

The Rise of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: Biblical and Epigraphic Evidence¹

Christopher A. Rollston
Assistant Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Studies
Emmanuel School of Religion

Christianity is an heir to the Jewish monotheism of the late Second Temple Period. However, based upon an inductive analysis of the Old Testament evidence, it is readily apparent that ancient Israelite religion was not originally monotheistic. Rather, during the centuries of the Old Testament period, monotheism developed gradually. In addition to the biblical material, Iron Age Hebrew epigraphic evidence and various other types of ancient Near Eastern evidence are employed within this article, as these provide a window on the broader cultural context of ancient Israel. Ultimately, therefore, this article suggests that the monotheistic faith of Israel was a final product of a long process of development and revelation. Of course, normative Christianity has consistently accepted the monotheism, and the Stone-Campbell Movement stands firmly within this tradition.

1. Certain general methodological statements regarding the study of Israelite religion should be noted at the outset: (1) It is readily apparent from the available sources that ancient Israelite religion was not static, but rather, during the course of time, Israelite religion changed and developed; therefore, there is a diachronic component to the study of Israelite religion. (2) The biblical and epigraphic evidence suggests that there was synchronic variation within Israelite religion as well. (3) There were probably stark differences, as well as consistent similarities, between the “official religion” of the state, and the “popular religion” of the masses. (4) Cultures do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in a complicated nexus of reciprocal influence, confluences, and cognate origins; for this reason, ancient Israelite religion is most profitably analyzed through its own documents, through those of the surrounding ancient Near Eastern world, and through the lens of the archaeological and epigraphic record. See Patrick D. Miller’s monograph, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 46-47, for similar methodological statements and caveats. For a more exhaustive statement of methodology, see the seminal two-volume work on Israelite religion by Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* (Old Testament Library; trans. John Bowden; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 1:12-21. (5) Throughout this article, I use the term “Israelite” broadly, as a means of referring to both Israel and Judah.

“I am Yahweh your god, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:2,3).² This inaugural command of the Decalogue has sometimes been considered to be monotheistic. Nevertheless, astute readers will note that while this text affirms that Israel must give complete and total allegiance to Yahweh, it does not deny the existence of other deities. Monotheism (with its denial of the existence of other deities, of course) would ultimately become dominant in Israelite religion by the late seventh century, and monotheism certainly was very widespread during the Babylonian Exile and in Second Temple Judaism; however, the fact of the matter is that the constellation of biblical and Old Hebrew epigraphic evidence (i.e., Iron Age Hebrew inscriptions) converges to demonstrate that monotheism was actually *not* a characteristic feature of Israelite religion during the first few centuries (Iron I and early Iron II).³

Scholars within the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement have traditionally been willing to posit the development of religious conceptions during the many centuries of the OT period; therefore, the conclusion of my inductive analysis in this article, namely, that monotheism was affirmed late in Israelite religion but not early in Israelite religion, should present no fundamental problem.⁴

2. The common convention in English Bibles is to render the Hebrew divine name “Yahweh” as “LORD.” Because the Semitic root of this divine name for the God of Israel does not derive from a root meaning “lord,” this is a problematic convention. For this reason, this article uses “Yahweh,” which is, in essence, a transliteration and vocalization of the Hebrew. “Yahweh” probably means something analogous to “He who brings into being,” or “He who creates.” For a discussion of the etymology and meaning of the divine name “Yahweh,” see Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History and Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) 60-75.

3. The Iron Age is subdivided into three major periods: Iron I (c. 1200 BC–900 BC), Iron II (c. 900 BC–586 BC), and Iron III (c. 586–539 BC). The term “First Temple Period” is used to refer to the time during which the temple erected by Solomon stood, roughly from the late 10th century to 587 BC. The term “Second Temple” is used to refer to the time during which the Second Temple stood, roughly from 516 BC to AD 70.

4. For similar statements from a Church of Christ (a cappella) scholar, see J.J.M. Roberts, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Collected Essays* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002) 268-269; 325-327, 335.

