

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# Monotheism and Ancient Israelite Religion

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The peoples of the Ancient Near East remain a source of fascination to moderns. No one can fail to be impressed by the pyramids, the ziggurats, and the artistic monuments of ancient Egypt and western Asia. But the interest in these great ancient civilizations is antiquarian. In contrast, ancient Israel, which was never the home of a great ruling power or of monumental architecture, is the ultimate birthplace of the monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For good and ill, the stories of Abraham and not those of Gilgamesh remain sources of inspiration and guidance for moderns. As such, the recovery of ancient Israelite religion is relevant within the academy and without, and therein lies a problem.

Scholars with personal religious attachments to the Bible must always exert themselves to avoid the kinds of apologetics that they would never offer in other fields. They must resist the temptation to explain away elements in Israelite religion, child sacrifice for example, if they find them abhorrent. Contrariwise, scholars with the opposite bent must resist emphasizing the Bible's nefarious support of ideologies and institutions of which they disapprove, if such disapproval impairs understanding of what the texts meant in their time of composition and early reception.

A second problem is the paucity of primary data, a situation in stark contrast to Mesopotamia, Egypt, Ugarit, Anatolia (Turkey), and Greece, which, in addition to their literary productions, have left us temples and temple-offering lists telling us which gods were worshiped and what attention they received. These same "extra-biblical" cultures have provided a wealth of pictorial representations of their divinities, enabling us to visualize their gods the way they did. Different size temples to different gods in the same geographical area are another indication of relative importance, and these too are lacking in ancient Israel. Ancient Israel has thus far provided no undisputed pictorial representations of the Hebrew god Yahweh. Our only offering list from the biblical period comes from the fifth century Jewish temple at Elephantine in Egypt, a structure destroyed by

hostile Egyptians in antiquity. The list indicates that offerings were made to YHW/YHH (forms of Yahweh) along with the goddesses (?) Anat-Yahu and Anat-Bethel (Van Der Toorn 1992, pp. 80–81). Although we have ancient Hebrew letters, inscriptions, and artifacts, most of our information about Israelite religion comes from the Hebrew Bible, a selective anthology containing material written over a period of some 800 years but completed late in the first pre-Christian millennium. As such, the Bible's religion is not necessarily ancient Israelite religion but a later understanding. In contrast to the situation of other Ancient Near Eastern texts, we have no originals of the Bible, only copies far removed chronologically from their original authors or scribes.

The greatest problem in studying Israelite religion is the figure of the Hebrew god, the hero of the Bible absent only from the books of Esther and Song of Songs. Within the Bible the Hebrew god is depicted as creator, law-giver, provider, and director of all the events of what would later be called “nature” and “history,” biblical Hebrew having no word for either concept. At some point this Hebrew divinity came to be viewed by followers as the sole god in existence. His proper name is Yahweh, usually translated “Lord,” or “Eternal,” god of “Israel,” a small, politically insignificant people in western Asia first attested in the late second millennium BCE. Yahweh has thus far not been found in any pre-Israelite pantheons (Van Der Toorn 1999b). Yahweh was known by various names and epithets, among them Adonay, El, Eloah, Elohim, Shadday, and Elyon, some of which were originally the names of other gods absorbed into the figure of Yahweh. He came in the course of time to be simply the only “God” of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (Van Der Toorn 1999a,b; Spronk 1999; Cross 1973, p. 44; Miller 2000, pp. 2–3; Herrmann 1999; Knauf 1999; Elnes and Miller 1999; Pardee 1999). The figure of El is the best documented of those folded into the god of Israel. In a complicated process, El, once head of a North Syrian pantheon, became so thoroughly identified with Yahweh that his separate existence was virtually unacknowledged by the Hebrew writers (Cross 1973: 44; Miller 2000, pp. 2–3; Herrmann 1999).

The name Yahweh is a scholarly reconstruction of the consonant cluster YHWH attested more than 6600 times in the Hebrew Bible, and in the Moabite Stone of the ninth century BCE. The Hebrew writing system employed to compose what were to become the books of the Hebrew Bible is primarily consonantal. The vowel points were added during the first millennium of our era because Jews had come to avoid the pronunciation of the ancient divine name, and the original vowels of YHWH are not included in the Hebrew Bible. Instead readers are directed to pronounce YHWH as though it were another less sacred name, “Adonay,” meaning “Lord.”

