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## YAHWEH: THE GOD OF SUN?

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In the course of researching the nature of the Ugaritic sun goddess,<sup>1</sup> I have investigated several studies which argue for solar aspects of Yahweh worship in the Hebrew Bible. The idea of Yahweh's special relationship with the sun in modern study of the Hebrew Scriptures appears early in critical studies,<sup>2</sup> perhaps fuelled by ancient records such as Ezek. 8.16. The idea has been taken up by many scholars seeking to understand various aspects of Israelite/Judahite religion from the earliest stages up to the time of the Qumran community.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars have taken the idea of solar worship in ancient Israel a step further to see in it a solar understanding of Yahweh: they claim that Israel's God was worshipped as the sun.<sup>4</sup>

That solar worship in some respect was part of the religious life of the

1. See my 'Shapsh, Lamp of the Gods', in J.B. Lloyd, N. Wyatt and W.G.E. Watson (eds.), *Ugarit: Religion and Culture. Proceedings of the Edinburgh 1994 Conference* (Festschrift J.C.L. Gibson; Munster: Ugarit Verlag, forthcoming).

2. See for example, C.R. Conder, 'Sun Worship in Syria', *PEFQS* 1881, pp. 80-84, or K. Vollers, 'Die solare Seite des alttestamentlichen Gottesbegriffes', *ARW* 9 (1906), pp. 176-84, and their references.

3. M. Smith, 'Helios in Palestine', *EI* 16 (1982), pp. 199-214; and 'The Case of the Gilded Staircase', *BAR* 10.5 (1984), pp. 50-55. See also the response by J. Milgrom, 'Challenge to Sun-Worship Interpretation of Temple Scroll's Gilded Staircase', *BAR* 11.1 (1985), pp. 70-72.

4. H.-P. Stähli, *Solare Elemente in Jahweglauben des Alten Testaments* (OBO, 66; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985); J.G. Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel* (JSOTSup, 111; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); and 'Was Yahweh Worshipped as the Sun?', *BAR* 20.3 (1994), pp. 52-61, 90-91.

ancient Near East is beyond question. That Yahweh was actually worshipped as a solar deity is questionable. How sound are these assertions of Yahweh's alleged solar nature? A speculative leap is required to move from suggesting the possibility of solar worship in ancient Israel to the identification of its national deity with the sun. A related question suggests itself: is describing a deity in the terms of a natural phenomenon the same as equating the deity with that phenomenon? Metaphorical language is such a ubiquitous literary device in ancient writing that caution should predominate when such language is applied to deities. The same is even true of modern writing: few lovers mean that their love interests are actually flowers or celestial bodies, no matter how appropriate such language may seem! What I will address below relates to these two issues: the proposed solar nature of Yahweh and the use of metaphorical language to describe a deity.

The nature of the evidence presented for the suggested intimate connection between Yahweh and the sun tends to come from 1) interpretations of archaeological finds, particularly iconographic sources; 2) the supposed solar alignment of ancient structures of worship; 3) theophoric names; and 4) biblical texts. Each of these areas has been explored, often with further subdivisions, to glean evidence for the theory of Yahweh as a sun-god. By examining the evidence for these assertions in some detail, the soundness of these theories may be tested.<sup>5</sup> Stähli's and Taylor's recent books on the subject contain the most complete argumentation and the strongest suggestions,<sup>6</sup> and will therefore be primary sources for consideration.

### *Archaeological Finds*

It must be asked which archaeological discoveries support a solar interpretation of Yahweh. In recent discussions 'horses of the sun' (usually

5. Recent studies which suggest solar connections, but without going as far as an actual identification, are: Smith, 'Helios in Palestine' and 'Case of the Gilded Staircase'; M.S. Smith, "'Seeing God" in the Psalms: The Background to the Beatific Vision in the Hebrew Bible', *CBQ* 50 (1988), pp. 171-83; 'The Near Eastern Background of Solar Language for Yahweh', *JBL* 109 (1990), pp. 29-39 (expanded and reprinted in *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990], pp. 115-24); E. Lipiński, 'Le culte du soleil chez les Sémites occidentaux au I<sup>er</sup> millénaire av. J.-C.', *OLP* 22 (1991), pp. 57-72.

6. Stähli, *Solare Elemente*, and Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun*.

figurines), a cult stand from Taanach, seals which picture a solar disk and mosaic floors of synagogues have all been presented as evidence. I shall examine each type of evidence in turn to determine if the claims made are truly substantiated.

The first item to consider is the horses of the sun. Much speculation has developed over the obscure references to the 'horses which the kings of Judah dedicated to the sun' and their accompanying chariots (2 Kgs 23.11). The 2 Kings citation is the only biblical reference to such items. Perhaps because of their obscurity, they have been used as evidence by those who wish to find a connection between Yahweh and solar worship.<sup>7</sup> It appears obvious that there is some element of solar worship indicated here,<sup>8</sup> but whether or not it is to be associated with Yahweh is more difficult to determine.

