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The Ascension of Yahweh: The Origins and Development of Israelite Monotheism from the Afrasan to Josiah

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THE ASCENSION OF YAHWEH:
*The Origins and Development of Israelite Monotheism
from the Afrasan to Josiah*

Andrew Halladay

*Submitted to the Department of Religious Studies of
Pomona College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Senior Exercise for the Bachelor in the Arts.*

Thesis Readers: Oona Eisenstadt, Gary Gilbert

April 23, 2010

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Andrew Halladay
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INTRODUCTION: THE SEARCH FOR THE GOD OF ABRAHAM

TEXT AND HISTORY: THE FORMATION OF THE ABRAHAMIC DEITY

Recent years have seen substantial changes in the study of ancient Israelite religion. These changes have created ample work for scholars of religious studies and related fields as virtually all disciplines have something to say about recent archaeological and scholarly developments concerning Yahwism and its early development. In this scholarly milieu, it is difficult to present anything that is wholly new, but certainly possible to enter a spirited discourse about ancient questions. To discuss the origins and evolution of the Abrahamic deity—as I shall—necessitates drawing from many disciplines because discussion of this deity pervades all discourses on ancient Israelite religion. Accordingly, I will draw from scholarly tools characteristic of the disciplines of history, linguistics, and archaeology. The bulk of my argument, however, will be centered around the biblical texts themselves. Though the historicity of these texts is highly suspect, they nevertheless provide valuable historical information that, if engaged with carefully, can aid in understanding the origin and evolution of one Yahweh of Canaan.

Archaeology and a careful reading of the biblical texts confirm what we in some sense already know intuitively: that monotheism in the Near East did not emerge in a vacuum. Though Beersheba, Sinai, Golgotha, and Mecca are now considered important milestones in an evolution from polytheism to monotheism, none occurred in isolation. Rather, they are associated with developments that rested on the shoulders of contemporary philosophical, theological, and sociological circumstances. Monotheism, like any influential idea, developed over centuries and entered history gradually.

Accordingly a full—or even a satisfactory—history of the development of the Abrahamic deity defeats the scope of this and any paper; the historical breath and the ideological confluences that muddle that history are simply too vast. My discussion of the formation of the Abrahamic deity is appropriately more modest.

In terms of historical scope, I shall follow the development of the Abrahamic conception of divinity from its earliest development through to its adolescence in the Davidic monarchy. To understand this period fully, I must cast a somewhat wider temporal net as many of the principal texts documenting this period were written later—many during the Exilic period. As these texts say more about their own contemporary settings than the history they purport to relate, I must include discussion of monotheism during the Exilic period as well. I set this period as the upper historical bound of my discussion not because later developments are inconsequential, but because I wish to do justice to the periods I will explore. Clearly the evangelism of Paul and the early Christian Church, the rise of Islam, the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, and contemporary discussions about the Abrahamic deity are indispensable from a full history of Abrahamic monotheism. That history, however, is not this paper. Here, I seek only to present ancient Israel's transition from a polytheistic society into a (more or less) monotheistic one—a transition that runs in tandem with political centralization and that can be—to some extent—substantiated by texts of the Hebrew Bible.

This Israelite tradition finds its origins in the polytheism of the ancient Levant. The pantheon there—and the decentralized political structures that reinforced it—provided the context in which Israelite religion developed. The Hebrew Bible maintains glimmers of a more pluralistic conception of divinity; critical moments in its text suggest

that Yahweh is one deity among several. Although he is the deity of the Israelites and ostensibly the creator of the world, the neighboring peoples always—and the Israelites often—acknowledge the existence of other deities. And yet it seems clear that an important ideological shift occurred between the events the biblical writings relate and the composition of those texts. Somehow, the Israelites—who were, like any other Near Eastern people, polytheistic and decentralized—had become a centralized political structure championing a form of monotheism. Therefore a change had occurred in two realms—the political and the religious. Both began as decentralized and pluralistic, but with the Davidic monarchy each had become singular—one king and one deity. I shall argue that these two convergences are not unrelated; rather, one ran in tandem with the other, and each reinforced the other.

In composing the biblical texts, writers sought to bring cultural memories and a civil self-understanding to the narratives they told. They painted these narratives as more monotheistic than the periods actually were, thereby masking the moments in which Israelite monotheism gained ground. For the biblical writers, the Israelites' transition from polytheism to monotheism did not happen because they believed their ancestors had always been the chosen people of one deity named Yahweh. Yet this does not preclude the biblical texts' utility in extracting historical developments the texts mask. Using archaeological and scholarly data as my base, I will outline how the text might offer hints about the religious developments predating the Exilic period when most biblical texts were composed.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

In a discussion that spans millennia, religions and peoples evolve dramatically. Accordingly, there is a natural problem in assigning precise language to movements that are perpetually in a state of flux. Moreover, modern European terms are particularly problematic for phenomena that are neither modern nor European. These will remain difficulties throughout this paper, but discussion of the more essential terms will hopefully minimize ambiguities.

First, I address—and shall attempt to distinguish—the terms “polytheism”, “henotheism”, and “monotheism.” These three terms consistently bleed into each other, and many traditions defy easy categorization into one or another. This is particularly true for “polytheism” and “henotheism”—both of which imply a multiplicity of gods. Yet for purposes of this paper, I shall use the term “henotheism” to imply a subset of “polytheism” in which a believer only worships a single (usually clan) deity while acknowledging the existence of other gods. “Polytheism”, by contrast, will be a generic term for the belief in multiple gods that may imply the worship of one or many gods. It is important that I note that much of the literature that I am working with argues that certain traditions are “henotheistic” or “polytheistic.” While I have retained the terminology of the scholars to whom I refer, I am not particularly concerned about drawing sharp contrasts between the two. Instead, I shall concentrate on the characteristics of these traditions’ practices and avoid arguing about which label best describes them.

“Monotheism”, by contrast, will denote the general belief in a single deity. Despite the apparent simplicity of this label, a perpetual problem in my research has been determining when a tradition can safely be classified as “monotheistic.” As my analysis

will show, the transition from polytheism to monotheism was gradual—and probably never entirely complete—in Israelite religion. Even after the belief in a singular god was established, the term remains inconsistent with its modern connotations. Still today the traditions generally identified as “monotheistic” have radically divergent notions about divinity. Accordingly, I will try to avoid discussion of monotheism in its strictest sense and instead concentrate on the monotheistic tendencies of the traditions I analyze.

These terms are problematic in part because they imply a notion of “belief” in a given number of deities. With the exception of some notable verses I shall explore, the Hebrew Bible is not concerned with “belief” but with “worship.” It is worth looking at a particular historical moment to illustrate. After the reign of Josiah—a relatively mature stage in Israel’s transition to monotheism—Josiah’s numerous reforms precluded the worship of all deities except Yahweh. Cosmologically speaking, however, these gods were still considered by many to exist as lesser beings unworthy of worship. Although I draw attention to the monotheistic tendencies of such a circumstance, it is clear that this is not “monotheism” in its strictest sense as it entailed the worship of a single deity without the belief in that deity’s cosmological singularity.

To cite more modern examples beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that even after the Christian conversion of Europe many once dominant deities shrunk to insignificant sprites; this exposes that even centuries after the dominance of Yahweh in the Israelite pantheon there remained a tendency to centralize worship of Yahweh without negating the existence of other deities. Even in the most modern manifestations of monotheism, we still encounter the peculiar position of saints and angels in a monotheistic cosmology. This discussion of the problems with the term “monotheism”

seeks to highlight a running theme of this paper: though it attempts to track the general development from polytheistic to monotheistic forms of worship—again worship, not belief—it is uncomfortable with absolute notions of monotheism or polytheism. They shall therefore be fluid terms that help us talk about fluid concepts.

Lastly, I must clarify my use of the term “Abrahamic monotheism.” In using this term, I am implying that the historical evolution of Israelite religion is a historical precursor to the religions we now know as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha’i Faith—among others. “Abrahamic monotheism” does not imply that the theological worldview of these faiths is the same, but rather that all of these traditions find their genesis in the same tradition—Israelite monotheism.

HISTORY OF THE SCHOLARSHIP ON THE EVOLUTION OF YAHWISM

The scholarship that turns to the early years of Yahwism is predictably vast. It is impossible to describe all assessments of the development of the Abrahamic deity; accordingly, I shall give only the general trajectory of major scholarly movements. My discussion commences with the rise and fall of “Biblical archaeology” that was long the standard for Western scholars addressing Yahwism before “newer” techniques—mainly stemming from processual and post-processual archaeology—challenged most of Biblical archaeology’s assumptions. My review of relevant literature ends with scholars who are specifically addressing my thesis question, namely Israel’s gradual transition from polytheistic to more monotheistic practices commensurate with political centralization.

Scholarly developments surrounding the study of Israelite religion is best understood with the relationship between archaeological findings and the biblical texts in

mind. Biblical archaeology (championed by Albright, Bright, etc.) was anchored in part on the premise that archaeological methods could verify many biblical claims. It therefore used archaeology as a tool that, if appropriated correctly, could be used to better understand biblical events. Later archaeological theory would jettison the belief that the biblical narrative should be given any special status. Instead, it undertook archaeological excavations of the Southern Levant to understand history for its own sake—not for the biblical text's. I attempt to forward the dialog begun by many by offering that we establish archaeology and scientific methods as our starting point, and that the biblical text—as a historical document read in its proper context—can aid in interpreting these findings.

A discussion of the ancient Levant cannot begin without paying homage to the Biblical Archaeology school. Foundational to this school were the works of American William F. Albright, whose prolific writings would set a standard for virtually all research into the biblical period for nearly half a century after he first traveled to Palestine in 1919.¹ Before the contributions of Albright, archeology had played a surprisingly small role in the academic discussions about the historicity of the biblical texts. Scholarship about the historicity of the biblical narrative had been almost purely textual and was carried out in intellectual German circles. One of the most influential works of the period was that of Julius Wellhausen and his Documentary Hypothesis (largely outlined in *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, 1883). This work argued that the biblical narrative stretching from Genesis to 2 Kings was in fact a redaction of several

¹ Moorey, 54

different sources, the earliest of which was composed after Solomon and the most recent of which was probably composed during the Babylonian Exile. Two of these sources—the J(ahwist) and the E(lohist) sources—were redacted into one text c. 750 BCE. A second redactor combined this text with the D(euteronomist) and the P(riestly) sources around 400 BCE. The major consequence of this work was that it rendered any historical events before the rise of Solomon highly dubious because these events predated the biblical writers. Moreover, no other extant writings substantiate the biblical texts’ most general claims (the exodus from Egypt, the invasion of Canaan, etc.)². While the theory was ultimately met with serious criticisms (to be explored below), modern scholars still give more than a perfunctory nod to the Documentary Hypothesis. Of Wellhausen, influential scholar J. Maxwell Miller notes that “most... would regard him as on the right track.”³

The contribution of Albright was to throw archaeological findings into what had been a principally hermeneutical discussion. Importantly, by introducing new methods he did not seek to overturn the legitimacy of the biblical text—as Wellhausen had—but to affirm it with archaeological methods. Even though he sought to add scientific methods—namely archaeology—to the field of biblical studies, in some ways he regressed from the progress made by German intellectuals. Regardless, his excavations did lead to substantial discoveries—principally new texts. He also sought to expand the fledgling field of “Palestinian archaeology” to all locations relevant to biblical studies. The establishment of this geographical space reveals—critically—that Albright was not undertaking archaeology for archaeology’s sake, but was seeking to, in his own words,

² Miller, 42

³ Miller, 43

“throw some light, directly or indirectly, on the Bible.”⁴

Albright’s work gave rise to a number of influential scholars in the field. Most notably for this paper is his protégé John Bright, whose influential *History of Israel* (1959) relied heavily on the findings of Albright and has remained a standard work on the history of ancient Israel. Bright’s stance is somewhat more nuanced than Albright’s. In his *History*, for instance, Bright concedes that the patriarchal narratives—and by extension much of the biblical text—are not “reliable sources of history” by themselves.⁵ However, it is occasionally evident that Bright’s own theological persuasions hinder his presentation of Israelite history. Despite his qualification concerning the historicity of the patriarchal narratives, Bright still begins his history with Abraham, who was—as was noted in one of the more critical reviews of Bright—“neither Israelite nor Jew. It is for theological reasons, not historical reasons, that Bright begins with Abraham.”⁶

Two books posed a serious threat to Albright and Bright’s belief that archaeology could affirm the Bible. The first was Thomas L. Thompson’s *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* in 1974 and John Van Seters’ *Abraham in History and Tradition* the following year. Both works rejected the claim that the Bible accurately portrayed the environmental and cultural milieu in which Abraham had lived a millennium before the Bible’s composition, and that the oral traditions codified in the Bible therefore did not—as Bright and Albright claimed—accurately portray the events they described. Thompson noted tellingly that, “Not only has archaeology not proven a single event of the

⁴ Albright, quoted in Moorey, 54

⁵ Bright, 73

⁶ Ahlström, 236

patriarchal traditions to be historical, it has not shown any of the traditions to be likely.⁷

Engaging in dialog with the mainstream Documentary Hypothesis, Thompson argued that the final date of the codification of the Deuteronomy to 2 Kings epic was likely in the Persian period or even later, further exacerbating the waning legitimacy of the biblical texts to describe historical events.

Van Seters' book was particularly devastating for Biblical archaeology, and also represented one of the most serious reconfigurations of Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis since its development nearly a century prior. In his analysis, Van Seters focused on Genesis, though many of his arguments might be extrapolated to the other texts as well. His model suggested a central Yahwistic writing (slightly amended from Wellhausen's J-source). Further writers, he argued, simply worked from that text and wove in their own narratives. The current text therefore represents a constant rewriting of an earlier, Yahwistic proto-text instead of a redacting of various separate texts into one. Throughout my work, I will use this refined form of the Documentary Hypothesis, but will refer to this proto-Yahwistic text as the J text because it is more familiar.

While the above scholarship does not explicitly address the concern of my thesis—the formation of Israelite monotheism—paying homage to earlier work is a vital prerequisite to moving forward. The findings of these scholars provide the lens through which my own thesis can begin to take form. First and foremost, Wellhausen's work provides a pivotal breakthrough in hermeneutics as it allowed for the historical epic spanning Genesis to 2 Kings to be divided into different sections composed at different times. Although I agree with Van Seters that this text was probably a single text that was

⁷ Thompson, 328

constantly edited by a series of writers, it does not negate that the text as it stands represents a work subject to substantial editorial sleight of hand. Throughout my own work, I will use the basic terminology of the Documentary Hypothesis (J, E, P, and D), building in Van Seters pivotal caveat that these probably represent additions to an original text rather than a haphazard amalgamation of several texts by an enigmatic redactor. Although Thompson's decision to move the final composition of this text to the Hasmonean period is too radical for me, I still assert the composition of these texts was well after most of the events they purport to describe.

Furthermore, if Van Seters and Thompsons' critique of Albright and Bright is true, and the oral traditions preserved in the Bible do *not* accurately reflect the times they were written about, then the historicity of the oral traditions preserved in the Bible falls into serious question. What the Bible preserves is not unadulterated history, but rather a memory of that history. It is a memory that grew richer with retelling, and eventually erased most (though not all) of the polytheistic elements that archaeology shows were once dominant. It is with this lens—as a literary work that attempts to legitimize the history and theology of its people—that I shall read the Bible.

I now turn to the status of scholarship concerning my principal question—Israel's transition from polytheism to monotheism. The principal scholar I will engage is Mark Smith, a noted expert on the Ugaritic scriptures and the polytheistic origins of the Israelite religion. Two of his most crucial works, *The Early History of God* (1990) and *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (2001), help to integrate the excavations of the Ugaritic scriptures (begun in 1958) into the larger scholarly discussion, thereby giving ample voice to the Canaanites who—in the biblical text—are portrayed as the antithesis

of anything Israelite.

Throughout *History of God*, Smith argues that the Canaanites and the Israelites are closely related in their traditions. When, according to the biblical account, the Israelites acquired the practices of Canaanite religions it was not—as the Bible suggests—the adoption of foreign polytheistic habits, but rather a reversion to an older form of Israelite religion. Smith also deftly outlines the phenomenon of convergence in which various deities melded into one—ultimately Yahweh. Beginning around the time of the judges until well into the monarchy, the mythological personages of El and Yahweh gradually melded into one deity. The idea can be substantiated in part because the later prophets (such as Isaiah) seem to speak of an era before the monarchy in which Israel was polytheistic, but suggest that after the monarchy it became more monotheistic. Read carefully—to Smith anyway—these verses may suggest that the prophets are remembering a time when deities were distinct—before they melded into a single deity contemporaneously with the monarchy.⁸

Virtually all scholars writing on the polytheistic traditions of ancient Israel make extensive reference to the Ugaritic Scriptures. Principal among these scholars is Albright himself. Despite the polemic later fired against him, his work on Canaanite religion remains one of the greatest. I am content to use this work because it is not the data he presents—rather the conclusions he draws—that are problematic. Though Albright would have largely rejected the notion that the Israelites and the Canaanites were the same people, his work on Canaanite religion is still very useful for modern scholarship.

⁸ Smith, 8

As I have stated, my principal aim is to use the religious texts to understand archeological findings concerning the transition from monotheism to polytheism. As my thesis will show, much of these theological changes ran in tandem with political changes, and therefore it is important to engage scholars who have noted also the important relationship between political and religious evolution. One particularly useful scholar is Karl Gnuse, whose principal arguments rest on the shared origins of the Israelites and the Canaanites, and the later political changes that drove them apart.

Gnuse begins *No Other Gods* by discussing the major scholarly shifts that have occurred since 1975 centering around the historicity of the origins of Israel as recounted in the biblical texts.⁹ Principally, he notes that scholarly understanding of the Israelite conquest (1200-1050 BCE) and the emergence of Yahwistic monotheism have been misguided. The prevailing scholarly consensus has changed from notions of a gradual migration to the prevailing view that there was no conquest at all. In this new model, the Israelites emerged from the land of Palestine itself, and presumably created the conquest myth to distinguish themselves from other inhabitants of the land. Monotheism is now understood to have evolved much more slowly than former scholarship suggested, reaching maturity much later.