RELIGIONS OF THE CULTURAL CENTERS OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

During antiquity, polytheism was the norm in ancient Mesopotamia, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. Indeed, Sumerian and Akkadian texts from Mesopotamia, various Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, and Demotic texts from Egypt, as well as numerous Phoenician, Aramaic, and Ugaritic texts from the Levant (Syria-Palestine), all reflect a belief in a multiplicity of deities.⁵ Because of its geographic proximity to Israel, and because of the plethora of data, the Late Bronze Age (1500–1200 BC) material from Ugarit (Syria) is especially relevant for an analysis of the cultural context out of which ancient Israel arose. Major epics replete with substantial material about the Ugaritic pantheon and religious practices, for example, are extant among the Ugaritic materials, with the Ba'lu Epic, (cf. the biblical divine name Ba'al), the Kirta Epic, and the Aqhat Epic (with a wise man named Dan'il as a major character) being among the most important. Various deities figure prominently in the Ugaritic pantheon, with 'Il (= 'El) as the head of the pantheon, but with a superabundance of material about 'El's consort 'Atrt (= 'Asherah), about Ba'lu and his consort 'Anat, as well as substantial material about Yammu (Sea), Motu (Death), Kothar-wa-Hasis (the Craftsman god).⁶

5. See, for example, the following secondary sources: A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (rev. ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) 171-227; Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods* (trans. Zainab Bahrani and Marc van de Mieroop; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 201-286; Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia* (trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Stephen Quirke, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992); G. del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion according to the Liturgical Texts of Ugarit* (Bethesda: CDL, 1999); Brian Peckham, "Phoenicia and the Religion of Israel: The Epigraphic Evidence," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, S. Dean McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 79-99; Jonas C. Greenfield, "Aspects of Aramean Religion," in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, 67-78. For translations of the primary sources, see especially the following: Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (2 vols., rev. ed.; Bethesda: CDL, 1996); Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (3 vols.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976–1980); Michael David Coogan, *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Louisville: Westminster, 1978).

6. Note that Shamgar's patronymic is "ben 'Anat" (Judg 3:31; 5:6). The name Shamgar may be Hurrian, referring to Šimiga, the Hurrian god of the sun. Regarding 'Anat, see especially Neil Walls, *The Goddess Anat in Ugaritic Myth* (SBLDS, no. 135; Atlanta: Scholars, 1992).

Lists of deities are also extant from Ugaritic, and various deities figure prominently in ritual and legal texts as well.⁷ Ugarit's religion is typical of ancient Near Eastern religion generally: thoroughly polytheistic. Occasionally in the ancient Near East, certain deities associated with powerful cities (Marduk for Babylon) became dominant within certain circles, but this is, of course, still polytheism (there was no denial of the existence of other deities). Pharaoh Akhenaten (c. 14th century BC) was a monotheist, but his religious "reforms" in Egypt were short-lived.⁸ In essence, then, polytheism was the norm in the ancient Near East. Most significantly for the purposes of this article, it is imperative to note that Iron Age Israel was a small peripheral nation, was within a polytheistic cultural context, had substantial contacts with these cultures throughout its history, and, according to the Bible, originated as a component of this cultural context (Gen 11:31).

One feature of ancient Near Eastern religion that merits special consideration at this juncture is the "divine council." Within ancient Near Eastern texts, there are numerous references to an "assembly of deities," consisting both of gods and goddesses, presided over by one deity, who was the head of the pantheon, similar to the gods of Mount Olympus in Greek mythology. A paradigmatic example of a divine council is contained in the Mesopotamian creation story known as Enūma Eliš, where an "assembly of the gods" (Akkadian: *puhur ilāni*) convenes in order to consider a problem (the raging of the goddess Tiamat) and

7. The Ugaritic material has been published in numerous places. Transliterations of most of the published Ugaritic texts are contained in the following volume: Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquin Sanmartin, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995). This compendium is normally abbreviated as CAT. Coogan, *Stories*, is a reliable translation of the major Ugaritic epics. See also, Simon B. Parker, *The Pre-Biblical Narrative Tradition: Essays on the Ugaritic Poems Keret and Aqhat* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

