the poem celebrating the marriage of *yrh* and *nl*, two lunar deities, reveals that the Moon-god and Moon-goddess were deeply involved in the fertility religion of the age.⁴⁸ Again, the poem about 'the gracious gods' places *šhr* and *šlm*, Venus as the morning and evening star, firmly in the fertility cultus.⁴⁹ It is still open to question whether *šhr* in the Ras Shamra texts is an astral deity like his namesake in Arabia,⁵⁰ but some scholars would compare him with *Hēlēl ben-šāḥar* in Isa. 14.12-15, who is Venus as the morning star.⁵¹ As in Mesopotamia, so in Ugarit there were astronomers and astrologers; *pḡt* was said to 'know the courses of the stars',⁵² and an astrological text has been found.⁵³ The phrase *šbū.špš* (var. *šbā, šbē, šbēā*) appears five times in the Ugaritic literature⁵⁴ and has been thought to suggest the background to the Hebrew 'Host of Heaven'.⁵⁵ But, although this phrase has been translated 'host of the Sun', a number of scholars now prefer the translation 'sunset'.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the fixed stars (*kbkbm.knm*) are grouped together with the Sun as objects of sacrificial worship in the poem in honour of *šhr* and *šlm*⁵⁷ and it therefore remains a possibility, particularly since the Sun, the Moon and the stars in Mesopotamia are never called an army or host,⁵⁸ that the Ras Shamra texts do provide some kind

of clue to the background of the Old Testament 'Host of Heaven'. This also seems more probable in view of the constant association of the astral bodies with fertility in Ugarit and the Old Testament, and also in view of the fact that the term 'Host of Heaven' was already in use in Israel before the advent of the Assyrians.⁵⁹

Turning to Judah's more immediate neighbours, two Philistine gods only are known from the Old Testament, Dagon of Ashdod and Beelzebub of Ekron, and neither of these is known to have had astral associations.⁶⁰ But Herodotus says that a temple at Ashkelon dedicated to *ἡ Οὐρανία Ἀφροδίτη* was the oldest of all the temples of Aphrodite,⁶¹ and his information has been supported by the discovery of an inscription from Delos, dedicated by a certain Damon of Ashkelon to Zeus, *Ἀστάρτη Παλαιστίνη* and *Ἀφροδίτη Οὐρανία*.⁶² In Graeco-Roman mythology and religion Aphrodite, who was equated with Astarte in Syria and Palestine, was identified with Venus, the brightest of the planets.⁶³

It is difficult to describe Kemosh more fully than as the war-god of Moab,⁶⁴ but there are some indications that the celestial bodies were worshipped in Moab. The occurrence of the name *štr*⁶⁵ on the Moabite Stone and the symbols of the Sun and the Moon on the *Balu'a* stele point to some kind of astral beliefs.⁶⁶ Van Zyl compares the figurine of a god on horseback with *Ἀχιζῆς*,⁶⁷ who in Palmyrene religion was identified with Venus as the morning star⁶⁸ and with Castor in Gemini.⁶⁹

The chief gods of the Tyrian pantheon in the seventh century BC were Asherah-Bethel and Baalshamem, Anat and Baal-šaphon, Melqart and Ashtart.⁷⁰ Of these Ashtart may have been the Tyrian counterpart of Ishtar-Venus, since, according to Philo of Byblos, 'the Phoenicians say that Astarte is Aphrodite'.⁷¹ The Phoenician Asherah may also have had astral features, since she was later called *Asteria*, 'the Bestarred'.⁷² It has been suggested also that some form of solar worship was found in Tyre in association with the god Melqart.⁷³

In ancient Syria the gods Reshef, *Rkb'l*, Shamash and perhaps a solar El have already been encountered at Zinjirli,⁷⁴ and Baalshamem, Shamash, Sahr and the gods of heaven at Afis.⁷⁵ In Hellenistic times the supreme triad at Ba'albek was Jupiter, Venus and Mercury, corresponding to Hadad, Atargatis and Simios, which may, though not necessarily, be indicative of astral aspects in these Syrian gods in an earlier age.⁷⁶ In the same way, the god of

Elmesa was later identified with the Sun and his cult was superseded by a *sacerdos dei solis Elagabali*.⁷⁷

In view of this widespread diffusion of belief in the divinity of the heavenly bodies amongst Israel's neighbours in the ancient Near East, it should not be merely assumed that the cult of the Host of Heaven in the Old Testament is an Assyrian importation. Indeed, the impression is that Israel's astral cults, which would appear to have been based in superstitious veneration of the celestial bodies rather than in observation of their movements for the determination of astrological *omina*, stood much closer to the cults of her immediate neighbours than to the astral aspects of Mesopotamian religion. If this is a correct impression, there ought to be traces of indigenous solar, lunar and astral religious beliefs in Israel prior to the time of Assyrian conquest. And this evidence is most certainly to be found.

