



GOD
in the Beginning

Doug Mason

GOD in the Beginning

The ancient Hebrews left two bequests:

- a universal, single God named Yahweh;
- a series of writings identified as sacred Scripture.

Using highly credentialed sources, this Study examines how these were formed.

Version 1

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This Study is available at: http://www.jwstudies.com/GOD_in_the_beginning.pdf

The companion New Testament Study is available at:

http://www.jwstudies.com/Why_Does_WTS_Accept_Christendoms_Scriptures.pdf

Front cover: "**Pillars of Creation**" is a photograph taken by the Hubble Space Telescope of elephant trunks of interstellar gas and dust in the Eagle Nebula, some 7,000 light years from Earth. They are so named because the gas and dust are in the process of creating new stars, while also being eroded by the light from nearby stars that have recently formed https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pillars_of_Creation (accessed 15 July 2015)

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REFERENCES CITED IN THIS STUDY

Reference	Title	Author
Early History	<i>The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel (Second Edition)</i>	Mark S. Smith: Has held the Skirball Chair of Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at New York University since 2000. President of the Catholic Biblical Association of America in 2010-2011, and in 2011 he was elected a fellow of the American Academy for Jewish Research. A two-time winner of New York University's Golden Dozen Award for excellence in undergraduate teaching and the recipient of the Frank Moore Cross award for publication awarded by the American Schools of Oriental Research. (William Eerdmans; 2002)
God, Wife?	<i>Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel</i>	William G. Dever: American archaeologist specialising in the history of Israel and the Near East in Biblical times. Professor of Near Eastern Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Arizona in Tucson from 1975 to 2002. A Distinguished Professor of Near Eastern Archaeology at Lycoming College in Pennsylvania. (William Eerdmans; 2005)
Hebrew Goddess	<i>The Hebrew Goddess, 3rd Enlarged Edition</i>	Raphael Patai. anthropologist and historian; Instructor of Hebrew Language, Hebrew University, Jerusalem Research Fellow in Ethnology; Professor of Anthropology, Dropsie College, Philadelphia Lecturer in Anthropology, New York University; Director of Research, Herzl Institute; Professor of Anthropology, Fairleigh Dickinson University. (3rd edition, Wayne State University Press;)
Monotheism, Minority	<i>Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority: An Essay in Biblical History and Sociology (The Social World of Biblical Antiquity Series, 1</i>	Bernhard Lang: Professor of Religion at the University of Paderborn, Germany, and has taught in Tübingen, Mainz, Philadelphia (Temple University), Paris (the Sorbonne), Aarhus, and St. Andrews. Honorary Professor of Divinity at the University of St. Andrews, an honorary member of the Society for Old Testament Study, and was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Theology by the University of Aarhus, Denmark. (The Almond Press; June 1983)
Origins, Monotheism	<i>The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts</i>	Mark S. Smith: (See above) (Oxford University Press; 2001)
Reconstructing Society	<i>Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel</i>	Paula McNutt: Professor of Religious Studies and Dean of Arts and Sciences at Canisius College in Buffalo, NY. (Westminster John Knox Press, Kentucky; 1999; SPCK, London)
Yahweh, Gods Canaan	<i>Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan</i>	John Day, Reader in Biblical Studies at the University of Oxford, and Fellow and Tutor of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford; Dean of Degrees from 1985 to 2013; editor of the Society for Old Testament Book List (2007-2009).(Sheffield Academic Press; 2002)

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Title	Author
<i>Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible</i>	John H. Walton. (Apollos; 2007)
<i>Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, Volume II: The Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian periods (732-332 B.C.E.)</i>	Ephraim Stern (Doubleday, The Anchor Bible Reference Library; 2001)
<i>Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School</i>	Moshe Weinfeld (Eisenbrauns; 2014 – reprint of 1972 edition)
<i>God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World & Why Their Differences Matter</i>	Stephen Prothero (Black Inc; 2010)
<i>History's Vanquished Goddess ASHERAH: God's Wife: the Goddess Asherah, Wife of Yahweh. Archaeological & Historical Aspects of Syro-Palestinian Prebiblical Religious Traditions, Macrocosmically Examined</i>	Darlene Kosnik. (Createspace, 2014)
<i>How the Bible Became a Book</i>	William M. Schniedewind (Cambridge University Press; 2004)
<i>How the Bible Became Holy</i>	Michael L. Satlow (Yale University Press; 2014)
<i>How to Read the Jewish Bible</i>	Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford University Press; 2005)
<i>Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.</i>	Rainer Albertz (The Society of Biblical Literature; 2003)
<i>Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period</i>	Oded Lipschits, Joseph Blenkinsop (editors) (Eisenbrauns; 2003)
<i>Old Testament Times: A Social, Political, and Cultural Context</i>	R. K. Harrison (Baker Books; 2005)
<i>Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament</i>	Morton Smith (SCM Press / Trinity Press International; 2nd, corrected edition; 1988)
<i>Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction</i>	Lawrence Boadt (Paulist Press; 1984)
<i>Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible</i>	Karel van der Toorn (Harvard University Press; 2007)
<i>The Art of Biblical Narrative</i>	Robert Alter (Basic Books; 1981, revised 2011)
<i>The Bible as it was</i>	James L. Kugel (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press; 1997)
<i>The Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View into the Five Books of Moses</i>	Richard Elliott Friedman (Harper Collins; 2003)
<i>The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis</i>	Joel S. Baden (New Haven: Yale University Press; 2012)
<i>The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess</i>	Judith M. Hadley (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications; 2000)
<i>The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem</i>	Oded Lipschits (Eisenbrauns; 2005)
<i>The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction</i>	David M. Carr (Oxford University Press; 2011)
<i>The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East</i>	Karel van der Toorn (Peeters; 1998)
<i>The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us</i>	Douglas A. Knight and Amy-Jill Levine (Harper Collins; 2011)

<i>The Word of God in Transition: From Prophet to Exegete in the Second Temple Period</i>	William M. Schniedewind (Bloomsbury T&T Clark; 1 edition; 2009)
<i>What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?: What Archeology Can Tell Us About the Reality of Ancient Israel</i>	William G. Dever (Eerdmans, 2001)
<i>When God Was a Woman</i>	Merlin Stone (Mariner Books; 1978)
<i>Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?</i>	William G. Dever (William B. Eerdmans; 2003)
<i>Who Wrote the Bible?</i>	Richard Elliott Friedman (Harper Collins; 1987)

GOD IN THE BEGINNING

About 3500 years ago, Jews created the legacies of:

- A single God named Yahweh; and
- The sacred writings now known as the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, or the Tanakh.

This Study traces the pathway that led to the institution of these great legacies.

It is essential to know the people who were involved and to have an understanding of their communities. Their religious beliefs and the outcomes of those beliefs were shaped by the environment; they did not fall out of the sky fully formed. They were not formed in a vacuum.

This study addresses the following phases:

- [Patriarchs \(Late Bronze Age\)](#)
- [Tribal, Judges \(Iron Age I\)](#)
- [Monarchy, united and divided \(Iron Age II\)](#)
- [Babylonian Exile \(586-539 BCE\)](#)
- [Post-exilic Persian Era \(539-332 BCE\)](#)

A Summary is provided at the start of each Section.

CONCLUSIONS

Patriarchs (Late Bronze Age)

Yahweh was unknown to the patriarchs of the Hebrews. Rather, they worshiped the Canaanite god, El. He is the chief of the deities, the father of the pantheon. The multiplicity of deities sitting together in council is taken for granted in the Hebrew Bible. El names and titles proliferate in the older patriarchal narratives.

Yahweh himself does not appear to have been a Canaanite god in origin; he had his origins outside the land of Israel to the south, in the area of Midian.

Yahweh was incorporated into the older figure of El. Yahweh and El were identified at an early stage and ultimately Yahweh became the supreme deity. El as a separate god disappeared.

The goddess Asherah, the chief goddess of the Canaanite pantheon, was El's consort. When Yahweh was assimilated into El, Asherah became Yahweh's consort. Asherah was the earliest female deity worshiped by the Children of Israel.

Tribal, Judges (Iron Age I)

Israelite religion grew out of Canaanite religion. The examples of El, Baal, and the symbol of the asherah illustrate this continuity for the period of the Judges. The cult of the Canaanite mother-goddess Asherah penetrated Hebrew religion.

Like the asherah, the "high places" were acceptable in the period of the Judges and during the monarchy.

In the earlier centuries, 'the Yahweh alone party' was less in evidence. Yahwism lacked the female touch which was such an important part of Canaanite religious life. Nothing it could offer replaced the Canaanite goddesses.

Monarchy, united and divided (Iron Age II)

With the growth of socioeconomic complexity and political centralization, religion inevitably became "official". The need to manage the cult fostered a priestly class. The state or "official" religion came into being 200 years or more into Israelite history. This represents a departure from tradition.

Solomon's temple marked a radical departure from earlier religious traditions. For almost two-thirds of its life, the statue of Asherah was present in the Temple. Primarily, the elite had constant and easy access to the Temple. However, during the monarchy, the nation's dominant religion is polytheistic, with an array of idols, no different to that of its neighbours. Goddesses played a more important role than gods did.

The worship of many gods by the Hebrew people is not a lapse from an earlier higher faith revealed at Sinai. Israel's religious history is not a fight to restore an original monotheism.

In their opposition to "folk religion", the prophets were in the minority and they arrived late on the scene.

Yahweh was the chief god. The other gods and goddesses were worshipped as part of his pantheon. The worship of Asherah as the consort of Yahweh ("*his* Asherah"!) was an integral element of religious life.

Influence of the monolatric idea is not attested before the 9th century BCE. The worship of "Yahweh-alone" is the cause of a small group only. The official trend of the Temple remained polytheistic. The "purest form of Yahwism" belonged to the late monarchy, not to an early stage of Israel's history.

Babylonian Exile (586-539 BCE)

The Hebrew people had, by and large, clung to Asherah for six centuries in spite of the increasing vigor of Yahwist monotheism. However, at some point, perhaps about the time of the exile, the cult of Asherah disappeared among the Jews and absolute monotheism solidified.

Isaiah 40-55 is attributed to an unnamed author writing at the end of the Babylonian exile. That author was the first to give explicit expression to absolute monotheism. Before that time, monotheists acknowledged the presence of other gods, with Yahweh having been assigned to the Israelites while head of the pantheon of gods.

Post-exilic Persian Era (539-332 BCE)

The archaeology of the province of “Yehud” in the Persian era reveals the *complete absence* of any evidence of polytheism.

Absolute monotheism appears predominant in the postexilic period.

Persian period Judah is the most likely setting for the final construct of much of the Hebrew Bible.

The Bible is religious and political literature constructed from a religious perspective. The “history” recorded in the biblical narratives, whether they contain accurate information or not, must be understood first and foremost as representing notions, beliefs, and myths constructed to serve some purpose in the social and historical contexts in which they were written, edited, and arranged in their present form.

These texts cannot simply be picked up and read in a straightforward manner as though they constitute objective factual history in the modern sense, based on contemporary eyewitness reports.

The biblical literature constitutes what is essentially “propaganda.” The writers make no pretense to objectivity. It is “revisionist history” on a grand scale. The Hebrew Bible is largely “theocratic history”.

These extremists had been minority parties. The Hebrew Bible is a “minority report”.

Those responsible for gathering and editing this material would have been deliberately selective in what they included, therefore providing us with a skewed view of Israel’s past.

PREFACE

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

The role of archaeology

In the past, archaeologists working in the Middle East were typically interested in illuminating the biblical text and clarifying the relationship of Israel to surrounding cultures. Thus, historians used the material remains of ancient Israelite culture ... to supplement (and often to corroborate) the biblical texts in their reconstructions. In recent years, however, more emphasis has been placed on the kinds of information they contribute to reconstructing the total range of ancient Israel's social world—the world out of which the biblical texts were produced.¹

Archaeology primary source

Pictures, i.e., “symbols,” are if anything *more* evocative of the past than are texts, because the so-called “precise and unequivocal meaning” of texts is an illusion. ... Pictures provide a deeper understanding of the religio-historical evolution of Israel than does a purely text-oriented approach.²

Greater emphasis on archaeology

Although traditionally the Hebrew Bible has been the primary source for interpreting the social contexts out of which the literature contained in it emerged, many recent studies have placed more emphasis on archaeological information and theories and models from comparative sociology and anthropology.³

Bible and archaeology not always in agreement

Textual information from the Bible and archaeological information do not always appear to tell the same stories. ... Archaeological evidence is considered by many to be more reliable and accurate than the biblical texts as a source of historical information.⁴

Archaeology can “correct” the written text

Archaeology is obviously a *parallel* way of viewing the past, alongside texts. ... Archaeology can provide a *corrective* to texts and thus may constitute an equal or even superior source of information.⁵

Scholars' stance lies between literal and sceptical views of the Bible

At one end of the spectrum are those who insist that the Bible is literally accurate in all historical details. At the other end are those who view the overall value of the Bible as a historical source with great skepticism. Most biblical scholars fall somewhere between the two extremes.⁶

DEVELOPMENT OF BIBLICAL RELIGION

Israel's religion, a rapid succession of revolutions

However fragmentary our knowledge of the development of Israel's religion is, we may describe it as a chain of revolutions which follow one another in rapid succession.⁷

Different possibilities in the national religion

Psalm 82, like Deuteronomy 32:8-9, preserves the outlines of the older Israelite theology it is rejecting. ... What little evidence we do have, implies that a number of different possibilities existed in the larger context of the national religion.⁸

¹ *Reconstructing Society*, page 11

² *God, Wife?*, page 54

³ *Reconstructing Society*, page 3

⁴ *Reconstructing Society*, page 12

⁵ *God, Wife?*, page 74

⁶ *Reconstructing Society*, page 7

⁷ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 56

⁸ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 157

Folk religion and book religion compared

In “book religion”:

- (1) belief is primarily intellectual (theology);
- (2) piety consists mostly of liturgy (institutional religion); and
- (3) morality focuses largely on overarching theoretical principles.

This is the characteristic religion of elites, the few who can appreciate great literature and its lofty ideals. ...

On the other hand, we have folk religion, in which

- (1) belief is mostly intuitive;
- (2) piety consists of private and family rituals to insure well-being (“magic”); and
- (3) morality is defined by right relations and charitable acts within the immediate circle. ...

It is the religion, for example, of the poor, illiterate Jewish women in Jerusalem. I [William Dever] have argued that it was also the religion of both the majority of women *and* men in ancient Israel. I [William Dever] have tried not to regard either expression of religion as “better” than the other, only different — piety in different dimensions. ... Religion is not what institutions and clerics legislate, but what the majority of people *do*.⁹

“Religion”, the practice of the majority

Nearly all of the conventional works ... seem to be preoccupied with religious *ideas*. These ideas derive, of course, almost exclusively from the Hebrew Bible, conceived as though it were a “theological textbook” in which one can look up any topic essential to an understanding of Israelite religion. ... These fail to define “religion” essentially as the practice of the *majority*.

They still assume that theology — that is, the orthodox beliefs of the few who wrote the Bible — was prior and gave rise to practice. The reverse is the case, as far as I [William Dever] can see.

Religion (certainly “folk religion”) arises out of the exigencies of real-life experience. Theological formulations and even the “official” cult come later, largely as a reaction against practices already widespread.¹⁰

Pagan means “countryside”

The word [pagan] comes from the Latin *pagus*, “countryside.” When many Romans converted to Christianity in the 4th century A.D., unsophisticated folk in rural areas were slow to accept the new beliefs and thus were called “pagans” (and in later Roman Catholic theology they became “heathens”).¹¹

⁹ *God, Wife?*, pages 314-315

¹⁰ *God, Wife?*, pages 59-60

¹¹ *God, Wife?*, page 270

PATRIARCHS (LATE BRONZE AGE)

Patriarchs	“Judges”	United Monarchy	Divided monarchy	Babylonian exile	Persian province of “Yehud”
ca 1300-1200 BCE	ca 1200-1000 BCE	ca 1000-900 BCE	ca 900-586 BCE	586-539 BCE	539-332 BCE
Late Bronze	Iron I	Iron IIA	Iron IIB	Babylonian Exile	Persian Period
Oral traditions	Oral traditions	Some records written (J, E)		Deutero-Isaiah Historical works (DTr)	Texts written. Texts combined, edited
Community					
<p>The “Patriarchal era” (if historical) would be dated somewhere in the early-mid 2nd millennium B.C. However, archaeologists regard the Middle-Late Bronze Age (ca. 2000-1200 B.C.) as the period when Canaanite culture flourished. There is very little in the way of textual material dating to this period that can help us sort out the problem of who the early Israelites were or where they came from.</p>					
Religion	<p>Yahweh was unknown to the patriarchs of the Hebrews. Rather, they worshiped the Canaanite god, El. He is the chief of the deities, the father of the pantheon.</p> <p>The multiplicity of deities sitting together in council is taken for granted in the Hebrew Bible. El names and titles proliferate in the older patriarchal narratives.</p> <p>Yahweh himself does not appear to have been a Canaanite god in origin; he had his origins outside the land of Israel to the south, in the area of Midian.</p> <p>Yahweh was incorporated into the older figure of El. Yahweh and El were identified at an early stage and Yahweh ultimately became the supreme deity. El as a separate god disappeared.</p> <p>The goddess Asherah, the chief goddess of the Canaanite pantheon, was El’s consort. When Yahweh was assimilated into El, Asherah became Yahweh’s consort. Asherah was the earliest female deity worshiped by the Children of Israel.</p>				
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Summary of the following section: *Patriarchs*

BRONZE AGE COMMUNITY

Little textual material from Late Bronze Age

There is very little in the way of textual material dating to this period that can help us sort out the problem of who the early Israelites were or where they came from.¹²

Culture, chronology

“Israel” appeared in Canaan ca. 1200 B.C. and that the “Patriarchal era” (if historical) would have to be dated somewhere in the early-mid 2nd millennium B.C. Archaeologists have always regarded the Middle-Late Bronze Age in Syria-Palestine, ca. 2000-1200 B.C., as the period when Canaanite culture flourished.¹³

Little knowledge of any Bronze Age Israel

Until the last several decades, historians of ancient Israel have tended to begin their accounts of Israel’s history with the so-called “ancestral” or “patriarchal” period, dated variously to Middle Bronze I (ca. 2000-1750 B.C.E.), Middle Bronze II (ca. 1750-1550), or the early part of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550-1200). Underlying these histories is an assumption that the traditions recorded in the book of Genesis about Abraham and his descendants, those in the remainder of the Pentateuch about Moses and the exodus from Egypt, and those in Joshua and Judges about the conquest and settlement preserve some historical evidence of a period preceding the birth of Israel as a nation at the end of the early Iron Age.

