

## **Yahweh's Assimilation of West Semitic Deities**

### **Introduction**

The early Israelites practiced a religion that is vastly different from that which was recorded in the Hebrew Bible. In order to ascertain the gaps in the text, it is necessary to first clarify the myth of where the Israelites originated. Through studying the religion of the Ancient Israelites, it is apparent that they were originally polytheistic, and had three specific forms of expression: outdoor worship, folk religion, and the more centralized religion of the temple. Eventually, with the introduction of monotheism by the reforms of Josiah and Hezekiah, the roots of polytheistic religion were written out of the cultural record, and Yahweh absorbed many of the aspects of early Hebrew deities.

### **“Israelites” vs. “Canaanites”: An Erroneous Distinction**

Many scholars outside the field of biblical studies (and, unfortunately, a few scholars within the field itself) are under the impression that the Bible is an accurate historical document that is essentially correct about the origins of Israelite culture and religion; however, this impression is a fallacy. The prominent belief is that the Israelites were monotheistic from their inception, that they were enslaved in Egypt for 400 years before completing a mass exodus across the Sinai desert that led them to settle in the land of Canaan, and therefore comprised a distinct ethnic group from the Canaanites—but the reality is, this view is incorrect and in fact stems from a history of Western bias, underdeveloped archaeological methods, and Christocentrism. In order to discuss early Israelite religion, it is necessary to first establish the truth about the origin of the Israelites based on archaeological evidence, an accurate analysis of biblical and extra-biblical literature, and comparative linguistics.

William Foxwell Albright is considered by some to be the “father of biblical archaeology,” and is one of the first scholars to suggest the necessity of comparative studies between Ugaritic and Biblical Hebrew in order to illuminate scripture.<sup>1</sup> Despite his contributions to archaeology of the Ancient Near East, Albright’s comparison of Canaanite religion to early Israelite religion was an unfortunate misinterpretation rife with Western bias that was a reflection of the rudimentary archaeological methods and the social reality of early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Scholars of the Albright school were prone to use words with negative connotations to describe Canaanite religion, such as “polytheistic,” “depraved,” “magical,” “power-oriented,” while words with more positive connotations were used to describe early Israelite religion, such as “monotheistic,” “moral,” “historical,” “covenant-oriented.”<sup>2</sup> These distinctions were largely incorrect—and were formulated based on the adoption of the biblical writers’ bias. Archaeological evidence suggests that there was indeed no distinction between early Israelite religion and Canaanite religion—in fact, Israelites did not develop a strict sense of national identity and monotheism until well into the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, or perhaps even later.<sup>3</sup>

The term “Canaanite” requires some elaboration—in the biblical context, the Canaanites are depicted as an ethnic group that is foreign to and distinct from the Israelites.<sup>4</sup> Their religious practices are therefore portrayed as corrupt and prone to lead the Israelite people astray from the purity of monotheistic Yahwism.<sup>5</sup> However, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Mark S, "Ugaritic studies and Israelite religion: a retrospective view" *Near Eastern Archaeology* (2002), 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> This point will be further elaborated upon later in this paper (see below).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Gen 10:19, Exod 3:8, 17, 13:15, 23:23, 33:2, 34:11, Deut 7:1, Num 13:29, Ezra 1:21, 9:1

<sup>5</sup> Niehr, Herbert. "‘Israelite’ Religion and ‘Canaanite’ Religion," *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 23.

archaeological context, the term “Canaanite” refers not to a member of a particular ethnic group, but to a person residing in a specific region—namely, what comprises present-day Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan.<sup>6</sup> Much like the Israelites, the Canaanites were a Semitic people—in fact, some Ancient Near Eastern scholars, seeking to remove the stigma associated with the term “Canaanite” as well as to emphasize the indistinguishableness of the early Israelites and the so-called Canaanites, have introduced a new term to describe ancient peoples living in this region—Old Northwest Semitic, or simply West Semitic.<sup>7</sup> The Israelites who eventually developed a separate culture and a monotheistic religion were originally a subgroup of West Semitic peoples who were akin to the purported “Canaanites” they later condemned as foreign and debased.

Were it not for the improvement of archaeological techniques, biblical scholars would perhaps still be misinformed about the true origins of the Israelites.<sup>8</sup> In fact, there is little to no evidence that the Israelites were ever enslaved in Egypt, and there is even less evidence concerning their supposed exodus. Most scholars have dated the Exodus to the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The fact of the matter is, if a group comprising over six hundred thousand people wandered through the desert for forty years, *they would have left evidence*, and there is no evidence of human settlement or nomadic movements through the Sinai desert from this time period. Despite living lives of simplicity, people on the move do leave material remains behind—whether it be building campfires, burying their dead, or leaving rubbish behind at their campsites—each of these activities produces material remains that

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<sup>6</sup> Coogan, Michael David, and Mark S. Smith, eds. “Introduction,” *Stories from ancient Canaan* Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2012, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, "Ugaritic studies and Israelite religion," 21 – 22.