Accordingly Gnuse argues—as Smith does—that “Canaanite” and “Israelite” religion were in fact very similar to one another, and that many of the biblical condemnations of Canaanite religion must be read as propaganda or at least as exaggerations. Interestingly, Gnuse also notes that Solomon’s “turning to other gods” was in fact a populist move in which the monarchy rejected the monotheist model in an

⁹ Gnuse, 12

attempt to earn popular support. This political move was—unfortunately for Solomon—remembered poorly by subsequent biblical biographers. Therefore many of the prophets and some kings—principally Josiah—must be understood as crusaders aiming to remove “adulterated” (read: traditional) elements from Yahwism in an attempt to use monotheism and the special relationship between Yahweh and the Davidic line to legitimize their rule.

Similar arguments are forward by Jorge Pixley, who endeavors to explain the history of the Israelites from the perspective of the poor. His volume, *Biblical History: A People's History*, moves the focus away from the biblical narrative of kings, prophets, and Yahweh, and attempts to describe the contemporary setting as seen by the average Israelite. Like the other scholars on whom I rely, he argues that the Israelites and the Canaanites were once the same, more or less polytheistic people from whom the Israelites diverged principally for economic and agricultural reasons. These changes, he argues, ultimately manifested politically—namely in the rise of the monarchy under Saul and its maturity under David. For Pixley, the rise of monotheism necessarily correlates with the rise of political centralization.

Although I shall attempt to center my arguments as much as possible on the relationship between religion and politics as exposed in the biblical text and substantiated by archaeology, I will require some information for the earliest years that fall outside of the scope of the biblical text. My principal ally in this endeavor will be Christopher Ehret, one of the world's preeminent scholars on African history. Christopher Ehret's *The Civilizations of Africa* argues that the Israelites have their ultimate origin in the religious practices of the Afrasan people, one of the four primary peoples of Africa before the

agricultural age. Ehret discusses the social structures of the early Afrasan, outlining their clan structure that became prominent around 13,000 BCE.¹⁰

He describes how the structure of the Afrasan (ancestors of the Israelites) was essentially clan-based and henotheistic—a tradition that remained in tact through the earliest periods of the Yahwistic tradition. This information is vital as it outlines the religious practices from which the Semitic peoples would ultimately evolve. The trend can be identified most distinctly in the Israelites; Ehret argues that their *ancestors* were undoubtedly henotheists, and that it is likely that—whether consciously or not—some of these ideologies were maintained in Israelite religion.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My methodology is indebted heavily to the work of contemporary biblical scholars, such as Smith, who continue to do excellent work in reconstructing the religious milieu in which the Israelite religion emerged. While I shall not part radically from the methods of Smith and other scholars, it is important first that I explicitly lay out my goals for this project, as they are integral to the theoretical framework I choose and the way I employ it.

As I have stated, few archaeological findings mesh with the biblical narrative preceding Solomon. As there are no extant records of other texts before the initial composition of the earliest biblical texts—likely the J-source around 950 BCE¹¹—then it appears that this text was relying heavily on oral traditions dating to the preceding millennium. These oral traditions—when finally codified into the biblical text—seem to

¹⁰ Ehret, 39

¹¹ Harris, 97

have lost much of the polytheistic worldview that archaeology shows was present when these oral traditions first emerged. My method seeks to use these archaeological findings—principally the Ugaritic scriptures—to guide my study of the biblical text. I shall pay particular attention to polytheistic undertones still latent in the biblical text. Moreover, I seek to understand where the transition from monotheism to polytheism began, and what happened in the gap between a period that archaeology shows to be polytheistic and that later biblical writers recall as monotheistic.

I am assuming—and I think safely so—that the final redaction of the text spanning Genesis to 2 Kings was done by writers who were monotheistic, if not entirely in our modern sense. Such a model would work well with Van Seters, who argues that the Bible began with the initial J-text and was subsequently augmented with new writings by new writers. Each of these writers would have carefully removed most polytheistic fingerprints left by the preceding writers, although the text maintains vestiges of polytheism. Since even the earliest of these texts was written after the formation of the Davidic monarchy, it seems that even these writers lived during a period of emerging monotheism because—as I shall argue—the rise of the Davidic monarchy is one of the pivotal events in monotheism. The final edit to this portion of the biblical text—by the Deuteronomist around 440 BCE—was written when most of the kings of the monarchy were little more than a mythological memory. Therefore the epic spanning from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings is more solidly monotheistic than other books of the Torah that occasionally bear the footprint of polytheistic traditions; these later texts were composed after the monarchy had better solidified its legitimacy based on the relationship between David and Yahweh.

This is—albeit in brief—the theoretical framework with which I shall turn to the biblical texts, the Ugaritic texts, and other historical documents and discoveries as I seek to understand how the polytheistic history of the Israelites was recorded by the biblical writers as monotheistic—and whence that monotheism derives. The answer, I propose and shall show, emerges from the coalescence of power in the form of the monarchy.

Polytheism is well-suited for a decentralized people in which local clans could worship individual gods without negating the existence or the legitimacy of the other clans' gods. There existed a powerful connection between a particular clan, its deity, and the priest that theoretically negotiated between the two. Familiar relationships between deities often paralleled what were believed to be shared origins between various clans. In few other traditions is this clan structure as clear as for the Israelites, for whom the Joseph epic proposes that the twelve tribes of Israel derived from twelve powerful sons of Jacob—the final patriarch of the Israelites.

Such a structure worked well for a decentralized agrarian people. But economic shifts—brought about, I shall show, through changes in internal agricultural and external political pressures—caused certain clans in Canaan to differentiate themselves as Israelites. Yet this confederation of clans was not politically viable if each had separate priests and deities to whom each owed allegiance. What was needed—as David understood and Josiah reinforced—was a single god who could, like a single king—bring unity to Israel. The development was particularly convenient because the seeds of monotheism were sown before the rise of the Davidic monarchy, and the Davidic line was quick to reap them. The biblical writers' intense love of David probably stems not only from the political centralization that David inaugurated, but also their understanding

that the political structure of the monarchy was necessary to cement and maintain monotheism. In short, the popularity of David would ensure the supremacy of his preferred deity Yahweh.

These are the arguments that the archaeological findings present, and the task before me is to closely examine the biblical texts for clues that can shed light on this historical period. I will be aided in the process through intensive linguistic work, that will attempt to show—among other things—the shared origins of the Israelite and Canaanite peoples, as well as the rejection of some deities—and the coalescence others—into Yahweh of Canaan.

THE GENERAL TRAJECTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF YAHWISM

My discussion of the origins of Abrahamic monotheism includes four chapters beginning with pre-history and concluding with the reign of Josiah. Since many of the texts concerning these later periods were written much later, it is necessary to include as well the contemporary religious circumstances during their composition.

My first chapter looks to the earliest origins of the religious tradition that would evolve into Israelite polytheism and—ultimately—monotheism. Relying on Ehret, I begin by establishing the archaeological understanding of what the earliest origins of the tradition were, and then later describe how these archaeological findings are sometimes revealed in the biblical text itself. In particular, I discuss how the early Afrahan were structured in clans, each with a distinct deity and a priest that communed for that deity. In this henotheistic framework, clans acknowledged the existence of other gods but worshiped only their own. This closely parallels some of the earliest and most

fundamental aspects of Israelite religion, namely the clan structure and the unique and powerful role of the priest. This polytheistic framework—I shall argue more fully—is also to some extent extant in the biblical text. Discussion then turns to the Natufian people, descendants of the Afrasan who were thought to be some of the earliest residents of Canaan. Key findings at their graves reveal a priestess who demonstrates that the religious organization of the Afrasan came with the Natufians to the Near East.

The latter part of the chapter then chronicles many of the larger and more influential civilizations that were developing around the fledgling culture in Canaan, and assesses to what degree their notions of divinity inspired the Israelites'. In particular I look to the Sumerians and the Egyptians, though I make reference to other powers as well. The influence of Sumer has been documented by linguistic evidence, and its polytheistic framework seems to have reinforced the existing polytheistic tendencies extant in Canaan at the time. I note that some of the myths contained in the Hebrew Bible (particularly the E source) seem to rely heavily on Sumerian mythology.

Egypt was—at the prompting of influential intellectuals like Assman and Freud—long identified as a possible origin of Israelites monotheism. I assess in detail the ascendancy of pharaoh Amonhotep, whose empowerment of the relatively insignificant deity Aton has been cited as one of the earliest examples of monotheism. Like the later ascendancy of Yahweh in Israel, Aton came to prominence because of the political support of the Pharaoh. Although his dominance was short-lived, I argue the degree to which his idea may have percolated into Israel. Although I argue it was probably less influential than many scholars once believed, the event probably did not go unnoticed in the surrounding region. Importantly, later Davidic rulers probably returned to his

example to some degree.

The next two chapters concern Canaan specifically. The second chapter describes the essential oneness of the Israelite and Canaanite peoples, and the third chapter outlines the religion that they both—more or less—shared until the monarchic period. It is critical to establish that the Israelites and the Canaanites descended from the same people, as this is one of the pivotal archaeological findings in recent years and an essential groundwork with which to approach the biblical text. Although it departs radically from the biblical narrative, understanding this historical reality can aid in understanding the biblical polemic against the Canaanites.

The second chapter commences around 1220 BCE, a time traditionally associated with the Exodus, although—as I argue—the exodus probably never happened at all, but was rather a story constructed to cement the special relationship between Yahweh, the Israelites, and the land. I begin with a discussion of the climate of Palestine, explaining how its geography naturally allowed for political decentralization. I cement this argument in part by looking at the languages of the Canaanites and the Israelites, which have been shown to be remarkably similar—implying, therefore, either a shared mutual ancestor or a high-degree of mutual influence. I then move into some critiques of the patriarchal narrative, showing how both the traveling story of Abraham and the conquest of Canaan were likely fabrications to enhance the argument that Yahweh wanted the land for the Israelites. The chapter concludes with an argument that if the Canaanites and the Israelites were for a time the same people, then it follows that they would have shared remarkable similarities in their religious practices.

This is precisely where chapter three begins—with a detailed analysis of

Canaanite/Israelite religion through the lens of archaeology and the Ugaritic scriptures. It opens with a description of some of the more influential lines in the biblical text that suggest the biblical writers were emerging from a polytheistic context.

Analysis then turns to the pivotal Ugaritic scriptures that represented a watershed moment in the study of Canaanite religion. Until their discovery, details about Canaanite religion was derived from a paucity of archeological findings and the highly adulterated information presented in the Hebrew Bible. These scriptures contained, instead, three more or less complete epics that showed pivotal information about the pantheon, and—to some extent—the practices of the Canaanite religion, and by extension Israelite religion.

The principal deity of this pantheon is El, who had—much like Kronos in Greek mythology—began to decay in prominence. Discussion of him is important because he is one of the principal deities that would later meld into Yahweh. Moreover, "*el*" is the generic Hebrew word for "god" and therefore I approach its appearance in the Bible with special caution. El is also of note as he is the only deity—apart from Yahweh—to receive no polemic in the Hebrew Bible.

Asherah, too, probably played a more prominent role in Israelite religion than the Hebrew Bible maintained. Her role in the Bible is generally associated with certain poles that bore her name, and therefore I approach these and other verses carefully. I also look to the creation story where, in Canaanite myth, she was thought to be pivotal. I discuss Baal, too, who—according to the biblical narrative—was Yahweh's chief rival for Israelite affection. The Ugaritic texts portray him as the dominant god in the Canaanite pantheon who opposed Yahweh, a chief deity of the south.

I again return to linguistic data to show how many of the practices of the

Canaanites and the Israelites were the same. Many of the sacrifices, for instance, bear mutually intelligible names, and where they do not I propose roots that might explain another sort of linguistic relationship. I conclude by saying that the religious practices of the Canaanites and Israelites worked well for a decentralized society, but—after changes with the monarchy—the pantheon would undergo a radical power-shift.

The last chapter is concerned with the formation of the monarchy, a political centralization I argue is commensurate with monotheism. The discussion begins by discussing the problems with using the Bible as a historical text as it attempts to make history fit with contemporary settings more than it desires to render loyal history. In particular, my discussion is concerned with the central role of David in the narrative stretching from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings; David's ascendancy and his reign are its central concerns.

Relying on archaeological data, I discuss the historical circumstances that led up to the foundation of the monarchy, and then discuss how the Saul story was likely constructed to give further legitimacy to David. Unlike Saul, David was believed to have the blessing of Yahweh. This would provide a critical link between the monarchy and the relatively obscure southern deity of Yahweh, and would be appropriated by David's successors to cement their own legitimacy. Monotheism grew out of the monarchy because some kings—namely David and Josiah—understood that more powerful than the blessing of a deity was the blessing of the *only* deity.

The move was difficult because the Israelite people often rejected such a radical challenge to their beliefs. In several populist moves, several kings would revert to the old ways (they were not—as the Bible suggests—acquiring foreign habits). Among the most

influential kings to jettison polytheistic practices was Josiah, who in Amonhotep-like fashion attempted to rid all non-Yahwistic elements from Israelite religion. Josiah was ostensibly inspired by a book found in the Temple, probably Deuteronomy whose composition he himself had overseen. My final chapter concludes that only with the political centrality of the monarchy—and the subsequent narrative of the monarchy spun by the biblical writers—could monotheism truly emerge.

Clearly this evolution spanned millennia and countless generations. Though it matured with the Davidic monarchy, it was a slow process that grew in small steps. Importantly, inklings of the polytheistic origins of Israelite religion still linger in a close reading of the biblical text; indeed, the Bible is an invaluable source in reconstructing the early history of Canaan. But to begin to understand the earliest origins of the Israelite tradition, we must look not to Canaan, but to Africa.

CHAPTER I: THE EARLIEST ORIGINS OF THE ISRAELITE TRADITION

Monotheism is popularly associated with the Israelites, and justifiably so; their religion, Yahwism, sired the modern Abrahamic faiths. Yahwism is often understood as a profound philosophical leap, a monotheistic island in a polytheistic sea. But Yahwism was neither the original monotheism nor originally monotheistic; it represented neither the beginning nor the end of the evolution of monotheism, but instead an important rung on a boundless ladder. Though the scriptural parent of the Abrahamic faiths, Yahwism has its own ancestors, ultimately reaching far back into the nebulosity of prehistory. This analysis seeks to connect these ancient origins with a nascent faith in Palestine thousands of years later. In particular, my analysis shall examine the ancestral faiths of Yahwism, that—like most contemporary religions—was primarily polytheistic. Wherever possible, I shall highlight where the biblical text has been influenced by the parent traditions I shall explore.

THE EARLIEST ORIGINS OF THE ISRAELITE PEOPLE: THE AFRASAN

Though all humanity ultimately traces its origins to Africa, the Israelites' ancestors emerged from the continent relatively recently. Thankfully, their ancestors—the Afrasan—have been increasingly studied as interest in African history burgeons. I do not intend to dwell too much on them, except to mention some of the important archaeological work concerning their religion. As I will show, many of the religious aspects of this culture were maintained by the Israelites and other descendants of the Afrasan well after this proto-people dispersed. Therefore, discussion of Afrasan religion

is essential in building a framework for the origins of Israelite religion.

We know that such a people existed principally through comparative linguistics, which identifies a proto-language for peoples who today occupy most of northern Africa and the Near East. The language groups spoken in these regions—Chadic, Berber, Cushitic, and Semitic, among others—are far from mutually intelligible, but certain linguistic markers reveal a shared ancestor. Roots, such as *d-m* (blood) or *m-t* (death), are the same or similar in most of these linguistic branches; the suffix /t/ commonly denotes a feminine ending; and most languages have an underlying VSO structure. Such patterns are more than coincidental, and suggest that all these languages share a common ancestor and cultural heritage. Since the middle of the twentieth century, this proto-language was known as “Proto-Afroasiatic”. Given the intercontinental expanse of its modern descendants, the name was appropriate, yet now—as linguists place the language’s origin in Africa—the term “Afrasan” is preferred.

Using the tool of historical linguistics, migration patterns, and other archaeological findings, we know something about the origins of the people who spoke this proto-language. They are first identifiable as a group around 13,000 BCE when they emerged along the western Red Sea coast¹²—in a region stretching from Djibouti to southern Egypt in modern political parlance. They were one of four dominant African peoples before the agricultural age, and had been fortunate beneficiaries of changing climate conditions. Six thousand years prior, the African climate had begun to radically

Ehret, 37

alter; rainforests receded, deserts grew, and rainfall became sparse.¹³ The changing climate necessitated that Africa's inhabitants interact with their environment differently. Some Nile cultures in southern Egypt (collectively known as the Cataract Tradition)¹⁴ combated changes through sedge collection; one of these cultures, the Afrasan, further adapted by harvesting wild grains. By employing both traditional gathering and hunting *and* new grain consumption, the Afrasan ate better than their neighbors, engendering a large population and political comfort. When conflicts over natural resources arose—as inevitably they did¹⁵—the large Afrasan population held the advantage. Gradually, neighboring peoples died off or assimilated as the Afrasan population burgeoned.

By successfully adapting to the new environment, the Afrasan became the sole descendants of the much larger Cataract Tradition. Yet in their singularity the Afrasan became so large that they necessarily began to divide into clans—groupings that likely emerged with the rise of grain collection.¹⁶ Here, I define a clan as a group claiming descent from a common—frequently mythological—ancestor. Descent among the Afrasan was largely patrilineal.

A hereditary ruler (here identified by the Cushitic term *wap'er*) headed each clan, though their power was religious, not political. Community meetings attended to routine political needs, and when political leadership was required (as in wartime), the community would gather to appoint a temporary ruler.¹⁷ Afrasan society therefore had a proclivity to keep religion separate from politics. And yet respect for religious leaders

¹³ Ehret, 33

¹⁴ Ehret, 35

¹⁵ Ehret, 36

¹⁶ Ehret, 39

¹⁷ Ehret, 40

was supreme. A *wap'er's* relative absence from politics was compensated by his or her complete sovereignty over spiritual matters. Each *wap'er* was said to commune with the clan deity—the center of Afrasan spirituality. The deity was said to communicate with the clan only through the *wap'er*—therefore the Afrasan explicitly rejected the notion now common to most Abrahamic traditions that all people can—in some way—communicate directly with divinity. In Afrasan culture, each person only worshiped the god of their clan, but respected the existence of other clans' deities; such henotheistic practices characterize the religious traditions of the Afrasan.