Worship of the Sun is mentioned in Ezek. 8.16; 11.1 (?); Job 31.26-7, as well as in several passages already discussed in the foregoing chapters, and scholars have found many further traces of it throughout the Old Testament. Analysis of personal and place names, study of religious terminology, consideration of the orientation of the Temple, examination of Temple rituals, festivals and cultic apparatus, and the relating of archaeological finds to the information given in the Old Testament have all contributed to a total picture which supports the belief that Sun-worship was deeply rooted in early Israel. The subject has been so well explored that there is little to be added here.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, it has also been thought that the *lmk* jar-handle stamps may furnish evidence that the Assyrians demanded recognition of the authority of their Sun-god, or at least his symbol, from the people of Judah. Aharoni has argued that the four-winged scarab impression showing Egyptian influence dates from Hezekiah's reign before the Assyrian invasion of 701 BC, but that after that date either Hezekiah or Manasseh was obliged to adopt the two-winged flying disc, 'the royal insignia of Assyria'.⁷⁹ However, it would seem that the change of insignia, in his opinion, was less of religious than of political significance. Be that as it may, Aharoni's view of the date of the two-winged stamps is not generally accepted. The consensus of current opinion is that these stamps come from the reign of Josiah, and therefore from the period of Assyrian decline.⁸⁰ It has also been pointed out that, since vassal kings in the empire

were not usually stripped of their trappings of royalty, it is unlikely that an Assyrian monarch would have attempted to control the use of a vassal's royal seal in this way.⁸¹ Furthermore, it has been shown that the style of the two-winged Sun-disc on the Judaeen jar handles is Syro-Phoenician rather than Assyrian.⁸² It would therefore seem that the *lmk* seals should not be regarded as evidence for the imposition of Assyrian solar beliefs or religious practice in Judah and, since the two-winged Sun-disc symbol was widely used in the ancient Near East, they are probably to be regarded only as further evidence of an indigenous Palestinian solar mythology.⁸³

Studies in Israelite Moon-worship are hampered from the start by the paucity and obscurity of the Old Testament information. Outside the literature of the Assyrian period, an explicit statement that the Moon was worshipped occurs only in Job 31.26-7, but there are signs that the Israelites, like other ancient peoples, had regarded the Moon with veneration from earliest times. Moon-pendants (*šabrônîm*) are mentioned in Judg. 8.21, 26; Isa. 3.18 and are now illustrated by archaeological finds from various sites.⁸⁴ Jericho may have been a city of the cult of the Moon⁸⁵ and the personal names Jarah, Jaroah and Hodesh may point to some kind of worship of or superstitious attitude to the Moon.⁸⁶ Isaiah describes the overthrow of the Moon (*l'banā*) in an eschatological battle between Yahweh and the Host of Heaven (24.23), the Psalmist feared the suffering that the Moon could inflict (121.6), and the wisdom writers suggest that the period of the waning Moon was unpropitious for the conduct of business (Prov. 7.20).⁸⁷ The day of the New Moon (*hōdeš*) was an occasion of religious observance in ancient Israel. At the New Moon the king's courtiers were required to dine with him (I Sam. 20.18ff.) and the trumpet was blown in the Temple, because it was a time of festival (Ps. 81.4, EVV 3). New Moon and Sabbath appear together as appropriate times for consulting a prophet (II Kings 4.23) and as occasions of restricted trade (Amos 8.5) or of special sacrifices (Isa. 1.13). The New Moon is also coupled with the appointed feasts (*mō'ādîm*), or with both the Sabbath and the appointed feasts, as times of mirth (Hos. 2.13, EVV 11) and of special religious observance (I Chron. 23.31; II Chron. 2.3, EVV 4; 8.13; 31.3; Ezra 3.5; Neh. 10.34, EVV 33; Ezek. 45.17; 46.1-6). Because they were abused, the New Moon festivals were condemned by the

early prophets (Amos. 8.5; Hos. 2.11; Isa. 1.13). It is most probable that the origins of the New Moon festival lie in the obscure past of lunar religion,⁸⁸ possibly in the wilderness period,⁸⁹ and although the festival was incorporated into Yahwism, the old taboos, rituals and fears persisted until a late time when the *hōdeš* became solely of calendrical significance.