<sup>8</sup> The discipline of Near Eastern archaeology is indebted to Kathleen Kenyon, who helped to develop the current method of analyzing material finds based on stratigraphy.

can be used by archaeologists to gain further insight into that particular group's lifestyle. In light of this argument, some scholars have posited that perhaps a much smaller group of Israelites escaped from Egypt, and that the Exodus story is exaggerated for symbolic purposes, which would explain the lack of material remains in the Sinai desert from the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE. However, Israeli archaeologist Israel Finkelstein argues:

Modern archaeological techniques are quite capable of tracing even the very meager remains of hunter-gatherers and pastoral nomads all over the world. Indeed, the archaeological record from the Sinai Peninsula discloses evidence for pastoral activity in such areas as the third millennium BCE and the Hellenistic and Byzantine periods.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that there are material remains from both earlier and later periods than the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE—and that these material remains come from small pastoral communities, but that there are no material remains from the supposed time of the Exodus—speaks volumes. Therefore, the biblical book of Exodus should be viewed as part of the fabric of cultural and mythological framework that comprises Israelite (and later Jewish and Christian) identity, not as an accurate historical account.

So, if the Israelites did not emigrate from Egypt, then where did they come from, and how did the distinction between Israelites and Canaanites arise? The answer to this question perhaps lies in the Merneptah Stele, which was inscribed in Egypt around 1210 BCE, and is the earliest known text to mention the Israelites. This stele implies that both Israel and Canaan were “subdivisions of Palestine,” the Canaanites being located in more

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<sup>9</sup> Finkelstein, Israel, and Neil Asher Silberman, “Did the Exodus Happen?” *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Sacred Texts*, Simon and Schuster, 2002, 62 – 63.

urbanized areas, while the Israelites dwelled in more rural areas: the hinterland and the hill country.<sup>10</sup> Essentially, these people groups were subdivisions of West Semitic peoples, and shared a common culture, despite the vast differences in their living situations.

This organization of the West Semitic peoples in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE, with part of the population located in large administrative city-states while a smaller portion of the population was dispersed amongst pastoral communities throughout the hill country, reflects a tribal organization that is common amongst cultures of the Ancient Near East.<sup>11</sup> The idea of a society organized by tribes is also present in the Hebrew Bible regarding the twelve tribes of Israel.<sup>12</sup> The common linguistic heritage of the Israelites and the Canaanites reflects this dichotomy—there are numerous cognates between Biblical Hebrew, Phoenician, and Ugaritic, especially amongst the names of deities, holy days, and religious rites.<sup>13</sup> This common cultural heritage, reflected further in shared linguistic roots, alludes to the fact that before the development of monotheism, the Israelites originally practiced a polytheistic religion. Early Israelite religion was related to the religion of the so-called Canaanites, and can be considered a subdivision of West Semitic religions.<sup>14</sup> In fact, it can be argued that the Israelites practiced polytheism not only in the realm of folk religion, but also in the sanctioned realm of the priesthood until the religious reforms in the

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<sup>10</sup> Niehr, Herbert, "‘Israelite’ Religion and ‘Canaanite’ Religion," 25.

<sup>11</sup> Van der Steen, Eveline J, "The sanctuaries of Early Bronze IB Megiddo: Evidence of a tribal polity?" *American journal of archaeology* (2005), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Gen 49:28

<sup>13</sup> Day, John, "Religion of Canaan," *Freedman, DN (ed)* (1992), 835 – 836.

<sup>14</sup> It should also be noted that monotheistic Yahwism is a subdivision of West Semitic religions.

7<sup>th</sup> century BCE under Kings Josiah and Hezekiah—and these reforms did little to deter people from returning to their old ways shortly after the kings' deaths.<sup>15</sup>

### **Early Israelite Religious Practices**

Early Israelite religion took three forms—*al fresco* religion, household religion, and the sanctioned religion of the temple. Each of these forms was in some way condemned during the religious reforms of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and while the religion of the temple was able to adapt to suit the demands of the monarchy, those who practiced *al fresco* and household religion had more difficulty adapting their rituals to monotheism.