In 2 Kings Josiah is certainly presented as clearing the temple of items offensive to Yahweh. This, however, does not prove that 'sun horses' were utilized in the worship of Yahweh, but only that they were in the temple. This in itself does not associate them with Yahweh, since temples were not the domain of a single deity in the ancient world.<sup>9</sup> The very text of 2 Kings, while admittedly polemical, considers such accretions to the temple paraphernalia to be foreign.<sup>10</sup> This question of the patron deity of the horses cannot be decided on the basis of the tacit evidence in 2 Kgs 23.11. Nevertheless, the question is raised concerning whether

7. For recent discussions see K. Kenyon, 'The Mystery of the Horses of the Sun at the Temple Entrance', *BAR* 4.2 (1978), pp. 8-9 (abstracted from Kenyon's Jerusalem excavations); Lipiński, 'Le culte du soleil', pp. 64-66; J.W. McKay, 'Further Light on the Horses and Chariot of the Sun in the Jerusalem Temple (2 Kings 23.11)', *PEQ* 105 (1973), pp. 167-69; Smith, "'Seeing God" in the Psalms', pp. 178-79.

8. McKay, 'Further Light', pp. 167-69; T.R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (WBC, 13; Waco: Word Books, 1985), pp. 334-35.

9. B. Alroth, 'Visiting Gods—Who and Why?', in T. Linders and G. Nordquist (eds.), *Gifts to the Gods: Proceedings of the Uppsala Symposium 1985* (Boreas, 15; Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1987), pp. 9-19, addresses this question. See also the series of articles on ancient temples in *BA* 7 (1944), pp. 41-88, especially H.N. Nelson, 'I. The Egyptian Temple', p. 44 and A.L. Oppenheim, 'II. The Mesopotamian Temple', p. 58.

10. M. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into the Character of Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 134.

or not horse figurines found in ancient Israel indicate that Yahweh was worshipped as the sun.

Taylor presents equine figurines as evidence for solar worship in ancient Israel. He cites a terracotta quadruped from tenth-century Hazor,<sup>11</sup> and various horse figurines from eighth- or seventh-century contexts. Here, however, even Taylor admits that such figurines do not provide 'direct evidence for linking these horses to sun worship'.<sup>12</sup> His assessment of the evidence here is accurate: there are no cases where these clay figurines unambiguously portray solar disks on the horses. Thus the horse figurines fail to make an explicit connection between the worship of the sun and Yahweh.

Another piece of evidence supplied by Taylor is the Taanach cult stand.<sup>13</sup> This stand, the original use of which is unknown, was discovered in 1968 at Taanach.<sup>14</sup> It has sparked discussion concerning Asherah as well as the 'sun god'.<sup>15</sup> Rather than being detained by the identity of the female figure on the stand,<sup>16</sup> I wish to turn to Taylor's remarks concerning the sun and the stand.

This cult stand has four registers, all of which bear some decoration. The top register portrays a quadruped underneath a circular design. The second register down depicts a 'tree of life' flanked by goats, the third is hollow in the middle with sphinxes on either side, and the bottom register depicts a nude female figure holding onto the ears of lions on either side. Taylor begins his description of the stand by stating that each register

11. Also cited by J. Gray, *I and II Kings* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), pp. 736-37.

12. Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun*, pp. 37-40 (Hazor), pp. 58-66 (other figurines). The quotation is from p. 66.

13. The case for the cult stand was previously made in J.G. Taylor, 'The Two Earliest Representations of Yahweh', in L. Eslinger and G. Taylor (eds.), *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie* (JSOTSup. 67; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), pp. 557-66. It is cited yet again in his recent article, 'Was Yahweh Worshipped as the Sun?'

14. P.W. Lapp, 'The 1968 Excavation at Tell Ta'anek', *BASOR* 195 (1969), p. 42.

15. R. Hestrin, 'The Cult Stand from Ta'anach and its Religious Background', in E. Lipiński (ed.), *Studia Phoenicia. V. Phoenicia and the East Mediterranean in the First Millennium BC. Proceedings of the Conference Held in Leuven 14-16 November 1985* (OLA, 22; Louvain: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1987), pp. 61-77, and 'The Lachish Ewer and the 'Asherah', *IEJ* 37 (1987), pp. 212-23.