But it is now generally recognized that there is nothing specific in the Genesis stories that can be definitively related to known history in or around Canaan in the early second millennium B.C.E., and that there is, in fact, no solid evidence for any date.

None of the kings mentioned is known from other sources. The identification of Abimelech as king of the Philistines could not be historically accurate, as the Philistines did not arrive in Palestine until much later in the second millennium. The pharaoh who enlists Joseph into his services is anonymous. Abraham is identified as coming from “Ur of the Chaldeans,” but the Babylonians were not known as Chaldeans until a much later time. Laban is identified as an Aramaean, but there is no evidence that the Arameans were an identifiable political entity before the twelfth century B.C.E.¹⁴

EL, THE MIGHTY GOD WORSHIPED BY THE PATRIARCHS

El was the original Israeli god

The original god of Israel was El. This reconstruction may be inferred from two pieces of information. First, the name of Israel is not a Yahwistic name with the divine element of Yahweh, but an El name, with the element, ‘el. This fact would suggest that El was the original chief god of the group named Israel. Second, Genesis 49:24-25 presents a series of El epithets separate from the mention of Yahweh in verse 18. Yet early on, Yahweh is understood as Israel’s god in distinction to El. Deuteronomy 32:8-9 casts Yahweh in the role of one of the sons of El, here called Elyon. ... This passage presents an order in which each deity received its own nation. Israel was the nation that Yahweh received. It also suggests that Yahweh, originally a warrior-god from Sinai/Paran/Edom/Teiman, was known separately from El at an early point in early Israel.¹⁵

Although no one can today maintain that the patriarchal narratives are historical accounts, there are grounds for believing that their depiction of an El religion does at least in part reflect something of pre-monarchical religion, however much it has been overlaid by later accretions.

In favour of a pre-monarchic El religion amongst the Hebrews one may first of all note the very name Israel, meaning probably ‘El will rule’, a name already attested in the late thirteenth century BCE on the stele of the Egyptian pharaoh Merneptah. It is surely an indication of El’s early importance that the very name of the people incorporates the name of the god El. Secondly, as various scholars have noted, prior to the rise of the monarchy theophoric personal names including the name ‘el are very common, whereas explicitly Yahwistic personal names are very rare (apart from Joshua, only five from the Judges period).¹⁶

¹² *Reconstructing Society*, page 44

¹³ *God, Wife?*, page 253

¹⁴ *Reconstructing Society*, page 41

¹⁵ *Early History*, page 32

¹⁶ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, pages 16-17

Was El Israel's Original God?

The name of Israel contains not the divine element of Yahweh but El's name. ... If Yahweh had been the original god of Israel, then its name might have been *yisra-yahweh*, or perhaps better *yisra-yah* in accordance with other Hebrew proper names containing the divine name. This fact would suggest that El not Yahweh was the original chief god of the group named Israel. The distribution of El and Yahweh in personal names in many so-called early poems likewise points in this direction.¹⁷

Biblical texts do attest to Yahweh and El as different gods sanctioned by early Israel. For example, Genesis 49:24-25 presents a series of El epithets separate from the mention of Yahweh in verse 18. This passage does not show the relative status of the two gods in early Israel, only that they could be named separately in the same poem.

More helpful is the text of the Septuagint and one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QDeut^j) for Deuteronomy 32:8-9, which cast Yahweh in the role of one of the divine sons, understood as fathered by El, called Elyon in the first line. ... The traditional Hebrew text (MT) [of Deuteronomy 32:8-9] perhaps reflects a discomfort with this polytheistic theology of Israel, for it shows in the fourth line not "sons of El" but "sons of Israel." ...

Israel was the nation which Yahweh received, yet El was the head of this pantheon and Yahweh only one of its members. This reading points to an old phase of Israel's religion when El held a pre-eminent position apart from the status of Yahweh.

Apparently, originally El was Israel's chief god, as suggested by the personal name, Israel. Then when the cult of Yahweh became more important in the land of early Israel, the view reflected in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 served as a mode to accommodate this religious development.¹⁸

Patriarchs worshiped El

Yahweh was unknown to the patriarchs. Rather, they worshiped the Canaanite god, El.¹⁹

Patriarchs visited Canaanite shrines

The fact that the biblical patriarchs seem at home with the older Canaanite deities, we are not surprised to find them visiting traditional Canaanite shrines and holy places.²⁰

El the mighty creator god

A national god such as Yahweh need not be conceived of as the creator of the universe. For most of ancient Israel, as well as for its immediate neighbours, man and world were created by a mighty god called El or Elohim. Accordingly, one text speaks of "El, the Most High, creator of heaven and earth".²¹

El appeared in earlier times, not Yahweh

"Patriarchal religion" was deeply indebted to much older Canaanite religious traditions, especially as revealed in the mythological texts from Ugarit. ... In the *oldest* literary strands of the traditions in the Pentateuch, it is the Canaanite deity El who regularly appears, not Yahweh. Furthermore, the epithets, or "titles," of El are especially revealing. They are, like the divine name itself, antique.²²

Was El the Original God of the Exodus?

El may have been the original god connected with the Exodus from Egypt and this event was secondarily associated with Yahweh when the two gods coalesced. Numbers 23:22 and 24:8 (cf. 23:8) associate the Exodus not with Yahweh but with the name of El. ... The poems in Numbers 23-24 contain the name of Yahweh (23:8, 21; 24:6), but it is considerably rarer than the name of El (23:8, 19, 22, 23; 24:4, 8, 16, 23). Indeed, El is attested almost three times as often as Yahweh.²³

¹⁷ *Origins, Monotheism*, pages 142-143

¹⁸ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 143

¹⁹ *Early History*, page 34

²⁰ *God, Wife?*, page 264

²¹ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 22

²² *God, Wife?*, page 257

²³ *Origins, Monotheism*, pages 146-147

THE HEAVENLY COUNCIL, THE PANTHEON OF GODS

El in the Bronze Age, chief of the deities

The most extensive Bronze Age source about El comes from Ugarit ... El appears as the divine patriarch par excellence. ... El is the chief of the deities.²⁴ El is generically regarded as the father of the pantheon.²⁵

Multiple deities in a council at Creation and in the First Commandment

The notion of a multiplicity of deities sitting together in council — so typical of the Canaanite pantheon and its functions — is taken for granted in the Hebrew Bible, even after Yahweh is said to have come into his ascendancy.

Indeed, the very first words of the Hebrew Bible are “When God began to create the heavens and the earth.” The Hebrew does not say “Yahweh,” but rather ‘*elohim*, “the gods” (plural). Even a rather thick reader is bound to ask, “Why does the text say ‘the gods’?” Then in verse 26, the text says: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man (NRSV: “humankind”) in our image.” But a literal translation would read, “Then the gods (‘*elohim*) said.” Again, the reader may ask, “Who is ‘us’?” Who else is there with “the gods” at creation? The fact is that the biblical writers, even in their most doctrinaire espousal of Yahweh as sole deity, are fully aware of the polytheistic setting of most of their world — even in Israelite folk religion.

That is why the First Commandment is phrased the way it is: “You shall have no other gods before [or ‘besides’] me” (Exodus 20:3). One could have other gods; and many, if not most, ancient Israelites did have. For that reason, most scholars today regard Israel’s faith not as monotheism, but rather as “monolatry.” This is the acknowledgment of other gods, but the worship of only one of them, in this case, Yahweh, the supreme deity.²⁶

The heavenly court is never, “the sons of Yahweh”

It is interesting to note that the Old Testament never refers to the heavenly court as ‘the sons of Yahweh’.²⁷

Deut. 32:8, “the sons of God”

Deut. 32.8 ..., ‘When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God’. The reading ‘sons of God’ has the support of the Qumran fragment, 4QDeut, the LXX, Symmachus, Old Latin and the Syro-Hexaplaric manuscript, Cambr. Or. 929. This is clearly the original reading, to be preferred to the MT’s ‘sons of Israel’, which must have arisen as a deliberate alteration on the part of a scribe who did not approve of the polytheistic overtones of the phrase ‘sons of God’.²⁸

In older theology, Yahweh not at top of pantheon

Psalm 82, like Deuteronomy 32:8-9, preserves the outlines of the older theology it is rejecting. From the perspective of this older theology, Yahweh did *not* belong to the top tier of the pantheon. Instead, in early Israel the god of Israel apparently belonged to the second tier of the pantheon; he was not the presider god, but one of his sons.²⁹

Yahweh not at head of divine council

One biblical text that presents Yahweh in an explicit divine council scene does not cast him as its head ... This text is Psalm 82, which begins in verse 1:

God (*elohim*) stands in the divine assembly/assembly of El (*adat el*),
Among the divinities (*elohim*) He pronounces judgment. ...

The assembly consists of all the gods of the world.³⁰

RECONSTRUCTION REQUIRES BALANCE

In reconstructing the history of Israelite religion, it is important to neither overemphasize the importance of deities other than Yahweh nor diminish their significance.³¹

²⁴ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 135

²⁵ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 64

²⁶ *God, Wife?*, page 263

²⁷ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 24

²⁸ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, pages 23-24

²⁹ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 49

³⁰ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 48

EPITHETS ASSOCIATED WITH EL

Proliferation of El names in older narratives

It is perhaps no accident that El names and titles proliferate in the older patriarchal narratives.³²

El-shadday

Genesis 17:1. When Abraham is 99 years old and has long been resident in Canaan, God appears to him as “El-Shadday” to renew the covenant.

Genesis 35:11. At the old shrine of Bethel, God introduces himself to Jacob as “El-Shadday,” and again he renews the covenant with “the fathers.”

Genesis 43:14; 48:3. In the first passage, grandson Jacob (“Israel”) blesses his sons who have sold Joseph into slavery, but are about to go to Egypt themselves in the name of “El-Shadday.” In the second passage, Jacob in Egypt tells Joseph that “El-Shadday” had appeared to him at Bethel (as also to Abraham), and again the context is one of renewing the divine covenant with “the fathers.”

Genesis 49:25. Thought by many scholars to be among the oldest texts preserved in the Hebrew Bible (11th century B.C.). Here we have *three* epithets of the patriarchal deity, all very ancient: “Bull of Jacob” (Canaanite El’s principal epithet is “Bull”); “Shepherd, Rock of Israel”; and “El-Shadday.” ...

Exodus 6:3. Here, much later, God introduces himself to Moses, explaining that formerly he was known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as “El-Shadday,” and under that name he had covenanted with the fathers. But henceforth, he wishes to be known to the soon-to-be Israelites as “Yahweh”.³³

El-Elohay

Genesis 33:20. ... This phrase clearly refers to the deity El as the God of the patriarch Israel (Jacob’s alternate name).³⁴

El-Elyon

Genesis 14:18-24. Here Melchizedek, king and priest of Salem (Jerusalem), blesses “Abram the Hebrew” by “El-Elyon,” “God Most High.” ...

Deuteronomy 32:8, 9. This passage is another archaic Hebrew poem, the “Song of Moses” (11th century B.C.?). On his deathbed Moses exhorts the people of Israel that they are to remember “the days of old”, when “El-Elyon” made a covenant with “your fathers.” But then the poem goes on to specify that now “Yahweh” will preserve and bless his people. The “evolution” from “El-Elyon” to “Yahweh” is significant.³⁵

Religion, early, El-Roi

Genesis 16:13. ... Having miraculously “seen” God and lived, Hagar calls his name “El-Roi,” “El who sees” again a word play, but very revealing.³⁶

El-Olam

Genesis 21:33. Abraham ...”calls on the name of ‘El-Olam:’ ... The divine name here is “El the Everlasting.”³⁷

El Bethel

Genesis 31:13. God appears to Jacob at Paddan-aram and identifies himself with past appearances, the famous story of Jacob and the angel, saying “I am El-Bethel.” ... This is a very old epithet, attached to a particular place.

Genesis 35:7. Jacob builds an altar there and calls the altar “El-Bethel.”³⁸

³¹ *Early History*, page 182

³² *Origins, Monotheism*, page 148

³³ *God, Wife?*, pages 257-258 (see also *Origins, Monotheism*, page 147 and *Early History*, page 34)

³⁴ *God, Wife?*, page 259

³⁵ *God, Wife?*, pages 258-259

³⁶ *God, Wife?*, page 260

³⁷ *God, Wife?*, page 259

³⁸ *God, Wife?*, page 259

ASSIMILATION OF YAHWEH INTO EL'S PANTHEON

Yahweh's origin

Yahweh himself does not appear to have been a Canaanite god in origin: for example, he does not appear in the Ugaritic pantheon lists. Most scholars who have written on the subject during recent decades support the idea that Yahweh had his origins outside the land of Israel to the south, in the area of Midian (cf. Judg. 5.4-5; Deut. 33.2; Hab. 3.3, 7)³⁹

Assimilation of Yahweh into the larger pantheon headed by El

Passages such as Deuteronomy 32:8-9 suggest a literary vestige of the initial assimilation of Yahweh, the southern warrior-god, into the larger highland pantheism, headed by El.⁴⁰

Yahweh incorporated into the older figure of El

At a variety of sites, Yahweh was incorporated into the older figure of El, who belonged to Israel's original West Semitic religious heritage.⁴¹

El's characteristics became Yahweh's

In Israel the characteristics and epithets of El became part of the repertoire of descriptions of Yahweh.⁴²

Yahweh and El identified at an early stage

One indication that Yahweh and El were identified at an early stage is that there are no biblical polemics against El. At an early point, Israelite tradition identified El with Yahweh or presupposed this equation. It is for this reason that the Hebrew Bible so rarely distinguishes between El and Yahweh. The development of the name El ('*el*) into a generic noun meaning "god" also was compatible with the loss of El's distinct character in Israelite religious texts.⁴³

El evolves into Yahweh

But how does Yahweh *become* the supreme deity — that is, how does he finally supplant Canaanite El? ... Exodus 3 is the story of how Moses, long after the age of the patriarchs, was *reintroduced* to their god by another name. God appears in the burning bush and identifies himself to Moses specifically as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God then tells Moses how he is going to free the people from Egyptian bondage, and how he is going to dispatch Moses as his agent. Moses protests that when he declares "God has sent me," people will say "Who? What's his name?" And *now* the text gives God's personal name: "Yahweh." ... The implication of the passage in Exodus 3 is of enormous importance. The god of Israel about-to-be is the same god of the patriarchs centuries earlier, the "El" of that era in Canaan. But now "in the fullness of time" he deigns to reveal his personal name "Yahweh," and by that name he wishes to be known and worshipped henceforth.⁴⁴

Exodus 6:1-9. Here God appears again to Moses. He refers not only to "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" again, but he explains that he revealed himself to them then only as "El-Shadday" and deliberately did not reveal his name "Yahweh." And again he specifies to Moses that he is really "Yahweh," and under this name he will covenant with the people of Israel and will deliver them.⁴⁵

Cultural process behind Yahwistic inclusion of old sites of El

In the early history of Israel, when the cult of Shechem became Yahwistic, it continued the El traditions of that site. As a result, Yahweh received the ... old title of El.⁴⁶

Israelite traditions identified El with Yahweh

At some point, a number of Israelite traditions identified El with Yahweh or presupposed this equation. The Hebrew Bible rarely distinguishes between El and Yahweh or offers polemics against El. ... In Israel, El's characteristics and epithets became part of the repertoire of descriptions of Yahweh.⁴⁷

³⁹ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 15

⁴⁰ *Early History*, page 33

⁴¹ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 140

⁴² *Early History*, page 35

⁴³ *Early History*, pages 33-34

⁴⁴ *God, Wife?*, pages 263-264

⁴⁵ *God, Wife?*, page 264

⁴⁶ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 140

⁴⁷ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 141

El as a separate god disappeared, then there was only One

El as a separate god disappeared, perhaps at different rates in different regions. This process may appear to involve Yahweh incorporating El's characteristics, for Yahweh is the eventual historical "winner." ... [Yahweh] was identified with El: here the son replaced and became the father whose name only serves as a title for the son. ... The erasure of the father, with his transformation into the son, was a requisite condition for the monotheistic identity of the son. ... With a distinct father-god erased, the son's identity as son was also erased. And then there was only One.⁴⁸