*Al fresco* religion encompasses rituals that were practiced outdoors. Much like other ancient cultures, the ancient Israelites revered high places (*bamôt*), and many of their sacred local shrines were on hilltops. These localized shrines were more accessible to people who lived outside of the city limits and were unable to access urban temples on a regular basis, and also permitted women to worship at them. *Bamôt* would often be located in a sacred grove of trees, and might have a makeshift altar for sacrifices. These sacred groves would occasionally contain *massebôt*, which were standing stones that resembled the deities.<sup>16</sup> The tree was a symbol of the West Semitic mother goddess, Asherah, which could explain why these sacred groves were condemned in the monarchy's attempt to establish monotheism.<sup>17</sup> An additional explanation for the condemnation of the *bamôt* is that the Israelite monarchy desired to centralize religious practices in Jerusalem, where the seat of the monarchy as well as the main temple existed, allowing for greater ease at regulating the official religion of the state.

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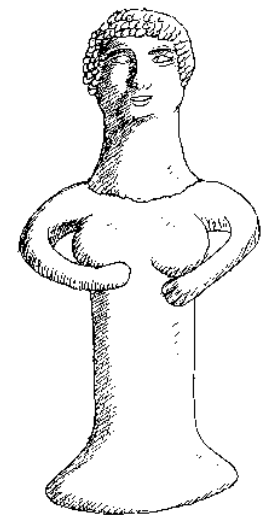
<sup>15</sup> Dever, William G, *Did God have a wife?: Archaeology and folk religion in ancient Israel*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005, 235 – 236.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 239 – 240.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 226 – 227.

The second type of religious practice in Ancient Israel—and as a matter of fact, the primary locus of religious activity in the Bronze Age in Israel—comprises the religion of the household. Although this form of religion is commonly referred to as “women’s cults,” it has been demonstrated that men actively participated in this “folk religion,” although it was largely initiated and maintained by women.<sup>18</sup> Certain rites were even restricted to women, such as the celebration of a girl’s menarche, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood and establishing a woman as eligible for marriage.<sup>19</sup> Women would also bake cakes as offerings to the goddess Asherah, and would use molds in the shape of the goddess in order to do so.<sup>20</sup>

Another implement of household religion, which seems to have been associated with families of higher socio-economic status, were the *naoi*, or miniature temples found in households, often implemented with female figurines. These *naoi* stood about 30cm high, and were often beautifully decorated in the style of Canaanite religious architecture.<sup>21</sup> Among the different types of figurines that may have



Judean Pillar Figurine

been placed in the *naoi*, we find Judean pillar figurines, which seem to symbolize fertility with their prominent breasts and tree-trunk-shaped bodies. It has been argued that these votive figurines are supposed to represent the goddess Asherah, as they

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 236 – 239.

<sup>19</sup> Ebeling, Jennie R, “Womanhood,” *Women's Lives in Biblical Times*, Continuum, 2010, 67 – 68.

<sup>20</sup> Dever, *Did God have a wife?*, 234 – 235.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 220 – 221.

fell out of use around the time that the monarchy instituted religious reforms in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, coinciding with the promotion of monotheism.<sup>22</sup>

Household religion was greatly condemned in the monarchical reforms, and even in modern scholarship is often viewed as mere superstition, not worthy of the status of “real religion.”<sup>23</sup> However, seeing as household religion was the most widely practiced form of religion in Ancient Israel, it certainly constituted religious practice for the majority of Israelites, and thus should be evaluated in the same manner as scriptural traditions.<sup>24</sup> The distinction between what scholars deem “real religion” and “cultic practices” or “folk religion” is often merely a result of artificially formed boundaries which reflect their own prejudices about what practices are adequate enough to constitute religious devotion.

The third form of religious practice in Ancient Israel was the religion of the temple. Localized temples in urban centers were quite similar to the description of Solomon’s temple in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>25</sup> The typical West Semitic temple was surrounded by strong walls, had a courtyard with an altar for sacrificing animals, and had many chambers with a “holy of holies,” where only the ritually pure (male members of the priesthood) were permitted to enter in order to directly access the divine.<sup>26</sup> The altar in the courtyard was a horned altar, indicative of Yahweh’s bull-like traits, and West Semitic people generally preferred to sacrifice sheep and goats as opposed to cattle, perhaps reflecting a semi-

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<sup>22</sup> Edelman, Diana, “The Disappearance of Mrs. God,” *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society*, 2001/2002, Vol. 19/20, 184.

<sup>23</sup> Dever, *Did God have a wife?*, 236 – 240.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, it is estimated that the biblical authors comprised one percent of the population of Ancient Israel (Ibid).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. I Kings 6 – as stated above, urban centers were associated with the Canaanites in the Bronze Age.