The authors of the Bible consistently portrayed Yahweh as a unique divinity, but differed about the extent of that uniqueness. At one pole we have full-blown Yahwistic monotheism, that is, the claim that there is only one god in existence, and that his name is Yahweh. The prophet known as “Isaiah of the Exile” or Deutero-Isaiah declared Yahweh to be the sole god in existence (Isaiah 43:10–11, 45:5–7, 14, 18, 21–2, 46:9; Wildberger 1977). For this prophet the claim that Yahweh alone is god entails the cultic corollary of Yahweh's demand for exclusive worship. Other gods must cease to exist (Versnel 2000, p. 83). Accordingly, Yahweh demands the worship of all humanity, not just that of Israelites or Jews (Isaiah 44:6, 66:23). At the opposite pole, we find Yahweh jealous of other gods (Exodus 20:5, 34:15; Deuteronomy 5:9; Joshua 24:19), defeating other gods (Exodus

12:12; Numbers 33:4), acting as king of gods (Psalm 95:3) or god of gods (Psalm 136:2), and accepting the homage of other gods (Psalm 29:1–2, 96:4). These passages all take for granted the existence, if inferiority, of other divinities. Deuteronomy chapter 4, despite its rhetorical, monotheizing flourishes (4:35, 39), avers that Yahweh himself had allotted the depersonalized sun, moon, and stars to the gentiles as legitimate objects of worship (4:19). The gentiles could not worship Yahweh himself. For the author of Deuteronomy 4, the exclusive worship of Yahweh was both an Israelite obligation and an Israelite privilege.

Because the Bible is the work of many authors and not a systematic treatise, there are numerous disagreements about matters that are of fundamental importance to students of ancient Israelite religion. According to Genesis 4, the name of Yahweh was known to the earliest humans. In contrast, Exodus 6:3 claims that Yahweh first revealed his proper name to Moses, but not to the earlier patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who knew him only as El Shadday. Individual contributors to the biblical anthology differed on the question of whether other gods existed, or whether gentiles were to worship Yahweh. All agreed, though, that Yahweh was the sole legitimate object of Israelite worship. Israelites who worshiped other gods than Yahweh, or in addition to Yahweh, were both sinful and stupid (Jeremiah 5:19–23; 7:8–11). Despite biblical rhetoric accusing Israelites of abandoning Yahweh for other gods, it appears that it was more often the case that polytheistic Israelites viewed Yahweh as the head of an Israelite pantheon, supplementing his worship with that of others.

It is precisely that supplementary worship which is condemned in I Kings 18:21 and Jeremiah 7:9–10. Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible do we find any of the “good guys” supporting Israelite worship of Yahweh’s rivals. Whenever the biblical writers describe Israelite worship of other gods, male and female, which they do with considerable frequency (Exodus 32:7–8; Numbers 25:1–5; Judges 2:10–13; 1 Kings 11:33; 2 Kings 17:16; Jeremiah 3:6–10, 44:2–10; Ezekiel 8:5–17; 20:7–8; 27–31; Psalm 106:34–39), they characterize such worship as “backsliding,” or as deviation from the worship of Yahweh alone as demanded by the “ten words” (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13, 10:4) or decalogue, as spoken by Yahweh to Moses (Exodus 20:3–5; Deuteronomy 5:7–9; compare Hosea 13:4). Often, Israelite deviation is attributed to the potential and actual influence of the local and neighboring gentiles, and to Israelite sexual contact and intermarriage with them (Exodus 23:32–33, 34:11–16; Numbers 25:1–9, 31:14–18; Deuteronomy 12:2–3, 29–31). The view of the Old Testament that the worship of Yahweh alone was normative in Israel from the earliest days of the nation, was canonized in the New Testament (Acts 7:35–43) and held sway until challenged during the rise of modern biblical criticism in the nineteenth century.

The best known of the early modern Bible critics, the German scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), employed analytical literary criticism, called source criticism, to distinguish earlier from later writings within the Hebrew Bible. Based on his system of dating biblical texts, Wellhausen reconstructed Israelite religious development, and concluded that monotheism had evolved gradually out of polytheism, passing through a stage of monolatry, the worship of a single god at the same time that other gods are believed to exist. No humanist of the time could escape the ramifications of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Whether Wellhausen was also influenced by Hegel is another matter (Perlitt 1965). According to Wellhausen, in the earlier biblical period Yahweh was a national god, much

like Chemosh in Moab and Assur in Assyria. The fact that as a national god Yahweh claimed the allegiance of every Israelite did not entail the rejection of other gods, any more than allegiance to Assur entailed the neglect of the cults of Šamaš or Ishtar.