Yahweh emerged as Israel's national god

Yahweh, a tribal god of the highlands, emerged as the national god of Israel (1 Kings 20:23).⁴⁹

THE GODDESS ASHERAH

Asherah, "Mother of the Gods"

"*Asherahs*." The Hebrew word *asherah*, occurring over forty times in the Hebrew Bible, has long suggested to scholars some connection with the well-known Canaanite Mother Goddess Asherah. ... Her role in the cult is as the consort of El, the principal male deity of the pantheon, as "Mother of the Gods."⁵⁰

Implication that El had 70 sons

At Ugarit we read in the Baal myth of 'the seventy sons of Asherah (Athirat)'. Since Asherah was El's consort, this therefore implies that El's sons were seventy in number.⁵¹

Asherah was the chief goddess of the Canaanite pantheon. ... Asherah figured prominently as the wife of El, the chief god. ... All other gods, numbering seventy, were her children, including Baal, Math, Mot, and the other chief protagonists of the Ugaritic pantheon.⁵²

Asherah became Yahweh's consort

It has been argued that Asherah became the consort of Yahweh as a result of his identification with El.⁵³

Genesis 49:25 indicated that Asherah may have been the consort of El, but not Yahweh, at some early point in Israelite religion. Olyan's argument that Asherah became Yahweh's consort by virtue of the identification of Yahweh and El has provided a viable explanation for the development of the cult of Yahweh and his Asherah.⁵⁴

Goddess Asherah, earliest female deity worshiped by Israel

The Goddess Asherah, who was the earliest female deity known to have been worshiped by the Children of Israel.⁵⁵

The biblical field has generally embraced the view that the inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, Khirbet el-Qom, and Tel Miqne and some biblical passages attest to a goddess [Asherah], regardless of problems attendant with this reconstruction.⁵⁶

It seems clear that originally in ancient Israel there was a Goddess named "Asherah," who was associated with living trees and hilltop forest sanctuaries, and who could sometimes be symbolized by a wooden pole or an image of a tree. This tradition concerning a goddess became anathema in time.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 144

⁴⁹ *Early History*, page 91

⁵⁰ *God, Wife?*, pages 100-101

⁵¹ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 23

⁵² *Hebrew Goddess*, pages 36, 37

⁵³ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 142

⁵⁴ *Early History*, pages 125-126

⁵⁵ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 34

⁵⁶ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 73

⁵⁷ *God, Wife?*, page 102

TRIBAL, JUDGES (IRON AGE I)

Patriarchs	“Judges”	United Monarchy	Divided monarchy	Babylonian exile	Persian province of “Yehud”
ca 1300-1200 BCE	ca 1200-1000 BCE	ca 1000-900 BCE	ca 900-586 BCE	586-539 BCE	539-332 BCE
Late Bronze	Iron I	Iron IIA	Iron IIB	Babylonian Exile	Persian Period
Oral traditions	Oral traditions	Some records written (J, E)		Deutero-Isaiah Historical works (DTr)	Texts written. Texts combined, edited
Community	<p>Ancient Israel was a truly <i>marginal</i> economy and society. The country was always poor, powerless, on the verge of extinction. It was an obscure cultural and historical backwater. Most people lived in hamlets, villages, and small towns of no more than a few hundred people. The highland population of Iron Age I Palestine probably consisted of nomads, semi-nomads, semi-sedentary peoples, and sedentary farmers and village residents.</p>				
Religion	<p>Israelite religion grew out of Canaanite religion. The examples of El, Baal, and the symbol of the asherah illustrate this continuity for the period of the Judges. The cult of the Canaanite mother-goddess Asherah penetrated Hebrew religion.</p> <p>Like the asherah, the “high places” were acceptable in the period of the Judges and during the monarchy.</p> <p>In the earlier centuries, ‘the Yahweh alone party’ was less in evidence. Yahwism lacked the female touch which was such an important part of Canaanite religious life. Nothing it could offer replaced the Canaanite goddesses.</p>				

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Summary of the following section: *Tribal, Judges (Iron Age I)*

IRON AGE I COMMUNITY

The origins of ancient “Israel”

Iron Age I—the so-called tribal period or period of the Judges—is now generally recognized as the earliest possible period to which Israel’s origins may be traceable.⁵⁸

The “Tribal” Period

The biblical books traditionally regarded as providing information about the so-called “tribal period” or “period of the Judges” are Joshua, Judges, and 1 and 2 Samuel. ... Although we cannot make definitive assertions about whether these narratives contain any historical nucleus deriving from the period preceding Iron Age II, it is nevertheless possible that some of the traditions, even if they do derive from later periods, preserve some fragmentary information about fundamental features of the Iron Age I social world.⁵⁹

Iron Age I: Community

Ancient Israel was a truly *marginal* economy and society. The country was always poor compared to its prosperous neighbors; always powerless compared to their might; always on the verge of extinction. ... Ancient Israel was an obscure cultural and historical backwater of the ancient Near East. It would have been long forgotten except for its one memorable contribution to civilization: the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁰

Iron I (1200-1000) illustrates both continuity and discontinuity with the previous Late Bronze Age. There is no definitive cultural break between the thirteenth and twelfth century throughout the entire region, although certain new features in the hill country, Transjordan and coastal region may suggest the appearance of the Aramaean and Sea People groups. There is evidence, however, that shows strong continuity with Bronze Age culture, although as one moves later into Iron I the culture begins to diverge more significantly from that of the late second millennium.⁶¹

Most people in ancient Israel ... lived in hamlets, villages, and small towns of no more than a few hundred people. ... The bulk of the Israelite population lived in *relatively isolated, traditional areas*. ... Most people were thus removed from the centers of political power, religious authority, and international tensions, insulated from the decision-making processes that shaped national culture. ... The orthodox religious ideals enshrined in the Hebrew Bible would have been foreign to them throughout most of Israel’s history.⁶²

The highland population of Iron Age I Palestine probably consisted of nomads, semi-nomads, semi-sedentary peoples, and sedentary farmers and village residents.⁶³

Early Israel was exclusively rural: village, hamlets, and a few isolated homesteads. Of the 300 or so 12th-11th century B.C. Israelite sites that are currently known, none had a population of more than 300, and most had fewer than 100. None was a town, much less a city, by any criteria. A total population of about 50,000 (12th century B.C.) to 75,000 (11th century B.C.) was widely dispersed over the countryside, concentrated mostly in the central hills, stretching from Galilee, through Samaria and Judea and into the northern Negev.⁶⁴

In villages and farm families in early Israel, everyone was a farmer; there were really no other options. Each family made and produced everything that it needed, perhaps now and then in cooperation with other families. But there were no professional or mercantile classes, no specialized artisans — and no priests. These villages may have been relatively poor, depending as they did upon subsistence farming. But they possessed a strong sense of solidarity, and they were able to maintain and enforce traditional values. And folk religion was the glue that held everything together — simple, but adequate for the needs of a simple agrarian society.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ *Reconstructing Society*, page 40

⁵⁹ *Reconstructing Society*, pages 64-65

⁶⁰ *God, Wife?*, page 15

⁶¹ <http://www.bu.edu/anep/Ir.html> (accessed 27 July 2015)

⁶² *God, Wife?*, page 18

⁶³ *Reconstructing Society*, page 78

⁶⁴ *God, Wife?*, page 273

⁶⁵ *God, Wife?*, pages 273-274

IRON AGE I RELIGION

Canaanites and Israelites had shared cultures

Israelite and Canaanite cultures shared a great deal in common, and religion was no exception. Deities and their cults in Iron Age Israel represented aspects of the cultural continuity with the indigenous Late Bronze Age culture and the contemporary urban culture on the coast and in the valleys. The examples of El, Baal, and the symbol of the asherah illustrate this continuity for the period of the Judges.⁶⁶

Difficulty reconstruction Iron Age I religion

Reconstructing the religion of Iron Age I Israel has proved to be equally as difficult as reconstructing the social processes that were intertwined with its emergence. ... Reconstructions of Israel's religion in all periods have emphasized the systems of belief associated with the "official" religion represented in the viewpoints of the biblical writers, rather than on religious organization or action, or on the "popular" religions. ... It is probably impossible to excavate the many layers of religious ideology represented in the final biblical construct of Israel's religion to uncover what the religion in this area might have been like before the formation of the state. Because of this major obstacle, biblical scholars and archaeologists alike are now appealing more to the material evidence uncovered through excavations.⁶⁷

El in Iron Age Israel

Outside of proper names, the word 'el occurs about 230 times in the Hebrew Bible. It usually occurs as an appellation designating a foreign deity (Ezekiel 28:2) as well as Israel's chief deity. ... It appears as a proper name of the deity in some poetic books, such as Psalms (5:5, 7:12; 18 [= 2 Sam 22]:3, 31, 33, 48; 102:25), Job, and Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40:18; 43:12; 45:14, 22; 46:9; cf. 42:5).⁶⁸

Yahweh came from southern nations

The oldest biblical traditions place Yahweh originally as a god in southern Edom (possibly in northwestern Saudi Arabia), known by the biblical names of Edom, Midian, Teman, Paran, and Sinai. This general area for old Yahwistic cult is attested in the Bible (Deuteronomy 33:2; Judges 5:4-5; Psalm 68:9, 18; Habakkuk 3:3) as well as in inscriptional sources.⁶⁹

Israelite religion grew out of Canaanite religion

Older, partisan portraits of Canaanite and Israelite religions saw almost everything through the lens of the Deuteronomistic historians, whose programmatic ideal was "Mosaic monotheism." ...

The point that I [William Dever] am making here, only to stress how much Canaanite and Israelite religion had in common, and that from the earliest phases of the latter's development. Thus Israelite religion ... grew out of Canaanite religion, not, as biblical propagandists claimed, in opposition to it.⁷⁰

Two aspects of El originally accepted by many Israelites, but later rejected

There were a couple of aspects of the El cult, however, that were accepted by many Israelites, but ultimately came to be rejected by the Old Testament. One was the appropriation by Yahweh of El's wife, Asherah. The other concerns the symbolism of the deity by a bull. In the Ugaritic texts El is frequently referred to as the 'Bull El'.⁷¹

High places accepted during the Judges and the Monarchy

Like the asherah, the "high places" were acceptable both in the period of the Judges and during the monarchy.⁷²

Sun, moon, part of Yahweh's host

Another possible text associating the sun and moon as part of Yahweh's military host is Joshua 10:12.⁷³

⁶⁶ *Early History*, page 31

⁶⁷ *Reconstructing Society*, page 102

⁶⁸ *Origins, Monotheism*, pages 139-140

⁶⁹ *Origins, Monotheism*, pages 139-140

⁷⁰ *God, Wife?*, pages 269-270

⁷¹ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 34

⁷² *Early History*, page 160

⁷³ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 63

Asherah as a divine name at Judges 3

A further place where Asherah appears as a divine name in the Old Testament is Judg. 3.7, where it occurs in the plural form ‘Asheroth’: ‘And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and serving the Baals and the Asheroth’. The parallelism with ‘the Baals’ makes it undeniable that a divine reference was intended by ‘the Asheroth’.⁷⁴

It was almost inevitable that the cult of this great Canaanite mother-goddess ... should penetrate Hebrew religion as well. In fact, it was not long after the Israelite conquest of the Canaanite hill country, in the period of mixed Israelite-Canaanite settlement, that this development took place, together with intermarriage between the Israelites and the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, “among whom they dwelt.” The establishment of family and religious ties went hand in hand, and “the Children of Israel ... served the Baals and the Asherahs” [Judges 3:5-7].⁷⁵

Yahwism lacked the female touch

Yahwism lacked the female touch which was such an important part of Canaanite religious life. Nothing it could offer replaced the Canaanite goddesses.⁷⁶

Yahweh-alone party less in evidence during the earlier centuries

Earlier centuries, when ‘the Yahweh alone party’ was less in evidence.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 45

⁷⁵ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 38

⁷⁶ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 31

⁷⁷ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 228

MONARCHY, UNITED AND DIVIDED (IRON AGE II)

Patriarchs	“Judges”	United Monarchy	Divided monarchy	Babylonian exile	Persian province of “Yehud”
ca 1300-1200 BCE	ca 1200-1000 BCE	ca 1000-900 BCE	ca 900-586 BCE	586-539 BCE	539-332 BCE
Late Bronze	Iron I	Iron IIA	Iron IIB	Babylonian Exile	Persian Period
Oral traditions	Oral traditions	Some records written (J, E)		Deutero-Isaiah Historical works (DTr)	Texts written. Texts combined, edited
Community	<p>The majority of earlier villages were abandoned, new towns were established in centralized locations, and an urban society began to develop, although the bulk of the population remained rural. Kin-based villages gave way to new towns and cities where entrepreneurs moved to seek their fortune.</p> <p>A small elite class of officials, bureaucrats, priestly functionaries, and wealthy aristocrats arose around the court of the newly formed capital in Jerusalem. The greater number of lower-class folk were at the mercy of a tiny, rapacious upper class where wealth and power were concentrated.</p>				

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Summary of the following section: Monarchy, United and Divided (Iron Age II)—Community

Monarchy, United and Divided (Iron Age II)

Patriarchs	"Judges"	United Monarchy	Divided monarchy	Babylonian exile	Persian province of "Yehud"
ca 1300-1200 BCE	ca 1200-1000 BCE	ca 1000-900 BCE	ca 900-586 BCE	586-539 BCE	539-332 BCE
Late Bronze	Iron I	Iron IIA	Iron IIB	Babylonian Exile	Persian Period
Oral traditions	Oral traditions	Some records written (J, E)		Deutero-Isaiah Historical works (DTr)	Texts written. Texts combined, edited
Religion	<p>With the growth of socioeconomic complexity and political centralization, religion inevitably became "official". The need to manage the cult fostered a priestly class. The state or "official" religion came into being 200 years or more into Israelite history. This represents a departure from tradition.</p> <p>Solomon's temple marked a radical departure from earlier religious traditions. For almost two-thirds of its life, the statue of Asherah was present in the Temple. Primarily, the elite had constant and easy access to the Temple. However, during the monarchy, the nation's dominant religion is polytheistic, with an array of idols, no different to that of its neighbours. Goddesses played a more important role than gods did.</p> <p>The worship of many gods by the Hebrew people is not a lapse from an earlier higher faith revealed at Sinai. Israel's religious history is not a fight to restore an original, monotheism.</p> <p>In their opposition to "folk religion", the prophets were in the minority and they arrived late on the scene.</p> <p>Yahweh was the chief god. The other gods and goddesses were worshipped as part of his pantheon. The worship of Asherah as the consort of Yahweh ("his Asherah"!) was an integral element of religious life.</p> <p>Influence of the monolatric idea is not attested before the 9th century BCE. The worship of "Yahweh-alone" is the cause of a small group only. The official trend of the Temple remained polytheistic. The "purest form of Yahwism" belonged to the late monarchy, not to an early stage of Israel's history.</p>				

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Summary of the following section: Monarchy, United and Divided (Iron Age II)—Religion

COMMUNITY

By the 10th century B.C., after some two centuries of experience during a formative era, when Israelite society was largely rural and egalitarian and “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6), a major change took place. ... The “period of the judges” was supplanted by the “United Monarchy” — the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, which we now know date to *ca.* 1020-930 B.C.⁷⁸

Between the late 11th and the early 10th century B.C. the picture changed. The majority of the “proto-Israelite” villages characterized above were abandoned, new towns were established in a few more centralized locations, and an urban society began to develop.⁷⁹

By the mid-late 10th century B.C. in the “Age of Solomon,” when the population may have reached some 100,000, there were about 20 “towns” by suitable local criteria, that is, centers with a population of 500-1,000. There may have been a few real cities, with up to 2,000 people. The latter might have totaled some 5,000 people in all, or roughly the five percent urban population that I suggested above. It is clear that the bulk of the population remained rural, as recent studies have shown.⁸⁰

Statehood is ... about *centralization* – the concentration of decision-making and the distribution of goods and services in the hands of some central authority. ... Centralization, however, resulted in just what the prophet Samuel had warned about – the gradual usurpation of power by king and court and the consequent loss of independence and freedom that once belonged to ordinary people.⁸¹

The significant fact, however, is that with the beginnings of statehood there now emerges a small nucleus of urban elites that had not existed before. It is this new urban, privileged class that will soon come to clash with traditional, rural-based folk religion as they begin to focus on their own vested interests.⁸²

Rural lifestyles tend to be “egalitarian,” ... That changed beginning with the growth of urbanism and the monarchy. Kin-based villages, in which all were roughly equal (equally poor) and were closely related to each other, gave way to new towns and cities where entrepreneurs moved to seek their fortune, becoming anonymous in the process. Fewer and fewer uprooted people were blood relations, or even knew each other. Some clever opportunists got rich, but many more became trapped in a cycle of urban poverty. A once homogeneous people gradually became “stratified,” differentiated into economic and social classes that were often in conflict.