8. For a discussion of Marduk's rise to dominance, see Bottéro, *Religion*, esp. 55-58. For the monotheistic religious reforms (or monolatry) of the 14th century Pharaoh named Akhenaten, as well as Egypt's return to polytheism after Akhenaten's death (and thus the failure of his religious "reforms"), see Donald B. Redford, *Akhenaten: The Heretic King* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Note that Simo Parpola, in *One God or Many: Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World* (ed. by Simo Parpola and Barbara Nevling Porter; Transactions of the Casco Bay Assyriological Institute 1; Casco Bay, ME: Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, 2001), has argued that Assyrian religion (with Ashur as the chief deity) was essentially monotheistic. However, Barbara Porter in the same publication has demonstrated convincingly that this simply was not the case.

render a decision about Marduk's request to become head of the pantheon (if he can defeat Tiamat).⁹

Of particular importance is the fact that at Ugarit, there are also numerous references to the "assembly of the gods," that is, the "divine council." Several different terms are used, with various nuances, but all with the same basic connotation. There are, for example, Ugaritic texts that refer to the "assembly of the gods" (*phr 'ilm*: CAT 1.47.29; 1.118.28; 1.148.9), "the assembly of the sons of the gods" (*phr bn 'ilm*: CAT 1.4. III 14), and the "assembly of the council" (*phr m'd*: CAT 1.2. I 14, 15, 16-17, 20, 31). Similar terms such as "the circle of 'Il" (*dr 'Il*) or "the circle of the sons of 'Il" (*dr bn 'Il*) are also well attested at Ugarit, as a means of referring to the divine assembly (CAT 1.15. III 19; 1.4025, 33-34). At these councils, in addition to feasting, the Ugaritic gods convened, discussed, and made decisions about various aspects of the world.¹⁰ In addition to the Ugaritic evidence, note the reference to the *kl dr bn 'lm* ("the whole circle of the sons of the gods") in Phoenician as well (from Karatepe).¹¹ The notion of a divine council was, therefore, pervasive in the ancient Near East.

RELIGIONS OF AMMON, MOAB, AND EDMOM

Before narrowing the focus to the religion of ancient Israel, it is imperative to summarize briefly the religions of the ancient southern Levantine "states" of Ammon, Moab, and Edom. Although only sparse data exists for the religions of these regions, based on the extant data

9. For a fine treatment of the Mesopotamian divine council, see Thorkild Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture* (ed. by William L. Moran; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970) 157-170. For a translation of Enūma Eliš, see Foster, *Before the Muses*.

10. For more detail, see Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 41-53. The dissertation of E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (HSM, no. 24; Atlanta: Scholars, 1980), continues to be a *sine qua non*; Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, is still seminal.

11. See H. Donner and W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften, dritte Auflage* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1973) vol 1, text 26A, III, 19. In addition, see Hartmut Gese et al., *Die Religionen Altsyriens, Altarabiens, und der Mandäer* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1970) esp. 100-102.

(biblical and epigraphic), the basic features of these religions are generally agreed upon: namely, they were (probably) "polytheistic," but the official national cult of each "state" possessed a "chief god" or "national god." Ancient "national god" religion can be briefly described as a religion in a particular "nation" or "culture" that was characterized by: (a) the predominance of a specific single deity (who will sometimes have a consort) as the main focus of worship for a "state," (b) but without denying the existence or relative potency of the deities of surrounding "states" or "cultures."