Wellhausen's thesis presented a problem. If Yahweh had at the outset been a god no different qualitatively from the Moabite Chemosh and the Assyrian Assur, why did monotheism never arise in Moab or Assyria? We do not have enough Moabite material to deny categorically that other gods in addition to Chemosh were worshiped in Moab. The Moabite Stone of the ninth century BCE mentions an Ashtar-Chemosh along with Chemosh. Does this indicate the merger of Chemosh with the god Ashtar, known as a defunct deity in the Ugaritic texts of the thirteenth century (Müller 1999)? With Assur, the Assyriologist Simo Parpola has argued that underneath the apparent polytheism of Assyrian religion was a unifying monotheistic notion (Parpola 2000). But even Parpola does not deny that Assyrian religion was polytheistic for all but the most sophisticated thinkers.

For Wellhausen the new direction was to be sought in the teaching of the eighth century Hebrew prophets. Only after Hosea and Amos began to interpret the political upheavals of the eighth century BCE as Yahweh's means of enforcing his demands upon Israel, demands that were primarily ethical and moral rather than cultic, did monotheism begin to emerge. As interpreted by Wellhausen, Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah shortly thereafter taught that Yahweh could move all the peoples of the earth either to punish or reward his people Israel. If so, he must be much more than a national god; he must have no rivals at all. "Ethical monotheism," though taught by succeeding prophets, took two centuries to take root among most of the populace. In Wellhausen's view, only during the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BCE did the masses of Jews, prodded by a guilty conscience, begin to realize that the prophets had been right (Zechariah 1:1–6). Both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel had fallen because of their failure to serve Yahweh exclusively. It was at that point that the demand that Yahweh alone was to be worshiped was retrojected into the laws and narratives set in earlier centuries.

Wellhausen's view was largely accepted until the 1940s when it began to be attacked by the American archaeologist William Foxwell Albright (1891–1971) and his followers, and the Israeli Yehezkel Kaufmann (1889–1963) and his mostly Jewish followers.<sup>1</sup> Wellhausen had reached his conclusions solely on the internal evidence of the Bible. Albright, in contrast, insisted that the biblical texts could be understood and dated only in the light of the Near Eastern world in which ancient Israel had emerged.

In Albright's view there was archaeological evidence that many biblical texts written centuries later than the events they portrayed had faithfully preserved ancient traditions. That being the case, the biblical claims about the roots of monotheism in the age of Moses ought to be historically credible. In his 1940 classic *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process*,<sup>2</sup> Albright broke with the evolutionary explanations of monotheistic origins in favor of a monotheistic revolution led by Moses. For him, Mosaic monotheism was "functional," rather than systematic. Nonetheless, Moses was the first Hebrew to teach the existence of one God, the creator of everything, the source of justice, who is equally powerful in the desert, and in Palestine, who has no sexuality and no mythology, who is human in form but cannot be seen by human eye and cannot be represented in any form (Albright, 1957, p. 272).

Thus, monotheism was not an evolutionary development within Israel, though the groundwork had been laid for it in the high gods of other cultures and especially in the exaltation of the solar disk, called the Aten, and the ban on all competing cults by King Akhenaten of Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE. According to Albright, "the Aten cult was ... a true monotheism" (1957, p. 221). The Egyptologist Donald Redford observes, "The Roman world might have called Akhenaten an 'atheist,' for what was left to Egypt was not a 'god' at all, but a disc in the heavens" (1984, p. 170; Foster 1995, especially p. 1760; Propp 1999 and the bibliography, 537, n. 1).

Albright thought that the Mosaic revolution proved to be a great success with the masses of the Israelite population. Of course, there were always "ignorant" or "moronic" Israelites who were attracted to polytheism (Albright 1957, p. 288). There was also the corrupting influence of the monarchy, sometimes tempted to adopt or promote gentile practices (1 Kings 11:4–8, 16:30–33; 2 Kings 16:10–11, 21:1–7). At the opposite pole stood zealots who felt the need to make Mosaic monotheism consistent by standardizing worship and eliminating vestiges of polytheistic practice and mythic language. But these zealots were reformers rather than innovators. Essentially, Albright held that Moses was a historical figure who brought a functional, if not systematic, monotheism to Israel in the thirteenth century BCE.