In particular, there arose around the court of the newly formed capital in Jerusalem a circle of officials, bureaucrats, priestly functionaries, and wealthy aristocrats who were dependent upon crown subsidies, as well as literati, all of whom constituted a powerful “lobby.” They represented, however, a small elite class, not the majority of Jerusalemites. And they had scarcely any contact with the majority of people in the countryside. Yet these elites would soon dominate life in the capital. Now Israel’s early egalitarian ideals were severely tested, and traditional cultural and religious values were threatened. Religion would have to meet these new and increasingly sophisticated challenges.⁸³

Israel was hardly a “middle class” society. It was bottom-heavy, with a preponderance of lower-class folk — theoretically “free men and women,” but in reality at the mercy of the tiny but rapacious upper class in whose hands wealth and power were concentrated.⁸⁴

Was the Jerusalem Temple ... *really* the focus of national religious life? ... Many people in ancient Israel had probably never been to Jerusalem in their whole lives. And even if they did get there, they would not have been admitted to the Temple, the “house of the deity,” largely a royal chapel.

It appears that *whatever* actually went on in the Jerusalem Temple and its precincts, the activities were conducted by and for a small priestly class, not even the majority of the small population resident in Jerusalem. For most people in ancient Israel, the Temple liturgy and the official Temple theology of the orthodox parties

⁷⁸ *God, Wife?*, page 271

⁷⁹ *God, Wife?*, page 273

⁸⁰ *God, Wife?*, page 273

⁸¹ *God, Wife?*, page 275

⁸² *God, Wife?*, page 273

⁸³ *God, Wife?*, pages 274-275

⁸⁴ *God, Wife?*, page 16

who wrote the Bible were unknown, and they would have been irrelevant in any case. Despite the fact that many today still resonate with “Book religion,” it was not the *real* religion of ancient Israel, at least for the majority.⁸⁵

The transition from tribal organization to centralized state is believed by many scholars to have been accompanied by the rise of a literary court culture alongside oral forms of transmitting traditions. This is typically understood in terms of a rapid increase in literary activity, with earlier oral forms being set down in writing and often arranged in larger compositions.⁸⁶

RELIGION

Religion was an integral part of all life in ancient Israel, as we have seen, so all the changes we have discussed affected religious beliefs and practices. Accompanying the growth of socioeconomic complexity and political centralization, there were inevitable developments that resulted in religion becoming as “official” as everything else. The need to manage the cult fostered a priestly class, soon a large bureaucracy, aligned with the state and utilizing religion to legitimate both.

In theory, the priesthood went back to Israel’s origins in the Sinai, but the texts are largely late royal propaganda. There is no evidence in pre-monarchical Israel of *any* organized religious leadership, especially of an established priesthood.⁸⁷

The changes ... combined to bring into existence for the first time a small class of reasonably well-educated people who had the leisure, the opportunity, and the motivation to pursue intellectual and aesthetic interests. ...

Current opinion leans to an 8th- or (more likely) a 7th-century date for the literary composition, because the archaeological evidence for widespread literacy is no earlier than that. ... The notion of a great, sweeping “national epic” was undoubtedly born early in the monarchy. And that becomes the basis for both the later Tetrateuch/Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic traditions. ...

(1) Most of this literature arises relatively late in Israelite history, by any estimate; and

(2) It is the product of a very few intellectuals and literati and reflects almost exclusively their concerns and vested interests. ...

The urban elites who wrote and edited the Hebrew Bible cannot *possibly* have constituted more than a tiny fraction of one percent, isolated from and largely alienated from the vast majority. ...

While “Book religion” did incorporate aspects of folk religion and always overlapped with it to some degree, clashes were inevitable, and by the 8th century B.C. they had provoked a painful crisis.

But there were even earlier flashpoints. By far the most significant yet most controversial departure accompanying the rise of an “official” state-sponsored cult was the construction of a national shrine, the Solomonic Temple in Jerusalem.⁸⁸

The supposed “sons of Aaron,” Moses’ brother, are set up to regulate religion under crown supervision, as part of the new state apparatus. Thus the state or “official” religion that we have sometimes contrasted with folk religion comes into being — for the first time, 200 years or more into Israelite history. It is not so much a development of tradition as it is a departure from tradition, a momentous change that will set the stage for all subsequent changes in Israelite religion.⁸⁹

SOLOMON’S TEMPLE

Solomon’s temple – state-sponsored religion

By far the most significant yet most controversial departure accompanying the rise of an “official” state-sponsored cult was the construction of a national shrine, the Solomonic Temple in Jerusalem.⁹⁰

[Solomon’s temple] marked a radical departure from earlier religious traditions.⁹¹

⁸⁵ *God, Wife?*, page 98

⁸⁶ *Reconstructing Society*, page 109

⁸⁷ *God, Wife?*, page 275

⁸⁸ *God, Wife?*, pages 275-277

⁸⁹ *God, Wife?*, page 275

⁹⁰ *God, Wife?*, page 277

⁹¹ *God, Wife?*, page 277

Solomon's temple a copy of others

The architects and builders who, at Solomon's request, were sent by King Hiram of Tyre to Jerusalem to build the temple hewed close to the patterns familiar to them from their own temples. That this was the case is indicated by a comparison of archaeological discoveries with the Biblical description of Solomon's temple. ... In Solomon's temple, all the brass work, including the two pillars Jachin and Boaz, was executed by a Tyrian craftsman also called Hiram. Again, archaeology teaches us that these brass furnishings of the Jerusalem temple were made in a manner customary in temples dedicated to "other gods" along the east Mediterranean coast.⁹²

For almost two-thirds of the temple's existence, the statue of Asherah was present in the Temple

Of the 370 years during which the Solomonic Temple stood in Jerusalem, for no less than 236 years (or almost two-thirds of the time) the statue of Asherah was present in the Temple, and her worship was a part of the legitimate religion approved and led by the king, the court, and the priesthood and opposed by only a few prophetic voices crying out against it at relatively long intervals.⁹³

"Official" religion associated with the Temple

The "official" religion in Judah was probably, as is suggested in the biblical texts, closely associated with the Temple, whose construction is attributed to Solomon. It is possible that, as a symbol of the official religion, the Temple was connected to the palace and that the king had ultimate responsibility for the cult. It is unlikely, however, that the Jerusalem Temple was considered by the priestly hierarchy to be the *only* legitimate cult site until either very late in the monarchic period or after the exile.⁹⁴

Religion of the united monarchy

Polemics against the high places among the idealistic reformers of the late monarchy are conspicuously absent in descriptions of religious life in the United Monarchy in the 10th century B.C. Saul visits a high place in a town in Judah to look for a "seer" at the local high place.⁹⁵

State religion had little impact

I would argue that as the "Temple theology" was elaborated it became less and less relevant to the religious beliefs and practices of most people's lives. Even the canonical Scripture that developed in Temple circles over time had little impact on most people's everyday lives. That is why the Deuteronomists — the party that promoted state and "Book religion" — found themselves so much at odds with the populace by the 8th-7th centuries B.C. and attempted reforms, most largely unsuccessful.⁹⁶

Differing relationships with the official religion

Various groups within Judah would have related to the official religion of the Jerusalem Temple and priesthood in different ways. It was primarily the elite, however, who would have had constant and easy access to the Temple and its leadership, as well as sufficient wealth to participate in the most lavish of the Temple celebrations.⁹⁷

POLYTHEISM

During the four and a half centuries of Israelite monarchy (ca. 1020-586 B.C.), the dominant religion is polytheistic and undifferentiated from that of its neighbours. ... The original religion of Israel belongs to this group of West-Semitic cults. Every individual Israelite clan, from the king down to serfs and slaves, honours its own tutelary god or spirit who is taken to be responsible for the family's health and well-being. ... It worships Yahweh, the god of country and nation, whose special domains are kingship, war, and peace. Finally, there are 'departmental gods' whose fields of competence may be weather, rain, female fertility, and the like. ... Yahweh, the 'god of hosts', is surrounded by a host of gods.⁹⁸

⁹² *Hebrew Goddess*, page 40

⁹³ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 50

⁹⁴ *Reconstructing Society*, pages 176-177

⁹⁵ *God, Wife?*, page 94

⁹⁶ *God, Wife?*, page 279

⁹⁷ *Reconstructing Society*, page 211

⁹⁸ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 20

Polytheism is not a lapse

You have to slowly adapt your eyes to a new perspective. ... The worship of many gods by the Hebrew people is not a lapse, or defection, from an earlier and metaphysically higher faith revealed at Sinai, but merely exemplifies the polytheism of all ancient and primitive nations.

Israel's religious history is not characterized by the fight for restoring the original, monolatric orthodoxy, but rather by the fluctuating fate of a minority Yahweh-alone movement.

Their presentation of the story in the Books of Kings should not mislead the modern scholar as it is the biased view of the victorious party.⁹⁹

Frequent Worship of other deities

If we follow the evidence of the Old Testament itself it would seem that the worship of other deities was quite frequent. One may compare, for example, the condemnations found in prophets such as Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the cyclical pattern of apostasy and faithfulness depicted by the Deuteronomist in the book of Judges, and the fact that the books of Kings represent most of the kings as having done evil in the sight of the Lord, either by worshipping other deities or by tolerating them by not abolishing the high places.¹⁰⁰

There was a multitude of deities in Israelite polytheism. With the sun, moon, and the hosts of heaven in attendance, the divine assembly of Yahweh is quite full (1 Kings 22:19; cf. Exodus 15:11).¹⁰¹

Idols feature in Israel's oldest religions

Another feature of Israel's oldest religion is an array of idols, or cult images representing gods or goddess in human shape. ... It seems that Yahweh himself is never represented in iconic form, but that a bronze serpent, a golden calf-bull and a sacred tree can symbolize his power to heal and to dispense fertility in various domains.¹⁰²

Israeli divinities: Judges and Monarchy

In the Judges period, Israelite divinities may have included Yahweh, El, Baal, and perhaps Asherah as well as the sun, moon, and stars. During the monarchy, Yahweh, Baal, Astarte, and the sun, moon, and stars were considered deities in Israel.¹⁰³

Polytheism sustained during the monarchy

The period of the monarchy sustained various forms of Israelite polytheism.¹⁰⁴

Worship of Canaanite gods and goddesses integral to the end of the Hebrew monarchy

There can be no doubt that down to the very end of the Hebrew monarchy the worship of old Canaanite gods was an integral part of the religion of the Hebrews. ... The worship of goddesses played a much more important role in this popular religion than that of gods.¹⁰⁵

8th century pantheon larger than biblical reports

In the pre-exilic period (and perhaps as early as the eighth century) Israel enjoyed perhaps a lesser pantheon than that in the Ugaritic texts, but certainly it was considerably more extensive than what the biblical record reports.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹ *Monotheism, Minority*, pages 18-19

¹⁰⁰ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 226

¹⁰¹ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 52

¹⁰² *Monotheism, Minority*, page 23

¹⁰³ *Early History*, page 182

¹⁰⁴ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 155

¹⁰⁵ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 31

¹⁰⁶ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 50

The 'Holy Ones' of polytheistic Israel

There is at least one further hint at the original polytheistic nature of Prov 1-9. It is in the final paragraph and reads: "The first step to wisdom is the fear of Yahweh and knowledge of the Holy One(s) is understanding". ... Originally, the 'Holy Ones' are the gods of polytheistic Israel, among whom Lady Wisdom belongs.¹⁰⁷

HEBREW GODDESSES

Goddesses Asherah, Astarte, and Anath adopted the Hebrews

[Goddesses] Asherah, Astarte, and Anath, ... although foreign in origin, they soon adopted the Hebrews as their children, and allotted them all the benefits man finds in the worship of a goddess.¹⁰⁸

The Ugaritic texts, which refer to the goddess Athirat (Asherah) as the consort of El.¹⁰⁹

Asherah was an important household goddess

There is ample archaeological evidence as to the importance of Asherah as a household goddess. ... The worship of the goddess must have been extremely popular in all segments of Hebrew society.¹¹⁰

'Asherah' denotes the goddess herself

There are several places in the Old Testament where the word 'Asherah' denotes the goddess herself, and not simply the cult symbol of Asherah.¹¹¹

There are several passages where Asherah refers directly to the goddess herself: Judg. 3:7; 1 Kgs 14:13, 18:19; 2 Kgs 21:7, 23:4.¹¹²

In at least a handful of cases, the term '*asherah* must refer to the Goddess Asherah herself, not merely to a "symbol." Thus I Kings 15:13 describes "an abominable image made for Asherah"; one cannot make an "image" for an image (cf. also II Kings 21:7; 23:4). I Kings 18:19 mentions "the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al and the four hundred prophets of Asherah." If "Ba'al" is a deity — as he certainly is, and well known in the Hebrew Bible — then so is "Asherah" (cf. II Kings 23:4).¹¹³

A number of biblical passages have been cited in defense of the reconstruction that Asherah was a goddess in Israel. These texts, 1 Kings 18:19, 2 Kings 21:7, 2 Kings 23:4, Judges 3:7, and Jeremiah 2:27, are addressed in turn to examine the strength of the reconstruction of Asherah as Yahweh's consort. As many scholars have noted, the one Iron II (ca. 1000-587) passage that unambiguously mentions the goddess Asherah is 1 Kings 18:19.¹¹⁴

Asherah was a full-fledged deity, and ... her cult *did* flourish in ancient Israel alongside the cult of Yahweh, even as part of it.¹¹⁵

Asherah at 1 Kgs 15:13 (cf. 2 Chron. 15:16)

A further passage where the only natural interpretation is to take Asherah as the name of a goddess is 1 Kgs 15:13 (cf. parallel in 2 Chron. 15:16), where we read that King Asa 'removed Maacah his mother from being queen mother because she had a horrid thing made for Asherah. ... It must have been some kind of idolatrous object dedicated to the goddess Asherah, for the only alternative would be to suppose that the text was referring to an idolatrous object made for the Asherah [cult object], which would imply an idolatrous object made for another idolatrous object, which does not seem very plausible.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁷ *Monotheism, Minority*, pages 52-53

¹⁰⁸ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 31

¹⁰⁹ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 43

¹¹⁰ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 39

¹¹¹ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 46

¹¹² *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 42

¹¹³ *God, Wife?*, page 101

¹¹⁴ *Early History*, pages 125-126

¹¹⁵ *God, Wife?*, page 203

¹¹⁶ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 44



Burial Inscription: “Uriyahu the prince wrote it: Blessed be Uriyahu by **Yahweh, and his Asherah,**
for from his enemies he (Yahweh) has saved him.”

Khirbet el-Qom. **Iron Age II, 7th century BCE** (Stone H: 34; W: 40 cm)

Israel Antiquities Authority

<http://www.imj.org.il/imaginer/galleries/viewItemE.asp?case=14&itemNum=375273> (Israel Museum) (Accessed 15 August 2015)

Asherah at 1 Kings 18:19

Yet another verse where it is indubitable that Asherah is the name of a goddess, not merely a cult object, is 1 Kgs 18:19, where Elijah is said to have commanded ‘the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah’ to come to the contest on Mt Carmel. The parallelism of Asherah with Baal can mean only that a divine name is intended.¹¹⁷

Asherah symbol initially accepted

The biblical record condemns the goddess Asherah much less frequently than the asherah. The symbol was initially an acceptable feature of Yahwistic cult, but later was treated as a non-Yahwistic aberration.¹¹⁸

Asherah in the 8th and 7th centuries

Asherah’s presence ... is transparent in the several passages in the Hebrew Bible where the word ‘*asherah*’ must be read as a proper name — and the name of whom, if not the well-known old Canaanite deity Asherah?¹¹⁹

In II Kings 18:4, Hezekiah is said to have ... cut down the Asherah”. But his son Manasseh set up “a graven image of Asherah” in Solomon’s Temple, where only Yahweh’s name should have been established forever (II Kings 21:1-7). Thus Hezekiah’s abortive “reform” was a failure. Why? Obviously because it lacked both popular support and subsequent royal approval. Asherah remained in the temple, at home alongside Yahweh, where many Israelites (perhaps most) thought she belonged.