Biblical materials that refer to the religion of Moab suggest that Kemosh (also spelled Chemosh) was the dominant "national" god worshiped in the land of Moab (Judg 11:24; 1 Kgs 11:5-7,33; 2 Kgs 23:13; Jer 48:7), and that Milkom was the dominant deity in the land of Ammon (1 Kgs 11:5-7,33; 2 Kgs 23:13; cf Jer 49:1,3; Jer 32:35; Lev 18:21; 20:2-5). Significantly, epigraphic evidence in Moabite writings also suggests that Kemosh (a male deity) was the national god of the Moabites. Some of the most decisive epigraphic evidence for this is the content of the Mesha Stele (9th century BC).¹² However, additional epigraphic evidence corroborating this is also extant.¹³ Regarding

12. The Mesha Stele is one of the longest monumental inscriptions in linear Northwest Semitic. This inscription is written in the Moabite language, and in a script derived from the Phoenician script. For methodological reasons, it should not be referred to as a "Hebrew script" *pace* Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet: An Introduction to West Semitic Epigraphy and Palaeography* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1987). The content of the inscription is significant, for the incipit of it refers to Kemosh's having been angry with his people, the Moabites (compare Yahweh's anger with Israel at various times), which ultimately led to Kemosh's permitting the Northern Kingdom of Israel to gain hegemony over Moabite territories. Nevertheless, Kemosh was later pacified and so there is a reference to Mesha's reconquest of Moabite territories, and also to Mesha's "dragging the vessels of Yahweh before Kemosh" (lines 17,18). Note that although there is substantial agreement between the biblical and Moabite accounts, there is still a certain amount of tension (cf. 2 Kgs 3). For a general discussion of this inscription and the literature about it, see the article by Christopher A. Rollston, "Moabite Stone," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. by David Noel Freedman; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). For a relatively thorough treatment of various aspects of this inscription, see the volume edited by Andrew Dearman, *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989).

13. For example, the el-Kerak inscription has "Kemosh" as the theophoric element of a personal name. See F.V. Winnett and W.L. Reed, "A Fragment of an Early Moabite Inscription from Kerak," *BASOR* 172 (1963) 1-9. Note that a personal name on the incense altar from Hīrbet el-Mudeyine has an 'El theophoric. For the *editio princeps*, see Paul E. Dion and P.M. Michèle

Ammonite religion, the epigraphic evidence is more complicated. The Amman Citadel Inscription (9th century BC) probably begins with Milkom (a male deity) commanding the erection of a monumental building (temple, palace).¹⁴ Moreover, “Milkom” appears as a theophoric element in Ammonite glyptics and ostraca.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the predominant theophoric in Ammonite inscriptions is actually ’Il (cf. ’El), not Milkom. For this reason, some have argued that although Milkom may have been an important Ammonite deity, the chief god of the Ammonite cult was probably ’Il.¹⁶ Finally, epigraphic evidence in Edomite suggests that Qaus (*Qws*) was the national god of Edom.¹⁷

Daviau, “An Inscribed Incense Altar of Iron Age II at Hīrbet el-Mudeyine (Jordan),” *ZDPV* 116 (2000) 1-13. ’El is common Semitic for “god,” and so could easily be understood as a reference to “Kemosh” in this inscription, just as the Israelite name “Nathaniel,” for example, uses the same theophoric to refer to the Israelite god “Yahweh.”

14. For the *editio princeps* of this inscription, see Siegfried H. Horn, “The Amman Citadel Inscription,” *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 12-13 (1967–68) 81-83. For reference to readings and interpretations of this inscription, see Walter E. Aufrecht, *A Corpus of Ammonite Inscriptions* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1989) 154.

15. For example, a seal impression from Tell el-’Umeiri reads as follows: *lmlkm’wr ’bd b’lys’*. An ostrakon from Tell el-Mazar has the personal name *mlkmyt*. For bibliographic material, see Aufrecht, *Corpus*, nos. 129, 147.

16. For example, Walter E. Aufrecht, “The Religion of the Ammonites,” in *Ancient Ammon* (ed. by Burton MacDonald and Randall W. Younger; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 159. Note that Jeffrey H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (HSS, no. 31; Atlanta: Scholars, 1986) 19, 20, has stated not only that ’El was probably the chief god of the Ammonites but also that “Milkom” “was merely a title of El,” and he goes on to state that the Ammonites may not have been polytheistic at all. Based on a constellation of evidence, Tigay’s proposal must be rejected, as has been argued by Ulrich Hübner, *Die Ammoniter: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte, Kultur und Religion eines Transjordanischen Volkes im 1. Jahrtausend v Chr* (Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästinavereins, no. 16; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992) 268. Regarding “Molek,” see George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment* (JSOTSup, no. 43; Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1985).