Throughout the foregoing chapters deliberate emphasis has been laid on indications of both foreign and indigenous star-cults in Judah. It has been argued that Ahaz's roof altars may have been erected for the worship of Palestinian (astral ?) deities, that Manasseh's *semel* may have been dedicated to the Phoenician Astarte (but more probably to Asherah) who is associated with Venus, that a plot of land in Jerusalem was dedicated to the Arabian *Al-'Uẓẓā* who is Venus as the morning star, that the Host of Heaven associated with Baal and Asherah in the Jerusalem Temple and on the Judaeon *bāmōt* may have been Syro-Phoenician or indigenous, that the *ke'mārīm* in Josiah's time may have been priests of Canaanite star-cults, the *mazzālōt* was probably a Canaanite or Israelite term for the planets or the Host of Heaven revered by Josiah's subjects, that the god of the Hinnom cult may have been a Phoenician god associated with the planet Saturn, that Ashtoreth of the Sidonians, worshipped on the Mount of Olives from Solomonic times, was probably associated with the planet Venus, and that the Queen of Heaven was the Canaanite Anat.⁹⁰ Even though some of these identifications are based on fairly slender evidence, there now seems little reason to doubt that the Israelites did have an astral lore and mythology which was not entirely borrowed from Mesopotamia. Indeed, there are a number of archaeological finds which suggest that Palestine had its own independent astral beliefs from very early times. A wall fresco of astral significance at the late Stone Age settlement of *Tel'ēlāt Ghassnīl*, north-west of the Dead Sea, gives what is perhaps the earliest indication of interest in the stars in Palestine.⁹¹ From Gezer of the Amarna age comes a tablet bearing signs resembling those on Mesopotamian boundary stones, some of which have been held to be star symbols. However, this tablet may be Mesopotamian in origin and hence not permissible as evidence in the present discussion.⁹² Several examples of star-pendants, perhaps ear-rings, have been found at various sites in Palestine and these, like the Sun-pendants and Moon-pendants already mentioned,

were probably prophylactic trinkets worn by devotees of the heavenly bodies.⁹³ From the period of the Judaeon monarchy come the *Tell es-Šāfi* plaque, the Anat star at Megiddo, the Gezer altar⁹⁴ and a potsherd from *El-Jib* inscribed with a hexagram framing a stylized bird.⁹⁵ The motif on this last find is probably a symbol of the mother-goddess, since several birds, particularly the swallow and the dove, were sacred to her in the ancient world.⁹⁶ A much older fragment of decorated pottery from Gaza shows a bird with a star on its wing and this may be an alternative version of the same motif.⁹⁷ Further examples of stars drawn or scratched on seals and pottery could be cited,⁹⁸ but it is often a matter of conjecture whether these had any religious significance. These few discoveries may not witness to a rich abundance of astral cults in Palestine, but neither does the Old Testament. None the less, they remove all possible doubt about the existence of star-worship in Palestine before the Assyrian period. On the whole it would appear that, even though some of these objects were found in or near various shrines, their generally rather crude art forms are further evidence for the conclusion already reached on other grounds, that veneration of the stars in early Israel was by and large a form of popular religion, often little better than superstition.

The names given by the Hebrews to the more outstanding stars and constellations are for the most part *sui generis* and often bear little or no resemblance to the Mesopotamian star names, that is, as far as it is possible to identify them.⁹⁹ Thus Aldebaran and the Hyades were known in Israel as 'the Moth' (*āš/āyīš*; Job 9.9; 38.32), but in Babylonia as 'the Cheek of the Bull' (*mulis lē*) or 'the Tiara of Anu' (*mulagī d'anim*). The Israelites named Ursa Major 'the Winnowing-fan' (*mēzārīm*; Job 37.9), but the Babylonians called it 'the Cart' (*mulmar-gīd-da*). It is thought that Canis Major and its bright star, Sirius, were regarded by the Israelites as animals of some kind, perhaps dogs, and were known as 'the Evil Ones' (*rešā'im*) or 'the Hairy Ones' (*šē'irīm*; Job. 38.13 – the reading is uncertain), but in Mesopotamia Sirius was known as 'the Spear' (*mulkak-si-sā*) and Canis Major as 'the Bow' (*mul gisban*). In the Old Testament the Pleiades are 'the Cluster' (*kīmā*; Job 9.9; 38.31; Amos 5.8), but in Babylonian 'the Mane (of Taurus)' (*mulzappu*) and in Sumerian 'the Stars' (*mul-mul*). Orion in the Old Testament is named 'the Stout One' or 'the Clumsy Fool' (*kesil*; Job 9.9; 38.31; Amos 5.8), but in Mesopotamia 'the Faithful Shepherd of