II Kings 23 is the most revealing passage of all. ... [King Josiah] is said to have demolished all the high places and removed “the Asherah” from the Temple and burned it. ... What we have in II Kings 23 is nothing less than an “inventory” of the religious practices of *most* people in ancient Israel, not only toward the very end of the monarchy, but as they undoubtedly had been in place from the beginning.¹²⁰

In folk religion, Asherah may have been his consort, and thus part of Yahwism, his lady; but to the orthodox Deuteronomist parties, she was the whore of pagan gods.¹²¹

Astarte; late Judean monarchy

The references to “the asherah” in 2 Kings 21 and 23 might point to the late Judean monarchy as the time for the substitution of Asherah for Astarte in 1 Kings 18:19. It is precisely this period when Astarte had a cult in ancient Israel. There is no evidence for Astarte as a goddess in Israel prior to the second half of the monarchy.¹²²

Queen of Heaven and other deities

The Queen of Heaven (Jer. 7:18; 44:18-19, 25) was the title of a goddess, perhaps Astarte, Ishtar (or, a syncretized Astarte-Ishtar) or less likely Anat. Tammuz (Ezek. 8:14; cf. Isa. 17:10-11; Dan. 11:37) and Hadad-Rimmon (Zech. 12:11) are sometimes considered to be manifestations of Baal.... . Deities in this category would include Bethel (Jer. 48:13), perhaps Chemosh. ... Bethel, like Astarte, may have been a specifically Phoenician import into Judean religion, an influence reflected in both Jeremiah 48:13 and the Jewish Egyptian evidence.¹²³

Queen of heaven; Astarte

The most intriguing aspect of all this is the probability that the “Queen of Heaven” in [Jeremiah] can be identified specifically as Astarte — that is, as *another* “Canaanite” mother goddess venerated in folk religion in late Judean times.¹²⁴

The ‘Queen of Heaven’ is the title of a goddess referred to in the Old Testament in Jer. 7.18 and 44.17-19, 25. ... At the present time the most popular view is that the ‘Queen of Heaven’ refers to Astarte, and indeed the most plausible case can be made for this goddess.¹²⁵

¹¹⁷ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, pages 44-45

¹¹⁸ *Early History*, page 160

¹¹⁹ *God, Wife?*, page 211

¹²⁰ *God, Wife?*, page 212

¹²¹ *God, Wife?*, page 214

¹²² *Early History*, pages 126-127

¹²³ *Early History*, pages 182-183

¹²⁴ *God, Wife?*, page 234

¹²⁵ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, pages 144, 148-149

People blame disaster on the Queen of Heaven not being worshiped

Jer 44.18 may give evidence to the fact that all cults except Yahweh's were discontinued during the siege of Jerusalem in 587/586 B.C.:

From the time we left off burning sacrifices to the Queen of Heaven and pouring drink-offerings to her, we have been in great want, and in the end we have fallen victims to sword and famine

protest the people whom Jeremiah tries to convince of the Yahweh-alone idea.¹²⁶

Texts about an Israelite goddess

Beautiful polytheistic texts about an Israelite goddess can be found in Proverbs, chaps. 1-9, a self-contained little book which I date to the pre-exilic period. The goddess is called 'Hokhmah', in English 'wisdom' or 'shrewdness', and was later taken to be a simple poetic personification of school wisdom or of God's own wisdom. But to take Prov 8.22-30 as referring to the wisdom of the only God is contrary to sound textual analysis.¹²⁷

A Hebrew goddess, the best divine mother

There can be no doubt that the goddess to whom the Hebrews clung with such tenacity down to the days of Josiah, and to whom they returned with such remorse following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, was, whatever the prophets had to say about her, no foreign seductress, but a Hebrew goddess, the best divine mother the people had had to that time.¹²⁸

The Hebrew goddess experienced a metamorphosis

Following the death of the "spirit of idolatry" in the days of Nehemiah, the Hebrew goddess succeeded in surviving. She underwent, to be sure, an astounding metamorphosis. ... In one of her manifestations she penetrated ... the rebuilt sanctuary as a female Cherub, poised in marital embrace with her male partner in the dark cell of the Holy of Holies. In another, she became the manifestation of God's presence, the Shekhina—a feminine name just as God's is masculine—the loving, rejoicing, motherly, suffering, mourning, and, in general, emotion-charged aspect of deity.¹²⁹

Ishtar, widow of Tammuz

There is ... evidence of still another goddess who was venerated by the ancient Judeans. The prophet Ezekiel reports that at the gate of the Temple in Jerusalem there sat "women weeping for Tammuz" (Ezekiel 8:14). "Tammuz" was the later name of the 3rd millennium Sumerian god Dumuzi. He was a seasonal "dying and rising" god whose consort was Ishtar. ... The Mesopotamian cult of Tammuz was largely the province of women, who naturally empathize with his "widow" Ishtar, and ritually mourn his passing. There seems little doubt that this pan-Mediterranean seasonal myth of Ba'al and 'Anat, Tammuz and Ishtar, was popular in some circles in Judah.¹³⁰

SOUTHERN KINGDOM OF JUDAH

Hezekiah's action against polytheism

Assuming that it was Isaiah and prophetic sympathizers who supplied the theological rationale for Hezekiah's attempted reforms, the specifics are significant. Among these are (1) removing the high places; (2) tearing down the standing stones; (3) cutting down the "Asherah" trees or poles, and (4) breaking up a bronze serpent that was called "Nehushtan" and was used for burning incense (II Kings 18:3, 4). All these acts are aimed at polytheism in general, and the worship of Asherah in particular.¹³¹

Altars for host of heaven in the house of Yahweh

2 Kings 21:5 mentions Manasseh's construction of "altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts in the house of Yahweh."¹³²

¹²⁶ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 34

¹²⁷ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 51

¹²⁸ *Hebrew Goddess*, pages 31-32

¹²⁹ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 32

¹³⁰ *God, Wife?*, pages 234-235

¹³¹ *God, Wife?*, pages 286-287

¹³² *Origins, Monotheism*, page 63

Josiah acted against folk religion

Folk religion was, in fact, everything that Josiah and his reformist colleagues wanted to put a stop to.¹³³

Josiah's acts are aimed at folk religion — here not out in the boondocks where people may be expected to be “pagan,” but rather in the Jerusalem Temple and the “official” cult. Of particular interest are the numerous references to the cult of Asherah.¹³⁴

2 Kgs 23.4. Here, as part of the account of Josiah's reform, we read that ‘the king commanded ... to bring out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven’. Since Asherah is referred to in between allusions to Baal and the host of heaven, both of which were worshipped as divinities (cf. v. 5, for example), it would be extremely forced not to understand Asherah here as the name of a deity likewise.¹³⁵

Asherah figurines from times of Hezekiah and of Josiah

The “Asherah” figurines were flourishing *precisely* during the attempted reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah, one of whose principal objectives was eliminating the cult of Asherah.¹³⁶

Asherah survived the Assyrian invasion and following, until Josiah

The goddess survived all the upheavals that passed over Samaria during the Assyrian invasion and following it, until she fell under the axe of Josiah, that last great Yahwist reformer among the Judaeans kings, who could tolerate the worship of no other god besides Yahweh in any part of the country under his control.¹³⁷

Prophets in the minority

The prophets, in their outspoken opposition to polytheistic folk religion, were indeed a minority. They burst on the scene relatively late, but dramatically, and they spoke with religious fervor. But their message was too extreme — too diametrically opposed to traditional religious beliefs and practices — to have been widely accepted, at least at first. ... Had it not been for a small circle of fiercely faithful disciples who collected their works later, the prophetic works would likely never have been preserved. They certainly would not have found their way into the canonical literature. There, together with the works of their visionary partners the Deuteronomists, the prophetic writings form what some have called “the Bible, a minority report.”¹³⁸

Religion of the family cults

The only thing “nonconformist” about such local family cults is that they were local, not connected with the Temple in Jerusalem. Here there were typically no official priests, only the *paterfamilias* — or, more often, the wife and mother of the household. There were probably few regular schedules of formal “services”; few prescribed liturgies; few theological creeds to affirm. ... Such local shrines were accepted matter-of-factly in the settlement period and early in the monarchy. They became anathema only under the late Deuteronomistic reforms, when attempts were made to suppress them and to centralize all worship in Jerusalem.¹³⁹

Folk religion: Jeremiah

Jeremiah 44:15-23, describes folk religion in the early 6th century B.C. This passage contains some of our most candid and revealing witnesses to family and folk religion — especially to the role of women in the cult. We are told that women “offered incense to other gods”; “burned incense to the Queen of Heaven”; and “poured out libations” to her, as they had *always* done (that is, back in Judah). Significantly, all this was part of the performance of women's vows. The men are portrayed as being aware of these practices, but ambivalent; they stand around and let the women defend themselves to the prophet Jeremiah. What the women do is interesting. They are not docile. They go on the offensive. They say to Jeremiah: “We were doing just fine until you came along; our vows were *working*.” And they declare that their husbands know all about this and even tacitly approve of it. ...

While women were often shut out of public rituals and more formal observances of cult, they were accustomed to household and private forms of religious practice that were uniquely “real” to them. These were more personal, more meaningful; and they found their expression chiefly in prayers and vows. Women could venerate

¹³³ *God, Wife?*, page 94

¹³⁴ *God, Wife?*, page 289

¹³⁵ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 43

¹³⁶ *God, Wife?*, page 290

¹³⁷ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 46

¹³⁸ *God, Wife?*, page 286

¹³⁹ *God, Wife?*, page 122

female deities, if they seemed more accessible to them, more congenial, more likely to understand and fulfill *their* needs — not competing with, but different from those of men. ... The essence of piety in traditional daily religious life consists largely of prayers and vows, relating mostly to the practical concerns of the family, which often fall to women more than to men.¹⁴⁰

YAHWEH

Yahweh surrounded by heavenly hosts

The presentation of Yahweh as a king enthroned and surrounded by his heavenly hosts can be found in many biblical passages, such as I Kings 22, Isaiah 6, and Daniel 7.¹⁴¹

Yahweh and the Sun

Two pieces of archaeological evidence attest the presence of the sun cult in Israel prior to any likely Mesopotamian influence. The first is a tenth-century BCE cult stand from Taanach, which contains four tiers, the first representing what seems to be a horse and sun disc. The second is a small horse's head from Hazor with a disc-like symbol on its forehead, dating from c. 925-905 BCE. These are particularly significant, since 2 Kgs 23.11 specifically mentions horses and chariots of the sun as having been removed from the Jerusalem temple in the course of Josiah's reformation.¹⁴²

Yahweh and El are masculine

The two Biblical names of God, *Yahweh* and *Elohim* (or briefly *El*, translated as "God"), are masculine. ... Every verbal statement about God conveyed the idea that He was masculine.¹⁴³

The Biblical God-concept, intuitively grasped by the prophets ... reflects the strictly patriarchal order of the society which produced it; this patriarchal society gave rise to a religion centered around a single, universal deity ... pronouncedly male, a true projection of the patriarchal family-head.¹⁴⁴

The image of Yahweh in the eyes of the common people

The image of Yahweh, in the eyes of the common people, did not differ greatly from that of Baal or the other Canaanite male gods. Often it would have been difficult to determine whether a certain cult was legitimately Yahwistic, heretically Yahwistic, or unequivocally pagan. The worship of Yahweh thus easily merged into, complemented, or supplanted that of the Canaanite male gods.¹⁴⁵

Gods and goddesses part of Yahweh's pantheon

Yahweh was very much the chief god in ancient Israel, and the other gods and goddesses would have been worshipped as part of his pantheon.¹⁴⁶

Yahweh enthroned among other heavenly beings

The earliest texts render Yahweh as a divine monarch enthroned among other heavenly beings. The divine status of the other members of the council is stressed by terms such as "sons of gods," (Pss. 29:1; 89:7) and "congregation of the holy ones," (Ps. 89:6; cf. Hos. 12:1; Zech. 14:5). Similarly, 'elohim in Psalm 82:1b apparently means "gods," since it parallels the "divine council" in verse 1a. All these texts present Yahweh as the preeminent member of the divine assembly. In 1 Kings 22:19, Yahweh is surrounded by a heavenly army or "host". The prophetic vision of the divine assembly of Isaiah 6:1 renders Yahweh after the fashion of an enthroned human king. ... Genesis 1:26-28 utilizes the traditional language of the divine council, as manifest, for example, in the use of the first common plural for divine speech in Genesis 1:26, a feature found also in Genesis 3:22; 11:7; and Isaiah 6:8.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ *God, Wife?*, pages 190-191

¹⁴¹ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 47

¹⁴² *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 153

¹⁴³ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 28

¹⁴⁴ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 30

¹⁴⁵ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 31

¹⁴⁶ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 228

¹⁴⁷ *Early History*, pages 143-144

Yahweh's theophanic retinue

Habakkuk 3:5 presents Resheph and Deber as part of Yahweh's theophanic retinue; both are well-known West Semitic gods. Psalm 29 calls the divine beings to join in praise of Yahweh. Similarly, Job 1-2 presents divine beings coming before God, including "the satan." The "astral religion" of later monarchic Judah likewise maintains the Judean national god at the head of a pantheon of lesser astral divinities.¹⁴⁸

Some associated Yahweh with a consort

There is also some indication that, at least in some areas, Yahweh was associated with a consort. This is represented particularly clearly in the ninth-century B.C.E. Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscription that makes reference to Yahweh and his Asherah.¹⁴⁹

The worship of Asherah as the consort of Yahweh ("his Asherah"!) was an integral element of religious life in ancient Israel prior to the reforms introduced by King Josiah in 621 B.C.E.¹⁵⁰

Asherah cult, close relationship with Yahweh

It is unquestionable that the Asherah cult object stood in a special relationship with Yahweh. ... The Asherah cult object was clearly regarded as a symbol of the goddess Asherah. ... Accordingly, we may clearly speak of a close relationship not only between Yahweh and the Asherah cult object but between Yahweh and the goddess Asherah. What was this relationship? The obvious conclusion that comes to mind is one of a god and his consort. This becomes a near certainty when we recall that in Canaanite religion Asherah was the consort of El and that the Old Testament equates Yahweh and El.¹⁵¹

MONOTHEISM

North (Israel): protests by Elijah; Elisha

The prevalence of this kind of folk religion in the north sparked the first prophetic protests, under Elijah and Elisha in the 9th century B.C. ... They operated largely in rural areas, where they were popular figures. ... First, they protested against usurpers like Omri and Ahab, and then in defense of "the poor of the Land" against abuses by royalty and the elite classes. In the end, however, they became spokesmen for "Yahweh alone" and thus opposed to much of folk religion.¹⁵²

Monolatry not before the 9th century BC

Actual influence of the monolatric idea is not attested before the 9th century B.C. when it is advocated by the prophets, Elijah and Elisha, in the northern kingdom, and by the reforms of kings Asa and Jehoshaphat in the south. The exact aims of the monolatric movement are as difficult to grasp as the origins of its ideology. ... In the north there is a fierce battle ... between an official polylatric cult patronized by King Ahab and a group supporting Yahwistic monolatry.¹⁵³

Yahweh-alone not expressed in Amos (8th century)

Amos reveals nothing of a polemic against false gods. Amos is indeed a prophet of Yahweh but the Yahweh-alone idea does not find expression in his written legacy. Not every worshipper of Yahweh is simultaneously a supporter of the Yahweh-alone movement.¹⁵⁴

Monolatric movement in 8th century Israel

For a long time to come there are no records on the monolatric movement. ... It is documented again when Hosea appears on the scene in eighth century Israel, when King Manasseh persecutes the Yahweh-aloneists, and when, in the late seventh century, the reform of King Josiah inaugurates a true growth period for monolatry.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁸ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 149

¹⁴⁹ *Reconstructing Society*, pages 176-177

¹⁵⁰ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 53

¹⁵¹ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 60

¹⁵² *God, Wife?*, page 282

¹⁵³ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 19

¹⁵⁴ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 30

¹⁵⁵ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 19

Isaiah is not a Yahweh-aloneist (8th century, Judah)

The traces of the Yahweh-alone idea which we find in [the books of Isaiah and Micah] seem to be later additions. In his poem on the birth or ascension to the throne of Hezekiah, Isaiah describes the king, according to polytheistic courtly style, as god-like (Isa 9.5). Isaiah is no Yahweh-aloneist.¹⁵⁶

Yahweh-alone party arises: 8th century BC (Hosea)

In the period between the coup d'état of Jehu (841) and the appearance of the prophet Hosea (around 750) a religious movement comes into being in the northern kingdom which, following Morton Smith's suggestion, can be called the 'Yahweh-alone party'. Our knowledge of this group is very limited and essentially rests on the Book of Hosea.¹⁵⁷

The Israelites should worship Yahweh and neglect all other gods on principle. In the words of Hosea's god this reads:

But I have been Yahweh, your god, since your days in Egypt. You shall know no god but me!
There is no saviour beside me. (Hos 13.4)

What sounds like a play on the words of the decalogue to the ears of a later Jew or Christian well-versed in the Scriptures is, in fact, the basis of the Ten Commandments, which appear much later and allude to the words of Hosea. The worship of Yahweh alone is the cause of a small group only. The official trend of the religion of the Temple remains, of course, polytheistic:

They must needs sacrifice to the Baalim and burn offerings before carved images. (Hos 11.2)

They resort to other gods and love the raisin-cakes offered to their idols. (Hos 3.1)¹⁵⁸

Difficult to ground monotheism before 7th century

To use biblical texts to ground monotheism, or even monolatry, historically before the seventh century is difficult.¹⁵⁹

PURE, ABSOLUTE MONOTHEISM, YAHWISM

Pure Yahwism is a late development

The cult of Baal, the symbol of the asherah, the high places, and the cultic practices involving the dead all belonged to Israel's ancient past, its Canaanite past. ... The "purest form of Yahwism" belonged not to an early stage of Israel's history but to the late monarchy. Differentiation of the cult of Yahweh did not begin until the ninth century and appeared in full flower only in the eighth century and afterward. Even this stage of reform was marked by other religious developments considered idolatrous by later generations; the cults of the "Queen of Heaven" and "the Tammuz" undermine any idealization of the late monarchy. The temple idolatry denounced in Ezekiel 8-11 probably constituted the norm rather than the exception for the final decades of the monarchy.¹⁶⁰

Yahweh-alone, northern kingdom (Hosea)

While the Book of Hosea gives clear evidence for the existence and concerns of the Yahweh-alone movement in the northern kingdom, we know virtually nothing about the situation in the southern kingdom of Judah.¹⁶¹