As noted by Mark Smith (2001, p. 150), Albright's definition of monotheism is a composite drawn from various biblical sources of varying dates. In addition, these features do not have equal weight in regard to the question of the sole existence of Yahweh. (1) In some cultures, creation is a specialized function of lower rather than higher gods. (2) In Mesopotamian sources the deities Kittu (truth) and Mesharu (justice) are gods responsible for justice. The Egyptian goddess Ma'at and a whole host of other gods are sources of justice without being unique. In Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda is the source of justice, but the existence of opposition by the thoroughly evil and very powerful Angra Mainyu does not permit us to call Zoroastrianism "monotheism." (3) As for the ban on images, its date is unclear. From the perspective of art history, Schroer (1987) argues that the anti-image tradition arose late in Israel; Mettinger believes that early absence of images is itself not determinative because we must distinguish between *de facto* absence of images, a phenomenon attested widely in West Semitic polytheistic cults, and programmatic avoidance of images, the explicit prohibition of images, which did not appear in biblical sources composed before the exilic period. Indeed, several scholars have argued that the second commandment, which prohibits images (Exodus 20:4 = Deuteronomy 5:8), is an interpolation that interrupts the natural flow between "You shall have no gods in my presence" and "You shall not bow down to them in worship" (Mettinger 1995, 1997; Hendel 1997).

Yehezkel Kaufmann went further than Albright. Kaufmann wrote his magnum opus, *The History of the Israelite Faith*, in eight volumes between 1938 and 1956, a period in which few gentile scholars could read Modern Hebrew. An abridgment of the first seven volumes, *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), translated into English by Moshe Greenberg, appeared in 1960 and extended Kaufmann's influence somewhat, but mostly among those Jews whose Hebrew was not fluent. The complete eighth volume was translated by Efroymson (1997). The German scholar Krapf has brought renewed attention to Kaufmann's work (Krapf 1992); Krapf had earlier treated Kaufmann's intellectual history (1990).

In Kaufmann's view the Mosaic revolution had thoroughly eradicated paganism from Israel in one fell swoop. Whereas the tales of the biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob reflect a polytheistic background (Kaufmann 1938–56, II/1, pp. 25–32), Moses had successfully taught Israel that no other gods existed but Yahweh. Any biblical references to other gods in Israel subsequent to the Mosaic revolution should be understood as literary conceits, or petrified language emptied of mythic significance. Albright had attributed infidelity to Yahweh to morons, and other scholars had distinguished between “official” religion faithful to Yahweh alone and “popular” religion, which was polytheistic and syncretistic. But Kaufmann attempted to demonstrate that the number of morons as well as the differences between the “official” and the “popular” had been greatly exaggerated.<sup>3</sup> Kaufmann conceded that the royal courts sometimes imported foreign cults. The wives of Solomon had private chapels for their own use (1 Kings 11). King Ahab had permitted Queen Jezebel to bring the gods Baal and Asherah and their prophets into the northern capital Samaria (1 Kings 16:31–33, 18:19). But these were aberrations and no more.

Problematic for Kaufmann's thesis were the many denunciations of Israelite idolatry and polytheism in the prophetic books, as well as in the editorial comments in the biblical narratives, which give the impression that wholehearted fidelity to Yahweh was in short supply among the masses. Kaufmann's ingenious response was that biblical writers were not denouncing the real worship of other gods, which was not to be found in Israel, but the occasional superstitious resort to stick and stone fetishes. Indeed, by the eighth century BCE, Israelites had become so far removed from the worship of gods other than Yahweh that they projected their own vestigial fetishism on the gentiles, assuming the gods of the nations to be fetishes, rather than divinities with real personalities whose loves and wars were celebrated in myth and cult. In sum, Israelites could never worship the gods of the gentiles because they did not know how. According to Kaufmann, the Hebrew prophets denounced these minor lapses into superstition out of puritanical zeal for monotheism. We might compare the prophetic zeal with that of an Orthodox rabbi who equates a Jewish child's visit to a department store Santa Claus, or that child's participation in an Easter egg hunt, with his conversion to Christianity.