Yet Afrasan religion entailed much more than clan deities and their interpreters. The spirits with whom the *wap'ers* communed were thought to be benign, and were said to oppose evil spirits.¹⁸ Such a notion of lesser, mischievous spirits has continued to percolate the modern descendants of the Afrasan. The Arabic *jinn*, for instance, were integral to Arabic folk religion long before the rise of Islam that retained them. And—though perhaps not strictly “religious”—a final word needs to be said about male circumcision which was practiced widely among the Afrasan. To what degree this practice was associated with religion is uncertain, but it is worth noting that the practice became institutionalized in many modern religious descendants of Afrasan religion—namely Judaism and Islam.

On the whole, the religious traditions of the Afrasan appear reasonably tolerant; in practice, each clan is permitted to worship its own deity, and—theologically—all these deities actually exist. One might assume that conversion or accusations of idolatry do not originate with the earliest iterations of what became Abrahamic monotheism; however

¹⁸ Ehret, 41

with research largely silent on Afrasan views of non-Afrasan religions, it is difficult to say definitively. Regardless, the religious views of the early Afrasan are clear on three points that prove important in later religious history: Afrasan religion included the set of clan deities, each member would worship only the deity of his or her own clan, and these deities were accessible only through unique clan leaders.

The first point confirms one of the core arguments of this paper, that the earliest origins of Yahwism were polytheistic. The Afrasan religion—the earliest religious tradition from which it emerged—was centered around the notion of multiple deities. The archaeological evidence—as presented here—suggests this clearly, but the biblical text too reveals that the Yahwistic tradition emerges from a polytheistic framework. One of the most notable examples is the E writing’s choice of the term *Elohim* to refer to divinity. While it is generally understood to be semantically singular, grammatically the Hebrew plural ending *-im* remains. It suggests that the oral tradition from which the E writing descended believed that *Elohim*—that is, the set of gods—had made the world and the other actions attributed to the biblical *Elohim*. At some point though, the notion of pluralistic divinity switched to a singular deity, but the plural ending was retained.

The Afrasan tradition that each clan would only worship its own deity was also retained in early Yahwism. The ten commandments, for instance, command that “you shall have no other god before me” (Exodus 20:2). The commandment hardly negates that there are other deities, but only reinforces that Israelites may worship only Yahweh, their clan god. Additionally, the commandment is explicitly given in the singular form—to Israel. It is not intended to be a general commandment but rather to solidify a specific connection between Israel and Yahweh.

Lastly, concerning the *wap'er* structure of the Afrasan, the role of the priests in Israelite religion closely mirrors it. During the Second Temple period, for instance, only the chief priest (*kohen gadol*) could utter the tetragrammaton in the Temple on Yom Kippur—granting him the unique rite to access divinity. Even earlier in the biblical period, the role of the priests and the prophets suggests that conversation with divinity was relegated to a very specific segment of Israelite society—just as conversation with a deity had rested exclusively with the *wap'er* in Afrasan times. These tendencies show that Israelite religion long retained many of the central religious elements of the earlier Afrasan religion. It is central for a discussion that seeks to understand Israelite monotheism's origins and to unmask its polytheistic roots in the biblical text.

ACROSS THE SINAI

By the twelfth millennia B.C.E., the Afrasan revolution of grain collection had spread north to Egypt, carrying with it Afrasan culture, languages, and religions. One subset of this northern branch of the Afrasan—known today as the Mushabians—migrated to Palestine about the same time, speaking a dialect of Afrasan known as Proto-Semitic. Historical linguistics shows striking parallels between this language and ancient Egyptian that was incubating in the Nile delta at the time, though—strictly speaking—Egyptian is not a Semitic language because it lacks the tri-consonantal root pivotal to Semitic languages. Exactly where this language developed is a matter of debate, but establishing its origins becomes important in assessing the relationship between the Egyptian and Semitic peoples, as I shall shortly. One theory proposes that the Mushabians brought the Proto-Semitic language with them, ostensibly after it was

developed near the Nile Delta.¹⁹ Such a theory would entail that the Egyptians and the proto-Semitic peoples occupied essentially the same area, and that they made have been the same people until—for some reason—the Semitic people crossed the Sinai and the Egyptian peoples remained in the Nile delta. Important scholarship exists on both sides, but in general scholars seem to prefer this model. I prefer it is as well, because the important religious and cultural continuities between the Egyptians and the Semitic peoples can be better explained by it.

Upon arriving in the Levant, the Mushabians interacted—and ultimately merged—with the “Geometric Kebaran” culture that was occupying the region.²⁰ Apart from some limited excavations in modern Jordan,²¹ very little is known about the Geometric Kebarans. Their origins are largely shrouded in mystery, therefore important details for this discussion—namely their religion—are unknown to us. What we do seem to know is that the Afrasan Mushabians and the Geometric Kebarans melded together into a hybrid culture known as “Natufian”, named after a site where much of the major archaeological research on these people has been done.

The language spoken by the Natufian people is clearly Afrasan—bearing close resemblances to Egyptian. Therefore the Mushabians were probably more powerful than the Kebarans, who may have simply assimilated into the Mushabians to create the Natufian culture. Indeed, the linguistic differences between Egyptian and Proto-Semitic seem more likely to be the product of natural evolution than Proto-Semitic blending with another language family. That the Mushabian—and thus Afrasan—culture was more

¹⁹ Ehret, Keita, Newman

²⁰ Ehret, 38

²¹ Milstein, Mati

dominant is substantiated by the religious practices of these people that seem to be clearly Afrasan. Extensive excavation sites throughout the Levant are devoted to the Natufians, and findings there often make headlines in Israel—and occasionally internationally. Among the most famous findings was the tomb of a woman in 2008.²² In contrast to the many other Natufian graves found throughout Israel, this woman’s grave included such extravagances as animal parts and even a human foot. These elements and the general organization of the burial prompted archeologists to conclude that she had an important societal position, which the media lazily identified as a “shaman.” More likely the woman seems to have been the cultural heir of the ancient Afrasan *wap’er*—even if that role had evolved slightly since early Afrasan times. But regardless, the persistence of the *wap’er* role suggests that the Natufians had inherited an important religious tradition from their Afrasan forbears.

The grave dates to about 10,000 B.C.E., contemporaneous with important environmental changes that precipitated the Natufian society’s transition from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle. Such practices were rare at that time, though the existence of villages and other communities throughout Israel confirm the Natufians’ preference for a sedentary lifestyle. The ability to remain sedentary was likely commensurate with another pivotal development at the time—farming. This was so rare at the time that one anthropologist deemed the Natufians “the earliest farmers.”²³

While it may seem that discussion of Natufian agriculture digresses from a search of the origins of Yahwism, it is for me absolutely pivotal. For the first time—perhaps anywhere—a people connected with a *specific* piece of land. No longer was the land to be

²² Maher, Banning

²³ Bar Yosef, 162

traversed in search of food, but the land could be used and manipulated to provide it. For generations, they lived on it and died on it, and through farming had come to rely on it to provide sustenance. Unlike their migratory ancestors, the Natufians were able to consistently and completely rely on one piece of land. At some point, the land and the religion interpenetrated, breeding a connection so powerful that the term “Israel” is at the core of Abrahamic monotheism today.

THE SUMERIANS

Independently of these Afrasan peoples (and, it seems, independently of almost everyone else) a civilization was flourishing in the north. Here I shall refer to it as Sumer, though it is commonly known by its Greek name “Mesopotamia” which actually relates only to the “land between two rivers”, not the actual political entity that arose in the sixth millennium BCE. Its culture truly began to flourish between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the fourth millennium BCE with the rise of the Uruk period. The details of that civilization are not important here, but it is important to note the powerful political and ideological influence Sumer bore on its neighbors. In 2500 BCE, for example, the ailing Sumer had already greatly influenced civilizations in Syria, which had adapted numerous Sumerian customs and arguably its most revolutionary innovation—writing.²⁴ If such cultural elements were known to percolate into Syria, it is not unlikely that religious beliefs were present in the area as well.

Before I outline the religious ideology of Sumer, I shall briefly describe how these religious beliefs may have penetrated Semitic cultures to the south. Historical linguistics

²⁴ Bottéro, 10

offers a vital tool in tracing this ideological lineage as linguistic colonization often runs in tandem with religious exportation. After Sumer fell into decline, Sumerian—which had been the lingua franca of the region—was replaced by Old Akkadian—a Semitic language. As a language isolate, Sumerian shared no common ancestor with Old Akkadian, but it nevertheless influenced it in critical ways—most importantly through its widespread adoption of cuneiform writing.²⁵ Although Sumerian remained in the area as a liturgical language, Old Akkadian was the dominant language of the land by 2500 B.C.E. Five hundred years later, Akkadian split into Babylonian and Assyrian, which influenced other Semitic languages that were incubating in the east where the Natufians were splintering into several different peoples. One of these, known in historical linguistics as Northwest Semitic, divided into Canaanite and Aramaic. Hebrew was a descendant of Canaanite, spoken by the Israelite people. If the importation of language corresponds not just with the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary, but also ideology, then this linguistic work demonstrates the way in which the future-Israelite people came to accept many of the Sumerian religious beliefs.

The Sumerian religion was—like most religions in the region at the time—both polytheistic and henotheistic. It was polytheistic in the sense the pantheon boasted many gods, who—in accordance with political developments in Sumer—rose and fell in prominence. It was henotheistic because many different regions of the Sumerian empire (which was, like any culture, internally diverse) gave preference for their local gods while acknowledging the metaphysical existence of the neighboring regions' gods.

²⁵ Sáenz-Badillos, 3

THE EGYPTIANS

Meanwhile, cradled in the Nile Delta, a northern branch of the Afrasan founded one of the world's great empires. As the preeminent power in the known world for a time, Egyptian culture—including religion—spread to other regions; in particular, some scholars have suggested that aspects of Egyptian religion would fundamentally shape Yahwism. However, the relationship between the Egyptians and the soon-to-be Israelite peoples is complex. On the one hand, recent excavation shows that ideas were not solely exported; Egypt also borrowed ideas from neighboring cultures—including Canaan. There are examples, too, of a correspondence between Israel and Egypt, as noted by a set of letters discovered in an Egyptian diplomatic office in Tel-el-amarna.²⁶ This collection of letters also supposes that Egypt was in control of at least some of the city-states in the Palestine region, therefore suggesting that Egyptian influence could have been significant.

Yet more evidence of this sort is sparse, and accordingly other scholars have argued that Israel's critical years of development probably happened quite independently of Egypt, and that the Israelites probably did not have great awareness of Egypt until around the second millennium BCE.²⁷ In this view, we are to assume that the references to Egypt in the Hebrew Bible (all contained in the Torah, or—if not—references to events that happened in the Torah) were attempts by biblical writers to show Israel's power through its control over (Joseph) and defeat of (Moses) the largest empire in the known world. This theory receives further justification in that much of the archaeological

²⁶ Pixley, 17

²⁷ Bottéro, 5

evidence surrounding the Exodus story does little to support it the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt, or their exodus into Asia.

Regardless, the Egyptian pantheon and religion has been widely studied as one of the source religions for the religion of the Israelites. In particular, the ascension of the minor god Aton has often been linked to the ascension of Yahweh himself. The parallels are interesting—namely how Aton briefly eradicated the entire Egyptian pantheon as Yahweh himself would later do over the Semitic pantheon. Although I will move toward deemphasizing this connection once deemed vital by many scholars, it is nevertheless important to include an analysis of what is consistently cited as one of the breakthrough moments for monotheism.

The ascendancy of pharaoh Amonhotep IV (died c. 1347 B.C.E.) was pivotal in the religious history of Egypt, and of religion generally. His name was derived from the deity whom he would later denounce—Amon (or Ra).²⁸ Because hieroglyphics lacked short vowels, transcription of this name is highly erratic. Yet unfortunately few spellings include the initial /y/ easily visible in the hieroglyphics. Thus “YMN” would be the most accurate—if awkward—transcription of the deity commonly known in English as Amon. My inclusion of /y/ is not merely pedantic; the root “YMN” appears also in Semitic languages (namely Arabic and Hebrew), meaning “right” in both the directional and ethical senses. The word famously appears in Exodus 15: “Your *right* [hand], YHWH, [is] glorious in power; your *right* [hand] shattered the enemy.” The image remained important in both Christian and Islamic theology (i.e., “at the right hand of God”). In Semitic languages, the few roots starting with /y/ are usually ancient, thus “YMN” in

²⁸ Kirsch, 22

Egyptian and Semitic are likely related linguistically and ideologically, as are many words in both languages. Thus understanding Amon aides in understanding the “YMN” (right) aspects of Yahweh because it suggests a shared root that probably once represented a deity in Semitic cultures—as it continued to do in Egypt. This is not uncommon; Hebrew words such as *yam* (sea) and *shemayim* (heavens) were once understood as gods as well.

At the very least, the Israelites had enough communication with the great empire beyond their borders to know more than a little about Amon. How much Amon influenced conceptions of Yahweh is a difficult and open question, but that there is at least some relationship between the solar deity of the Egyptians and the sun deity of the Canaanites seems likely. And that relationship may not be one of influence; since the Egyptians and the Canaanites shared common ancestry, Amon and Yahweh may simply be different descendants of the same proto-solar deity.

YMN in Egyptian roughly means “solar disk”, though an Indo-European notion of semantics fails to uncover the “meaning” of Egyptian words. That is, YMN is not just a “solar disk” but also many other things that might be extrapolated from that same set of hieroglyphics. Regardless, the Egyptians understood YMN, or Amon, to be a solar deity who—in the pantheon—held the *highest* position because the sun was the most powerful object in Egyptian cosmology. Other deities were common as well, specifically Anubis (the jackal-headed god of the newly-dead), Osiris (god of the netherworld), Isis (goddess of fertility), and Bes (god of dance and music).²⁹ True to the Afrasan tradition, each important deity had priests and priestesses who would oversee their temples and work as

²⁹ Kirsch, 23

intermediaries for their worship. But the theological model had altered over the thousands of years of evolution; specifically, there was more fluidity among which gods individuals could invoke—a change likely stemming from the waning of the clan structure that required loyalty to a clan deity. Yet even this altered model had many distinctly Afrasan elements. Perhaps because of Egypt’s unmatched political power, the Egyptians saw their gods as distinctly *Egyptian*; otherwise they would not have favored Egyptian civilization. Yet, the unprecedented political and geographic expanse of the civilization inspired a new tradition with no precedent in Afrasan culture—the pharaoh. Sharply contrasting the “town-hall” political style of the Afrasan, Egypt’s pharaohs showed strong, centralized—and exclusive—political authority.

History generally remembers the pharaoh as both a political and religious authority. While this was *ultimately* true, it was not *always* true. In the seventeen dynasties prior to Amonhotep, the priests followed the Afrasan tradition of having complete control over religious affairs.³⁰ Pharaohs—boasting complete political authority—had to rely on priests for even the most mundane religious activities. Egyptian society in its early years ostensibly championed the separation of church and state, just as Afrasan tradition had.

The changes during the reign of Amonhotep were profound. First, he challenged the role of the priests as the intermediaries of the gods, and second, he entirely redesigned the pantheon that they served. Personally, Amonhotep represented these religious transformations by changing his name from *Amon-hotep* to *Aken-aton*. Beneath this new appellation was a stirring religious change; the pharaoh—a political figure—had

³⁰ Kirsch, 24

circumvented the priests and raised another deity, Aton—*not* Amon—to the position of preeminence. Like Amon, Aton was a solar deity. Yet the means of his worship was entirely different; Akenaton dispensed of idols to Amon, or to any other deity. Priests serving temples to other gods were dismissed, and names of the deities whom they had once served were effaced from their stones. The chief priest of Amon—formerly among the most powerful men in the known world—left for a quarry to live as a slave.³¹

We cannot know with certainty what Akenaton's motivations were. Surely they were at least partly political; if the priests lost religious authority, then Akenaton himself could fill their void. But this explanation is not entirely satisfactory because the priests—of Aton at least—remained very powerful. Other theories suggest that pressure from Akenaton's famous spouse, Nefertiti, may have contributed, and the most generous interpretation is that Akenaton was—in the tradition of Moses, Paul, and others—motivated to action by a sincere religious conversion.

Regardless, the elimination of every god save one was truly a theological experiment for Egypt. Although not necessarily the first instance of a tradition with strong monotheistic tendencies, it remains the best documented and the most influential for that time period. And, in the context of a civilization that valued both tradition and Amon, it is the most perplexing. Exactly what Akenaton saw in Aton is unclear, yet perhaps Akenaton was motivated in part by his own relationship to the deity. His new appellation supported this; unlike his previous title Amonhotep (“Beloved of Amon”), Akenaton meant “Splendor of Aton.” The first title, “beloved”, implied merely that the pharaoh is the object of the deity's love. The second, “splendor” lacks such passivity;

³¹ Kirsch, 25

instead, it implies that the pharaoh himself radiated the qualities of the deity, so much so that the famous brightness of the solar deity shone through the pharaoh. During the reign of Akenaton, the lines distinguishing religion and state, polytheism and monotheism, and pharaoh and god, radically shifted.

Yet no matter how profound the changes were for Akenaton personally—or even for the Egyptian elite generally—they were short-lived. After Akenaton’s death, the court moved from Akenaton’s fledgling new capital dedicated to Aton and back to Thebes, and all the old priestly cults (to Amon and others) were reinstated. As for Akenaton, his name was erased from lists of Egyptian pharaohs, and the new temples built to Aton quickly fell into desuetude. Akenaton’s son-in-law and successor, Tutankh-*aton*, symbolically rechristened himself Tutankh-*amon*.³² It was Tutankhamon who rose to fame in 1922 as the “boy king” or “King Tut”; ironically, few remember him as the pharaoh who nipped the bud of monotheism nearly a millennium before the Babylonian exile.

Many scholars have argued Israelite monotheism began with the failed religious experiment of this forgotten pharaoh. Ultimately I diverge from most scholars here, but still explore their theories to extract the kernels of truth, and to engage with theories that have long dominated research into early monotheism. Among the most imaginative theories are those posed by the famous Egyptologist Jan Assmann and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Freud, in his literarily laudable but scholarly questionable *Moses and Monotheism*, suggests that Moses, an Egyptian, was none other than a frustrated priest of Aton struggling to find converts after his religion fell from grace in Egypt. Even ignoring

³² Kirsch, 28

the small asterisk that is Freud’s lack of archaeological or hermeneutical evidence, the claim is doubtful in light of recent research that calls the Exodus story—or, indeed, any enslavement in Egypt—into serious question. These are arguments that will be forwarded in the next chapter.