Yahweh-aloneists a minority among 8th century BCE prophets

Both Yahweh-aloneists and Pharisees were a minority among eighth century B.C. prophets and the sages active before 70 A.D., respectively.¹⁶²

No simple Yahweh-only path from 9th century to the 8th century

No straightforward path leads from the confrontations of the ninth century to the developed Yahweh-alone theology of Hosea.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁶ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 36

¹⁵⁷ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 30

¹⁵⁸ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 31

¹⁵⁹ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 150

¹⁶⁰ *Early History*, page 197

¹⁶¹ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 36

¹⁶² *Monotheism, Minority*, page 11

¹⁶³ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 33

Zephaniah, Yahweh-aloneist (7th century)

During the first two years of Josiah's reign the prophet Zephaniah appears. In the collection of his words there is an oracle which shows him to be an adherent of the Yahweh-alone movement (Zephaniah 1:4-6).¹⁶⁴

Jeremiah, Yahweh aloneist

Jeremiah is active in Jerusalem (from 609 B.C.). He too is an uncompromising exponent of Yahweh-alone theology.¹⁶⁵

After the destruction of Jerusalem (586) [Jeremiah] is driven to Egypt where we meet him, once again, quarrelling with the opposition party. The latter stands firm on its point of view:

We will burn sacrifices to the Queen of Heaven and pour drink-offerings to her as we used to do, we and our fathers, our kings and our princes, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. (Jer 44.17)

The eloquent rhetoric of Jeremiah that follows cannot hide the fact that the Yahweh-alone idea is innovative, rather than traditional polytheism.¹⁶⁶

Ezekiel, Yahweh-aloneist

[Ezekiel] comes from a family of priests and from his youth belongs to the Yahweh-aloneists.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 38

¹⁶⁵ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 40

¹⁶⁶ *Monotheism, Minority*, pages 40-41

¹⁶⁷ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 40

BABYLONIAN EXILE (586-539 BCE)

Patriarchs	“Judges”	United Monarchy	Divided monarchy	Babylonian exile	Persian province of “Yehud”
ca 1300-1200 BCE	ca 1200-1000 BCE	ca 1000-900 BCE	ca 900-586 BCE	586-539 BCE	539-332 BCE
Late Bronze	Iron I	Iron IIA	Iron IIB	Babylonian Exile	Persian Period
Oral traditions	Oral traditions	Some records written (J, E)		Deutero-Isaiah Historical works (DTr)	Texts written. Texts combined, edited
Community	<p>586 BCE – Jerusalem and the temple destroyed by the Babylonians and their allies. Judah’s remaining elite and powerful are exiled.</p> <p>539 BCE – Babylon’s dominance ended when they are defeated by the Medes and Persians under Cyrus. The exiles are permitted to return to their ancestral homes.</p>				
Religion	<p>The Hebrew people had, by and large, clung to Asherah for six centuries in spite of the increasing vigor of Yahwist monotheism. However, at some point, perhaps about the time of the exile, the cult of Asherah disappeared among the Jews and absolute monotheism solidified.</p> <p>Isaiah 40-55 is attributed to an unnamed author writing at the end of the Babylonian exile. That author was the first to give explicit expression to absolute monotheism. Before that time, monotheists acknowledged the presence of other gods, with Yahweh having been assigned to the Israelites while head of the pantheon of gods.</p>				

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Summary of the following section: *Babylonian Exile (586-539 BCE)*

THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

Davidic dynasty ended

Judah remained under vassalage to the Babylonians until, during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 B.C.E.), its status as a semi-independent state came to an end—the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, some portion of Judah's population was deported, and the Davidic dynasty came to an end.¹⁶⁸

Foundations of Judaism

The book of Kings, which was supplemented and reworked during the exile, recounts the fall of Judah in its last two chapters (24, 25). ... Despite skeptics Jerusalem did fall; the Temple was destroyed; and parts of Judah were depopulated. And these events precipitated a religious as well as a political crisis that brought the religions of ancient Israel to an end over the next half-century or so. Thus were laid the foundations for what we must call Judaism, beginning under Ezra and the returnees. That such changes did take place over time is beyond reasonable doubt. It only remains to speculate how and why — in particular, with respect to the ways in which traditional Israelite polytheism evolved into monotheism.¹⁶⁹

The Religious Crisis

- (1) First, the Temple — locus of Yahweh's effective presence among his people and sign of his covenant forever — was destroyed. ... Even though the Temple had been largely rather distant from the everyday lives of most people, it was nevertheless a powerful symbol of national identity.
- (2) Second, the priesthood was now diminished, the only official religious leadership that existed, even though this, too, had been somewhat remote.
- (3) Third, although it was mostly the elite classes that had been deported, and only the “poor of the land” were left (II Kings 25:12), *family life* for the survivors was severely disrupted. And the family life of ordinary people had been the place where folk religion had flourished.¹⁷⁰

FOLK RELIGION

The prophet Ezekiel shows that Israel had assimilated paganism

No prophet, no biblical writer, is as scathing as [Ezekiel] in describing the continuing apostasy of Israel, even *after* the conflagration and exile that should have taught them the folly of their ways. In some oracles he complains again and again about the high places; the pagan altars; the standing stones; the idols; the incense burning; the child sacrifice; the harlotry (Ezekiel 6:4-13; 16:15-44). For Ezekiel, these are all “Canaanite” abominations; yet he recognizes how completely Israel had *assimilated* them. His protest is poignant, but it reveals the true measure of Israelite accommodation.¹⁷¹

Israelites worshiped deities other than Yahweh

Israelites continued to worship deities other than Yahweh both before and possibly after the exile.¹⁷²

Folk religion disappeared slowly

Polytheistic folk religion persisted well into the exile, as we know from such texts as Jeremiah 7 and 44, Ezekiel 8, and Isaiah 57 and 65. So the abandonment of old ways did not occur overnight.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ *Reconstructing Society*, page 147

¹⁶⁹ *God, Wife?*, pages 293-294

¹⁷⁰ *God, Wife?*, page 291

¹⁷¹ *God, Wife?*, page 292

¹⁷² *Origins, Monotheism*, page 154

¹⁷³ *God, Wife?*, page 300

The Asherah and other Canaanite gods and goddesses were worshiped for the six centuries

For about six centuries ... down to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E., the Hebrews worshiped Asherah (and next to her also other, originally Canaanite, gods and goddesses) in most places and times. Only intermittently, although with gradually increasing intensity and frequency, did the prophetic demand for the worship of Yahweh as the one and only god make itself be heard and was it heeded by the people and their leaders.¹⁷⁴

Asherah, the tenacious goddess

The Biblical Asherah, this elusive yet tenacious goddess to whom considerable segments of the Hebrew nation remained devoted from the days of the conquest of Canaan down to the Babylonian exile, a period of roughly six centuries. In the eyes of the Yahwists, to whom belonged a few of the kings and all of the prophets, the worship of Asherah was an abomination. ...

There can be no doubt about the psychological importance that the belief in, and service of, Asherah had for the Hebrews. One cannot belittle the emotional gratification with which she must have rewarded her servants who saw in her the loving, motherly consort of Yahweh-Baal and for whom she was the great mother-goddess, giver of fertility, that greatest of all blessings. The Hebrew people, by and large, clung to her for six centuries in spite of the increasing vigor of Yahwist monotheism.¹⁷⁵

The “real life” was condemned

The *real* religions of ancient Israel consisted precisely of all the things that the prophets *condemned*.¹⁷⁶

Ultimately the cult of Asherah disappeared

At some point, perhaps about the time of the exile, the cult of Asherah disappeared among the Jews as absolute monotheism became solidified.¹⁷⁷

Asherah ended with the Exile

The history of the Israelite asherah apparently ended with the Judean exile (587/6), but biblical passages that depict an independent divine figure might reflect at some level of the tradition the ongoing literary impact of the myth associated with the asherah. The female figure of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 is a possible candidate.¹⁷⁸

ISAIAH

Isaiah: chapters 1-39 only attributable to him

Only chapters 1-39 of the book [of Isaiah] ... are to be attributed to the historical Isaiah. And even this portion has probably been added to and edited later, in the light of the bitter experience of the exile and aftermath. Thus Isaiah's "foretelling the future" is a retrojection from a later era, when monotheism actually was the reality, and Isaiah's "predictions" seemed to have been fulfilled.¹⁷⁹

Isaiah 40-55 penned about the end of the exile

[Isaiah 40-55] is attributed not to the prophet Isaiah but to an unnamed author speaking in the prophet's voice around the end of the exile of Judah in Babylon (dated to 587-539). Because this section has been viewed as a separate work, scholars have called it "Second Isaiah."¹⁸⁰

Deutero-Isaiah (546-539) ["Second Isaiah", chapters 40-55] is the prophet of a return to Palestine.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁴ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 34

¹⁷⁵ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 52

¹⁷⁶ *God, Wife?*, page 67

¹⁷⁷ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 52

¹⁷⁸ *Early History*, page 133

¹⁷⁹ *God, Wife?*, page 286

¹⁸⁰ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 179

¹⁸¹ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 44

MONOLATRY, MONOTHEISM

Deuteronomy 6:4 is not a declaration of monotheism

For all its familiarity, the precise meaning of the Shema [Deuteronomy 6:4] is uncertain and it permits several possible meanings. The present translation indicates that the verse is a description of the proper relationship between YHVH and Israel: He alone is Israel's God. This is not a declaration of monotheism, meaning that there is only one God.¹⁸²

No clear evolution from monarchic monolatry to monotheism

Because of the relative rarity of monotheistic claims and the ongoing presence of polytheism in ancient Israel, no one can confirm a clear evolution from monarchic monolatry (the worship of only one god, e.g., Exodus 22:19) to a new stage of religion called monotheism (belief in and worship of only one deity).¹⁸³

Single divine king developed later

The later dominant paradigm of a single national god with divine workers was only one version of devotion available in Iron Age Israel. Only later was the process of telescoping divinity into a single divine king with his servants completed.¹⁸⁴

Gradual ascendancy of Deuteronomistic school in Judah

The ascendancy of the Deuteronomistic school reflects the growth of a normative *theology* that gradually came into conflict with traditional folk practice. Thus by the 8th century B.C., *monotheism* is presented as the only acceptable ideal, and according to the biblical writers it had in fact been so from the days in the wilderness. Then, by the 7th century B.C., "Mosaic monotheism" was enshrined permanently in the literary tradition as this was now taking shape. It is this *final*, yet still theological, stage of Israelite religion that has been taken by scholars until recently as "normative." But it is largely a late literary construct — "Book religion."¹⁸⁵

ABSOLUTE MONOTHEISM

Absolute monotheism first expressed during the Babylonian exile

Absolute monotheism was first given explicit expression by the prophet Deutero-Isaiah in the exile and became fully operative in the post-exilic period. There has been a general rejection in recent decades of the view that absolute monotheism can be traced back to the time of Moses. The tendency to trace absolute monotheism to Deutero-Isaiah goes with a general understanding that the achievement of monotheism was a gradual process in the development of which the monolatrous challenge of Elijah, the work of the classical prophets, the Deuteronomic reform movement and Josiah's reform replayed an important role. ... One significant factor in the decline of the Canaanite deities and the enforcement of monolatry appears to have been Josiah's reformation in 621 BCE.¹⁸⁶

Several date the emergence of monotheism to the time of the Exile

A second group of scholars date the emergence of monotheism around the time of the "Exile" (587-538). Faced with the prospect of overwhelming earthly powers, Judeans exalted their deity in absolute terms. There is no doubt that this camp has an easier task in criticizing those who hold an early date for monotheism.¹⁸⁷

Monotheistic statements in Isaiah 40-55

Monotheistic statements in Isaiah 40-55 are confined to what scholars have identified as the first of the two major sections of the work (Isaiah 40-48, 49-55): 43:10-11; 44:6, 8; 45:5-7, 14, 18, 21; 46:9. ... All designed to persuade Israel of the reality of Yahweh in the world. Monotheistic statements are embedded in thematic contexts involving three basic claims: (1) Yahweh as creator of the world and master of its present; (2) Yahweh chooses Israel now for good just as Yahweh chose Israel for good in the past and just as Yahweh chose to punish Israel in the past; and (3) Israel should recognize Yahweh as its god because there are no other gods, as their images are empty idols.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸² *Origins, Monotheism*, page 153

¹⁸³ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 154

¹⁸⁴ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 155

¹⁸⁵ *God, Wife?*, pages 285-286

¹⁸⁶ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, pages 228-229

¹⁸⁷ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 150

¹⁸⁸ *Origins, Monotheism*, pages 180, 181

Most references to monotheism derive from the exilic period or later

Most of the references to monotheism derive from the exilic period or later. ... On the whole, the late monarchy and exile seem to represent the general period for the emergence of monotheistic rhetoric. ... It is unlikely that Second Isaiah was an innovator of monotheistic discourse. ... Monotheistic rhetoric probably emerged shortly before the exile.¹⁸⁹

Scholars date monotheism late in Hebrew history

The average layman, whether Jew or Gentile, still believes that the official Hebrew religion was a strict monotheism beginning with God's revelation of Himself to Abraham. Scholars date the origin of Hebrew monotheism a few centuries later, during the days of the great prophets.¹⁹⁰

Monotheism, a late development

The development of monotheism came very late in the monarchy, if not later still after ancient Israel's history was over. Yahwistic monotheism was the *ideal* of most of the orthodox, nationalist parties who wrote and edited the Hebrew Bible, but for the majority it had not been the *reality* throughout most of ancient Israel's history.¹⁹¹

Late literary expression of monotheism

The literary expression of monotheism at a relatively late point in Israel's history, either in the late monarchy or the Exile, "overwrites" and obscures the long development involving the earlier phenomenon of monolatry.¹⁹²

Monotheism - late, very restricted, and an arbitrary development

Monotheism is a late, very restricted, and even somewhat arbitrary development. From a secular perspective, it could even be argued that monotheism does not necessarily represent "progress," because it is in some ways *less* sophisticated — that is, less comprehensive, less flexible, less natural. In any case, it is not polytheism that needs to be explained, but rather monotheism.¹⁹³

The promotion of Moses to the position of "founder of Israelite religion," the elevation of "law" to a preeminent position, is almost certainly the product of the 7th-6th century B.C. Deuteronomistic theological agenda.

These are all late theological and literary *constructs* propagated by extremists toward the very end of the monarchy — right-wing, orthodox, nationalist parties. These concepts became normative *only* when "Book religion" came to the fore, as the new "Jewish" community began the process that would lead eventually to the formation of canonical Scripture.¹⁹⁴

The Breakthrough to Monotheism (586 BC)

In 586 B.C., when Jerusalem is reduced to ruins, the hour of the Yahweh-aloneists has come. Polytheistic Israel is dead, and out of its ashes arises Judaism, being firmly based on the teachings of the aloneist movement. The decline of the state and the Babylonian exile are represented as results of polytheistic heresy and as punishments of the god who is to be worshipped exclusively.¹⁹⁵

The Exile, time of the first unambiguous monotheism

Texts dating to the Exile or shortly beforehand are the first to attest to unambiguous expressions of Israelite monotheism. Second Isaiah (Isa. 45:5-7) gave voice to the monotheistic ideal that Yahweh was the only deity in the cosmos. ... Second Isaiah (Isa. 40:18-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-20; 46:1-13; 48:3-8) stresses the uniqueness of Yahweh in marked contrast with the lifeless, empty idols who represent lifeless, nonexistent deities. ... During the Babylonian captivity, writing continued to play a formative role in the development of Yahwism. By the end of the monarchy writing became the dominant mode of generating prophetic texts.¹⁹⁶

New dimension added by Yahweh-aloneists: monotheism

Some of the texts which doubtlessly belong to the Yahweh-alone tradition are interested in completing the monolatric belief by introducing a totally new principle: the denial of the existence of other gods, i.e.

¹⁸⁹ *Origins, Monotheism*, pages 153-154

¹⁹⁰ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 27. (See also *Hebrew Life and Literature: Selected Essays of Bernhard Lang*, page 143, by Bernhard Lang; Ashgate Publishing, 2008)

¹⁹¹ *God, Wife?*, page 252

¹⁹² *Early History*, page 196

¹⁹³ *God, Wife?*, page 298

¹⁹⁴ *God, Wife?*, page 299

¹⁹⁵ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 41

¹⁹⁶ *Early History*, pages 191-192

monotheism. The formula of Deut 6.4, which was to become the classical creed of Judaism, is still monolatric and expresses the traditional programme of the Yahweh-aloneists: “Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone”. But there is another and quite new dimension in its variants:

Yahweh is God, <u>there is no other</u> .	Deut 4.35
Yahweh is God in heaven above and on earth below; <u>there is no other</u> .	Deut 4.39
Yahweh is God, <u>he and no other</u> .	1 Kgs 8.60
... so that all kingdoms of the earth may know that thou, O Yahweh, <u>alone art God</u> .	2 Kgs 19.19

Such expressions are not only to be found in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist’s work, but also in Deutero-Isaiah:

There is <u>no god but me</u> ; there is no god other than I, victorious and able to save.	Isa 45.21
... for I am God, <u>there is no other</u> .	Isa 45.22
Before me there was no god fashioned nor ever shall be after me.	Isa 43.10. ¹⁹⁷

Babylonian captivity – emergence of true monotheism

True monotheism emerged only in the period of the exile in Babylon in the 6th century B.C., as the canon of the Hebrew Bible was taking shape. ... Monotheism did not arise out of folk religion, out of common *practice*, but rather out of theological reflection *after* the fact. This reflection on experience, including disaster, is what informs the Hebrew Bible. The Bible is thus “revisionist history.”¹⁹⁸

Religion – Why Monotheism? and Whither?