The prophets also needed to vindicate divine justice, an activity that theologians call “theodicy.” Israel held the land conditionally, so biblical theology taught, through a covenant with Yahweh. The primary condition of that covenant was that Israel was to serve Yahweh exclusively. Failure to do so was a breach of that covenant punishable by destruction by foreigners and expulsion of the population from the land. Since both Israelite kingdoms came to be destroyed by foreigners and both populations suffered expulsion, Kaufmann argued that the biblical writers were required to exaggerate Israelite infidelity to Yahweh, or even to invent it, in order to show that Israel had violated the covenant, and that Yahweh had justly punished them.

The “theodicy” element and the attention paid to prophetic rhetoric surely have merit, but otherwise Kaufmann's ingenious thesis is seriously flawed. First, he claims that Israel differed so fundamentally from its neighbors that Israelites told no myths about Yahweh and assumed naively that gentiles told no myths about their gods, who were therefore no more than fetishes. But Kaufmann's claim is unsustainable. Comparative study of the Bible and Near Eastern myths shows keen Israelite awareness of gentile myth as well as the use, adaptation, and transformation of mythic motifs by Hebrew writers (Cross 1973,

pp. 143–144). Kaufmann’s further claims about Israelite ignorance of the religions of the gentiles are likewise flawed, while the supposed qualitative differences between Israel and its neighbors are greatly exaggerated (Smith 1952).

Indeed, newer discussions of ancient Israelite religion stimulated by inscriptions and drawings discovered at Kuntillet Ajrud in the Sinai and at Khirbet el-Qôm on the west bank of the Jordan demonstrate that Israelite worship of gods in addition to Yahweh was not completely fabricated by the authors of the Bible. These texts from the ninth to eighth centuries BCE apparently mention the goddess Asherah in close connection to Yahweh (Becking 2001; Dever 1999; Miller 2000, pp. 29–43; Wyatt 1999). The Kuntillet Ajrud text was found on a jar, and the inscription follows the epistolary genre and is probably a school exercise text (Renz and Röllig 1995–2003, I 61). More than one reading and interpretation are possible:

1. “I bless you by/commend you to Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah.”  
On this interpretation “Asherah” is a proper name referring to the goddess Asherah known from the Hebrew Bible, from the Ugaritic writings of northern Syria dating from the late second millennium BCE and, apparently, from the recent excavations at Ekron (Tell Mique), a Philistine site of the earlier first millennium BCE (Müller, 1992, pp. 15–51; Wyatt 1999).<sup>4</sup>
2. “I bless you by/commend you to/Yahweh of Samaria and his consort.”  
According to this rendering, maintained by some scholars, the name of the goddess has been reduced to a common noun meaning “consort” (Hillers 1998, especially pp. 44–48).
3. “I bless you by/commend you to/Yahweh of Samaria and its *asherah*.”  
As with the first two renderings, other scholars translate the last word as a noun with a possessive feminine suffix, but takes the antecedent to be the city of Samaria. In addition, *asherah* is not taken as the goddess but as the illicit cultic object *asherah*, said to have stood in Samaria according to 2 Kings 13:6, and appearing in Deuteronomy 16:21 and Judges 6:25–26, 28, 30. The connection between the goddess and the cultic object of the same name remains a matter of dispute (Emerton 1999).
4. “I bless you by/commend you to Yahweh of Samaria and to Asheratah/Ashirtah.”  
In this last interpretation, scholars have opted to explain the final letter in the last word not as the feminine possessive suffix, but as an element of the name of the goddess (Zevitt 1984; Angerstorfer 1982), which seems the most likely for a number of reasons. First, it is unusual in the Semitic languages to attach a possessive suffix to a proper name. Second, the alternative form “Ashirta” is attested in the proper name Abdi-Ashirtah of the Amarna letters of the fourteenth century BCE. Third, it is common in greeting formulae of the Ancient Near East to bless an individual by one or more gods.

A very similar formula to this last was discovered in the Jewish colony of Elephantine in Egypt from the fifth century BCE:

I bless you by/commend you to YHH and to Khnub. (Porten 2003)

Khnum was an Egyptian god. According to Porten the name of the sender may indicate his non-Jewish origin. Even if Porten is correct, the formal structure is the same. The sender of the Kuntillet Ajrud letter cited here was named Amariah, indicating that his origins were from a family of worshipers of Yahweh; the *-iah* suffix is a form of Yahweh. This same interpretation that the goddess was known in Israelite venues as Ashirtah/Asheratah best suits the grave inscription from Khirbet el-Qôm on the west bank of the Jordan in what was the kingdom of Judah in the eighth century BCE. The main portion of that text reads:

Uriyahu the rich. His inscription:  
Uriyahu paid homage to<sup>5</sup> Yahweh,  
and out of his straits, to Asheratah.  
Save him!