Anu' (*mul-sipa-zi-an-na*) and in Babylonian texts 'the (Star of the) One Cleft by the Weapon' (*šitaddaru/šitaddalu*, meaning uncertain). On the basis of textual emendation three further star-names are found in Amos 5.9¹⁰⁰ and these possibly bear some similarity to their Babylonian counterparts. Taurus is here called 'the Bull' (*šör*), Capella 'the Goat' (*'ēz*) and Vindemiator in Virgo 'the Vintager' (*mebaššēr*). In Mesopotamia Taurus was 'the Bull of Heaven' (*mulgud-an-na*); whilst 'the Goat' (*muluza*) seems to have been the name for the constellation Lyra or for part of Capricorn, Capella may have been 'the Ram' (*muludu-nita*); and although no name is known which corresponds to Vindemiator, the constellation Virgo was known as 'the Furrow' (*mulab-sin*) and may therefore also be associated with the season of harvest. However, it may be of greater significance that the Israelite nomenclature in this instance corresponds more closely with that found amongst the Greeks who gave Taurus, Capella and Vindemiator precisely the same names, ταῦρος, αἴξ and προτυπήτης.¹⁰¹ Some further constellations are found in the Old Testament, but these have proved exceedingly difficult to identify. 'The Chamber' (*heder*; Job 37.9) and 'the Chambers of the South' (*hadrē tēmān*; Job 9.9) are often thought to be the same group of stars, probably some constellation or region of the southern sky.¹⁰² The *maṣṣārōt* (Job 38.32) remains a mystery.¹⁰³ It has also been suggested that *linyātān nāhāš bāriah*, *linyātān nāhāš 'aqallātōn* and *battannin 'ašer bayyām* in Isa. 27.1 should be identified with Serpens, Draco and Hydra,¹⁰⁴ but it is more likely that these names are of purely mythological reference without astral significance, since similar serpent-names, *ltn*, *btn.brh* and *btn. 'qltn*, are known from the Ugaritic texts where they appear to have no connection with the stars whatsoever.¹⁰⁵ Even though there are many problems involved in identifying the Babylonian star-names and despite the equally, if not more confusing uncertainties in the study of the Old Testament astronomical data, it seems that the outline given here is sufficient to show that, wherever the Israelites obtained their astral lore, it was to a significant degree independent of its Mesopotamian counterpart and may indeed well have been largely indigenous to the land of Canaan.

Stars in the Old Testament were animate bodies with names (Ps. 147.4) who ruled over the night (Ps. 136.7-9), who gave praise to Yahweh (Ps. 148.3; Neh. 9.6), who with the sons of God

sang at Yahweh's creation (Job. 38.7), and who fought for the Israelites in battle against the Canaanites (Judg. 5.20). Balaam prophesied that Israel's leader should be a 'star out of Jacob and a comet¹⁰⁶ out of Israel' (Num. 24.17), and the captain of Yahweh's host with drawn sword before Jericho may have been just such a comet (Josh. 5.13-14).¹⁰⁷ There can be consequently little doubt that when Micaiah ben Imlah saw Yahweh 'sitting on his throne and all the Host of Heaven standing by him', the heavenly court included astral beings (I Kings 22.19). Micaiah was not a polytheist, however, for the stars were always subject to Yahweh's authority (Job. 9.7; Ps. 147.4; Amos 5.8-9).