16. I examined this aspect in 'The Myth of Asherah: Lion Lady and Serpent Goddess', *UF* 23 (1991), pp. 383-94.

depicts a cultic scene.<sup>17</sup> He then argues that the deity represented in the top and third scenes is Yahweh, while the second and bottom portray Asherah.<sup>18</sup> The next step is to determine that Yahweh is here portrayed with solar characteristics, and this he does by means of interpreting the circular design above the quadruped as a stylized solar disk.<sup>19</sup>

The questions concerning this interpretation begin with the suggestion that the registers display cultic scenes. The context of the stand was near other cultic objects; the stand itself was found broken in a shaft or cistern.<sup>20</sup> This may be evidence that it was a votive offering which was purposely destroyed, or that it was perhaps discarded for some more mundane reason. That the object was actually used in the cult is difficult to prove, since it shows no signs of smoke or fire.<sup>21</sup> Lapp suggests that it might have been used for libations.<sup>22</sup> This is a classic dilemma: how should an artifact be interpreted without detailed knowledge of the religious system in which it was used?<sup>23</sup> We must be cautious when assigning a cultic significance to an object of unknown function. Given the uncertainties concerning the usage of this stand, argumentation based upon it cannot be tenable. We may assume here, for purposes of argumentation, that it is a religious artifact.

Religious artifacts are notorious for their ambiguous symbolism, and the same may be suggested for this cultic stand. The animals represented on it may have been intended to portray symbolic creatures. It is questionable that the symbolic creatures constitute a 'cultic scene' as Taylor suggests. The over-usage of one artifact to reconstruct religious episodes entails a certain amount of speculation, which may be damaging to other possible interpretations.<sup>24</sup> Yet the question being asked here is a finer one: is it sound to leap from symbolic 'scenes' to an argument that the

17. *Yahweh and the Sun*, p. 25.

18. *Yahweh and the Sun*, pp. 28-29.

19. *Yahweh and the Sun*, pp. 30-36.

20. Lapp, '1968 Excavation', p. 42.

21. Lapp, '1968 Excavation', p. 44.

22. Lapp, '1968 Excavation', p. 44.

23. This aspect of studying ancient religions is stressed by L.K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), pp. 3-5.

24. This is already the case with the lion 'goddess' portrayed on the stand. Because of the entirely uncertain identification of the woman represented (we do not even know that she is a goddess) it cannot reasonably be argued that she is a representation of Asherah, who is nowhere associated with lions.

symbols necessarily represent the deities in whose service the item was used? This would not appear, *prima facie*, to be unreasonable, yet neither is it a necessary conclusion. More tenuous still is the assertion that the four registers necessarily represent two *deities*. The 'tree of life' is a familiar cultic design throughout the ancient Near East, but its connection with any one particular deity is not obvious. The same is true of the woman with the lions. There is no evidence that this was supposed to represent Asherah, or any other goddess.<sup>25</sup> Nor do we know to which deity(ies) the stand was dedicated, if any. Without this information the alleged aniconic representation of Yahweh in the third register loses its force, leaving another familiar motif of the ancient Near East in the top register: a quadruped and a solar disk. It is also unlikely that the third register was intended as a picture of an invisible deity, who is represented elsewhere on the same artifact by the sun. If the one–three, two–four pattern which Taylor presents breaks down at any one register, his argument loses its force. If Yahweh is not represented in the third register, then which deity does the first register portray, if any? There is no evidence here that Yahweh, nowhere specifically portrayed, was worshipped as the sun.

Thus even if the cultic stand from Taanach is a cultic implement, there is no evidence that it was intended to portray specific deities. The motifs on the stand are so ubiquitous as to make any certain identifications impossible. With no evidence that Yahweh and sun-worship were mixed, we turn now to the seals which are used as evidence for such a fusion.

The evidence which is marshalled here is the impressions left by seals bearing a two-winged 'solar disk' and the four-winged scarab beetle. Both of these emblems appear to have originated in Egypt. Taylor supposes these to be variants of the same basic idea, and thus to have a common origin. He suggests that they were imported into the Judahite royal court during the reign of Hezekiah.<sup>26</sup> When dealing with the two-winged disk, Taylor's argument becomes somewhat confused. He argues that the disk has the head and tail of a falcon, but is a sun disk nevertheless. When citing a Phoenician parallel, he states that 'although circular, the "body" of the falcon on the Phoenician seal cannot be interpreted as a sun disk because, although almost imperceptible, small legs protrude from the disk-like body'.<sup>27</sup> This then begs the question of

25. Wiggins, 'Myth of Asherah', pp. 384-86.

26. *Yahweh and the Sun*, pp. 46-47.

27. *Yahweh and the Sun*, pp. 49 n. 3.

whether a falcon is represented on the Palestinian seals: if bird features discount a solar interpretation of some seals (especially those outside of the area covered by the proposed theory), why do they not discount others?