Jan Assmann also forwards a relationship between Aton and Yahweh. Though his scholarship is better than Freud’s, occasionally his assertions are linguistically dangerous. Among the most problematic moments is his claim that “Were not the Egyptian ‘Aton’ and the Hebrew ‘Adon’ the same name?”³³ My emphatic answer to Assmann is “No.” In biblical Hebrew “*Adon*” generally means “lord or master” in the earthly sense; occasionally it can refer to Yahweh, but this is not a preferred name of biblical writers. The Jewish tradition of “*Adon*” as a euphemism for “Yahweh” seems to emerge well after the time of the Israelites, thus making “Adon” an infrequent cognomen for “Yahweh” in biblical times. Furthermore, linguistically the roots appear entirely unrelated. “Aton”, like “Amon”, bears an initial /y/ generally deleted from Latinized versions of the hieroglyphics. Thus the letters, as they appear in hieroglyphics, is best transcribed as “YTN.” There is no Hebrew root for this letter sequence. The Hebrew “*Adon*” is best transcribed as “ʔDN”³⁴ Recall that we have absolutely no idea what vowel was pronounced when we write “o” in “Aton”. Therefore the two words—in English transliterated as “Aton” and “Adon”—but more accurately rendered as YTN and

³³ Assmann, 24

³⁴ ʔ denotes the glottal stop, characteristic of the Hebrew *alef*, the Arabic *hamza* or the Hawaiian *okina*. “A” (and occasionally other vowels) is a common replacement for the glottal-stop in Anglicized words from these and other languages, and phonological shifts from biblical to modern Hebrew has largely done away with the sound. Regardless, the glottal stop, a consonant, bears absolutely no relation to the vowel “A”.

ʔDN—share only a final /n/. Any linguistic relationship between these two words is therefore highly unlikely.

Yet Freud, Assmann, and others are right about one important observation—there was a relationship between Canaan and Egypt. Yet, that relationship has become so shrouded in biblical legend that peering beyond that mythology is all but impossible. Though the exodus story (without significant modifications) is unlikely, this is not to say that the first half of Exodus was set in Egypt for no reason. The people of Canaan clearly knew about the power just beyond their borders, and—even if contacts with Egypt were few—writing Egypt into Israel’s history reinforces one of the dominant themes of the Torah. From Lot surviving the destruction of Sodom, to the Israelites taking Canaan, to the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, the Torah constantly recycles the story of Israel beating all odds. Imagining Israel first as counselor to Egypt (through Joseph) and then as its victor (through Moses), the Hebrew Bible strove to weave Israel as the small—but powerful—nation among great civilizations.

That Canaan may have had great influence despite its relative political insignificance has been occasionally substantiated by new findings. Recent archaeological excavation has revealed interaction between Palestinians and Egyptians as early as 3,000 B.C.E.³⁵ Certain hieroglyphics—the meaning of which puzzled Egyptologists for a century—proved to represent a Semitic language, specifically a forerunner of Canaanite (and thus Hebrew). The inclusion of such words as “*yad*” (hand), “*beit*” (house), and “*ari*” (lion), closely parallel their Hebrew equivalents. Interestingly, the text is a Canaanite spell purporting to guard Egyptian tombs from

³⁵ Copans

snakes. The finding makes the relationship between Canaan and Egypt both more interesting and more complex; although likely the Egyptian superpower influenced neighboring, less politically fortunate cultures, it appears that the reverse is also true. Most importantly, if the Egyptians knew a Canaanite spell about snakes—otherwise undocumented—it seems likely they had some knowledge of the spell’s larger religious framework.

CONCLUSION

The number of cultures influencing the early followers of Yahwism were indeed many, and understanding these cultures is essential in identifying the evolution of the Israelites. Yet the critical question remains; are parallels the product of influence or of simultaneous evolution? Though the former may be possible, the latter is likely because the cultural origins of all these peoples (except the Sumerians) were shared.

Ultimately, the most important reason that the Israelites did not learn about monotheism from the Egyptians is that the Israelites were not monotheistic in these times. Though Akenaton may have championed a theology that looked very much like the theology we would later associate with the Israelites, for the Israelites, that theology would evolve gradually over hundreds of years, not achieving something recognizable in the modern sense as “monotheism” until the monarchy or the Babylonian exile. As the case of Akenaton shows, it would have been impossible for the Israelites to so radically—and so quickly—alter their religious persuasions. The failure of Akenaton’s experiment showed that monotheism was something that required centuries of

groundwork before people and cultures could naturally transition to it. This would be indicative of the religious changes under David and Josiah as well.

As the next chapter will show, the community of the Israelites and their religion were similar to other Afrasan cultures they had emerged from. Particular care will attend those unique elements—both within the culture and without—that engendered monotheism.

CHAPTER II: THE SHARED TRADITION OF CANAAN AND ISRAEL

Determining the moment “Israel” properly begins is largely arbitrary. Unlike the Bible, which recounts ancient Israel’s history largely as a narrative of critical moments, the historical evolution of the Israelites was probably much more gradual; therefore assigning moments or dates to its true inception is impossible. And yet, for convenience’s sake, I have identified the time traditionally associated with the Exodus (whether historically valid or imagined) as an important moment in Yahwism’s history. As mentioned before, the actual Exodus probably did not occur, but important changes did occur around the same time, rendering 1220 BCE³⁶ a useful starting point for a new stage in Yahwism’s history.

Unlike my past analysis that sought to understand the emerging position of the future-Israelites balanced among polytheistic superpowers, this stage will analyze the internal dynamics of these people. The principle players here are two, the Canaanites and the Israelites, but unlike the biblical narrative that concentrated on the differences between these two peoples, my analysis argues that they were at the beginning related ethnically, linguistically, and—most importantly—religiously. The biblical story of monotheistic settlers (the Israelites) barraged on all sides by the polytheistic locals (the Canaanites) shows what the writers of the biblical text wished the relationship had been: that the Israelites had been devoutly monotheistic while their enemies—the various peoples of Canaan—were not. Using archaeological evidence and a careful reading of

³⁶ Pixely, 17

the biblical text, I attempt to explore the dynamics in Canaan during the time traditionally associated with the Exodus.

THE PEOPLE OF PALESTINE

According to a set of letters found in Tel-el-amarna disclosing a diplomatic relationship between Egypt and the Israelites, the population in Palestine was concentrated largely in places of lower elevation, namely along the Mediterranean and in the Jezreel in the north.³⁷ These letters, combined with archaeological excavations in the area, suggest that there were few settlements in the mountains; Jerusalem, with a few other towns, were the significant exceptions. Settlements were generally in predictable places; lowlands offered abundant arable land, and some other areas, like Jerusalem, offered abundant water (One can still see long-dried riverbeds in Jerusalem today.). Palestine during this period—fourteenth century BCE—was home to a series of sparse settlements, often at a great distance from one another. Although its geographic proximity to the Mediterranean probably introduced periodic traders to the region, it did not profit from any substantial economic development and remained a largely feudal and decentralized strip of land that lacked any real political definition.³⁸ This decentralization is confirmed by the biblical accounts of this period; Palestine was decentralized, and different clans grew naturally out of relative isolation.

Maintaining an ancient Afrasan tradition, these new clans believed their members shared a common heritage with a mythological ancestor—in some cases one of the mythical twelve sons of Jacob. Each clan was headed by a political ruler—or set of

³⁷ Pixely, 17

³⁸ Kamm, 25

rulers—and according to the Tel-el-amarna letters paid a tribute to Egypt, although we do not know to what degree this demand was practiced. Conflict among the various clan rulers in Palestine was common, as were insurrections and raids.³⁹

My discussion so far has made no real distinctions between the Israelites and the Canaanites as the Bible does. This is not an omission, but rather an acknowledgement that—in the earliest days of their history—the Canaanites and the Israelites functioned as one collective people dispersed into various clans. While this radically departs with the biblical text and—until quite recently—scholarly consensus, there is a growing amount of evidence to suggest the Canaanites and Israelites were, for a time, the same people.

Linguistically, the two peoples spoke remarkably similar languages. A few moments in the Hebrew Bible suggest that the languages of the Israelites and the Canaanites were mutually intelligible. The famous story in which clans of Gilead (of Canaan) detect Ephraimites (of Israel) by their pronunciation of “*shiboleṭ*” as “*siboleṭ*”⁴⁰ underscores how miniscule the differences among dialects of Hebrew-Canaanite were.

Even later biblical writers seemed to acknowledge this degree of mutual intelligibility between the languages of the Israelites and the Canaanites. Isaiah prophesizes that in Egypt they “will speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to Yahweh the almighty.”⁴¹ It seems reasonable to assume in this context that Isaiah is not talking about the Canaanite language *rather than* Hebrew, especially because he describes in the next verse a future “altar to Yahweh in the heart of Egypt.”⁴² Clearly, he is suggesting that Yahwism will take hold in Egypt, and therefore it would make little

³⁹ Pixely, 18

⁴⁰ Judges 12:6

⁴¹ Isaiah 19:18

⁴² Isaiah 19:19

sense for him to assume that after this mass conversion the language spoken would be that of Israel's enemy. Instead, we must conclude that the language of Canaan *was* the language of the Israelites. Comparative linguistics further substantiates this, suggesting that Proto-Canaanite (sometimes Proto-Hebraic) was the ancestor language of what would become a continuum of once more or less mutually intelligible languages—Hebrew, Canaanite, Phoenician, and Ugaritic, among others.

Though I shall attempt to reject it, even *if* the biblical story were accurate and the Israelites were not indigenous to—but the conquerors of—the land of Canaan, there would be the possibility that the Israelites simply adapted the language of the locals. Regardless, this would still be quite incompatible with a biblical text that shows only military interaction between the Israelites and the Canaanites. It would be unlikely for the Israelites to borrow their language from the Canaanites with whom they only warred. Such linguistic adoption would necessitate a closer relationship than the Bible offers, therefore calling the historicity of the biblical text into question and concluding that that the Israelites and the Canaanites must have interacted closely. Therefore, though I shall argue that there was no migration to Canaan at all, even if this aspect of the biblical story were true, the close linguistic ties between the two peoples shows that the Israelites and the Canaanites for a time interacted closely and were a single people.

Much of the early biblical narrative rests on the distinction between the Canaanites and the Israelites, and the Israelites conquering Canaan. The account of the first immigration of Israelites' ancestors to Palestine is familiar; Abraham set out from Ur with his family after receiving a call from God, destined to follow divine instructions

until he came upon a land God had promised.⁴³ Modern analysis of this story places this migration around 2000 to 1550 BCE. Though the traditional site of Ur is in modern-day Iraq, some place it near Haran (a biblical city en route from Ur to Canaan) in southern Turkey. However, this ambiguous direction of Abraham's wanderings fits into the models of many scholars who embrace aspects of this story while offering that the migration was probably more directionless than Genesis suggests. Some make further changes to the story; in the case of Bright this move represents a larger shift of a nomadic people (not just Abraham and his family but the future Israelites) toward Canaan.⁴⁴ In this model, the move was probably determined by purely practical matters, such as the search for resources, and probably happened over a long period—perhaps centuries—of nomadic wanderings.

Yet despite reasonable changes to the standard biblical story, this model retains the critical element that the Israelites were not indigenous to Palestine; whether by following food sources, random wanderings, or divine commands—the Israelites were outsiders in Canaan. Accordingly, the long biblical struggle between the settling Israelites and the indigenous Canaanites can easily be explained by this model.

The theory does make a great deal of sense in its biblical context. If—as I shall soon propose—the Israelites *were* native to Palestine, then the entire biblical narrative of Genesis through Ruth would fall into serious question. If the Israelites are *not* outsiders, but instead—with the Canaanites—descendants of the Natufian peoples of northeast Africa, then a new model would have to explain the conflict between the Israelites and the Canaanites not as legendary battles of conquest but instead as civil war. The model

⁴³ Genesis 17

⁴⁴ Bright, 47

traditionally held by scholars—including Bright—does not demand this radical shift, in part because some scholars wished to preserve much of the validity of the biblical text. Bright’s motivations in part may have sought to respect a document that—despite its many historical errors—is the most complete text we have concerning the region during this period. But beyond this practical preference for the Bible, Bright’s mentor—William Albright—was the pioneer of Biblical archaeology, which openly sought to validate much of the Bible by using archaeological methods. Albright receives the dedication to Bright’s chef d’oeuvre *History of Israel* (to which I have referred above). It is not surprising, therefore, that Bright was unable to do as more modern scholars have done, and dispense of allegiance to the biblical text and propose instead that the Canaanites and the Israelites were—in the early years anyway—the same people.

Before I move on to these more recent models, I will present my own linguistic work that might have been appropriated by Bright—or others of his school—to show that the Israelites were not native, and therefore unrelated to the Canaanite peoples of Palestine. Much of this evidence, as I shall show, could *also* support the more modern models I favor. The meaning of the word “Hebrew” literally comes from a root meaning “to cross over”. Its verb form occurs frequently in the Hebrew Bible and also in other Semitic languages, such as Arabic. Its frequency and multiple attestation suggests that “to cross over” is the original meaning of the Semitic root, not an association unique to Hebrew.

It is worth noting, however, that as a noun “Hebrew” is much less common biblically than in modern parlance. “Israelite” is by far the preferred term of the people who practiced Yahwism, and many of the appearances of “Hebrew” suggest not a people,

but rather the literal meaning of the word: “one who has crossed over.” Its first attestation is when “Abraham” is described as a “Hebrew”, literally saying that Abraham “came from the other side” (probably of the Jordan) and not that he is a member of a group called “Hebrews.” This small point is important because it suggests that it is only *Abraham* who is understood as “one who has crossed over”, not his whole people, who would later appropriate this term. Therefore while it is possible that in the legend of Abraham’s journey to Canaan locals may have called him “one who has crossed over”, this does not necessitate that all of his people were outsiders—only Abraham. As mentioned above, “Hebrew” is not used in the Bible to refer to the language spoken by the Israelites; “the language of Canaan”, tellingly, is used more.

Abraham’s journey to Canaan is the first—not the only—biblical moment that “the people of Yahweh” migrate there. According to the biblical text, the few ancestors of the Israelites living in Canaan after Jacob willingly go to Egypt to live in prosperity with Joseph during the years of famine. As generations pass, they enter slavery, and then they reenter Canaan en masse in the Exodus. The Hebrew Bible repeatedly makes reference to this moment; Yahweh continually cites it as the reason why the Israelites should worship him, and it is—as far as the Bible is concerned—the moment that the Israelites encountered Yahweh in the Sinai and organized themselves into a people.

Yet, the historicity of this event has in recent years fallen into serious question. Until quite recently, most scholars were proponents of the biblical story, such as Bright who claimed in 1972: “Almost no one today would question it.”⁴⁵ He cites two reasons why the story should hold some weight. The first, and less convincing, is that it would be

⁴⁵ Bright, 120

difficult for the Israelites to invent such a story. Though all national epics are in some sense exaggerated, it would be exceptional to suppose that a culture would imagine a period of slavery and liberation were there not some basis. The counter is that many national epics maintain elements that are even more dubious, and that there are political motivations for the biblical writers to remember these critical years in its history in this manner.

His other argument is that many of the names during this period (Moses, Merari, Phinehas) are of Egyptian—not Proto-Canaanite—origin. While it is true that these names are probably not native to Hebrew (with the exception of “Merari” they have no comfortable Semitic root), that does not necessitate that these names were introduced as a product of slavery, but rather through the type of mild Egyptian influence I have already explored. It is possible, too, that later traditions designed these Egyptian-sounding names to better mesh with the constructed narrative.

Furthermore, there are problems with dates supplied by the biblical writers, and problems also in that there is no Egyptian document (nor any text save the biblical documents) that allude to the Israelites’ bondage in Egypt.⁴⁶ In fact there are few Egyptian documents that mention the Israelites at all, and the above-mentioned Tel-al-amarna documents all but preclude that the Israelites were recently in slavery. Suggesting a political relationship between the two entities—however frail—makes the model of recently-liberated Israelites dubious. Furthermore, if Egypt still claimed some political power over the Israelites (as it does in the Tel-al-amarna documents), it seems that there was nothing close to the type of liberation described in Exodus.

⁴⁶ Bright, 121

CANAAN AND ISRAEL

The shift in scholarship I am proposing—that the conquest myth (Numbers through Judges) was exaggerated, and likely entirely fabricated—has grown in prominence since around 1975. Gnuse, for instance, begins his analysis of ancient Israel by assessing this scholarly shift on the historicity of Israel’s origins as described by the biblical texts.⁴⁷ He argues that the mainstream scholarly understanding of the Israelite conquest (1200-1050 BCE) had more or less embraced the biblical saga, and was accordingly deeply misguided. He argues against even the moderate view of the Israelites’ gradual migration to Canaan, offering instead that no such conquest occurred. In this new model, the Israelites emerged from the land of Palestine itself, and presumably later created the conquest myth to distinguish themselves from other inhabitants of the land. In this model, as I shall show later, monotheism must have evolved more slowly than the Bible proposes or than scholars once suggested.

These new developments are important for discussion of monotheism because scholars originally assumed that Yahwism (and Yahweh) was imported to Palestine with Israelite migrants. In this model, Yahwism defined itself in opposition to the beliefs of indigenous Canaanite religion—biblically described as wrought with cultic activity. But if both the Canaanites and Israelites were indigenous, then we must question whether the differences between Yahwism and the Canaanite religion were as astronomical as the Bible describes. Smith, for instance, argues that Yahwism was not diametrically opposed

⁴⁷ Gnuse, 12

to the Canaanite religion at all, but instead its close relative because the Canaanites and the Israelites are themselves close relatives.

The question, then, is to determine how the legendary wars between the Israelites and the Canaanites developed, or—if they never did—why the biblical writers sought to so radically rewrite their own history. Smith offers that much of the biblical polemic against the Canaanite religion is a type of retroactive propaganda after Yahweh became the dominant—and ultimately only—deity in the Israelite pantheon. According to Smith, Yahweh can only be understood as a single element in the larger Canaanite pantheon,⁴⁸ and, since the Canaanites and Israelites were one people, this was the Israelite pantheon as well.