Old Testament astral mythology includes an apocalyptic vision of a heavenly battle in which Yahweh emerges victorious over the Host of Heaven. The stars, together with the Sun, the Moon and the rulers of the Earth, are finally imprisoned in the Pit, while Yahweh reigns triumphant from Zion (Isa. 24.21-3; cf. 13.10; 34.4). Presumably there is an element of polemic against the cult of the heavenly bodies in this myth, but it seems impossible to trace any clue which would suggest the provenance or nature of the astral deities in question. Certainly there is no instance in which the myth occurs in an oracle pre-dating the period of Assyrian domination and it may be that the prophet had Assyrian gods in mind, but this is by no means clear. There is, however, a second myth, that of Helel ben Shahar in Isa. 14.12-15, which, although it post-dates the Assyrian period in its present form, shows no trace of Assyrian influence, but belongs indubitably to a cycle of myths associated with the western seaboard.¹⁰⁸ Helel, who is Venus as the morning star, son of the Dawn-goddess, Shahar,¹⁰⁹ attempted to mount above the stars of El (*mimma'al le'kōkebē-'ēl*) and set his throne on the mount of assembly (*behar-mō'ed*) in the recesses of Šaphon (*be'yarkē'ē šāpōn*) in an attempt to emulate Elyon (*'eddammeb le'elyōn*). His attempt was unsuccessful and he ended in Sheol, in the Pit (*bōr*). The terminology is thoroughly Canaanite-Palestinian without trace of Mesopotamian influence and the myth may be related to the Greek account of the fall of Phaethon from the chariot of Helios and to the Ugaritic tradition of the failure of Athtar to occupy the throne of the dead Baal. Although the precise identification of Helel and Shahar has been debated, the cultural context of the myth is Greece, Phoenicia and Canaan, and its recurrence in varying versions and in different

contexts in Greece, Ugarit and the Old Testament once more points to the conclusion that Israel's astral beliefs were nearer to those of her western neighbours than to those of Mesopotamia, even after the period of Assyrian domination.¹¹⁰

Finally, in the Old Testament there is only one passage, Jer. 10.2, which could suggest that the Israelites may have shown any interest in astrology before or during the period of Assyrian rule:¹¹¹

Learn not the customs of the nations,
fear not the signs of heaven,
even though the nations stand in fear of them.¹¹²

Here it could be argued that the word *'ōt* (sign) is cognate with the Accadian *ittu* which is used of ominous signs in Mesopotamian astrology and that these were indeed frequently signs that were to be feared.¹¹³ But it could equally be argued that the 'signs of heaven' to which the prophet referred were extraordinary natural phenomena such as eclipses, comets, meteors, or even awesome meteorological phenomena such as lightning or unusual cloud formations. Whilst such signs were also important to the Assyrian omen readers, there is nothing to indicate that the fear of them in Israel belongs to any other sphere than universal primitive religious apprehension.¹¹⁴ Several other types of divination are known to have been practised in Israel during the Assyrian period, such as soothsaying by observation of the clouds, divination by snake charming or with the use of arrows, sorcery and necromancy, but none of these suggest an interest in astrology and all of them appear to have been practised in Palestine in earlier times.¹¹⁵

In view of the foregoing survey it may now be concluded that solar, lunar and astral religions were familiar to the Israelites in many forms from almost every one of their neighbours and that in Palestine itself they were known and their gods held in veneration from earliest times and during the period of the monarchy.¹¹⁶ Wherever it has been possible to investigate the nature of the astral bodies that featured in Israelite belief, it has been found that they belong to the Canaanite-Palestinian *milieu*, and it has never been necessary, and frequently impossible, to define them in Mesopotamian terms. Whilst it is very likely that the Host of Heaven included deities which were originally Assyrian importations, it seems illogical to define Judah's star cults solely in terms of

Assyrian gods whose worship was officially required as a symbol of vassal status. 'Host of Heaven' was a Palestinian term for the heavenly court (cf. I Kings 22.19), possibly originating in some similar Canaanite expression, and the Mesopotamians, it appears, never thought of the stars as a host or an army.¹¹⁷ On the whole, our material and literary evidences indicate that the astral beliefs and associated cultic practices of early Israel were of a popular and superstitious nature, as were the cult of the Queen of Heaven and the various divinatory practices current in the land. But it is the case that some of these cults and practices found their way into the official religious centres of the land during the period of Assyrian domination,¹¹⁸ and it is largely on the basis of this information alone that these cults have so often been defined as Assyrian. However, it now seems that it would be much more to the point to consider the suggestion that the Israelites, who, before the Assyrian invasion, had their own astral lore and venerated the stars in a fairly popular and superstitious manner, began, in the age of religious licence which started about 734 BC, to allow these indigenous superstitious cults to come to prominence, partly because of Assyrian cultural influence, but largely because of the failure of Yahweh to protect against the might of Ashur.¹¹⁹