<sup>26</sup> Nakhai, Beth Alpert, *Archaeology and the Religions of Canaan and Israel*, No. 7, Amer School of Oriental, 2001, 345 – 346.



nomadic or pastoral heritage.<sup>27</sup> During the monarchical reforms, worship of any deity but Yahweh in the temple was prohibited. After the construction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the temple remained monotheistic, and the priesthood associated with it no longer practiced polytheism.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Assimilation into Monotheism**

Yahweh assimilated aspects of two West Semitic gods, El and Ba'al, forming a composite of the two. El is the father and ruler of the Canaanite pantheon, and is depicted as compassionate and wise. The Ugaritic generic word for god eventually became *el*, and *el* was also used as a designation for Yahweh in Biblical Hebrew, particularly when combined into compound names, such as *El-Shaddai*, or "God of the Mountain." This name of God in particular is interesting, as it was believed that the Canaanite El resided on Mount Zaphon—mountains were often associated with deities in the ancient world. Ba'al is the Canaanite god of storms and fertility, and it is evident that Yahweh also rules over these aspects. Both Ba'al and Yahweh possess the epithet, "Rider on the Clouds," alluding to their control over the weather. It is made explicitly clear in the patriarchal narratives that it is Yahweh who grants fertility and fecundity—but what happened to Asherah, the mother goddess who ruled over fertility, in the transfer to Israelite monotheism?<sup>29</sup> It is possible that Asherah may have been an early Israelite goddess who was the consort of Yahweh. The fact that every pantheon in the Ancient Near East has a divine couple ruling over it

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<sup>27</sup> Finkelstein, Israel, and David Ussishkin, "Two Notes on Early Bronze Age Megiddo." *I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times*—*Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*, Winona Lake (2006), 19 – 20.

<sup>28</sup> Niehr, "'Israelite' Religion and 'Canaanite' Religion," 31 – 32.

<sup>29</sup> Coogan, and Smith, *Stories from ancient Canaan*, 13 – 18.

suggests that Asherah may have been an Israelite goddess.<sup>30</sup> However, there is concrete evidence outside of mere speculation based on recurrence, and this evidence is found at Kuntillet Ajrud, a trading outpost on the Sinai Peninsula. This outpost contains a structure which may possibly be a shrine, and on a pottery sherd excavated in that shrine, there are a



Detail of Jar from Kuntillet Ajrud

few depictions of interest.<sup>31</sup> The first is two bovine figures standing arm-in-arm—one appears to be female, as it is smaller and has breasts, and is seemingly the consort of the male. There are two inscriptions written in an early Hebrew script: “Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah,” and “Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah.” Although some scholars

have interpreted this as intending to be read

“Yahweh and his ‘*asherah*,’” as in the sacred wooden pole mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, the fact that these phrases are inscribed so close to the bovine figures seems to signal that these are indeed divine figures (note also the crowns on their heads, symbolizing divinity). Furthermore, there does not appear to be a sacred pole of any sort depicted on the jar. Therefore, it seems that these figures are what the inscriptions are referring to—Yahweh and his Asherah, his divine consort. Note also the suckling calf—an image representing fertility, health, and wellness. Perhaps whoever placed this jar in the shrine was invoking Yahweh and his Asherah for fertile fields, or for the purpose of conceiving an heir.

<sup>30</sup> Edelman, “The Disappearance of Mrs. God,” 184.

<sup>31</sup> Niehr, “‘Israelite’ Religion and ‘Canaanite’ Religion,” 24.

However, in spite of Asherah's relationship to fertility, particularly when combined with Yahweh, her functions were completely absorbed by Yahweh in the transfer to monotheism—Yahweh became the sole progenitor of fertility, blessings, and fecundity. Essentially, Asherah was written out of "official Yahwism" in the composition of the Hebrew Bible, and was deemed a foreign deity—foreignness was the ultimate symbol of impurity in Israelite monotheism. The division between Canaanites and Israelites in the Hebrew Scriptures, which is reflected in what is depicted as the depraved and foreign religion of the Canaanites, demonstrates a desire to unite this particular group of West Semitic peoples under a coherent religious tradition.

### **Conclusion**

Contrary to the history presented to us by the biblical writers, Israelite religion had a vastly different origin in polytheism. Based on archaeological, literary, and linguistic evidence, it is apparent that the religion of the Israelites began as polytheistic, and that it was a sect of West Semitic religions related to the so-called Canaanites. This religion existed in three forms: *al-fresco* worship, religion of the household, and the sacrosanct religion of the temple. Over time, the religion of the Israelites developed into monotheism, strengthened by the monarchy and central to the temple in Jerusalem, and thus the aspects of many gods were absorbed into one deity.

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