To make his argument, he relies principally on his reading of the Ugaritic texts that—for the first time—represent the Canaanite side of this classic story, thus balancing the bible’s Yahwistic perspective. Here, the mutual pantheon of the Israelites and the Canaanites is explored, and will be fully detailed in the next chapter.

If the Yahwism developed within Canaan, then the differences between Yahwism and the religion of the Canaanites is probably far less than the Bible would suggest. Canaanites and Israelites shared the same language, and—with the variations to be discussed later—the same religion.

The reason for the radical “otherness” attributed to Canaanites certainly has its origin in the biblical texts themselves, that describe the Canaanites in terms of hill sacrifices, idolatry, and polytheism, which—eventually—was omitted from the Yahwistic

⁴⁸ Smith, 1

tradition, though for a long time Israelites and Canaanites probably practiced these traditions together.

Yet this otherness has been exacerbated in part because of preaching, as Gnuse notes. Canaanites are referred to—often metaphorically—as the antithesis of everything Israelite (the “correct” religion), and therefore a corrupt religion.⁴⁹ While the Canaanites have long been maligned in the consciousness of any who follow an Abrahamic tradition as the classic example of worship gone awry, this exaggeration was probably common to the biblical writers too, who wanted to suggest that the Israelites had never been anything other than monotheistic.

Although it wasn’t until the post-exilic period that monotheism began to evolve rapidly, Gnuse argues that the period of the Israelites in Palestine was nevertheless essential groundwork without which the great theological shift of monotheism could not have occurred. The Israelites—for some reason—began to differentiate themselves from their Canaanite brethren. Political motivations may therefore have led to religious changes.

CONCLUSION

The period just described—biblically, if not historically, associated with the Exodus—is vital because it heralded in a new era for the tribes of Israel in which disparate groups would soon become unified under one political entity. There exist numerous theories to explain how some members of disparate, politically warring groups emerged under a single monarchy, or—said in other words—how the Israelites ultimately

⁴⁹ Gnuse, 14

came to distinguish themselves from their Canaanite brethren and unite while leaving other the Canaanites on the side. There are three prominent theories that describe how Israel was formed among the warring clans of Palestine: the Israelite peoples unified because of mutual racial origin, agricultural politics, or a peasant revolt.⁵⁰

While these three theories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and each has its advantages and disadvantages, whatever theory is favored must answer the pivotal question—why some people formed a subset of the Proto-Canaanite group, radically altered their religious convictions, and a few centuries later attempted to rewrite their own history. The next chapter labors to answer this question, and the final chapter will turn to the rise of the monarchy that was instrumental in creating an entity called “Israel”, a entity that was politically—and ultimately religiously—distinct from the Canaanites.

⁵⁰ Pixely, 19

CHAPTER III: THE ANCIENT RELIGION OF THE LEVANT

The last chapter argued that the two peoples of Canaan—the Canaanites and the Israelites—were closely related ethnically, culturally, and linguistically. This chapter explores their shared religion, focusing on new texts that reveal details about the pantheon and the way in which these deities were worshiped. Despite later biblical writers' more monotheistic rendering of this period, I attempt to outline the religious practices of the Israelites as they may actually have been—polytheistic like other Canaanites. Particular attention will be given to the members of the pantheon that were prominent before Yahweh solidified his supremacy in the monarchic period.

As described in the last chapter, the biblical narrative is unreliable in reconstructing the historical relationship between the peoples of Israel and Canaan. In describing their shared religion in the pre-monarchic period, the presentation of the biblical narrative is similarly misleading. If the conquest narrative is fabricated, as the last chapter proposed, then the shared origins of the Canaanites and the Israelites necessitate a shared religion. Therefore a discussion of the religion of the Canaanites (which this chapter offers) is—by extension—also a discussion of the religion of the Israelites. The pantheon below was once Israel's pantheon, and—though many of these deities receive only polemic in the biblical text—they were once important elements of the Israelite faith. Wherever possible, I have attempted to hypothesize where vestiges of these deities can still be seen in the biblical text.

Although generally interpreted as a monotheistic text, many biblical verses traditionally read as proof of Yahwism's monotheism in fact underscore its monolatry. Notably Exodus 15:11 asks "Who is like unto you Yahweh in the empyrean?", suggesting the existence of other deities. This selection from the Miriam's Song of the Sea is thought to be one of the oldest writings in the Bible, and it suggests that though Yahweh is most powerful god in the Israelite pantheon, he was not governing alone. This chapter outlines a time before this ascension, during the era traditionally associated with Joshua and Judges—between the exodus and the rise of the monarchy. In this era, Yahwism was—like its Canaanite parallel I shall explore—polytheistic.

In embracing this Israelite polytheism, we must understand biblical stories recounting Israelites practicing Canaanite religion not—as the Bible suggests—as the adoption of foreign polytheistic habits, but rather as a reversion to an older form of Israelite religion. Relying heavily on recent archaeological evidence, my discussion seeks to revive the Israelite religion that the biblical writers sought to conceal. Unfortunately this process of working with the biblical texts presents several challenges. Despite their historical fallibility, they nevertheless purport to relate a history about which we would have few details otherwise. The challenge before us is therefore for to discern which elements of the narratives have any historicity and which are embellishments or additions. This is particularly difficult for this chapter because I am interested less in the historical events, but more in the theological leanings of the Israelites during this period. Since the biblical writers attempted to drown out most polytheistic elements in their rendering of this history, what we are left with is a confusing historical puzzle that begins to take form as we encounter archaeological findings.

THE FINDING OF THE UGARITIC SCRIPTURES

The 1958 excavations in the remote site of Ugarit in modern-day Syria would radically alter our conception of Canaanite religion. Ugarit's location slightly north of Canaan proper makes the connection between Ugarit and Canaan somewhat dubious. However, despite the geographical separation, texts discovered there often describe Ugarit as a distinctly Canaanite city.⁵¹ Furthermore, cultural continuities with the land of Canaan to the south are strong, and the otherwise unknown language of these texts—dubbed Ugaritic—was easily derived by its close relationship with other Proto-Canaanite languages. Therefore these cultural, linguistic, and—to some extent—geographical connections with Canaan render the Ugaritic texts as reliable sources in examining Canaan generally and its religion in particular.

The Ugaritic texts—including at least three more or less complete epics—reveal extensive details about Canaanite religion—and thus Israelite religion—offering a rare glance into the cosmology and practices that the biblical texts labored so hard to eradicate and condemn. While I shall not explore the narratives of the epics, I shall explore the Canaanite pantheon in so far as it may be safely derived from them. Before I begin it is important to qualify that the texts—and to some extent the mythology—of Ugarit was somewhat adulterated by non-Canaanite sources. Occasionally linguistic loanwords or mythical elements appear imported from elsewhere.⁵² In the epic of Keret, for example, certain character names appear to be Anatolian—sometimes even Indo-Aryan—but not Semitic. The epic of Arqhat presents similar—if somewhat less frequent—problems.

⁵¹ Albright, 116

⁵² Albright, 118

And yet, even if these loanwords had been adapted in Syria, they could easily have permeated Canaan proper as well, therefore making the religious milieu at Ugarit hardly distinct from the religion in Palestine. And yet, the final epic—that of Baal—will receive the bulk of my analysis because its elements—both religious and linguistic—suggest that it is almost entirely Semitic in orientation⁵³ and therefore a more reliable tool in understanding religion in Canaan. Important also is this epic’s rather exhaustive treatment of the Canaanite pantheon, which I present below.

THE PECULIAR POSITION OF EL

There is no doubt that the religion described in the epic of Baal and other Ugaritic texts was polytheistic. Nor is there much doubt that the head of the pantheon was—once had been—El. Although modern descendants of Proto-Semitic languages use variations of the term “el” to refer to any deity generally (Hebrew “*el*” and Arabic “*ilah*”), it seems “el” was originally not merely a noun but also an identity.

Yet El’s position in the pantheon at the time of the Ugaritic scriptures was insecure. Perhaps among some local pantheons he figured more prominently into worship habits, but—generally in Canaan—he had become merely a *de jure* chief deity. Like the Greek Kronos⁵⁴, with whom he was later identified, El had retreated into an ethereal realm that seldom intersected the mythological drama of the other gods, or—especially—of people. In a cosmology closely paralleling his obscure position in contemporary religious practice, El was said to reside far away at the “source of the two rivers”—likely a reference to the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates (though now-extinct rivers are

⁵³ Albright, 119

⁵⁴ Albright, 120

possible too). Regardless, other gods would have to travel long distances to encounter him. Yet apart from this distant abode, El was said to contact other gods—and occasionally people—through rare apparitions.⁵⁵

The physical description of El found in the Ugaritic scriptures mirrors his frail role in the Canaanite pantheon. The goddess Anat describes him as having a long beard⁵⁶, and in various clay renderings he and his beard appear before the pantheon of other gods.⁵⁷ Described as the “father of the years” in Ugaritic texts, he is the prototype for the modern Western conception of an aged and bearded deity.

While such a divine conception owes much to the ancient renderings of El, the Western tradition likely inherited this image through Yahweh who himself assumed these aged associations. Yahweh—originally a southern warrior deity about whom considerably more will be said later—would in the monarchic period become indistinguishable from El. Yahweh’s description as the “Lord of hosts” or as the head of a divine pantheon seems to have been lifted directly from the tradition of El, as similar titles are applied to El in the Ugaritic scriptures. Although by the time of the Bible’s composition the heavenly hosts would be understood not as other deities, but angels, it seems clear whence this tradition derives.

El is the only deity—apart from Yahweh—not maligned in the biblical text. The Bible directs no polemic against him, but he is instead consistently praised; his name—like Yahweh’s—appears in names of prominent prophets (Daniel, Ezekiel, Samuel, Israel, etc.). The inclusion of the name seems to assume that for the Israelites “El” was

⁵⁵ Albright, 121

⁵⁶ Smith, 37

⁵⁷ Smith, 36

merely another word for “Yahweh” or else biblical writers would not have included the name in some of their most beloved prophets. Certainly a prophet deriving his name from “Baal” would have been unthinkable. The debate surrounding these names has caused some controversy among scholars; some—like Tigay—suggest that the inclusion of Yahwistic names (Jeremiah, Zachariah, etc.) implies that Yahweh was the exclusive deity for these people.⁵⁸ Smith⁵⁹ counters to say that although no examples exist of the Canaanites adopting their own deities into their names, they clearly worshiped these deities. Moreover, the lack of such evidence is unsurprising as we have very few names of Canaanite prophets independent of the Biblical text. Nor, I would add, does the inclusion of a deity into one’s name suggest that the deity is exclusive (recall Egyptian names such as Amonhotep).

Regardless, the inclusion of both deities into the names of prominent Israelite prophets suggests that both deities were important in the religion. And it is also clear in Canaan’s early history that the two were distinct. After Jacob’s prophecy about his sons, for instance, he praises El (Genesis 49:25) who is ostensibly separate from Yahweh, whose praise is awkwardly inserted (perhaps as a redaction by the later P source) between the prophecies of Dan and Gad (49:18).

Joshua 22:22—“God [*el*] of gods [*elohim*] is Yahweh”—may propose a relationship between El and Yahweh. And yet, we must be cautious in accepting this as a concession by biblical writers of the distinct persons of El and Yahweh. “El” here is in its constructive form, therefore implying it means not the proper noun, but rather the generic term “god”, therefore echoing similar superlatives elsewhere in the Hebrew text (i.e.,

⁵⁸ Tigay, 7

⁵⁹ Smith, 5

“king of kings”, “song of songs”, “holiest of holies”). And yet, the verse is still important because it—like the earlier verse of Exodus 15 above—seems to apply that Yahweh is not a singular element in the pantheon, but rather the head of a pantheon.

In the later P text, such monolatrous strands seemed to have gradually faded into a more monotheistic cosmology. In particular, the two deities seem to have melded into one. Yahweh discusses the history of his name in Exodus 6, revealing that he and El are one. “And God says to Moses, ‘I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, [and] to Jacob as El Shadday, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known unto them.’” It is highly likely that this is a late redaction by the P source (done in the Exilic period or later). Regardless, it is an imaginative way of solving the problem of having two chief gods—that they are in fact the same. Its inclusion all but concedes that the two deities were long imagined as separate deities, otherwise such a dramatic revelation—that Yahweh and El represent the same deity—would not have been necessary. The melding of these two deities into one was probably significantly aided by El’s undeveloped character; as an aged and distant deity, his personality posed no real clashes with the younger southern god called Yahweh.

THE MOTHER GODDESS, ASHERAH

Asherah was the Canaanite mother goddess and El’s consort. Common epithets for Asherah included “Qudshu” (Holiness), and the goddess was closely associated with childbirth. Yet her roles extended far beyond realms generally associated with birth; occasionally she was portrayed as a warrior goddess, defiant—even bellicose. In the earliest Canaanite myths, for instance, she is credited with destroying the Sea Dragon,

precipitating El's creation of the earth. The etymology of her name supports this critical—if ultimately forgotten—role in creation. “Asherah” is merely the middle word in a much longer name—*Rabbatu 'athiratu yammi* (“the woman who walks on the sea”)—in which *Yam* means both “sea” and a dragon-like being.⁶⁰

Accordingly to my reading of Genesis, the biblical writers (perhaps unconsciously) drew upon this ancient myth when composing its second verse, namely “the darkness upon the face of the deep.” This darkness is never explicitly returned to again, and it reads like exposition before Elohim creates the world. It is quite possible that this “darkness” represents the dragon that Asherah vanquished before creation, but—after Asherah's omission from the Yahwistic pantheon—the showdown between Asherah and the dragon was also omitted. All that remains of this cosmologically pivotal feat is the mere exposition of a force lingering over the water. However, it seems clear that the writers of Genesis emerge from a tradition in which this particular myth had once been a standard element in the creation story.

Asherah was also closely associated with the lion, and was often depicted in objects of worship seated upon her holy animal.⁶¹ References to lions in the Hebrew Bible, therefore, must be analyzed carefully (and shall be in the next chapter) because presumably the association between the goddess and her animal was so strong one could not be invoked without implying the other. She was associated, too, with diviners, and perhaps some of the Hebrew Bible's condemnation of this practice stems from its close association with the goddess.

⁶⁰ I am comfortable omitting the ending “i” because it represents merely the genitive case marking (which in Semitic languages includes the Indo-European locative). It is largely extinct in Hebrew, though still somewhat more common among its sister languages.

⁶¹ Albright, 122

Perhaps because of her association with fertility and childbirth, Asherah was often seen as a sort of temptress. In addition to her perpetual—if distant—consort El, myths speak about her attempted seduction of Baal and other deities; a set of statues, for instance, depicts two men warring over Asherah. At least part of the reason for Asherah's fall from favor in Yahwism may have been an embrace of female sexuality and promiscuity of the sort that Mosaic law was unwilling to allow.

The above evidence is safely derived from many non-Israelite writings—such as the Ugaritic scriptures—and statues found in the larger Levant area. However, relatively little information exists in Canaan itself from which to reconstruct Asherah's role. And yet the sparse evidence discovered in Canaan is important; quite possibly many of the region's uncovered *teraphim* depict her—as they seem to do in the wider region. These figurines—generally carved out of clay or ivory—were presumably prominent in worship, as is confirmed by Rachel's stealing of Laban's *teraphim* in Genesis 31. Archaeological evidence suggests Israelite worship of Asherah in pottery as well; a jar found in Kuntillat 'Arjud (in the Sinai) dates to the ninth century BCE and includes an interesting inscription: "I bless thee by Yahweh and his Asherah."⁶² That Asherah was Yahweh's consort instead of El's probably derives from the collapsing of El and Yahweh into one deity. For many, it must have made sense that Yahweh (now indistinguishable from El) would associate with Asherah as well.

Such evidence suggests that she was once prominent in the Israelite pantheon, but her fall from cosmological grace ensured that her role would be all but eradicated from the biblical text. The word "*asherah*", however, does appear in the biblical text some

⁶² Kirsch, 31

forty times (primarily in the Deuteronomist), but one must not immediately assume it directly refers to the goddess. Archaeological evidence suggests a type of ritual pole was also called *asherah*; many translations have proceeded cautiously in translating this word; the King James Version, for instance, generally rendered the word as “pole.” While the translation masks the clear appearance of the goddess’s name in the biblical text, it seems in the plural certainly (variously *asherot* or *asherim*) this term refers to ritual poles rather than the goddess proper. And yet it seems highly plausible that these poles were common in her worship, and therefore connected to her. Maintaining the argument that biblical polemic against Canaanite religion was an attempt to keep old elements out rather than prevent new ones, it seems these *asherah*—and, by extension, the goddess Asherah herself—had once been prominent in Israelite religion.

Scholars have raised many possible references to the goddess in the Hebrew text, most of which stem from direct references to the word “*asherah*.” Although I have, as noted above, acknowledged the relationship between these poles and the goddess, it seems difficult to reconstruct much information about the worship of the goddess from these references. What seems clear is that the biblical writers took every precaution to render Asherah into the biblical text not as a goddess, but as a mere pole; though there is likely information about the jettisoned goddess behind these references, it is difficult to extract this meaning from the text alone.

More safe for me are two—more indirect—passages in Jeremiah composed much later than the Deuteronomist, likely in the exilic period. The first concerns practices surrounding an enigmatic “queen of heaven”: “The women knead dough to make cakes unto the queen of heaven, and to pour drink offerings unto others gods that they may

provoke me [Yahweh] to anger” (7:18). The second verse—particularly illuminating—is a quote from the Israelites’ exile in Babylon: “We shall certainly do all we said we would...burn incense for the queen of heaven, to pour out drink offerings unto her, *as we did, and our fathers, and our kings, our princes, in cities in Judah, in Jerusalem streets*” (44:17). The Israelites continue to say: “Ever since we ceased burning incense unto the queen of heaven...we have had nothing and have been dying by sword and famine” (44:18).