In consideration of the four-winged beetle seals, Taylor is undoubtedly correct in seeing a solar connection between the beetle and the sun. He interprets both the two-winged and four-winged emblems to be symbolic of Horus of Edfu, since both were represented with a falcon's head. This particular interpretation may be correct, but the suggestion that this provides evidence that Yahweh was a solar deity stretches the evidence to extremes. To assume that a symbol of Horus of Edfu would have been taken over, with its full significance unchanged, by a Yahwistic king requires significant substantiation. Taylor himself admits that there may be no solar connection intended in the borrowing of these motifs by a king in Judah,<sup>28</sup> but this does not prevent him from arguing for such a solar connection. When this neutral piece of evidence is placed next to the horses and the Tanaach cult stand, it still adds up to no evidence for a solar understanding of Yahweh.

Stähli presents an archaeological piece of evidence for a solar understanding of Yahweh in the mosaic floors of synagogues. In particular he singles out the Beth-Alpha synagogue which has a representation of the sun-chariot in the floor.<sup>29</sup> This he explores and finds no sufficient explanation until after looking at other evidence. When considered from the perspective of the biblical texts examined in his book, he finds that the understanding 'of the image of the "sun" as idolatry in the Hellenistic style of representation had no place (with good reason) in the synagogue'.<sup>30</sup> The sun-chariot, in the light of the rest of his argument, represented Yahweh as the keeper of order.<sup>31</sup>

Here again we have a piece of evidence, which when weighed on its own merits, leads to no connection between Yahweh and the sun. It is a late motif (from the sixth century CE) which betrays Hellenistic influence. The only matter which would seem to require comment is the adoption of a Hellenistic emblem in a synagogue, but this in no way implies that Yahweh is here portrayed as a solar deity.

28. *Yahweh and the Sun*, pp. 53, 55.

29. Stähli, *Solare Elemente*, p. 1; also cited by Lipiński, 'Le culte du soleil', pp. 65-66.

30. Stähli, *Solare Elemente*, p. 49; my translation.

31. Stähli, *Solare Elemente*, p. 50.



Thus it is clear that when the archaeological evidence of a solar understanding of Yahweh is removed from the theories, it does not obviously suggest such an interpretation. Some of the evidence points to solar worship, but this is also reflected in the biblical texts themselves. What is *not* indicated is that Yahweh was understood to be a representation of, or was worshipped as, the sun.

A final aspect of archaeological finds garnered for support of a solar understanding of Yahweh is the alignment of temples with the sun. It is this argument to which I turn next.

### *Solar Alignment of the Temple*

Arguments for the solar significance of temples are quite old and are not limited to the Near East.<sup>32</sup> When Taylor considers previous studies of solar alignment of various structures in ancient Israel, he comes to a negative conclusion. The evidence does not fit the schemes of the previous theorists. Still, he believes that 'examination of the biblical material will offer strong support for the influence of solar elements at the time of the construction of the temple'.<sup>33</sup> When the biblical material is discussed, however, he comes once more to the conclusion that the evidence is ambiguous. Given the fact that modern scholars cannot know the actual alignment of the temple, he suggests that 'Although the precise angle of the temple remains the critical unknown factor, it is nonetheless possible in light of a rough date to work the other way round by estimating what the angle of the temple would be if it were aligned to the sun relative to both the Mount of Olives and the Feast of Booths.'<sup>34</sup> This provides no evidence since it presupposes a solar alignment.

Even with the suggested evidence of 1 Kings 8 and Ezek. 8.16, the only proof for an orientation towards the sun comes from the theory, not the evidence. Earlier studies performed trigonometric gymnastics to expose a side, any side, of Solomon's temple to the east.<sup>35</sup> Any building,

32. F.J. Hollis, 'The Sun-Cult and the Temple at Jerusalem', in S.H. Hooke (ed.), *Myth and Ritual of the Hebrews in relation to the Culture Pattern of the Ancient East* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 87-110. Smith, 'The Case of the Gilded Staircase', pp. 50-55, and 'Helios in Palestine', pp. 199-214, finds evidence for such an understanding at Qumran, while Conder, 'Sun Worship in Syria', p. 81, cites 'rude stone temples of our own country' (Britain).

33. *Yahweh and the Sun*, p. 85.

34. *Yahweh and the Sun*, p. 162.

35. See, for example, the figures in Hollis, 'The Sun-Cult'.

unless a corner faces due east, is going to have some solar exposure on the eastern side, unless it is blocked. This cannot be considered archaeological evidence for a solar alignment of Solomon's temple. Once again we find that there is a telling lack of evidence to corroborate a theory of Yahweh's identification with the sun. A final piece of evidence proposed before the biblical texts are considered is that of theophoric names with solar elements.