(Renz and Röhlig 1995–2003, I 207–211)

It is especially noteworthy that in all of the proper names in the inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qôm that contain a god's name, that name is written *-Yhw*, a short form of YHWH, an indication that all of these individuals not only worshiped Yahweh themselves but belonged to families who worshiped Yahweh over generations (Heide 2002, pp. 114–117). As a statistical sample of worship in ancient Israel, the data are insignificant. As snapshots, however, they tend to support the view best articulated by Morton Smith in his *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (1971). In that book, by now a classic, Smith takes seriously the biblical portrayal of Israelite vacillation between periods of “following other gods” and periods of consistent fidelity to Yahweh. Behind that vacillation, argues Smith, is a struggle between two parties: the first, the “Yahweh-alone” party, insisted that Yahweh was the only god to be worshiped by Israelites. On the other side stood what we might call the “Yahweh-plus” party, which acknowledged the divinity of Yahweh within a larger grouping of gods.<sup>6</sup> For example, Smith observed that even Ahab and Jezebel, notorious in the Bible for their support of Baal's cult, gave their children names with Yahweh as the divine element. The different parties struggled for power over centuries. Ultimate victory came to the “Yahweh-alone” party during the Persian period, 539–331 BCE. The grand narrative of the Old Testament was shaped by the victors who divided the kings of Israel and Judah into the “just” and the “unjust” depending on their degree of adherence to the principles of the “Yahweh-alone” party.

In contrast to Albright and Kaufmann, Smith, by examining the Yahweh-alone theology from a political standpoint, avoids any appeal to Israelite uniqueness. His thesis has the additional advantage of not having to explain the demand that Yahweh be worshiped by Israelites to the exclusion of all other gods as a retrojection. The task remains, however, to account in the first place for the monolatrous demand made in the name of Yahweh.

The demand that one god is to be worshiped even though the existence of others is not necessarily denied was not unique to the Yahweh-alone party in the ancient world. Reference has already been made to the reform of King Akhenaten, which forbade the worship of all gods but the sun-disk. Albright and Redford refer to Aten's worship as monotheistic. Others have withheld that characterization because under the reform the

king and the royal family continued to receive the divine honors that had been accorded the earlier pharaohs. But the phenomenon is close enough to the demands for Yahweh's exclusive worship to warrant serious comparison. Mesopotamian mythology refers to the worship of a single god in times of emergency. The prayer literature of the Ancient Near East regularly employed the language of monolatry. A worshiper might approach different gods in succession, declaring that each, in turn, was the only divinity worthy of human worship. At other times worshipers would declare to the god whom they were supplicating that all the other gods were aspects or limbs of the god addressed (Sperling 1998, p. 148, n. 35–37).

The cause of the monolatrous demand in Israel is to be sought in the particular historical circumstances in which Israel arose. It is clear from the archaeological researches of the past decades, especially in the wake of the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, that the Bible's central traditions of enslavement in Egypt, exodus from Egypt, and armed conquest of the Promised Land are not historical. While no full positive consensus on the origin of Israel has emerged, there is general agreement that:

1. There is no archaeological evidence in Egyptian sources that any elements of later Israel were ever in Egypt. Likewise, the early Israelite settlements do not contain Egyptian elements in their material culture, which an Egyptian sojourn would have produced (Dever 1992, p. 546). As such we cannot speak of a historical exodus from Egypt.
2. The related tradition of Israel's journey of 40 years through the desert is likewise unsupported archaeologically. Extensive exploration of the Sinai has found no evidence of occupation during the appropriate period.
3. Israel did not arise out of a group that had escaped from Egyptian servitude. Instead, the nucleus of Israel was "derived from the local Late Bronze culture through relatively normal social processes" (Dever 1992, p. 553).
4. Israel was not a single unified ethnic group. Instead, "Israelite ethnic identity came about through the process whereby the indigenous population began to understand and identify itself as Israelite" (Thompson 1987, p. 37).
5. Whatever movement of population occurred to produce an Israelite culture was internal, probably from the lowlands eastward and northward into the highlands (Bloch-Smith and Nakhai 1999, p. 103).