These verses suggest that worship of the queen of heaven (whom I argue is Asherah) is an ancient practice, and that at least some Israelites associated her worship with better fortune than monolatrous worship of Yahweh. The verse is therefore pivotal because it does not necessarily imply that the Israelites ceased worshiping Asherah and began worshiping Yahweh. Instead, it seems to imply that the worship of many gods at once was acceptable for the Israelites; what was unfavorable was the worship of a single deity. This is clear in the text itself which argues “we *ceased* burning unto the queen” not “we *began* worshiping Yahweh”. Therefore—literally a millennia after the imagined revelation in Sinai—the Israelite masses were still struggling to jettison their polytheistic practices that had ostensibly been central to their religion for so long.

THE STORM-GOD BAAL

Unfortunately the Ugaritic scriptures make little reference to Dagon, whose name appears somewhat frequently in the Hebrew Bible. A clue to his relative absence in the Ugaritic epics may lie in the biblical text, that associates Dagon principally with the Philistines (Canaan peoples on the *southern* coast of Canaan—far from Ugarit). The

principal reference to Dagon in the Ugaritic scriptures is that he is the father of Baal. Concerning Baal himself, however, the Ugaritic texts have considerably more to say. During the composition of the Ugaritic scriptures, the principal deity of Canaan was Baal. “Baal” was not his proper name however, but instead a common word in Hebrew and other Semitic languages for “master” or occasionally “husband.” His real name was Hadad, and around the fifteenth century⁶³ “Baal” (master) became the preferred appellation for the deity, much as “Adonai” would supercede “Yahweh” in vernacular parlance. He was often associated with the Egyptian storm-god Seth, and the two deities may have actually derived from an earlier Proto-African deity.

Although not his father, if El was the Canaanite Kronos, then Baal was the Canaanite Zeus. Though he played no role in the creation myth (although in later periods he came to replace Asherah as the vanquisher of the Sea Dragon), Baal had ascended to absolute ruler of heaven and earth. He was said to have destroyed both monsters of the sea and river, and (although his sister and consort Anat dealt the final blow), he also helped to defeat Mot (death) in a particularly dicey moment as a captive in the underworld.

Baal-Hadad dwelt on the mountain Zaphon (north), though there is some confusion about where this mountain is. There was a mountain known by that name about ten kilometers north of Ugarit (on the modern-day Syrian-Turkish border), and—during the later period of Hellenization—the Greeks identified the mountain as an abode of Zeus, presumably invoking a local tradition that placed Baal on the peak. A mountain

⁶³ Albright, 124

called Zaphon also appears in the Bible⁶⁴ although I doubt whether this is the mountain holy to Baal. It appears in Exodus when the Israelites camp at Pi-hahiroth after fleeing Egypt, somewhere between Migdol and Baal-Zephon. “*Migdol*” is a generic word for something tall (tower, hill, etc.) and “Zephon” merely means north, thus the location could be almost anywhere. If the mountain were the abode of Baal, it seems unlikely that the biblical authors would have mentioned it so offhandedly. Additionally, the Zaphon later made holy to the Greeks lay in the south of Turkey, making it too far north for the exodus from Egypt.

Yet wherever his abode was, Baal’s powers were wide-reaching. In addition to being associated with the north and storms, he was also the principal marine god (perhaps this was the reason he came to replace Asherah as the vanquisher of the Sea Dragon). Accordingly, he came to be viewed as the protector of mariners, and temples sprang up in his honor along the Mediterranean coast from Egypt to the south of Turkey.⁶⁵

In addition to the goddess Asherah, two other goddesses figured prominently in the Canaanite pantheon—Anat (or Anath), Baal’s virgin sister, and Astarte.⁶⁶ Baal’s relationship with these two goddesses was complicated—often violent. In one myth, for instance, he is said to have violently raped Anat. Anat engaged in violent activities as well, such as a mass slaughtering of humanity which she took pleasure in.⁶⁷ In one myth, she eats her brother Baal when she discovers him dead. And yet—as mentioned above—she has compassionate aspects too, such as when she defeats Mot in the underworld to save a captive Baal.

⁶⁴ Exodus 14:2

⁶⁵ Albright, 128

⁶⁶ Albright, 128

⁶⁷ Albright, 130

Astarte—although relatively common in other contemporary sources—makes few appearances in the epics of Ugarit, as Anat dominates most myths. And yet her absence from the Ugaritic texts does not preclude some discussion of her. She had already risen to great prominence in Egypt by the late Bronze Age⁶⁸. The Egyptian version of the defeat of Yam has neither Asherah nor Baal as the victor—but Astarte. There is some debate about the meaning of her name, but it generally understood as an obscure word for “splendor.” This epithet probably stems in part from the goddess’ association with the evening star.⁶⁹

THE RELIGION OF CANAAN IN PRACTICE

A reading of the history books of the Hebrew Bible supposes not only that the deities of the Israelites and the Canaanites, but also their practices, were radically different. Independent of other archaeological evidence, often the biblical text is its own sharpest critic. Animal sacrifices characteristic of Canaanite religion in the bible, for instance, would remain a central element of Yahwism until Roman times. In turning to the Ugaritic texts, many of the specific types of sacrifices in Ugarit appear identical to the acknowledged practices of the Israelites themselves. Sometimes these practices bear no ostensible etymological relation, such as the Biblical Hebrew *‘olah* and the Ugaritic “*sh-r-p*” both of which are offerings consumed by fire.⁷⁰ However, I suggest that the Arabic root “*sh-r-b*”, denoting consumption, may be related to the Ugaritic “*sh-r-p*” since any Proto-Semitic “p” appears in Arabic as “b”. If Ugaritic (West Semitic) and Arabic (South

⁶⁸ Albright, 133

⁶⁹ Albright, 134

⁷⁰ Smith, 23

Semitic) share this common linguistic ancestor, then it is likely that “*sh-r-p*” is the original Proto-Semitic root. Therefore Hebrew’s unconventional ‘*olah*’ may be an attempt to distinguish itself from the original tradition, though the practice remained the same.

More generally though, no such linguistic work is required to see the relationship between the sacrificial practices of the Ugaritic texts and Israelite religion. The Israelite practices of *shelamim* (peace offering), *minchah* (tribute offering), and *neder* (vow offering) all have direct linguistic parallels in the Ugaritic texts.⁷¹ The role of the priests (mutually inherited from ancient Afrasan origins) remained very similar. The Israelite “*hakkohen hagaddol*” (chief priest) and Ugaritic “*rb khnm*” (great priest) appear to represent essentially the same role. With such a multitude of religious practices that—in language and practice—so clearly mirror each other, it becomes challenging to accept the biblical narrative. It seems highly improbable that the outsiders (the Israelites) would stumble upon a piece of land in which the religious practices were so radically similar to their own with similar names. More likely—as I have consistently argued—the Israelites and the Canaanites were both natives to Canaan and developed their religious beliefs and practices together.

Of course, it is important to note that although the Canaanites and Israelites were performing essentially the same actions with similar names, they may not have understood them in the same way. Ultimately this became true because the Israelites would continue to perform similar actions through the Second Temple period, and yet very clearly they understood their worship practices as monotheistic. What these parallels show more than anything is that the Israelites and the Canaanites were emerging from the

⁷¹ Smith, 23

same tradition; the parallels in linguistics and in practice can be explained in no other way. While they did part ways theologically, these similarities nevertheless show us that they had the same religious origins.

CONCLUSION

And yet, it would be hasty to assume that the differences between these peoples and—by extension—their religions were solely revisions by biblical writers centuries later. As early as 1200 BCE, the two people are already differentiated in an Egyptian text celebrating the control of Egypt over the area⁷² (echoing the Tel-al-amarna document). Here “Israel” is mentioned as a people and “Canaan” as a country. Other cities such as Gezer and Ashkelon are mentioned in the text as well, so there is little doubt about the area in question. Though the text does not mention that these people are at war with one another, it does imply that they were distinct.

Apart from this text there are prominent elements in Israelite religion that do not appear to derive from Canaanite origin. Most notably is Yahweh’s southern sanctuary in Sinai and the exodus story in which that region is prominent.⁷³ It would appear that these two elements are related.

Although it is true that the biblical writers’ designed narrative sought to overwrite the shared mutual origins of the Canaanites and the Israelite peoples, it is true also that the branching of the religious traditions of the Israelites and the Canaanites was in some sense organic. The role of the biblical writers, therefore, was merely to erase the root from which these two branches mutually sprung, and to treat the two trajectories as

⁷² Smith, 26

⁷³ Smith, 25

having been always radically opposed. As is so often true in the history of religion, I shall argue that the religious differentiation between Canaan and Israel was initially political. With the rise of the Davidic monarchy, Israel received its hero and its political structure. Accordingly, its religion shifted, for a time, to the Judaic deity—Yahweh. Although the ascendancy under David would be short-lived, intense nostalgia for David by his successors and the biblical writers would ensure the eventual victory of Yahweh over the whole of the Canaanite pantheon.

CHAPTER IV: YAHWEH AND THE MONARCHY OF ISRAEL

*I will also appoint him my firstborn,
the most exalted of the kings of the earth.
I will maintain my love for him forever,
and my covenant with him will never fail.*

—Psalm 89:27-28

My second chapter argued against the biblical myth that the Israelites were outsiders to Canaan, suggesting instead they were at the beginning the same people as the Canaanites—sharing the same language, religion, and land. The third described that shared religion and outlined the mythological precursors in the religion that ultimately formed Yahwism. This chapter seeks to understand the blooming of that religion, principally the unique confluence of religious and political factors through which the Israelites defined themselves against other Canaanites. These political developments—culminating in the rise of the Davidic monarchy—gradually transformed a subset of the Canaanite peoples from a decentralized, polytheistic people into a politically unified and monotheistic social unit. They differentiated themselves from those who clung to the traditional ways by rallying behind the clan of Judah, its king, and its deity. Yet the rise of monotheism does not lie only with David. It was codified and reinforced by the biblical writers who sought to connect Yahweh with two of Israel’s political heroes—David and Josiah.

THE BIBLE AS A ROYAL BIOGRAPHY: A WORD ON BIBLICAL SOURCES

The Bible preserves cultural memory. Like memory generally, it is not always linear, factual, or even wholly unaware of its own imprecision. Accordingly, the Bible does not preserve a history, but rather a memory of that history. Central to this memory is

a certain David of Bethlehem whose rise to power, I shall argue, had consequences that were ultimately as much religious as political. David's centrality in the biblical text cannot be disputed; read as a whole, the various Hebrew texts collected in the Bible weave the royal epic of the son of Jesse. This opening analysis offers possible explanations for David's centrality, and attempts to contextualize the biblical sources that I will be engaging throughout this chapter. It is important that I qualify the historical fallibility of the biblical texts now as much of my analysis concerning the special relationship between David and Yahweh—and the subsequent political drama of the Davidic line—relies on them. My hermeneutical method necessitates that I engage with the biblical text on its own terms—as a document of oscillating historicity but with a structure that reveals what its writers felt to be important. In this vein, the Bible is less useful for the history it presents and more for how it presents it.

The writers of these particular biblical texts were more monotheistic than the ancient characters they wrote about, and accordingly their task was not an easy one. In turning back to this mythological period in their history, biblical writers were penetrating a historical moment in which polytheism was the norm of the land. Their task was to present a later theological development (monotheism) as though it had always been characteristic of the Israelite people. Although likely these writers did not doubt the veracity of a single deity, this reasonably new ideological development percolated their rendering of the ancient events they recounted, adulterating history with legend. My last chapter, for instance, recounted how the “adoption” of “Canaanite” practices was in fact no more than the standard religious praxis at that time, though the biblical writers criticized these practices in an attempt to render monotheism as central to Israelite

religious life since Moses. In their representation of David, too, the biblical writers attempted to paint a monotheistic story on a polytheistic canvass. Yet, as my analysis of the biblical texts will show, sometimes that canvass was bumpy and polytheistic ideologies protruded despite thick layers of theological paint.

Non-biblical evidence suggests that the Israelites had differentiated themselves from other Canaanites around 1200 BCE, a date not unrelated to David's supposed rise to power about two centuries later. Such organic differentiation was, after all, probably necessary for a portion of the inhabitants of Canaan to mobilize into a monarchy. As my last chapter showed, before the time associated with David's rise (and—as the biblical portrayal of Solomon's reign shows—after his death) some form of polytheism was dominant among Israelites and Canaanites. And yet somehow David's ascension under the banner of Judah and the purported blessing of Yahweh would have profound effects on Israelite religion; ultimately, it would be instrumental in the formation of monotheism. Yet this relationship was not as simple as cause and effect; though the monarchy would help to solidify Israel's trend toward monotheism, it was ultimately the biblical writers working in the Exilic period and beyond that cemented this connection. Although David himself may have invoked his relationship with Yahweh to solidify his own legitimacy, the biblical writers worked to draw attention to it and to expand on its implications. Therefore the rise of monotheism is connected both to the rise of the Israelite monarchy and the biblical writers' rendering of that narrative.

Martin Noth's influential thesis on source theory led most scholars to conclude that the bulk of this text spanning Deuteronomy to 2 Kings is the work of a single redactor. This author of this epic work connecting Sinai with the Babylonian captivity is

often dubbed “The Deuteronomist”—associated with the D writing in the traditional Documentary Hypothesis. Clearly there are continuities in this text, and read straight through the text crescendos to the formation of the Davidic monarchy and David himself. The Book of Ruth, for instance, seems irrelevant in the larger biblical drama unless to offer details about David’s ancestors. Because of David’s importance both politically and religiously, the redactor of these bible texts embraced and reinforced the centrality of David in the biblical narrative. For the Deuteronomist, David is the central human character in his narrative—a narrative that glorifies and legitimizes David’s ascent to power and laments that most—if not all—of his successors were but mere shadows of his splendor.

That Deuteronomy through 2 Kings is the work of a single author or redactor is substantiated even by portions of its text that do not mention David. In Deuteronomy and Judges, for instance, we have clear whispers of the coming of kings, implying a post-monarchic composition. In Deuteronomy, Moses tells his people in one of his farewell speeches, “When you enter the land Yahweh your God is giving you...and say ‘Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us, be sure to appoint over you the king whom Yahweh your god chooses.’ ” (Deuteronomy 17:14-15) This prophecy so closely follows the events of 1 Samuel that we can safely conclude that it postdates either the events themselves or the composition of the stories that relate them. Judges, similarly, ends with a passage that overtly suggests a monarchic influence on its composition: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” That these texts anticipate and centralize David is unsurprising as most scholars agree with Noth that the epic history from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings was the work of a single hand written after David. Despite the

astounding continuities however, I will address notable inconsistencies as they become relevant—such as the repetitions and contradictions between Joshua and Judges, and the peculiar history of Deuteronomy itself.

I follow most scholars and Noth and put the composition of this text sometime during the Exilic period⁷⁴. Such a late date implies that even though the events these texts relate were distant, they were still relevant. Probably because of the recent *götterdämmerung* of the Israelite monarchy, the Books of Samuel and Kings seek to romanticize David as a coping mechanism for political failure. Left with no political centrality—or autonomy—they had to search for and reinforce David’s lasting gift—Yahweh. They noticed, correctly, that a critical victory for Yahweh over other Canaanite deities corresponded in part with David’s ascension, and therefore constructed a story in which politics and religion interpenetrated—in which the rise of David and the consequential rise of Yahweh would ultimately become inseparable.

Texts predating the Deuteronomist allude to the Davidic narrative. Even the J text—identified by Wellhausen as the earliest substantial composition in the corpus (although a few short poems were earlier)—was probably written shortly after David’s death, perhaps around the year 970 BCE as suggested by prominent Hebrew Bible scholar Edwin Thiele. If so, then certainly the writers of these texts consciously sculpted them in such a way as to prepare for the coming of David and solidify the legitimacy of his line. The Joseph saga in Genesis, for instance, offers more details about Judah than any other of Joseph’s brothers. Although his actions are not always ethically outstanding (notably his relationship with his daughter-in-law/prostitute Tamar), the text labors to

⁷⁴ “The time will surely come when everything in your palace...will be carried off to Babylon.” (2 Kings 20:17)

redeem him and centralize him. It is Judah, after all, who recommends selling Joseph into slavery instead of killing him (Genesis 37:27), which—contextually speaking—appears ethical to the other characters. But of course my goal here is not to assess the ethics of the biblical Judah, but merely to highlight that the writers of these texts sought to draw attention—largely positive—to him. That David is Judah’s descendant suggests not a coincidence, but that the scribes sought to remember the ruling clan’s patriarch favorably.

A parallel version of David’s biography rests in the Book of Chronicles; taken as a whole it, it is somewhat more nostalgic of the Davidic era, and appropriately so as its composition was later than the Deuteronomist’s. Various elements in the text, such as the proclamation of Cyrus the Great allowing the Israelites to return to Canaan and the Aramaic influence on the Hebrew text suggest a very late—definitely postexilic—composition. For some time, scholars—led by Noth—argued that Chronicles was composed during the Greek period, implying a final redaction after 333 BCE.⁷⁵ His hypothesis has in recent years been adapted, principally because there are relatively few hints of a Greek influence on the Hebrew text. There is, for example, only one word of clear Greek origin (*drachma*) which does not necessarily imply Greek colonization.⁷⁶ The Davidic genealogy and the list of high priests (when compared with Josephus’ own lists) points to a somewhat earlier date of 400 BCE.