### *Theophoric Names*

Both Stähli and Taylor use the evidence of theophoric names to garner evidence for a solar interpretation of Yahweh.<sup>36</sup> Since Taylor critiques the dubious names proposed by Stähli, there is no need to redo his work here. Still Taylor sees evidence for a solar Yahwism in the names *yhwzrh* and *šhryh* in extrabiblical epigraphic sources and in the biblical names based on the same roots. *Yhwzrh* he renders as 'Yahweh has shone forth', noting that the element *zrh* occurs otherwise generally only of the sun: 'apart from cases in which the verb describes the action of Yahweh or his glory (*kābôd*), the verb *zrh*, "rise, shine forth", is used almost exclusively of the action of the sun'.<sup>37</sup> His statement here is tentative, and in a footnote he cites references which point to other usages of the verb *zrh*. Also, if the term is used of Yahweh's glory, to suggest that this is not evidence for other than solar usage begs the question.

The name *šhryh* provides no further evidence for a Yahwistic solar connection. Since it may be rendered 'Yahweh is Shaḥar' or simply 'Yahweh is dawn', it would appear to be evidence for a connection only with the deity Shaḥar, if any. It is a dubious practice to use theophoric names in order to discern fine points of ancient theology. Taylor himself is sceptical of the weight that should be given to this evidence as well: 'evidence about Israelite religion that is based upon personal names alone is tenuous and uncertain at best'.<sup>38</sup> Thus far, we have found, extrabiblical evidence fails to support a solar understanding of Yahweh.

### *Biblical Passages*

By far the most evidence marshalled for a solar interpretation of Yahweh comes from the Bible itself. As even a cursory overview of the

36. Stähli, *Solare Elemente*, pp. 40-41; Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun*, pp. 88-91.

37. *Yahweh and the Sun*, p. 89.

38. *Yahweh and the Sun*, p. 91.

secondary literature demonstrates, over half of the Old Testament books are cited as containing potential clues. This type of evidence becomes crucial to the theory of a solar connection with Yahweh since extra-biblical material does not offer any substantial proof. The sheer volume of these alleged proofs is too large to consider in their entirety here; instead it would be useful to consider them categorically. The passages suggesting such a connection fall into four basic categories: 1) pericopes which use metaphorical language reminiscent of the sun for Yahweh; 2) passages which utilize verbs with 'Yahweh' which also describe activities of the sun; 3) places where the timing of God's action is propitious with relation to the sun; and 4) verses concerning the temple cult which seem to have a solar significance. I shall now briefly consider each type of reference with some representative examples.

### 1. *Solar Metaphorical Language*

In this category are those verses which use language of the sun as a literary device to refer to Yahweh. There are relatively few examples of this kind of language,<sup>39</sup> but two of the most celebrated references are Pss. 19.5c-7 and 84.12a.

Ps. 19.5c-7 reads,

A tent for the sun he placed in them [the heavens].  
 (6) He, like a bridegroom coming out of his canopy,  
 rejoices like a warrior to run his path.  
 (7) His coming out is from the end of the heavens,  
 and his circuit is to the other end.  
 And nothing is hidden from his heat.

Sarna's study of this psalm freely acknowledges the borrowing of foreign solar imagery, and concludes that the psalm is an anti-sun-god polemic.<sup>40</sup> Although polemical language is not obvious, the solar imagery is. The grammatical difficulties of the psalm make deciphering the meaning tenuous. God (El) is mentioned in v. 2, and is not mentioned again before v. 5. Since the hymn prior to v. 5 extols El's creative activity, the subject of the verb *sām* ('he placed') is presumably God. The subject in v. 6 has apparently switched to the sun, since the activities in vv. 6-7 are characteristic of the sun. The poetic nature of these verses leaves

39. Smith, *Early History*, p. 115.

40. N. Sarna, 'Psalm xix and the Near Eastern Sun-God Literature', in *Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies: Papers* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1967), pp. 171-75.

room for some doubt concerning the subject, although a solar context is obvious.

No matter whether the subject of vv. 6-7 is God or the sun, the language used in these verses is metaphorical. The subject is *like* a bridegroom and a warrior. A simile implies comparison, not identity, between the subject and the object of comparison. The point is that both share some characteristic, here the freshness of a newlywed or the strength of a warrior. Nothing in these verses suggests that God or the sun was actually recently married or was a hero preparing for a race.

Ps. 84.12a has frequently been cited by proponents of solar Yahwism. It reads, 'For Yahweh Elohim is a sun and shield.' This is another instance of metaphorical language. The argument that Yahweh is here compared to the sun and was therefore conceived of as the sun, does not take the metaphor into account. God is not being equated with the sun, but rather being compared to it. The psalmist no more means that Yahweh is the sun in the sky than he means that the shield by his side is Yahweh. To suggest identity is to ignore meaning as expressed by metaphor.

## 2. *Verbs Describing Solar Activities*

In this category are those verses which use language descriptive of solar activity with Yahweh. The most persuasive examples are those which use the verb *zrh* (e.g. Deut. 33.2), those which extol Yahweh's giving of light (e.g. Ps. 118.27) and verses which record Yahweh coming from the east (e.g. Ezek. 43.2). Other facets of solar activity could be cited here, but they are not as convincing as these since there are obvious explanations for their utilization.