17. An Edomite ostrakon from Horvat ’Uza actually contains a blessing in the name of Qaus: “I (will) bless you by Qaus.” See Itzhaq Beit-Arieh and Bruce Cresson, “An Edomite Ostrakon from Horvat ’Uza,” *Tel Aviv* 12 (1985): 96-101. For the fragmentary inscription from Horvat Qitmit (on a rimsherd) referring to Qaus, see Itzhaq Beit-Arieh, *Horvat Qitmit: An Edomite Shrine in the Biblical Negev* (Tel Aviv: Institute of Archaeology) 260-261. For the seal referring to Qaus from Aroer, see Avraham Biran, “Aroer, 1976,” *IEJ* 26 (1976) 139-140 and plate 28b. Seal impression(s) from Umm el-Biyara refer to Qaus as well. Of course, Assyrian records refer to a king of Edom at the beginning of the 7th century named “Qosgabri.” The work of John R. Bartlett, *Edom and the*

Obviously, the ancient southern Levantine religions were not static throughout the Iron Age, but the epigraphic and biblical evidence do combine, nevertheless, to suggest strongly that Ammon, Moab, and Edom each had a “chief” or “national” god during the Iron Age.

BIBLICAL REMNANTS OF EARLY ISRAELITE RELIGION

Within the Primeval Cycle, the pericope of Gen 6:1-4 stands as a vestige of a very early stage in Israelite religion.¹⁸ According to this narrative, “the sons of the god saw the daughters of men (human women), that they were beautiful, and they took for themselves the women whom they had chosen.” The text goes on to state that these “sons of the god” had sex with the daughters of humankind, and that the resulting offspring were the “the heroes of old, men of renown,” that is, the “Nephilim.”¹⁹

The meaning of the phrase translated “the sons of the god” (Hebrew: בני האלהים, *b²nē hā’ēlōhīm*) is of fundamental importance. The Hebrew noun *’ēlōhīm* (אלהים) is morphologically plural. Within the Hebrew Bible, it can be semantically singular (normally a reference to Yahweh, the God of Israel) or plural (“gods”). Because of the context, it seems most likely to be semantically singular in Gen 6:1-4, referring to the head of the pantheon, but it is possible that it should be considered plural, that is, “gods.” Note also that the term “the sons” (Hebrew, בני, *b²nē*; i.e., masculine, plural, construct, definite) demonstrates that the

Edomites (JSOTSup, no. 77; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), remains fundamental for the study of the Edomites, as do also Piotr Bienkowski, ed., *Early Edom and Moab: The Beginning of the Iron Age in Southern Jordan* (Sheffield Archaeological Monographs, no. 7; Oxford: Alden, 1992); and Diana Vikander Edelman, ed., *You Shall Not Abhor an Edomite for He Is Your Brother: Edom and Seir in History and Tradition* (Archaeology and Biblical Studies, no. 3; Atlanta: Scholars, 1995). Note the presence in the Bible of the personal name “Bar-qōs,” a temple servant (Ezra 2:53; Neh 7:55).

18. For a discussion of the function of this pericope, within the Primeval Cycle, see Ronald S. Hendel, “Of Demigods and the Deluge: Toward an Interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4,” *JBL* 106 (1987) 13-26.