But regardless, this date implies Chronicles postdated the Exilic period and the work of the Deuteronomist. At so late a period, the memory of David was slipping further away into legend, and the writers lamented the void of political centrality and legitimacy. Perhaps because the texts of 1 Samuel to 2 Kings were commonly known at the time, the

⁷⁵ Myers, lxxxvii

⁷⁶ Myers, lxxxviii

writer of Chronicles sought to add copious details about contemporary religious practices (rather than political drama) into the narrative—particularly details concerning Temple worship. Since very few of Chronicles’ details about these religious elements appear in the earlier Books of Samuel, it is likely these details more closely portray the religious practices of the writers’ times than David’s. The writers of Chronicles probably wanted to connect their own religious practices with the ancient David, much like contemporary American politicians attempt to connect their own practices with “the founding fathers”. The biblical writers therefore sought to legitimize their current political and theological milieu rather than to accurately portray the history of the Israelites. Like the Book of Samuel, Chronicles represents the biblical writers’ attempt to make the religion of past centuries mirror the religious setting in which the text was composed—to suggest that the writers’ own monotheism and religious praxis derived from the Davidic era or earlier. Creating texts that substantiated contemporary practices provided the writers and their patrons with a powerful political and religious tool, but we cannot blame this sleight of hand because historicity was probably never a goal for the writer of Chronicles. Arguing that the goal of Chronicles was never historical accuracy has long been accepted in biblical studies; Benzinger observed, “The Chronicler is not at all a writer of history in our sense of the term; he does not aim to relate what took place but what serves to edify.”⁷⁷

In later prophetic books, too, prophets constantly look back to the “God of David” to lament both the loss of a legitimate ruler and also the piety that David embodied and endorsed under his rule. Invoking David’s name was the sugar that made their prophetic

⁷⁷ Benzinger, x

medicine go down; it was an echo of a past that had already slipped away into legend, and a prophet's greatest weapon in establishing his own legitimacy. It is worth noting, too, that many of the poetic works of the Bible (certainly the bulk of the Psalms) are attributed to David. Whether or not these were penned by the son of Jesse is irrelevant; what matters is that whoever did write them wanted to associate them with David. They wanted a legitimacy that only David's name could provide.

Although he was likely based on a historical personage, assessing the historicity of David is not relevant here. Therefore I shall make no attempt to assess the historicity of the biblical David. My focus is on the ascension of Yahweh and not the *historical* persona who helped to bring it about. While likely someone like David was involved in events similar to those of Samuel and Chronicles, analysis here focuses on the presentation of those biblical stories rather than their historicity. In short, it matters much more for this analysis how the biblical writers chose to remember David than how he actually was.

And—as this analysis has shown—their focus on David is supreme. Biblical discussion of the political status of Israel and its relationship to Yahweh consistently return to David. Moreover, historically the moment when “Israel” becomes distinct from the rest of Canaan shortly predates David's reign. For the writers of the Bible, the history of Israel cannot be understood unless contextualized in David. And—as the last chapter has shown—Yahweh was a God unique to Israel and independent of the larger Canaanite pantheon. In forming a political body separate from the rest of Canaan under David, the Israelites made their most critical step in providing Yahweh with legitimacy and ultimately singularity in the Israelite pantheon.

THE DEMAND OF THE PEOPLE: SAUL AS KING

For the biblical writers, there is little doubt that David is the first truly legitimate king of Israel. Central to their claim for David's legitimacy is that Yahweh (a character of the biblical writers) wishes for and orchestrates David's ascension to the throne of Israel. His predecessor Saul's legitimacy, by contrast, was only grudgingly rubber-stamped by Yahweh after lengthy pleading by the Israelites. Given the failure of Saul's reign, it seems Yahweh never believed Saul's rule would translate into anything other than failure. Yahweh seemed unable to accept that Israel would want a king when it had him.

This at least is the story the biblical narrative paints. Yet Yahweh's adamant stance against a king is challenging to reconcile in the context of other biblical events that bookend it. In particular, Yahweh's initial disdain for a king contradicts Yahweh's promise for a king before (Moses' promise in Deuteronomy), and his vehement support of David after. It may be that the reign of Saul is merely a point of discontinuity in Yahweh's otherwise consistent stance to allow for a king. It may be too that Moses' promise of kings lacks any historicity. At the very least, it suggests some historical revision by the biblical writers.

But regardless, the fundamental problem for Yahweh (read: the biblical writers) is that the *people* demand a king. In demanding a king it seems that the people are expressing dissatisfaction in their true leader—Yahweh. The people, therefore, appear to want to move the object of their veneration out of the empyrean and into an earthly throne. In his writings, the Deuteronomist allows Yahweh to grudgingly accept the cries of the Israelites, and selects Saul as king. The reason for the construction of the narrative

in this way becomes apparent; for the biblical writers, they associate his failure with the people's request—not Yahweh's—for a king. David's reign is celebrated by the biblical writers because Yahweh desired him. The writers therefore use Yahweh's approval of David's ascension to legitimize his monarchy and condemn Saul's.

Of course, as the last chapter suggests, Yahweh was not the only deity in Canaan at this time. Therefore it is unlikely that in the historical period the Deuteronomist describes, the Israelites would look only to Yahweh for legitimacy when many gods could offer it. Moreover, without a centralized, single deity it was only natural that people would look for a centralized political unit and desire a king. As priests and prophets may have been concerned that the rise of kings would challenge their own power (which of course they would), it is likely that the literary Yahweh's reticence mirrors the historical clergy's doubts about establishing a monarchy. It seems that this story of Israel craving a king against the wishes of its deity is exaggerated by the biblical writers; using Yahweh as a literary device, the writers are able to move the uneasiness among the clergy into Yahweh's own words, securing a theological legitimacy that would have been impossible in the historical period. Moreover, it vindicates the clergy who probably composed the text under the close eye of the monarchy.

Yet regardless, it seems historically likely that the Israelites *did* want a king. There are many reasons for this, and prominent among them is that the Israelites were gradually beginning to differentiate themselves from other Canaanite groups. Their reasons stemmed in part from agricultural differences (forwarded by Albrecht Alt) and also peasant insurrections (forwarded by Norman Gottwald), both related to the precarious position of peasants who fell victim to warring tribes and kings. The desire to

unify together under a king was probably believed to offer better stability and security in the long-run.⁷⁸

Whatever their reason, there has been ample archaeological research done around the hills of Ephraim and Judah that point to the desperate agricultural circumstances of the Israelites in those regions. Despite many villages' attempts to diversify their productions, the terraces necessary to support any real form of agricultural were inefficient and unpromising.⁷⁹ Villages elsewhere, however, were much better off economically, though they had to contend with raids from other villages struggling to survive. The situation was a deeply precarious one. The poor villages craved a more equal distribution of wealth, and the richer villages craved political stability that would keep hungry raiders outside the city walls. The seeds were well sown for the nascent stages of a centralized state and monarchy.

In many ways, our first meeting of Saul in the Bible is far less negative than the final image we are left with—of a failed king falling on his own sword. This sweet prelude contrasts with the epic failure of Saul's reign; read straight through, the biblical story of Saul is a disaster of Macbethian proportions that intentionally contrasts with the legitimacy of the biblical writers' venerated David.

Saul's introduction into the biblical narrative recalls many first appearances of other notable biblical characters. Saul's discovery by Samuel, for instance, closely mirrors the nameless servant's discovery of Rebecca (Genesis 24). Similarly, after Samuel tells Saul that the "desire of Israel" (1 Samuel 9:20) has turned to him, Saul answers with: "But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel?" (9:21), a verse that very

⁷⁸ Pixley, 21

⁷⁹ Pixley, 28

clearly invokes Moses' famous "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" In the context of Saul's later narrative, both allusions become powerful ironies as Saul is neither the ancestor of a great nation (like Rebecca) or a favorite of Yahweh (like Moses).

Simply put, Saul's reign represents a failure. Early in his reign, his testy relationship with David serves to underscore his opposition to the man who turns out to be Yahweh's chosen ruler. Furthermore, Saul's relationship with the witch of Endor and the taking of his own life highlight his ethical culpability more generally because, as his power grows, he consistently turned away from religious law. And finally, whether historical or not, the disaster at Gilboa is the biblical writers' attempt to solidify Saul's inadequacy as a ruler.

Again, my focus is not to determine whether any of these biblical events concerning Saul are historical, but rather to analyze their presentation by the biblical writers. Key to this endeavor is to extract a key moral message from the text: that kings chosen by the people end like Saul—in blasphemy and defeat. This narrative works as a juxtaposition to David. Although he too has turbulences in his reign, the imagined glory of the Davidic period is clear enough for the biblical writers. The difference between them seems principally that the Yahweh allows Saul to rule but Yahweh wants David to rule; that is, for the biblical writers David's rule has a divine legitimacy Saul's never did. While David may have invoked this legitimacy himself, more important is that the biblical writers return to it themselves in composing the text. They capitalized on nostalgia for David in the Exilic times by attempting to tie his reign to Yahweh. Admiration for David necessarily demanded an unwavering allegiance to God. Therefore

the connection between Yahweh and David worked both ways—it would help David establish his own legitimacy, and would help the biblical writers cement the legitimacy of Yahweh.

THE DEMAND OF YAHWEH: DAVID AS KING

Over their long relationship, David becomes Saul's nemesis and antithesis in the biblical text. After Samuel goes to Bethlehem to anoint David as Yahweh's "chosen one" (literally *meshiach*, "messiah"), David is taken immediately to Saul's court because some believe David's talent with the harp can soothe Saul's increasing mad fits. Soon after arriving in court, David attempts to broaden his contributions to the monarchy by asking Saul if he can challenge the Israelites' nemesis Goliath. As 2 Samuel (21:19) cites Elhanan with the deed, it is likely that the famous show-down between David and Goliath is fabricated. But regardless, its presentation tells us many valuable things about the biblical writers' views of David.

First, in his plea to Saul to challenge Goliath, David refers to his recent killing of a lion and a bear. Although certainly the killing rightfully establishes David as a warrior, the symbolic associations of the bear (with great armies) and the lion (with Asherah) should not go unnoticed (1 Samuel 17:37). Nor does David's seemingly idiotic decision to use a slingshot simply exacerbate David's long-shot victory. In Judges (Judges 20:16) the Benjamites were said to be excellent slingers, and therefore by appropriating the Benjamites' weapon of choice David is suggesting that he is better able than Saul (himself a Benjamite) to defend Israel. In these ways and countless others, the biblical writers render him as a powerful, monotheistic ruler from his introduction.

Critical for the biblical writers is connecting David's legitimacy to Yahweh's blessing. For them, Samuel's anointing of David seems to cement his legitimacy; in particular, Yahweh willingly chooses and advocates that David become king, unlike Saul whom Yahweh tapped grudgingly to concede to the Israelites' wishes. From a monotheistic perspective (where the one deity is Yahweh), such legitimacy seems reasonable enough, yet it masks that in the era of David the blessing of a relatively unimportant southern deity probably meant little to the masses. However, as some scholars have stated, it was not so much David's anointment, but rather his continuing military and political successes that created—or significantly reinforced—the idea that the gods truly did favor him.⁸⁰ In short, David's purported association with Yahweh turned out to have important religious consequences after David's ascension, but probably did not bring about that ascension. This distinction becomes important because it forwards the notion that the biblical writers sought to legitimize Yahweh through David. That is, they understood that the Israelites applauded David's outstanding achievements and that they had concluded such achievements must stem from divine favor. Since David's preferred deity was Yahweh, the biblical writers sought to work this relationship into the text by using David's popularity to reinforce the importance of Yahweh. In other words, they sought to use the popularity of David to forward the idea of monotheism.

Therefore although it came to justify David's rule, divine legitimacy was probably not what got him there. Whoever the historical David was, it seems unlikely that in a largely polytheistic society he would be able to legitimize his rule by his connection with

⁸⁰ Bright, 196

a single southern deity. Instead, he would have had to show something like the charisma and political savvy that the biblical text so epically recounts. The Bible imagines this principally through his guerilla armies in the hills of Judea in which he gathers the support of the masses.⁸¹ Although that support would wane, it would offer the biblical David enough of a foothold to easily earn the Judean crown after Saul and Jonathan's disaster and death at the battle of Gilboa. Whether or not this story is historical, it highlights at least one thing that probably was—David had the charisma to unite people and was capable of supreme military successes that would bring him to power.

Among the most savvy of David's supposed campaigns—and the most consequential for the history of Yahwism—was his conquest of Jerusalem. Although an ancient city (it is mentioned in the Tel-el-amarna documents and is probably Melchizedek's "Salem" in Genesis 14), in David's times it was probably relatively unimportant. Moreover, it was occupied by Jebusites, not Israelites, but we would do well to remember that this distinction—as the past chapter argues—is probably of little consequence. The Jebusites' refusal to join David's ranks (unlike the Gibeonites and the Shechemites)⁸² potentially shows the ease with which Canaanites became Israelites; whether or not this offer actually happened, this is the Deuteronomist's concession that the divisions between Israelites and other Canaanites were probably hazy.

Yet despite their refusal, the biblical David ultimately conquered Jerusalem anyway. His reasons were likely pragmatic, chiefly that Jerusalem was a central, fortifiable, and important link between the realm of Judah and Benjamin. Occupying this city, therefore, allowed David a strategic place from which to govern his new kingdom.

⁸¹ Pixley, 32

⁸² Pixley, 33

Unlike his predecessor Saul, who had no real capital apart from his home village of Gibeah,⁸³ David sought a powerful center from which to govern and launch military campaigns. I agree with the biblical text here that the conquest of Jerusalem was probably related to the historical person that became the biblical David. The foundation of a capital—and moving the center of religious practice there—was so central to the Deuteronomist and to the subsequent history of Yahwism (and, indeed, monotheism) that it a feat of this sort was likely necessary to solidify David's legacy.

Although I argue that much of link between David and Yahweh was made stronger by the biblical writers, it is very likely the connection has its origin with the historical David. Like his descendant Josiah, David understood that after achieving power, in order to preserve his legitimacy and line he would need to invoke a higher legitimacy. Unlike Saul, who had no real centralized priestly power under his control, in taking Jerusalem David hoped to establish a religious center with himself at its head. Having united the tribes of Israel under one banner, it made sense that David would attempt to put religion under his control just as he had politics. The historical David, too, may have realized that same thing his successor Josiah and the Deuteronomist had—that monotheism worked extremely well with centralized political power. In centralizing the tribes of Israel into one city and one monarchic line, he may have drawn the parallel—as his successors would so often do—between the singularity of his rule on earth and the singularity of Yahweh's rule in heaven. In particular, this parallel singularity allowed him to have a legitimacy that—despite civil war and political division after Solomon's death—would be long-lasting.

⁸³ Pixley, 29

In a symbolic move that paralleled the religious power he craved, he moved the ark of the covenant permanently to Jerusalem. How important this ark was at this time we cannot know, though certainly the J and E texts (written shortly after David's death) centralize it. Likely, it was a symbol of some religious significance that had been under the control of the priests. By placing the ark under his care—instead of the Levite priests—David made a radical shift in religious power. The power-shift was furthered as David followed a trend popular elsewhere in the Near East at the time by ordering the priests under his control.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the presence of the ark in Jerusalem probably had a profound effect on binding the tribes together under mutual unity and religious allegiance.⁸⁵

Elsewhere in the Near East at the time, it was common for the king to establish himself as a god or a son of a god to further secure his power. While the nuclear family is sometimes appropriated by the biblical text—Israel as Yahweh's bride and the king as Yahweh's son—the trend seems somewhat less powerful in Israel than in other comparative traditions. At varying stages of Egyptian history, for instance, it was understood that the Pharaohs were truly gods or descended from them. In Israel, the kings were understood to be appointed as the son of Yahweh, but it was generally understood as a sort of adoption. That David failed to make so explicit a claim probably indicates that Yahweh's position during his reign was probably still somewhat precarious. Had he chosen to elevate a more popular god—like Baal or El—he may have been able to appropriate a divine descent model. That he chose to demonstrate his divine legitimacy in

⁸⁴ Pixley, 35

⁸⁵ Smith, 201

other ways probably shows that Yahweh held power only because David did, or—more generally—that the people respected Yahweh because they respected David.

Although he was prevented, David's wish to build a Temple for Yahweh in Jerusalem would have been absolutely pivotal in forwarding this connection; it would secure his control over religious affairs and help to elevate Yahweh to an exclusive place in Israelite cosmology. The biblical text recounts his backlash from the priests who opposed its construction. Yahweh himself, speaking through Nathan, seems to suggest he preferred to wander around in the ark as the Israelites moved from place to place. "Did I ever ask..., 'why have you not built me a house?' " (2 Samuel 7:7) The bible suggests that David, unable to surmount such a prohibition, left the building of the Temple for his son and successor Solomon. We must raise our eyebrows at this story because later (1 Kings) the Deuteronomist records Yahweh's excruciatingly detailed wishes for the architecture and construction of his Temple. Perhaps Yahweh changed his mind, or perhaps historically David was politically unable to construct such a Temple because it would represent a cosmological centrality that David's polytheistic subjects simply could not stand.

I argue that this explains much of Solomon's reign and its consequences—namely his decision to build a Temple to Yahweh only to later turn to other gods. After constructing a Temple to his father's deity, Solomon was unable to muster the popular support for exclusive worship of Yahweh alone. He therefore necessarily turned back to other gods to avoid political upheaval à la Amonhotep. The disintegration of his kingdom (as the biblical text relates) is therefore probably historically true but occurred for reasons radically different than those the biblical text proposes. Solomon's decision to "adopt"

other gods did not, as the Bible argues, bring about divine retribution. His decision to *revert* to older deities was an attempt to save his precarious rule that had adopted religious policies too radical for his people. The division of Solomon’s kingdom, therefore, is directly correlated to David and Solomon’s attempt to make monotheism the state religion of Israel. Although they attempted to use monotheism to add legitimacy to their rule, such a radical cosmological shift ultimately backfired. Yet after this period slipped away into murky history, the nostalgia for David and his association with Yahweh would make monotheism more palatable. It was this nostalgia that motivated the Deuteronomist and Josiah to return to David and Solomon’s failed project in raising Yahweh to the singular god of Israel.

REVIVING DAVID: THE RULE OF JOSIAH

According to the Bible, Josiah ascended the throne at the age of eight (2 Kings 23:1). Two generations had passed since Judah had experienced a ruler that—for the biblical writers anyway—was considered good. This last good king was Hezekiah, who had made critical infrastructural changes (2 Kings 20:20) and—most importantly for the biblical writers—showed a high level of respect to Isaiah, the principal prophet of the times. His two immediate descendants and successors—Manasseh and Amon—are viewed much less favorably. Although other biblical and deuterocanonical texts provide more details and nuances about their political reigns, the focus in Kings is on these monarchs’ embracement of idols. Notably, Manasseh carves the pole of Asherah in the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem (2 Kings 21:7) and “bowed down to all the starry hosts” (21:3) after building altars to them in the Temple courtyards. Invoking Saul, he was also said to have practiced sorcery and divination (21:6). The details of the reign of his son—Amon, the father of

Josiah—are vague but the text tellingly offers that he “forsook Yahweh, the God of his fathers” (21:22) and that he “did evil in the eyes of Yahweh as his father Manasseh had done” (21:20). There must have been political turmoil during his reign as well, as his checkered reign ended in assassination.