Deut. 33.2a-b reads,

Yahweh came out from Sinai,  
and he rose from Seir upon him,  
he shone from Mount Paran,  
he came from Ribbot-Qodesh.<sup>41</sup>

This particular verse is important for this discussion because it utilizes the verb *zrh*, 'he rose', in reference to Yahweh. Taylor points out that this verb 'is used almost exclusively of the action of the sun'.<sup>42</sup> The fact that it is used of the appearance of leprosy in 2 Chron. 26.19 should signal

41. Since 33.2c has a textual difficulty which would impede any understanding for the verse as a whole, I have translated only the relevant first two sections of the verse here.

42. *Yahweh and the Sun*, p. 89.

caution for any absolute assertion of connotation. The root meaning of *zrh* seems to be 'coming forth, rising'.<sup>43</sup> The fact that Yahweh does this, along with the sun and disease, does not indicate that God is to be equated with either. The parallel word *hwpy*<sup>c</sup> (*hiphil* of the root *yp*<sup>c</sup>), 'he shone', lends no support to a solar connotation, since it is used almost exclusively of Yahweh, and never of the sun.

Ps. 118.27a states, 'Yahweh is God, he gives light to us' (the remainder of the verse instructs pilgrims to bind branches to the altar). Not only has this psalm been considered a source of direct information regarding Yahweh and the sun, it has also been used to provide information about the alleged enthronement ritual of Yahweh, which is supposed to have transpired at the autumnal equinox.<sup>44</sup> The suggestion that Yahweh provides light undoubtedly stems from the illuminating power of the sun. The question which must be addressed here, however, is if this colon is meant to be taken as a literal or as a figurative statement. There can be little doubt that the statement is metaphorical, and thus comes under the same category as passages which use solar characteristics to describe Yahweh, discussed above. The sun proves a useful standard for comparison, but the psalm does not provide proof for a perceived connection between Yahweh and the sun. This psalm's weight as evidence vanishes when it is acknowledged that the force of the argument is simply its supposed association with an enthronement ritual. We know nothing of this alleged ritual in Israel, not least even if it was ever practiced. If there is no evidence for the ritual here, then there is no reason to find a solar connection with Yahweh in the psalm.

Perhaps the most convincing of the solar actions ascribed to Yahweh is God's arrival from the east, as in Ezek. 43.2: 'And look! The glory of the God of Israel came from the direction of the east, and his voice was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory.' In this particular passage, however, there is a reasonable alternative for this symbolic return of Yahweh. Ezekiel is here envisioning the Jerusalem of the restoration. To anyone living in Jerusalem, Yahweh, the God of the exiles, would have had to have come from the east to return from Babylon to the temple. Likewise in other passages where Yahweh approaches from the east there are logical reasons for his approach from that direction other than a solar identification.

43. BDB, p. 280a.

44. H.G. May, 'Some Aspects of Solar Worship at Jerusalem', *ZAW* 55 (1937), pp. 276-77.

### 3. *Places Where the Timing of God's Action is Propitious with Relation to the Sun*

In this category are passages where Yahweh's action concurs with the activity of the sun. Some examples are Gen. 19.23; Exod. 17.8; and Ps. 46.6.

Gen. 19.23 concerns the destruction of Sodom and the cities of the plain. It reads, 'The sun came out upon the earth and Lot entered Zoar.' Here Stähli notes that God's judgment came with the rising of the sun.<sup>45</sup> Since God sent down fiery brimstone at dawn, does this not suggest that God is the sun? Another explanation is possible for this account. In the context of the story, it is already dawn when Lot and his family leave Sodom. Zoar is far enough away from the cities not to be destroyed with them. In other words, the time at which the destruction occurred was not precisely sunrise, but when 'the sun came out upon the earth'; here presented as being somewhat later in the morning. Also in the context of this story, Yahweh could not destroy the cities of the plain before that time or else Lot, who delayed leaving all night, would have been destroyed with them. This example does not necessarily equate Yahweh with the sun.

Exod. 17.12 recounts Israel's battle with the Amalekites: 'And Moses' hands became heavy and they took a stone and placed it under him and he sat upon it. Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one each, and it happened that his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.' Here God's victory over the Amalekites coincides with sunset, and thus suggests that Yahweh acts at the timing of the sun.<sup>46</sup> Again, another plausible explanation exists: the battle naturally ended with sunset, since it was then too dark to continue active warfare.<sup>47</sup> Sunset would be a strange idiom to equate the sun with Yahweh, since we should suppose that when God was waning, the Amalekites should begin to have victory.

Ps 46.6 reads,

God is within her [the city],  
she will not be moved;  
God will help her,  
at the turning of morning.