19. Note that this story, set in the antediluvian period, states that “the Nephilim were on the earth in those days” (Gen 6:4), but a subsequent Pentateuchal pericope states that they were present in the land of Canaan during the Mosaic period (Num 13:33). This makes for a serious tension between these two texts.

deities referred to are “male offspring” (“male children”) of the head of the pantheon and his consort (compare the divine children of Apsu and Tiamat in *Enūma Eliš*). The Hebrew term בני האלהים is semantically and etymologically cognate to the Ugaritic term *bn ʾilm*, as well as to the various terms in Akkadian.²⁰

Certain segments of Judaism and Christianity have been slow to embrace the idea that early Israelite religion originally accepted a pantheon of deities (but with Yahweh as the national deity of Israel). (1) During late Second Temple Judaism, for example, בני האלהים of this pericope were considered to be angels, and this interpretation of Gen 6:1-4 continued to be accepted for centuries.²¹ (2) Decades ago it was sometimes argued that this terminology in Gen 6:1-4 was simply a way of referring to the children of Seth.²² (3) More recently, it has even been suggested that בני האלהים should be understood as ancient Near Eastern kings, with stunning harems.²³

Such attempts to explain this phrase, however, are not convincing. The Hebrew term בני האלהים literally means, “the sons of the god(s),” and certainly does *not* mean “angels.” Biblical Hebrew has a word for “angel,” “messenger,” (*malʾāk*, מַלְאָךְ), and although it is quite common in the Hebrew Bible and even in Genesis (Gen 16:7,9,10; 21:17; 22:11; 48:16), it is not used in Gen 6:1-4.²⁴ Moreover, Seth is not referenced in Gen 6:1-4 either, and so it is dubious to attempt to suggest that this was some sort of reference to godly Sethites.²⁵ Furthermore,

neither the Masoretic Text of Gen 6:1-4 nor the evidence from the field of comparative Semitics, suggests that בני האלהים are ancient Near Eastern potentates with large harems. Rather, the Semitic languages and literatures of the biblical world (Mesopotamia, Ugarit, Phoenicia) provide decisive evidence that the term בני האלהים was a common means of referring to divine male offspring (children of the divine head[s] of the pantheon). Early Israelite religion arose within the ancient Semitic world, spoke and wrote in Semitic, and initially accepted the common Semitic belief that there was a pantheon of deities.²⁶ Gen 6:1-4 appears to be a crucial remnant of that early belief.

Deuteronomy 32:8-9 merits consideration at this juncture, for it reflects the same basic belief, but with additional detail. The Masoretic Text reads as follows: “When the Most High (עֶלְיוֹן, ʿElyōn) established the inheritance of each nation, when he divided humankind. He established the boundaries of the peoples, according to the number of the sons of Israel. For Yahweh’s portion was his people, Jacob was his allotted inheritance.” However, 4QDeut^a, a Dead Sea Scroll manuscript antedating the Masoretic Text by more than a millennium, reads as follows: “When the Most High established the inheritance of each nation, when he divided humankind. He established the boundaries of the peoples, according to the number of the sons of the god (בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים).” Significantly, the reading of the Septuagint does not reflect a Hebrew *Vorlage* with “sons of Israel.”²⁷ Rather, it reads “angels of God.”

20. This is precisely the way that the Aramaic phrase בר אלהין should be understood in the narrative in Dan 3:25. That is, Nebuchadnezzar was a polytheist and he was affirming that the countenance of one of the occupants of the furnace had the radiance of a divine being of some sort.

21. The fact that this pericope was viewed in this way is demonstrated by the treatment of this material in 1 Enoch. As expected, this interpretation is reflected in the Septuagint (LXX) as well, for the LXX is a product of Second Temple Judaism.

22. For example, J. Scharbert, “Traditions- und Redaktionsgeschichte von Gn 6,1-4,” *BZ*, N.F. 11 (1967) 66-78.

23. Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 80.

24. It is important to note that this word is “Common Semitic,” occurring in Ugaritic, Phoenician, Old Aramaic, Arabic, and Ethiopic. Therefore, it is not convincing to suggest that it was unknown at any point in the ancient Hebrew language.

25. Significantly, the בני אלהים are said to have been present at creation (Job 38:7), thus making the Sethite interpretation even more dubious.