The emergence of monotheism — of exclusive Yahwism — was largely a response to the tragic experience of the exile. It was, in effect, a “rationalization” of defeat, an attempt to forge a *new* identity and destiny for a people who otherwise would have been left without hope. Thus there came into being the “New Israel” envisioned by the later prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and especially Second Isaiah (chapters 40-66, by later hands).¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ *Monotheism, Minority*, pages 44-45

¹⁹⁸ *God, Wife?*, page 295

¹⁹⁹ *God, Wife?*, page 297

POST-EXILIC PERSIAN ERA (539-332 BCE)

Patriarchs	“Judges”	United Monarchy	Divided monarchy	Babylonian exile	Persian province of “Yehud”
ca 1300-1200 BCE	ca 1200-1000 BCE	ca 1000-900 BCE	ca 900-586 BCE	586-539 BCE	539-332 BCE
Late Bronze	Iron I	Iron IIA	Iron IIB	Babylonian Exile	Persian Period
Oral traditions	Oral traditions	Some records written (J, E)		Deutero-Isaiah Historical works (DTr)	Texts written. Texts combined, edited
Community	<p>The Babylonians had removed the elite and powerful from Judah, leaving only the “poor of the land”. When deportees returned, they met with opposition from those who had been left behind, whom they regarded as polluting and as having no legitimate claims in the new community.</p> <p>The Returnees did not reinstate the monarchy. Instead, they placed themselves in charge, centralising all political and religious control in their hands at Jerusalem; imposed their Yahweh-alone monotheistic theology; and they wrote the Bible.</p>				

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Summary of the following section: Post-exilic Persian Era (539-332 BCE)—Community

Post-exilic Persian Era (539-332 BCE)

Patriarchs	"Judges"	United Monarchy	Divided monarchy	Babylonian exile	Persian province of "Yehud"
ca 1300-1200 BCE	ca 1200-1000 BCE	ca 1000-900 BCE	ca 900-586 BCE	586-539 BCE	539-332 BCE
Late Bronze	Iron I	Iron IIA	Iron IIB	Babylonian Exile	Persian Period
Oral traditions	Oral traditions	Some records written (J, E)		Deutero-Isaiah Historical works (DTr)	Texts written. Texts combined, edited
Religion	<p>The archaeology of the province of "Yehud" in the Persian era reveals the <i>complete absence</i> of any evidence of polytheism. Absolute monotheism appears predominant in the postexilic period.</p> <p>Persian period Judah is the most likely setting for the final construct of much of the Hebrew Bible.</p> <p>The Bible is religious and political literature constructed from a religious perspective. The "history" recorded in the biblical narratives, whether they contain accurate information or not, must be understood first and foremost as representing notions, beliefs, and myths constructed to serve some purpose in the social and historical contexts in which they were written, edited, and arranged in their present form.</p> <p>These texts cannot simply be picked up and read in a straightforward manner as though they constitute objective factual history in the modern sense, based on contemporary eyewitness reports.</p> <p>The biblical literature constitutes what is essentially "propaganda." The writers make no pretense to objectivity. It is "revisionist history" on a grand scale. The Hebrew Bible is largely "theocratic history".</p> <p>These extremists had been minority parties. The Hebrew Bible is a "minority report".</p> <p>Those responsible for gathering and editing this material would have been deliberately selective in what they included, therefore providing us with a skewed view of Israel's past.</p>				

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Summary of the following section: Post-exilic Persian Era (539-332 BCE)—Religion

COMMUNITY

Returnees create an ideological superstructure

The literate class of this new society, usually regarded as having been composed of those who had returned from Babylonia, appear, then, to have generated a kind of ideological superstructure in which they created an identity and heritage that were continuous with the Iron Age II kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Written into this “history” was an “Israel” that promoted their own self-interests and explained their own situation, over against those of others such as the “people of the land,” that is, those who had remained behind, and peoples from other regions such as Samaria.

The biblical texts assert, for example, that there was a wholesale removal of all classes of “significant” people, and that only the poorest “people of the land” remained behind (2 Kings 24:14; 25:12; Jer. 39:10; 52:15), or that during the period of exile, the land was essentially emptied of people (2 Chron. 36:17-21). When the deportees returned, according to this construct, they met with opposition from the “people of the land,” who are regarded as polluting and as having no legitimate claims in the new community (Ezra 4:1-5; 10:1-17).²⁰⁰

Yahwist-aloneist’s objective of future restoration

One of the main objectives of the Yahweh-aloneists is the future restoration of the Jewish state, with its only cultic center to be the temple of Jerusalem. For this purpose the legal code of Deuteronomy is substantially revised; the new texts inserted provide the most vital regulations for the new Jewish commonwealth and is official religion. Ezekiel’s book, too, includes a detailed draft of a national constitution dating from 573.²⁰¹

Written laws had limited effect

For most of Judah’s population, written law would have had little effect, as very few villagers and occupants of rural areas would have been literate. The upper classes and those who lived in Jerusalem, on the other hand, would have had higher rates of literacy, or at least access to those who could read.²⁰²

Strengthened religious belief

Because of their loss of national independence, self-identity among the peoples of postexilic Judah was probably grounded more in religious beliefs and practices than had been the case during the monarchic period. One of the ways in which identity was constructed, at least among the elites, was on the basis of establishing and affirming religious continuity with the “past.” This was accomplished institutionally by rebuilding the Temple and reestablishing its services of prayer and sacrifice, along with the festivals and rituals that had presumably continued to be celebrated to some extent during the exile, both in Babylonia and in Judah itself. It was also supported literarily by creating a coherent body of sacred literature that was composed in part of earlier traditions, which were reinterpreted in light of the present situation, and in part of newer traditions.²⁰³

Ezra-Nehemiah, propagandist orientation

Many of the social-scientific studies of the Persian period focus on issues relating to the traditions recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah. ... Although they purport to contain records relating to this period and earlier, there are a number of problems interpreters face in attempting to reconstruct the history and society of fifth-century Judah using these traditions as sources. One has to do with their propagandistic orientation.²⁰⁴

Ezra distraught, offers hope

[Ezra] gathered a large assembly, including community leaders, and presented himself to them, “weeping and casting himself down before the house of God.” Ezra is distraught because “from the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt.” ... For the people’s iniquities they had been delivered into the hands of conquerors, “to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame.” Now, however, Ezra declares that there is a “brief moment” of opportunity, of hope. The people are deeply moved and ... they “tremble at the commandment of God” and vow to do everything “according to the law” (Ezra 10:1-6).²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ *Reconstructing Society*, pages 182-183

²⁰¹ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 44

²⁰² *Reconstructing Society*, page 209

²⁰³ *Reconstructing Society*, page 209

²⁰⁴ *Reconstructing Society*, page 183

²⁰⁵ *God, Wife?*, pages 295-296

Reconstructing religious focus and consciousness

The emphases in the Persian period texts include the importance of reconstructing Jerusalem and establishing a temple center there, instituting religious law and a “covenant” relationship with a single deity, and promoting ethnic consciousness.²⁰⁶

Restored temple under Yahweh-alone priesthood

No doubt there is a polytheistic variety of Judaism which survives the exile and can be studied from the 5th century documents of the Jewish colony at Elephantine in Egypt. However, the restored temple of Jerusalem, consecrated in 515 B.C., remains from the outset under the rule of a Yahweh-alone priesthood. The monolatrists or, as we may call them now, the montheists, are no longer a minority but rather assume the leading role and set the fashion. The political and religious elite of post-exilic Judaism is firmly rooted in the monotheistic faith. Jerusalem remains the only legitimate place for sacrificial ritual.²⁰⁷

VIRTUAL LOSS OF FOLK RELIGION

Radical departure from folk religion

It is difficult to imagine a more radical departure from traditional folk religion, which centered upon the family. Now, conformity with the written law *supersedes* the old family values; theology trumps real life. There is only one God, rigidly male; and he is a jealous god, demanding, vengeful. Perhaps it is not too much to say that the men who wrote the Bible and henceforth will dominate the cult now have “their” god firmly in control at last. Asherah has finally been driven underground, and with her disappearance what little voice women had was silenced.²⁰⁸

Polytheistic literature lost

The canon of sacred literature which emerged gradually after the exile does not contain anything of the polytheistic literature which must have existed. It is completely lost.²⁰⁹

Divinity radically rethought

Yet in the end, in the “twilight of the gods,” these deities all failed—even Asherah. To the Babylonian exiles, as well as those left behind in Judah, it must have seemed that the whole world created by their gods had ended; and for them, it had. Henceforth the very notion of divinity would have to be radically rethought, if *any* of the gods were to be resurrected. That rethinking began, against all odds, during the exile, and it was codified in the systematic theological formulations of Ezra and his followers during the return in the late 6th and 5th centuries B.C.²¹⁰

Persian era archaeology reveals lack of polytheism

What is conspicuous in the archaeology of the province of “Yehud” in the Persian era in the late 6th-4th century B.C. — the biblical period of “the return from exile” — is the *complete absence* of all the evidence of polytheism. ... That includes high places; local shrines and sanctuaries of all kinds; Hebrew cultic inscriptions; and especially the female figurines. All these things end with the end of the Iron Age, sometime in the mid-6th century B.C.²¹¹

Canaanite deities left only an “afterglow”

Absolute monotheism having been established in postexilic Israel, what then happened to the Canaanite deities? Of course, amongst such people as the neighbouring Phoenicians they continued to be worshipped. Even amongst monotheistic Jews, though no longer worshipped, the Canaanite deities sometimes left a kind of ‘afterglow’. This is perhaps most marked in the world of apocalyptic. For example, the seventy sons of God, originally denoting the gods of the pantheon under El, with whom Yahweh became identified, now became demoted to the status of angels, the seventy guardian angels of the nations attested in 1 Enoch.²¹²

²⁰⁶ *Reconstructing Society*, page 182

²⁰⁷ *Monotheism, Minority*, pages 45-46

²⁰⁸ *God, Wife?*, page 296

²⁰⁹ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 50

²¹⁰ *God, Wife?*, page 296-2977

²¹¹ *God, Wife?*, page 299

²¹² *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 232

Originally gods; demoted as angels

Originally, these were gods, but as monotheism became absolute, so these were demoted to the status of angels.²¹³

Still welcomed with the words, “Come, O Bride”

The Matronit, meanwhile, continued to be closely concerned with her children. Like a true goddess, she played the role of spouse as well as mother to her people. She also assumed the form of a divine queen and bride, who joined them every Friday at dusk to bring them joy and happiness on the sacred Sabbath. To this day, in every Jewish temple or synagogue she is welcomed in the Friday evening prayers with the words “Come, O bride!”²¹⁴

ABSOLUTE MONOTHEISM VICTORIOUS

Absolute monotheism predominant in post-exilic period

Absolute monotheism seems to have been predominant in the postexilic period.²¹⁵

Not an entirely monotheistic culture

We may assume on the basis of available evidence that the ruling priestly groups of the post-exilic theocracy maintained a Yahwistic monolatry expressed in its rhetoric of monotheism, but such a historical conclusion does not justify claims for an entirely “monotheistic culture.”²¹⁶

Monotheism reinforced Israel’s exclusive relationship

As rhetoric, monotheism reinforced Israel’s exclusive relationship with its deity. Monotheism is a kind of inner community discourse establishing a distance from outsiders.²¹⁷

From a nation to a monotheistic church

De Wette’s and Wellhausen’s distinction between Israel and Judaism, and to see the truth of the saying that Israel went into exile a nation and returned a church - indeed a monotheistic one.²¹⁸

Nature of the deity redefined

The nature of the deity also seems to have been given new definition, and in the “official” religion of the urban elites the belief in a single, universal deity replaced the local national God of the monarchic period. Some groups, perhaps including the “people of the land,” were presumably excluded from this religion, which was centered in the Jerusalem Temple. The Temple appears to have become a symbol of the superiority of the ruling class.²¹⁹

Preserved post-exilic voices promote the new vision of only one deity

The dominant voices preserved in the post-exilic period—priestly, deuteronomic, wisdom, and apocalyptic—all promoted the new vision of the one and only deity.²²⁰

THE BIBLE

Gaining information on social worlds from the Bible

In order to glean from the Hebrew Bible any information about the social worlds in which it was produced, therefore, it is necessary first to ask such questions about a given text as: Who might have written this text? When was it written? Where was it written? Why was it written? What was the audience to whom it was directed?

For example, narratives that treat important ancestors or religious figures may have been intended *not* as historical accounts of what particular people actually did at particular times for particular purposes, but rather to explain *symbolically* something about origins, institutions, customs, or relations with other peoples. ...

²¹³ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 22

²¹⁴ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 33

²¹⁵ *Yahweh, Gods Canaan*, page 226

²¹⁶ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 154

²¹⁷ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 154

²¹⁸ *Monotheism, Minority*, page 11

²¹⁹ *Reconstructing Society*, page 210

²²⁰ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 194

In using the Bible as a source for historical and social reconstruction it is also important to consider who may have been responsible for having *collected* and *edited* the independent literary units over time, as well as when and why they may have been collected and edited.²²¹

Consider the social locations of those gathering and reading the material

Another important consideration is the social locations of those responsible for writing and editing the texts, as well as of the audiences toward whom they were directed. Because the literature of the ancient world was the product of scribal activity, it did not necessarily represent the ideals of the whole society. In typical agrarian societies such as Israel, those who can read and write well constitute less than 5 percent of the population.²²²

The Babylonian and Persian Periods: Biblical Information

Persian period Judah is the most likely setting for the final construct of much of the material in the Hebrew Bible.²²³

The supreme irony

What possible good could come out of the fall of Judah, the destruction of the Temple, the exile of so many to Babylon? By all reasonable expectations, nothing should have survived such a catastrophe. This ought to have been the end of the story.²²⁴

The supreme irony of Israelite and Jewish history is that the first edited version of the Hebrew Bible was not a product of the Jerusalem Temple and court in their heyday, but of the experience of slavery, destitution, and despair in a foreign land. There the faith that we think of as “biblical” was born, after Israel’s history was over. Thus “Book religion” triumphed over life — and over death as well.

Yet herein lies a mystery: *why* did tragedy issue in what many regard as the sublime achievement of ancient Israel and the biblical tradition, monotheism?

Shouldn’t this tragedy have meant not only the death of all the other gods, but also of *Yahweh*, who seemed to have deserted his people?²²⁵

The Bible writers were elitists

The prophets overall are hardly country bumpkins, to judge from the lofty literary style of the writings attributed to them. ... If the oracles of prophets like Isaiah had originally been “sermons” delivered in public, people in the countryside would scarcely have understood them. ...

The other biblical writers, principally those who produced the Deuteronomistic history, were doubtlessly elitists as well. ... One of the dominant motifs in shaping their epic history in the Book of Kings was the centrality of the Royal Temple in Jerusalem as the *exclusive* dwelling place of *Yahweh*. What could be more elitist? Many people in ancient Israel, however, had probably never been to Jerusalem in their whole lives, and they had never seen the Temple.²²⁶

Authors: male, small, elite class, reflected their own class

The authors of the biblical literature were most likely male, and would almost certainly have been from a small and elite class (probably based in the Jerusalem Temple and perhaps also in the governor’s court). The literature they constructed, then, most likely reflects more the concerns of their own gender and their own class consciousness than that of the society as a whole. ... Whatever actual religion and ideology the biblical literature reflects, it is not necessarily the religion and ideology of the people outside this class.²²⁷

²²¹ *Reconstructing Society*, page 5

²²² *Reconstructing Society*, page 6

²²³ *Reconstructing Society*, page 182

²²⁴ *God, Wife?*, page 294

²²⁵ *God, Wife?*, page 294

²²⁶ *God, Wife?*, pages 70-71

²²⁷ *Reconstructing Society*, page 6

Bible – elitist; but archaeology represents every class of society

The biblical texts, produced by a small circle of literati, are elitist. Yet the archaeological data ... are “populist” by nature. They are very broadly representative of every class of society, every profession, and in particular women, who are marginalized in the texts. The texts reflect special interest groups; the artifacts reflect vernacular culture.²²⁸

The preserved Biblical accounts are relatively late reworkings

The Biblical accounts are preserved in relatively late reworkings and are therefore not contemporary, in a strict sense of the word, with the events they describe. Editorial revisions were especially thorough when the subject matter pertained to the non-monotheistic phases of early Hebrew religion. References felt to be offensive were toned down or abridged, and we have, of course, no way of knowing how many were excised altogether. In the narratives which deal with the subsequent period of the Hebrew monarchy, the monotheistic point of view is even more stringent, so that all references to non-monotheistic forms of popular worship are not only consistently derisive and unrelentingly condemnatory but are kept purposely in vague and general terms.²²⁹

At the earliest, Deuteronomistic History produced at the end of the monarchy

The constructs of ancient Israel’s consolidation as a people and a “national” entity are represented primarily in the books of Joshua and Judges, part of the so-called Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings), which traces Israel’s “history” from the “conquest” of Canaan to the Babylonian exile. In its present form, the Deuteronomistic History is the product of the end of the monarchic period at the very earliest.