45. Stähli, *Solare Elemente*, p. 35.

46. Stähli, *Solare Elemente*, p. 35.

47. Y. Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Discovery* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1963), pp. 110-11.

This is perhaps the most convincing of the examples, since God's help, in a general sense, arrives in the morning.<sup>48</sup> Why would the psalmist choose morning if not because God was appearing then (in the form of the sun)? Another possible explanation for God's early help is the view from the opposite perspective: God's help comes in the morning when people are awake to appreciate from whence their deliverance has come. Not only does the sun rise in the morning, but human activity begins again in the morning. Without the support of the other examples, the suggestion that God's help coming in the morning identifies Yahweh with the sun loses its force.

#### *4. Verses concerning the Temple Cult which Seem to Have a Solar Significance*

This category includes those verses which have been farmed for hints of a hidden solar Yahwism in the temple cult. 1 Chron. 28.18; 2 Kgs 23.11; and Ezek. 8.16 are the best examples.

1 Chron. 28.18 ends a list of temple implements: 'also to the altar of incense, its weight in refined gold; and to the pattern of the chariot, the golden cherubim spreading and covering the ark of the covenant of Yahweh'. The cherubim chariot in the inner sanctum has been compared with the solar chariot, on the basis of Ezekiel's vision.<sup>49</sup> The association with the sun here begs the question of who is riding in the 'chariot'. Is the sun the only deity to use a chariot for locomotion? It seems likely that Baal's title, *rkb 'rpt*, implies 'charioteer of the clouds'.<sup>50</sup> Anat is also portrayed as riding a chariot.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to this question, there is also the discrepancy between this particular verse and the passages actually describing the holy of holies in 1 Kgs 6.23-28 and 2 Chron. 3.10-14, where no chariot is mentioned. It would seem that the mention of the chariot is a carry-over from a scribe familiar with Ezekiel's vision.<sup>52</sup>

48. Stähli, *Solare Elemente*, p. 38.

49. Lipiński, 'Le culte du soleil', p. 65.

50. N. Wyatt, 'The Titles of the Ugaritic Storm-God', *UF* 24 (1992), pp. 420-21.

51. Wyatt, 'Titles', p. 421.

52. S. Japhet, *I and II Chronicles: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 497; J.M. Myers, *I Chronicles: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), p. 193.

An often-cited passage with an obvious temple–sun connection is 2 Kgs 23.11: ‘And he removed the horses which the kings of Judah had given to the sun from the entrance of the house of Yahweh, to the halls of Nathan-Melek the eunuch, which is among the colonnades, and the chariots of the sun he burned with fire’ (this verse has been discussed above). In addition to the ‘horses of the sun’ mentioned here, other cultic implements of the Solomonic temple have been vested with solar significance by modern scholars. The two pillars erected at the entrance of the temple, as well as the altars of Manasseh in the court, have been understood as having a connection with the sun.<sup>53</sup> These implications, however, are based on comparisons with foreign practices, and are entirely without textual support for the Jerusalem temple. In addition, the solar connection (which is not obvious for pillars or altars) is only one possible explanation for these objects. Altars bring to mind sacrifice and not necessarily the sun. Pillars point skyward, and thus may suggest the sun. They may, however, suggest other heavenly objects as well: the moon and stars, or even the clouds which give rain. Even if these implements did have solar associations, this would not indicate that Yahweh and the sun were identified. They may point toward the realm of the sun, but that is only one half of the equation.

Ezek. 8.16 is the trump card in the hand of those wagering for a solar connection with Yahweh.<sup>54</sup> Here a passage explicitly connects the temple and sun worship—or does it? It reads, ‘And he brought me in to the inner court of the house of Yahweh, and look! At the doorway of the temple of Yahweh between the porch and the altar twenty-five men with their backs to the temple of Yahweh and their faces towards the east and they were bowing eastward towards the sun.’ The point being made by the prophet is not only that sun worship is being practiced, but that the men have turned their backs on the temple, which for Ezekiel represents the presence of Yahweh. This would be diametrically opposed to associating the sun and Yahweh, since the very point of the passage is that Yahweh has been neglected for the sun.

Thus in each of these four categories biblical evidence for a solar aspect of Yahweh is not convincing. Either the language is metaphorical or else there is another explanation for the imagery.

53. May, ‘Some Aspects’, pp. 269, 271.

54. Lipiński, ‘Le culte du soleil’, p. 66; Stähli, *Solare Elemente*, p. 9.



### 5. Other Considerations

In addition to these four categories, Psalm 104 deserves a special mention since it overtly uses solar imagery. Psalm 104 has often been cited as a vestige of Egyptian sun-worship in Israel. There is no serious reason to dispute some connection of this psalm with Akhenaten's hymn to the Aton.<sup>55</sup> As Dion has pointed out, however, 'The author of Psalm 104 finds his Amarnian source useful in elaborating upon the positive aspects of YHWH's storm-god attributes...but he avoids any suggestion of privileged relations between YHWH and the sun.'<sup>56</sup> Dion's remarks have a relevance to be kept in mind as biblical passages are examined: simply because solar language may be used of Yahweh or his activities, it does not prove, or even imply, that Yahweh was equated with, or represented by, the sun.