The biblical traditions about enslavement, exodus, and conquest must be understood as ideologically motivated accounts usually composed centuries later than the events, real or imagined, that they report. Behind these traditions it is often possible to recover historical information, usually more relevant to the account's time of composition than to its setting. Nonetheless, when judiciously combined with the data provided by archaeology and other historical sources, a reasonable synthesis of early Israelite history and religion is possible.<sup>7</sup>

One biblical text refers to 430 years of servitude in Egypt (Exodus 12:40); Genesis 15:13 has 400. Attempts to explain the figures schematically have proved unpersuasive (Propp 1998, pp. 415–416). In contrast, the figure fits remarkably well with the chronology of the rise and decline of imperial Egyptian power in Asia (Sperling 1986, pp. 8–12; Sperling 1998, pp. 53–60). The Egyptian Empire was part of the international system of the Bronze Age in the second millennium BCE, during which the great powers extended

their dominion well beyond their borders. Among the powers, which included the Hittites, Mitanni, Assyria, and the Minoan–Mycenean civilization in the Aegean, the Egyptian New Kingdom (about 1550–1069 BCE) was the greatest. Egypt’s power extended from northern Sudan in the south and into Syria and Lebanon in the north (Kuhrt 1995, I, pp. 185–224). The New Kingdom began after King Ahmose of Egypt overthrew the Hyksos invaders in the mid-sixteenth century BCE and Egypt began to campaign extensively in western Asia. At the battle of Megiddo, Thutmose III won a decisive victory after which the local Asiatic rulers became vassals of Egypt. Though rival superpowers, first Mitanni and then the Hittite Kingdom, challenged Egyptian expansion in Asia, the Syria–Palestine coastline and the interior of Palestine remained solidly in Egyptian control. Egyptian correspondence of the fourteenth century BCE shows the heavy economic burdens of taxation and compulsory labor to which the population of Syria–Palestine was subjected (Moran 1992). Local rulers subject to the Pharaoh would round up work gangs to cultivate royal lands. Naturally, this was greatly resented by the locals who could themselves be rallied to attempt to throw off their domination by Egypt and the local Canaanite rulers who cooperated with Egypt (Moran 1992, EA 74, EA 365; Kuhrt 1995, I, pp. 324–327).

About 1200 BCE the international system collapsed in what is termed “the catastrophe.” Throughout the eastern Mediterranean, “the twelfth century BCE ushered in a dark age” in which 47 major sites were destroyed in Greece, Crete, Anatolia, Cyprus, and Syria–Palestine (Drews 1993, p. 9). In Turkey the Hittite Empire collapsed. Mass movements of population, notably the Sea Peoples, among them the Philistines, transformed the face of the Middle East. Indeed, comparison between the social and political terminology of the Bible and the Bronze Age shows an almost complete discontinuity (Rainey 1987, p. 542). Against the turbulent international background we see populations caught in the middle of fighting among rival city-states, traders who functioned poorly in the unstable conditions, debtors and dislocated peasants, and the ever-present pastoralists who were always potentially disruptive. In Syria–Palestine we witness “the destruction of the Canaanite urban culture and the withdrawal of Egypt from Canaan” (Finkelstein and Na’aman 1994: 12). By the death of Rameses III about 1153 BCE, Egypt no longer dominated Canaan, though some sites continued a bit longer under Egyptian control (Bloch-Smith and Nakhai 1999, p. 83).

Gradually new groups emerged out of the disorder, among them a group called “Israel.” Made up of locals seeking a place in the new social order, these new groups denied their connections to Canaan and gave themselves a new “national” counter-identity (Machinist 1991, 1994; Sperling 1998, pp. 41–60). They began to depict themselves as an invading group from outside the land, much like the Philistines. The Bible’s ideological claim to Israel’s religious, social, and moral distinctiveness is framed in terms of geography. The Canaanite heritage is denied by the Torah in its claims that all of Israel’s laws and institutions were given by Yahweh through Moses to the people when they wandered in the desert. Nothing good in terms of law, morality, or religion came from the land. In line with this ideological geography, the historical traditions about the subjugation of the people who became “Israel” to Egyptians ruling the land of Canaan were transformed into traditions of subjugation in Egypt proper. The withdrawal of Egypt from Canaan became the escape from the land of Egypt itself. Given that the name of the new polity was “Israel,” a name which has El as the divine element, the god El must have been the group’s patron. At an early date, however, Yahweh completely absorbed the figure of El,

and it was Yahweh who became Israel's god. Because of the circumstances of its formation, as a political coalition rather than as an ethnic group, Israel constructed its mythic consciousness out of figures that we would call "political."