Before we progress too far, it is important to note that—on the whole—the history that the biblical texts offers for this period may be generally accurate. What is misleading is the presentation of that history, namely that these kings were reverting to other gods. In fact, they were probably doing what Israelites had always done, which was to worship a multitude of gods in addition to Yahweh. While Yahweh may have had supremacy under David and Solomon, this was a point of discontinuity from an otherwise linear polytheistic history. Although David had made critical changes in the religious cosmology of Israel, as Solomon’s reign shows jettisoning the old habits of polytheistic worship did not happen easily. To secure their own political stability, the kings of Israel and Judah would constantly embrace polytheistic practices because they sought to legitimize themselves in the minds of their largely polytheistic subjects. Although unfortunately for these kings they are remembered negatively by their later biographers, in their historical context they were probably doing what was demanded of them politically.

If the biblical text is accurate, then the reign of Josiah proposes a radical shift in religious practice for Judah. Likely the biblical text is correct in assigning such shifts to Josiah. His reign was—unlike David’s—somewhat nearer to the Deuteronomist. Although the biblical Josiah purports to receive inspiration from a mysterious “Book of Law”, it is well worth noting that Josiah’s first inspiration comes not from that text but from himself. It was his decision, after all, to restore the Temple after many years of absence—ostensibly because he laments that the Temple of Yahweh has fallen into desuetude since Solomon. During this restoration the chief priest discovers a mysterious “Book of Law” hidden in the

Temple (2 Kings 22:8). Although the biblical Josiah orders a series of reforms based on the contents of that book, we must pause for a moment to discuss its authorship. It seems too coincidental that Josiah, seeking to restore the religious practices of David and Solomon (as he does by cleansing the Temple), would happen upon a book there that detailed the sort of religious practices he was advocating. Josiah's decision to restore the Temple—and consequently stumble upon this Book of Law—only seems plausible if Josiah had the book written and hidden himself. This idea—that Josiah wrote or oversaw the writing of the “Book of Law”—has gained increasing traction among many.⁸⁶

I will return to Josiah's motivations in a moment, but before doing so it is important to determine what book we are talking about. The “Book of Law” has traditionally been identified as a missing piece of the Torah, an interpretation the Deuteronomist text seems to support. The Hebrew expression for “Book of Law” is, after all, “*Sefer haTorah*”—a phrase used in Joshua (1:8, 8:34) to explicitly refer to the Mosaic scriptures. Certainly the later writing of Chronicles runs with this idea, and explicitly calls these scriptures “the book of the law of Yahweh by the hand of Moses” (2 Chronicles 34:14). If so, it seems difficult to believe it is anything other than Deuteronomy, or—at least—some portion of it. Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers contain too much narrative to be called a books of law. Moreover, a version of these texts was probably already extant at the time, although they probably lacked the final redaction by the P writer during the Exilic period. There remains the possibility that the text might have been Leviticus (composed largely by the P-writer), but there is an important caution against this. First, it was likely composed much later, as evidenced by other P-writings in the Torah. And unlike Leviticus, Deuteronomy offers a set of laws addressing worship within the promised land—presumably under a king. This is the sort of text, therefore, that would have excited Josiah. More precisely, it is the sort of

⁸⁶ Kirsh, 74

text that Josiah would have composed.

While there remains the possibility that Josiah's priest just happened upon a missing piece of holy scripture in the Holy Temple, this is not very plausible. It is made more unlikely still given the contents of Deuteronomy—in particular its passage about the coming monarchy—which suggest Josiah's intervention. Certainly, Yahweh's blessing would give Josiah strong legitimacy. And yet Josiah realized such a claim could be strengthened were Yahweh the only deity. Like David before him, Josiah used monotheism as a political tool to cement his own legitimacy and secure his own power. Simply put, Josiah's writing and embracement of the "Book of Law" allowed him to connect his singular rule on earth with a singular ruler in heaven. It was Josiah's renewed quest for political unity and the legitimacy of a single deity that ultimately catapulted Yahweh from an obscure southern deity and into the sole god of the Israelites.

There is, however, a problem in terms of composition. If I am to follow Noth's thesis—and I do—I will have to accept that Deuteronomy through Kings 2 was largely composed in the Exilic era. Here, however, I am suggesting that Josiah oversaw the composition of part of Deuteronomy a century before the exile. I do not believe that the two views are irreconcilable, and various scholars join me in this. Although Deuteronomy is clearly a very mature literary text, its internal divisions suggest various redactions. It has, for instance, two introductions, and Moses' final ascension onto Nebo introduces a narrative tenor largely absent elsewhere in the text. Such a construction leads me to believe that the bulk of the text—at least Deuteronomy 12-26—was composed by Josiah's scribes. During its incorporation into the larger Deuteronomistic narrative,

Deuteronomy went through several redactions⁸⁷—most notably the addition of the outer chapters that sought to integrate these laws into the Deuteronomist’s larger narrative. That chapters 12-26 predate other compositions by the Deuteronomist is appropriate because the legalistic framework of these core chapters provides a lens through which the entire narrative is told.

The Deuteronomist’s additions to Josiah’s “Book of Law” work to refine the structure of Deuteronomy generally, but also played a pivotal role in the history of Israelite religion. As I have argued above, the portion of Deuteronomy discovered by Josiah’s chief priest was probably chapters 12-26. In its current form, it appears that Deuteronomy has experienced three different redactions added to the beginning of that text. The first redaction (chapters 5-11)—possibly intended as an introduction—lays out some general stipulations and rules. It varies notably in tone from the bulk of the legalistic text that follows it, and the its inclusion of the *shema* (6:4)—to be explored below—suggests that it is almost certainly a redaction and not part of the original text. This prologue is preceded by another introduction (about 1:6-4:49) that works to provide a historical orientation to the legalistic language that follows it. A five verse preamble seems to have been added at some other point, or may have been composed with the final introduction.

This source theory work can tell us something about Josiah, and what the Deuteronomist hoped to do through his redaction of Deuteronomy. If Josiah discovered Deuteronomy 12-26, then he likely had chapter 17 from which to invoke an early version of the notion of divine right of kings. It seems by the composition of Deuteronomy

⁸⁷ Wright, 6

outlined above, that he would not have had the *shema* (6:4). It seems likely that in building the “Book of Law” into his larger narrative, the Deuteronomist sought to recreate to some degree what the “Book of Law” was. The *shema* was probably an addition by the Deuteronomist, but was intended to be read as though it had been discovered by Josiah himself. Theologically, it is among the most pivotal verses in the Deuteronomist narrative, and it is a call for monotheism found nowhere else as explicitly in the Torah or the Deuteronomist. Not only does it not have the polytheistic “slips” that Genesis or Exodus do, but the *shema* is succinct and mature from a monotheistic sense; among many possibilities, it translates as: “Hear O Israel! Yahweh is our God. Yahweh is One.” Putting these arguments together implies—as in the case of David—that both Josiah and the biblical writers were forwarding monotheism in their different periods. For Josiah, he attempted to do as David did and legitimize his rule by jettisoning all other deities from worship in Israel. His contribution took place in the realm of worship—no Israelites were allowed to worship any god but Yahweh. The work of the Deuteronomist was, by contrast, more cosmological. The inclusion of the *shema* breaks new theological ground that the theology of the ten commandments never did; not only were the Israelites not allowed to worship other gods, *there were no other gods*. By including this detail in the book of Deuteronomy and presenting it as the Josiah’s “Book of Law”, the Deuteronomist is again trying to exploit the popularity of a ruler to forward a theological agenda. As with David, Josiah’s agenda was monotheism.

Yet before we conclude, the *shema* merits a few more words. In MacDonald’s work on Deuteronomy—particularly its two introductions—he gives extensive attention

to the baffling *shema*.⁸⁸ He offers several different possible interpretations of the verse, but—perhaps wisely—falls short of providing a definitive interpretation. In general though, he argues Deuteronomy stands apart in the Torah as its narrative portions appear not to stem from polytheistic origins. In particular, he compares the first commandment in Exodus 20 and its reappearance in Deuteronomy 5. For Exodus, he argues as I do—that the commandment demands that the Israelites not worship other gods but is silent on belief in other gods. Belief in other gods, he argues, would be natural given Exodus’s cosmologically polytheistic framework. Deuteronomy, by contrast, must contend with the *shema* that seems to preclude belief in other gods. Therefore the commandment in Deuteronomy makes a stronger theological statement than its earlier Exodus version. I would add that this is reinforced by the speakers in both instances; the narration in Exodus says that the commandments are spoken by Elohim—who addresses himself as Yahweh. The narration in Deuteronomy, more consistently, says the commandments are spoken by Yahweh who calls himself Yahweh. Deuteronomy therefore offers a more refined—or at least consistent—form of monotheism. In this context, the *shema* (6:4) is a clear cry for monotheism. Guided by his analysis of the Song of Moses, MacDonald argues—and I agree—that the central message of Deuteronomy is not—as its Hellenized name suggests—principally law, but rather the uniqueness of Yahweh and the commandment that he be worshiped exclusively. This was, at least, what the Deuteronomist hoped to achieve through his careful redaction of Josiah’s “Book of Law.”

From the biblical perspective, the “Book of Law” as the Deuteronomist redacted it had two aspects—theological and legal. The biblical Josiah is therefore frightened that

⁸⁸ MacDonald, 3

in the many years since its supposed composition Judah has not “obeyed the words of this book”—that is, been monotheistic. To counter this enormous oversight, he inaugurates a relentless campaign to eradicate all polytheistic elements in his kingdom. This event is probably related to the events of the actual Josiah, and yet—as I have argued above—it was probably reworked by the biblical writers. Specifically, it seems that the historical Josiah was seeking to establish a kingdom with worship of Yahweh alone. By redacting the “Book of Law” to include the *shema*, the Deuteronomist creates a Josiah who is seeking a kingdom with belief in Yahweh alone.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately for Josiah, his sons and subsequent rulers—Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim—reverted to the old ways, possibly bending to political pressure claiming that their father’s theological reforms were simply too radical. Whatever their reason, history shows that Josiah’s reforms ultimately won. The reason, I believe, is that he had something that David—despite his innumerable talents—did not: written history. In finding, writing, or fabricating the “Book of Law”, Josiah’s religious movement was able to gain a hold in writing that provided the rock to which the subsequent tradition would have its feet tied. The Deuteronomist too, would be able to expand the contents of that “Book of Law” by making his own additions that encouraged the acceleration of monotheistic practices. Yahweh had won.

CONCLUSION: FROM AFRICA TO JOSIAH

THE PROJECT AND THE FINDINGS

My inspiration for this project began after a series of close readings of the Hebrew Bible, in particular the passages that seemed to challenge a monotheistic framework. I set out to uncover the apparent discontinuities in the biblical text, using archaeological and linguistic tools to lay bare the actual history of Israelite religion and discover the reasons for the biblical portrayal of it. I soon learned that what I had envisioned as a rather linear transformation from monotheism to polytheism was in fact far more complex. The singularity of Yahweh within the Israelite pantheon ebbed and flowed; he would enjoy dominance during the reigns of David and Josiah only to fall from prominence with reversions to traditional ways after their deaths. Only through the codification of the biblical text in the Exilic period would the Deuteronomist's epic rewriting of Israelite history solidify a monotheistic framework.

The project revealed something that is logical but that I did not expect—namely the close relationship between monotheism and centralized political power. In monotheistic Europe rulers were wont to legitimize their rule through invoking the divine blessing of a single deity; it was interesting to uncover that establishing this single deity was itself related to the consolidation of power. David and Josiah both understood the value of a matching cosmological and political framework. The biblical writers sought to appropriate the popularity of these monarchs in forwarding the dominance of Yahweh.

My work also challenged the definitions and notions of “polytheism” and “monotheism” and my attempts to understand their application to ancient Israelite religion solidified that these terms are integrally tied to a modern framework that can

dangerously misrepresent past religious traditions. Most importantly, both polytheism and monotheism imply belief in a given number of deities, something relatively unimportant to the biblical writers. Their concern—as exposed through their prophets—was with practice. They feared Israel worshipping other gods, but only rarely took the perspective that these other gods did not exist. In notable examples prophets exposed the fallibility of idols, but this did not preclude that these deities existed at some other level. It was therefore challenging for me to determine whether this represented polytheism or monotheism, because though there was the exclusive worship in Yahweh and an acknowledgement of his supremacy, other deities were still thought to exist on a lesser level and were unworthy of worship. In addition to adding complexities to the history of Israelite monotheism, my project worked to add complexities to the term “monotheism” itself.

In searching for the origins of Israelite monotheism and the development of this tradition, I followed the development of a deity and an idea from the early religious practices through to the reign of Josiah and the codification of that history in the Exilic period. Clearly this is not a full history of Abrahamic monotheism, proposals for which will be explored in the next section. In following Yahweh and the emergence of monotheism, I was aided and hindered by the Bible itself, that—despite its dubious historicity—offered more details on the period than any other single source. Yet I did not intend to use the history of the Bible unchecked, but rather to enter it into conversation with archaeological findings. The result is therefore a narrative that is constructed from several different sources, yet that attempts to follow a central question: how did the

polytheistic Israelites come to worship a single deity named Yahweh? In particular, I sought to understand the relationship this transition had with political power and the codification of the biblical text.

That narrative began in northeast Africa with the earliest known ancestors of the people who would become the Israelites—the Afrasan. Although the details of these people are not widely known, archaeology has revealed details about their religious practices that offer an important starting framework for the larger discussion. In particular, the Afrasan believed in a multiplicity of gods, but restricted worship so that each clan could only worship its own deity. Communication with the clan deity was limited to an influential religious figure who worked as an intermediary between the clan and divinity.

After the Afrasan people moved into the Near East, they became some of the first farmers and intermingled with some peoples who had already been extant in the area. Their religious practices, however, remained very much related to Afrasan practices. Archaeological evidence reveals the existence of a religious figure with roles similar to Afrasan times, and by every measure it appears that these people were polytheistic and clan-oriented.

Through farming, these people became stationary and connected to their land. In neighboring regions, civilizations were rising. Their close neighbors, the Egyptians, had their own experiment with monotheism under Amonhotep, whose radical reforms were short-lived. However the Egyptians—like the Sumerians—influenced Israelite mythology to some degree. They were likely not the source of Israel’s monotheistic inspiration however.

Though the biblical narrative argues that the Israelites were captive in Egypt and had conquered Canaan, historical realities do not mesh with this narrative. What is more likely is that the Israelites and the Canaanites were, for a time, the same people. The later biblical polemic against the Canaanites emerged after these two groups of peoples had parted ways—particularly in religious matters.

There is ample archaeological data to support that these two peoples were—for a time—one. They spoke mutually intelligible languages, and their religious practices were remarkably similar. Moreover, before the monarchy Palestine was very decentralized politically, and therefore it would have been unlikely for there to have been the political centralization necessary for the sort of military campaigns the Bible describes. Yet at some point, these peoples began to part ways from each other—likely for economic or agricultural reasons.

This slight parting of the ways would have important consequences when it translated into the rise of the monarchy under David. Likely the tribes that rallied behind him were in some sense an arbitrary group of Canaanites who—looking back—tried to imagine that they had always been distinct from the rest of the inhabitants of the land. The deity associated with David's clan had been Yahweh, and although he fell short of demanding the singular worship of this deity for his subjects, his centralization of religious and political power in Jerusalem set the stage. David understood that there was a connection between political and theological centralization, and that he would best be able to invoke divine support if he had the blessing of the only god. David would enter the realm of legend in subsequent years, and when the biblical writers looked back on him they sought to exploit his popularity to cement the supremacy of Yahweh.

As is shown by Solomon's decision to revert to traditional religion, the Israelites were not prepared for the sort of monotheism that David represented. They comfortably remained polytheistic for many years until Josiah inaugurated a sweeping set of reforms, likely stemming from the production of a portion of Deuteronomy he himself had overseen. Although Judah would fall away from monotheism after Josiah, the reforms were nevertheless critical. In organizing Israelite history in the Exilic period, the Deuteronomist sought to draw on the popularity of David and Josiah to write a history that centralized their reigns and drew attention to their priorities—namely monotheism. The biblical writers sought to forward the monotheistic leanings of these kings, most notably by adding portions to Josiah's "Book of Law" that he himself probably did not write—specifically the monotheistic *shema*.

Writing in the Exilic period, the biblical writers wrote after the political centrality of the monarchy had fallen. But by remembering the cultural cohesion of this period, monotheism flourished in the Exile. The monotheistic tendencies of the Israelite monarchy were accelerated by Exilic writers who sought to differentiate the Israelites from the polytheists with whom they lived in exile. They therefore returned to the work begun by David and Josiah and retold the history of Israel to more clearly paint it as monotheistic.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Of course the development of Israelite religion does not stop here. The return to Israel, the Second Temple Period, and the Roman destruction of Israel all represent critical moments in the history of Israelite monotheism. I have chosen to omit discussion

of them here in order to give proper attention to the periods I have studied. It should be noted, however, that a full understanding of Israelite monotheism will need to look into these periods—again invoking archaeological and textual findings relevant to the periods in question.

A radical shift in Israelite religion occurred after the final exile from Israel. What had once been a religion centered around Temple worship and sacrifice evolved into a religion dominated by rabbis. The emergence of Judaism in exile encourages an entirely new thesis that looks at the development of monotheism within this tradition. The parallel tradition of Christianity is also indebted to the Israelite tradition studied here, yet its unique theological views suggest the intersection of several philosophies that need to be carefully examined. The rise of Islam too, represents monotheism in a very mature form. The *shahadah*—or the attestation of faith—calls believers to worship and believe in a single deity. Its demand is clear: “There is no god but Allah.”

Each of these traditions’ contributions to the idea of monotheism offers years of scholarship. Although they each introduce and appropriate different frameworks and ideologies, they are all united in that they stem from Israelite monotheism. This tradition no longer exists today, but as its theological descendents are thriving it is important to turn to this ancient tradition to understand our contemporary religious milieu. A glimpse into the development of Israelite monotheism tells us that political power and textual revisionism were key in the origins of the global phenomenon we now know as monotheism. This reveals that the development of religions is—like the development of all things—organic and integrally tied to historical context. These conclusions about ancient traditions will hopefully remain relevant today.

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