A final passage to consider is 1 Kgs 8.12, as cited by Taylor. The passage, according to Taylor, cannot be taken as written: 'Then Solomon said, "Yahweh said [I chose] to dwell in thick darkness"', but must be taken according to the the LXX rendering:

Then Solomon said:  
 'Sun he placed in the heavens,  
 But Yahweh himself has decided to dwell in thick cloud'  
 (Taylor's translation).

Taylor states, '*biblical passages such as 1 Kgs 8.12 which distinguish between Yahweh and the sun do not necessarily imply that there was no relationship between the God of Israel and sun, nor do they imply that Yahweh could not have been understood in solar terms*'.<sup>57</sup> The difficulties with this position are numerous. First, the evidence to which Taylor points—namely, that God as creator of the sun was not necessarily distinguished from the sun—presents a corollary which Taylor does not consider: this could be applied equally to all things with which Yahweh is credited as creating. If the sun, which is made by Yahweh, may be a representation of him, why not other objects which he is considered to have created? Is the moon a representation of Yahweh as

55. This connection has been called into question as well. See P.C. Craigie, 'The Comparison of Hebrew Poetry: Psalm 104 in the Light of Egyptian and Ugaritic Poetry', *Semitics* 4 (1974), pp. 10-15. A translation may be conveniently found in *ANET*, pp. 369-371.

56. P.E. Dion, 'YHWH as Storm-god and Sun-god: The Double Legacy of Egypt and Canaan as Reflected in Psalm 104', *ZAW* 103 (1991), p. 65.

57. *Yahweh and the Sun*, p. 141, emphasis Taylor's.

well?<sup>58</sup> Further, are human beings simply a figure of the divine, since they are after all created in the image of God? Finally, there is nothing to stop us from taking the next logical step: the birds, fish and beasts, as well as the earth upon which they exist, could also be a representation of Yahweh, according to this line of argumentation. In short, Taylor has presented us with an Israelite pantheism. If this is indeed the case, we would have no grounds to quibble, but it seems foreign to the concept of God as presented in the Hebrew Bible.

Secondly, if such passages do distinguish between Yahweh and the sun, how can it be argued that this is not what they intended to do? It may be that later editorial activity was intended to mask this connection, but Taylor argues that the passage under discussion is archaic, and that therefore the distinction is original. Why would the writer make the distinction if it is a false one? Would the author have juxtaposed Yahweh and the sun to indicate that they were the same by stating that one created the other?

Thirdly, the argument here is based on an implication and not a fact: '*nor do they imply that Yahweh could not have been understood in solar terms*'.<sup>59</sup> The only way to make the assertion which Taylor then makes is with a healthy portion of conjecture which is based on an implication of an obscure text. This does not constitute sound evidence.

It is obvious that when passages used to support solar-Yahwism are examined individually they lose their force. Their failure to convince must indicate that either a solar-Yahwistic cult was completely hidden by later redactors, or that it did not exist at all.

### *Conclusion*

Like many of the modern reconstructions of ancient Israelite religion based on multivalent archaeological artifacts and strained interpretations of obscure biblical passages, the identification of Yahweh with the sun fades when it is examined closely. This is not to deny that sun worship may have been a part of ancient Israelite religion, but it is to suggest that when uncertain evidence is pressed too far it produces tenuous hypotheses. Although archaeology continues to add to our understanding of life in ancient Israel, until those finds which are of uncertain

58. Taylor does not deny that this may be a possibility, as the moon is simply a smaller reflection of the sun (*Yahweh and the Sun*, p. 232 n. 1).

59. *Yahweh and the Sun*, p. 141 (emphasis mine).

intention are treated properly, we will face many idiosyncratic interpretations. Neither archaeology nor biblical texts, when considered on their own merits, suggest that Yahweh was ever considered to be manifested as the sun. It is to be hoped that future discoveries in both fields will shed yet further light on this issue.

#### ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to demonstrate that many unwarranted assumptions have been made regarding the identification of Yahweh with the sun. Four primary areas of evidence used to argue for solar-Yahwism are re-examined. The first area of evidence is archaeological finds; these are noted as being often ambiguous. The second piece of evidence is the alleged solar alignment of Solomon's temple. The third set of evidence comes from theophoric names with solar elements which are of limited information for ancient religion. Biblical passages which refer to Yahweh and the sun are the fourth area explored. Alternative explanations are offered for each passage.