It is clear that the editors of this portion of the Hebrew Bible were looking back at Israel’s history from a perspective colored by the events of their own times, writing a “history” that must have been aimed primarily at coming to terms with their current situation and articulating their sense of identity in that situation, particularly in relation to the exilic experience.²³⁰

Textual sources are limited – late; reworked

Even at *best*, the textual sources in the Hebrew Bible are limited for our purposes, and ... often severely so. There are many reasons for this.

All the biblical texts in their *present written form* were produced relatively late in Israel’s history. Most were composed no earlier than the 8th century B.C. (“J” and “E”) or the 7th century B.C. (“Dtr,” possibly “P”). And then these underwent extensive editing and reworking in the exilic and postexilic period, that is, after “Israel’s” history was over. ... The late date of composition and editing assumed here is not in debate among mainstream scholars.²³¹

Composite authorship; late date (J, E, P, Dtr)

The composite authorship and late date of the textual sources relevant to our inquiry here, in their present form, are beyond dispute, as are their theological biases.

The “J” document runs mostly through Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers. ... Today many biblical scholars (and the few archaeologists who deal with the question) would lower the date of J’s composition, if it is indeed an individual work, to the 9th if not the 8th century B.C. ...

The “E” document. This material, termed “E” because it uses the alternate name for God, “Elohim,” is thought to stem from a northern source. It was originally dated to the 9th century B.C., but now it is more commonly dated to the 8th century B.C. ... Eventually it was interlaced with “P” by later editors (perhaps as “J/E”). ...

The “P” document. This material, from anonymous “Priestly” sources, appears especially in Leviticus. ... The “P” editors reworked J and E, incorporating its materials into theirs to produce the books of Genesis through Numbers as we now have them. Many scholars date P late in the Judean monarchy, while others prefer a postexilic date, at least for the final reworking and editing.²³²

²²⁸ *God, Wife?*, page 76

²²⁹ *Hebrew Goddess*, page 35

²³⁰ *Reconstructing Society*, page 42

²³¹ *God, Wife?*, pages 68-69

²³² *God, Wife?*, pages 64-66

The most important source for us ... is the “Deuteronomistic history,” often designated “Dtr.” It runs from the book of Deuteronomy (added to Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers to form the “Pentateuch”) through [to] Kings. The Deuteronomistic school has provided us all the *earlier* textual material that we shall ever have.²³³

These editors took up the themes of Deuteronomy and combined them with various annalistic traditions both oral and written to produce the great national epic history of Israel from beginning to end in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings as we now have them, a sort of “theocratic history.” This history is thus governed by the central Deuteronomistic theological themes. ... The significance of what scholars call the Deuteronomistic history can scarcely be exaggerated, for it comprises *the* canonical history of ancient Israel, complete with warnings not to add or delete anything (Deut. 4:2; 12:32). Despite the obvious theological biases of its authors and editors, this history of early Israel and the monarchy is virtually the only “history” that we have in the Hebrew Bible.²³⁴

Abstract theology, book religion, product of the clergy

Abstract theological concepts, these are always products of the clerical establishment, of the literati, of the elites of the day — in this case, the right-wing, ultra-nationalist religious parties who wrote the Bible. ... For most people in ancient Israel ... such religion was unknown and in any case would have seemed irrelevant. ...

The religious practices of common folk, however, were informed not by the canonical literary tradition and its late, “orthodox” ideals, but rather by centuries-old religious myths and rituals, many of them going back to Canaanite Bronze Age traditions.²³⁵

The Bible, written from the perspective of its writers

It is no exaggeration to say that all the biblical literature — especially the historical and prophetic works — constitutes what is essentially “propaganda.” The writers make no pretense to objectivity. They are openly partisan, championing the cause of extreme nationalism and orthodox Yahwism, that is, the Truth as *they* see it. They have no tolerance for divergent views. ... These extremists were, of course, minority parties given the historical reality in 8th-7th century Israel. But it is *they* who wrote the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible ... is a “minority report” ... The Bible is ancient “revisionist history” on a grand scale.²³⁶

Intention of the Bible writers

The intentionality of the writers/editors is another factor that is important to consider. It is likely, for example, that in their original social contexts some of the biblical materials may have been intended in part as propaganda.²³⁷

Bible advances an ideological agenda

I [William Dever] reject absolutely the assertion of some “revisionists” that the Bible is not about history at all. ... The Hebrew Bible is obviously not history in the modern sense, that is, “disinterested,” objective, balanced, academic history. [Stories] are based on some genuine historical events, but always told in such a way as to advance the ideological agenda of the writers and editors. In the end, this is not “history,” but “his story.” The story is all about God — about religion in that sense — but embodying the writers’ idiosyncratic *version* of Israelite religion.²³⁸

Ascendancy of “Book Religion”

The *context* of the new emphasis on exclusive Yahwism is clear, however. Ezra, a “scribe skilled in the law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6, 12, 21), is usually credited with leading the restoration and reforms. ... *Scripture* (“holy writings”) — the “Law” and its interpretation by professional clerics — became normative for religious life, replacing the Temple and the old priesthood. And needless to say, the *new* source of authority completely abrogated the traditional independence of the family and clan where folk religion had flourished during the settlement period and the monarchy. These profound changes in the very foundations of religious beliefs and practices were what occasioned the ascendancy of “Book religion.”²³⁹

²³³ *God, Wife?*, page 66

²³⁴ *God, Wife?*, page 67

²³⁵ *God, Wife?*, page 60

²³⁶ *God, Wife?*, page 71

²³⁷ *Reconstructing Society*, page 6

²³⁸ *God, Wife?*, page 72

²³⁹ *God, Wife?*, page 295

The Bible is theocratic history; Archaeology provides secular history

The Hebrew Bible ... is largely “theocratic history,” with all the problems that poses. Archaeology, on the other hand, produces a “secular history” of ancient Israel that I [William Dever] would argue is often more realistic, more comprehensive, better balanced, and ultimately more satisfying. It is certainly so for the understanding of folk religion.²⁴⁰

Biblical portrait is idealistic

The Bible’s portrait throughout is an “idealistic” one — not a picture of Israelite religion as it was at all, but a picture of what it *should* have been, and would have been if these zealots had actually been in charge. Ironically, the very condemnation of “folk religion” by the editors is what reveals many of the very characteristics. ... In trying to suppress popular cults, they inadvertently confirm their existence.²⁴¹

Bible is idealistic, theological

The Hebrew Bible’s portrait of the religions of Israel is problematic because it is so “idealistic” — that is, so narrowly *theological* in intent.²⁴²

A “literary construct”, not actual history of the patriarchal period

It is now widely agreed that the so-called “patriarchal/ancestral period” is a later *literary* construct, not a period in the actual history of the ancient world. The same is the case for the “exodus” and the “wilderness period,” and more and more widely for the “period of the Judges.”²⁴³

Selection of material to include

Those responsible for gathering and editing this material would have been deliberately selective in what they chose to include, therefore providing us with a skewed view of Israel’s past. Behind these literary traditions there must have been some kernels of genuine historical memory, but the genuine is difficult to distinguish from that which was constructed at a later period.²⁴⁴

Bible – deliberate selectivity

The textual sources suffer from the deliberate selectivity. ... The biblical texts were heavily edited right from the beginning, and they have undergone continual reinterpretation by Synagogue and Church for 2,000 years and more. But what we call “the archaeological record” has not been edited by anyone.²⁴⁵

Selective historians

The second limitation of the biblical texts: Its writers and editors were historians of a sort, but they were highly selective in what they chose to include. ... They were mostly elites, literati attached to court and priestly circles in Jerusalem. ... They can hardly have constituted more than a fraction of one percent of the population. They were certainly not representative of the masses that we are considering here.²⁴⁶

The Chronicler reinterprets “History”

The “Chronicler” (1 and 2 Chronicles) borrows some passages directly from the books of Samuel and Kings, but ignores or changes other traditions. “History” is reinterpreted in light of the postexilic situation in Judah in which there was no longer a king, and politically neither Israel nor Judah was any longer an independent nation. The emphasis in the Chronicler’s construct is on Judah as a worshiping community, with the Jerusalem Temple playing a central role. In spite of apparent biases in these books, some scholars believe that they preserve some reliable details of genealogies, topography, and political administration that can be used to supplement material in Samuel through Kings.²⁴⁷

Theoretical propaganda from Judah

The Davidic line of kings continued upon the throne; Jerusalem, where Yahweh’s “name” dwelt exclusively in his Temple, remained as the political and religious capital, and the Sinai Covenant with Israel and its obligations became the central focus of religion. Much of this, however, was *theoretical* — more part of the

²⁴⁰ *God, Wife?*, page 76

²⁴¹ *God, Wife?*, page 72

²⁴² *God, Wife?*, page 90

²⁴³ *Reconstructing Society*, page 42

²⁴⁴ *Reconstructing Society*, page 6

²⁴⁵ *God, Wife?*, page 75

²⁴⁶ *God, Wife?*, pages 68-69

²⁴⁷ *Reconstructing Society*, page 145

Deuteronomistic propaganda of the “state cult” in the south than it was the reality. The fact is that virtually all the “Davidic” kings were corrupt; the Jerusalem Temple was never the center of religious life; and “covenant theology” developed only late and probably never affected the religious practices of the majority.²⁴⁸

Bible does not present objective reality

There is, in fact, no claim in the Bible itself that the writers intended it to be an objective representation of historical or social reality: It is religious and political literature in which the past is constructed from a religious perspective—written, edited, and arranged in its present form long after the collapse of the two nations on which the stories contained in it focus.²⁴⁹

The “history” recorded in the biblical narratives, therefore, whether they contain accurate information or not, must be understood first and foremost as representing notions, beliefs, and myths constructed to serve some purpose in the social and historical contexts in which they were written, edited, and arranged in their present form—that is, the *meanings* conveyed in these texts must be interpreted in relation to the “social dramas” that prompted their writing and editing. The past, for the biblical writers as well as for twentieth-century readers of the Bible, has meaning only when it is considered in light of the present, and perhaps an idealized future. ...

Any reconstruction of the history and society of ancient Israel must rely, then, on interpretations of the history and development of the texts themselves before we utilize them as sources of historical and social information.²⁵⁰

Bible does not provide an objective picture of Israel’s religion

As a result of the editing of later monotheists, only scattered references to a number of other deities who belong to the middle levels of the pantheon have survived. Indeed, the Bible hardly provides an objective or complete picture of Israel’s religion, because of significant editorial selection.²⁵¹

Pentateuch and historical works are problematic as “sources”

For more than a century now, critical scholars have known that the so-called Pentateuch (or “Five Books of Moses”) and the historical works in the great national epic sweeping from Joshua through Kings are problematic as “sources.” These texts cannot simply be picked up and read in a straightforward manner as though they constitute objective factual history in the modern sense, based on contemporary eyewitness reports. The former books (at least Genesis through Numbers) are by late, anonymous, composite “authors” and editors, produced at least five hundred years after a “Moses” would have lived. And the Book of Deuteronomy, all about Moses, is almost certainly a late monarchic theological homily put into the mouth of a Moses and then attached to both the Pentateuch (making it five books) and the other “historical” works.²⁵²

Bible is not an adequate resource

The Hebrew Bible is not an adequate source *in itself* for reconstructing a reliable portrait of Israelite religions as they actually were.²⁵³

Bible writers tacitly acknowledge popularity of “pagan practices”

The *real* popular religions of ancient Israel consisted precisely of what the biblical writers *condemned*, that is, of what they were aware of and disapproved of, but could not try to prohibit without mentioning. Thus they tacitly acknowledged not only the existence of “pagan practices,” but their popularity.²⁵⁴

Popular religion ... is everything that those who wrote the Bible *condemned*. It is not the religion of the Deuteronomistic school, the priests, or the prophets, the three groups from whom the majority of our biblical texts have come and the three groups who are the most influential in defining what biblical religion is.²⁵⁵

The *real* religions of ancient Judah consisted largely of everything that the biblical writers *condemned*. The inevitable clash of “Book” religion with folk religion had been nearly 600 years in the making, and now that the Book was taking shape the denouement had come.²⁵⁶

²⁴⁸ *God, Wife?*, page 285

²⁴⁹ *Reconstructing Society*, page 4

²⁵⁰ *Reconstructing Society*, page 4

²⁵¹ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 155

²⁵² *God, Wife?*, page 64

²⁵³ *God, Wife?*, page 32

²⁵⁴ *God, Wife?*, page 51

²⁵⁵ *God, Wife?*, page 47

²⁵⁶ *God, Wife?*, pages 290-291

Northern kings denounced by southern writers

Every single king in the north is condemned by the biblical writers. ... One of the difficulties we face in characterizing the state cult in the north is the obvious bias of the biblical texts, all written by Judean authors. It might be very different if we had a “northern Bible,” but we do not (except possibly for the E source).²⁵⁷

Bible preserves Canaanite imagery

The Hebrew Bible, despite its monotheistic biases, *preserves* the old Canaanite name El for the Israelite deity, and even uses it in the plural. Examples of “El” in the singular are too numerous to cite even briefly (more than 230), but some references are of special interest, because they still carry transparent Canaanite imagery. Isaiah’s taunt to the King of Babylon (14:12-14) includes the warning:

How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!
You said in your heart,
“I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high,
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far north;
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds.
I will make myself like the Most High.”

The “stars of El”; the “throne on high”; “the mount of assembly in the far north”; and “the heights of the clouds” are all transparent allusions to Canaanite mythology — right out of the pages of the Ugaritic texts.²⁵⁸

The very archaic “Canaanite” Psalm 29 declares in verse 1: “Ascribe to Yahweh, O heavenly beings (‘sons of gods’) ... glory and strength.”²⁵⁹

Psalm 29 is so similar to some of the Ugaritic poems that many phrases are borrowed almost word for word:

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;
worship the Lord in holy array.
The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord, upon many waters. ...
The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.

(Psalm 29:1-3, 10; cf. Psalms 82:1; 89:5-7)

The “heavenly beings” here (*‘elim*, “gods,” in “holy array”) are the subservient members of the Divine Council, precisely as with El and his council at Ugarit. The references in Psalm 29 to the “waters” and the “flood” on which Yahweh is “enthroned” mirror exactly El, who sits at the “sources of the floods, in the midst of the headwaters of the Two Oceans.” Even the word for “flood” (Hebrew *mabbeil*) is the same in both languages (see also Psalms 93:3; 98:7, 8).²⁶⁰

Several Psalms, such as Psalm 65 (below), invoke the “storm god” imagery of Canaanite Ba‘al.²⁶¹

Passages still based on older Yahweh-alone ideas

Monotheism was neither incorporated into the legal collection of chaps. 12-26 [of Deuteronomy], nor into the so-called historical creed of chap. 26, nor even into the Decalogue. All of these texts are still based on the older conception of the Yahweh-alone idea.²⁶²

²⁵⁷ *God, Wife?*, page 281

²⁵⁸ *God, Wife?*, page 261

²⁵⁹ *God, Wife?*, page 261

²⁶⁰ *God, Wife?*, pages 261-262

²⁶¹ *God, Wife?*, page 262

²⁶² *Monotheism, Minority*, pages 49-50

Bible: council of a single god

What is largely left in the biblical material is the council of a single god. Although other gods are in this assembly, it is headed by a single ruler: this is one well-attested form of Israelite polytheism, and its conceptual unity lies in the image of Ruler and the ruled of this single assembly.²⁶³

The relative rarity of monotheism in the Bible is striking

Because of the post-biblical importance of monotheism, the relative rarity of its expression in the Bible is quite striking ... The relatively few instances are spread over the whole of the so-called Deuteronomistic History (Joshua through 2 Kings), the post-exilic historical works of Ezra-Nehemiah, the two books of Chronicles, and a few other biblical books. The outstanding exception is “Second Isaiah,” dated to the removal of members of the Judean elite to Babylon in 587-538. This part consists of Isaiah 40-55 (in scholarly circles called “Second Isaiah”).²⁶⁴

The divine assembly is not oppositional to monotheistic statements

The divine assembly is not oppositional to monotheistic statements in biblical literature. For example, it is commonly held by biblical scholars that the opening of “Second Isaiah” (Isaiah 40) involves a divine council scene, yet this chapter is part of a larger work that contains the greatest number of monotheistic statements in the Bible.²⁶⁵

Bible overall does not teach only one God

The Bible as a whole simply does not teach the existence of only one God.²⁶⁶

Male chauvinist theology

There are no women among the writers and editors of the books of the Hebrew Bible (and relatively few in its stories). And there are no women writers at all in the long history of “biblical theology.” ...

The male chauvinist approach of the whole history of theology, indeed of the Hebrew Bible itself, raises the intriguing question of whether women would have produced a different, and in some way better, version of Israel’s history, faith, and religious practice.

I [William Dever] firmly believe that they could have done so, and may still do so. And by “better,” I mean truer to the *reality*, not necessarily more “normative” theologically.²⁶⁷

²⁶³ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 53

²⁶⁴ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 154

²⁶⁵ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 51

²⁶⁶ *Origins, Monotheism*, page 150

²⁶⁷ *God, Wife?*, page 61