The notion that Israel is linked to Yahweh by a "covenant" is central to the Torah. Mendenhall was the first biblical scholar to draw attention to the fact that the biblical notion of covenant was based on treaty formulae employed already in the second millennium BCE. In the treaties a great king bound subordinate kings to exclusive loyalty. Characteristically, divinities were called upon to bear witness to the treaty. Faithful adherence to the treaty was to be greatly rewarded while disloyalty would be punished with the severest forms of destruction (Mendenhall 1954). While subsequent scholarship has shown that several elements in Mendenhall's description require correction, there can be little doubt that his main observation was correct, namely, that the demand that Israel serve Yahweh exclusively was based on the treaty form. Ironically, Mendenhall himself saw the treaty formula as a model for monotheism: one god = one overlord. In fact, the covenant is a perfect metaphor of the religious notion of monolatry. Political treaties demanded exclusive service because there was always another great king who might be served. A Hittite king bound a minor Syrian king precisely because the minor king might serve the king of Egypt. Yahweh binds Israel because Israel might serve another god. What is of particular interest is that in biblical books of the exilic and post-exilic periods, when true monotheism emerges, the conditional covenant becomes a dead letter (Sperling 1989).

The theological construct of covenant with Yahweh mirrored the mundane fact of political union. Yahweh became, in essence, "the flag" that every Israelite saluted. Because Yahweh himself had no known prior connections to Canaanite cult and myth, exclusive loyalty to him served to strengthen the solidarity of the newly formed group. Initially an advantage, the absence of Yahweh from the local mythic traditions meant that the religious necessities served by gods of weather, agriculture, fertility, and the heavenly bodies would be unmet. In a monotheistic environment, monolatry is perfectly sensible; you worship one god because it is the only one. In contrast, restricting worship to one god when others are acknowledged to exist is difficult to uphold. In fact, ignoring powers that one knew to be potent could be dangerous, and relatively few Israelites in the early first millennium BCE took the risk. But if Morton Smith is right, there was always a minority who did.

Because the monolatrous demand as expressed in the primitive<sup>8</sup> notion of covenant was central to the formation of the Israelite polity, the call to serve Yahweh alone could resonate in times of crisis and serve as a general rallying point to encourage group solidarity (Exodus 32:25–29; I Samuel 7:1–14; I Kings 18; 2 Kings 9–10, 22–23). The crisis occasioned by the fall of the last Israelite state in 586 BCE proved decisive. Once Yahweh had proved his power by scattering his people "in a diaspora from one end of the known world to the other, what was left for him but monotheism?" (Smith 1952, p. 147).

## NOTES

1. The discussion of Albright is based on Gnuse (1997, pp. 64–66). See also Gnuse (1997, pp. 62–128) for an extensive summary of recent scholarship on monotheism. Important recent works are: Edelman (1996), Porter (2000), Van Der Toorn (1997),

- Propp (1999), and Smith (1990, 2002). For general critiques of Kaufmann's work, see Hayes (1999), Greenberg (1995), Levenson (1982), and Sperling (1986, especially pp. 16–21).
2. All citations herein are from the reprint by Doubleday Anchor (1957) of the second Johns Hopkins edition of 1946.
  3. The terms "popular" and "official" have not been rigorously employed by students of Israelite religion (Berlinerblau 1996, pp. 1–45, 1999).
  4. For a photograph of a Philistine inscription that reads "To Asherat," see *Biblical Archaeologist* 53/4 (1990): 232.
  5. This is how the verb *brk* with indirect object is used in Biblical Hebrew. See Psalm 95:6.
  6. This is an oversimplification. In the ancient world one would not be an abstract monotheist or polytheist. Whereas the "Yahweh-alone party" would tend to be an identifiable group, the "Yahweh-plus" party would be more diverse.
  7. In their summary of Iron Age I, Bloch-Smith and Nakhai (1999, p. 118) wrote: "Given the rather late and tendentious nature of the biblical text, it is somewhat unexpected to discover that archaeological evidence presents a similar, though not identical, picture of the events of the period." See also Dever (1998).
  8. I owe the apt characterization of covenant as "primitive" to Redford (1992, p. 275).

## FURTHER READING

Gnuse (1997) is a good place to begin, supplemented by Edelman (1996), Porter (2000), Van Der Toorn (1997), Propp (1999), and Smith (1990, 2002).

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