26. It should be noted that “father-son” terminology is often used within the Bible and the ancient Near East for the divine-human relationship. The biblical examples of this are well known (Exod 4:23; Hosea 11:1; Isa 43:6; 45:11; Deut 14:1). This terminology is sometimes used of kings as well (2 Sam 7; Ps 89; 2:7), as seems very natural. Moreover, certain personal names in Hebrew reflect the same basic terminology. For example, the personal name “Abijah” literally means “Yah[weh] is my father.” Similar terminology is used within Akkadian. Hence, names such as “Marduk-Abi” (“Marduk is my father”) and “Istar-ummi” (“Istar is my mother”) are also attested. See Bottéro, *Religion*, 40. Thus, terminology for the divine-human relationship is similar to, but different from (and thus not to be equated with) the Semitic terminology (biblical Hebrew, Ugaritic, Akkadian) for the divine council.

27. Note that the term *Vorlage* is a technical term used within the field to refer to the base text from which a translation was made. In this case, the term is used to refer to the Hebrew manuscript that was used as the basis for the Greek translation. Also, the “Letter of Aristeas” suggests that the translation of the Pentateuch from Hebrew into Greek occurred during the reign of

Obviously, the Septuagint translation reflects the tradition that the בני האלהים were “angels”; however, the main point is that its Hebrew *Vorlage* certainly did *not* have “sons of Israel,” but rather it had the same reading as 4QDeut. That is, based on the textual evidence from Qumran and the Septuagint, בני האלהים is the original reading of Deut 32:8-9.²⁸ The Masoretic Text’s “sons of Israel” is a secondary revision resulting from postbiblical scribal objections to the original reading (that is, “sons of Israel” is a “pseudo-correction”). Most significantly of all, note the ultimate import of this text: the chief deity (עליון) divided the world into a certain number of nations, on the basis of the number of בני האלהים, that is, the younger male deities.²⁹ Yahweh was among these בני האלהים, according to such early Israelite religious conceptions, and received the nation of “Israel” as his “inheritance.” In short, this text demonstrates that at a very early stage of Israelite religion (1) Yahweh was understood as a “national deity,” and Israel was his “assigned nation.” (2) Significantly, however, at this stage in Israelite religion, Yahweh was not yet the head of the pantheon; עליון was.³⁰

This phenomenon of ancient scribal “pseudo-corrections,” often motivated by the religious objections of the scribes, is well attested in the Hebrew Bible.³¹ In short, although not attested on every page of

Ptolemy Philadelphus II (285–247 BC), so as to be incorporated into the library at Alexandria. Based on the convergence of various forms of evidence, a translation of the Pentateuch during the third century BC is usually accepted, although the “Letter of Aristeas” is considered legendary.

28. For the textual evidence, see Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 269.

29. In some texts, Yahweh is equated with ‘Elyōn (Ps 47:3; 7:18; 83:19; 97:9). Compare Gen 14:22, with LXX and Syriac textual data, suggesting that Yahweh is an addition. However, the point is that it is most difficult (contextually) to understand ‘Elyōn in Deut 32:8-9 as a reference to Yahweh. Regarding ‘Elyōn, see also Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 50-52.

30. This issue is discussed at length by various biblical scholars. See especially, Smith, *Biblical Monotheism*, 47-53; John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (JSOTSup, no. 265; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 20-25.

31. One of the most interesting exemplars of this phenomenon is Judg 18:30. The original text reads as follows: “The Danites erected an image, and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, son of Moses, along with his sons, were the priests to the tribe of Dan, until the time of the exile.” However, at some point after the original composition, (an) ancient scribe(s) found this text problematic, because it stated that a grandson of Moses was a cultic priest at a Danite cultic site in Northern Israel. Therefore, to ameliorate the situation, a *nun* was added, thus changing the name Msh

the Hebrew Bible, it is readily apparent that Hebrew scribes sometimes changed the received Hebrew text for theological reasons. The textual evidence strongly suggests that this is precisely what occurred in Deut 32:8-9.

EARLY ISRAELITE RELIGION: YAHWEH AS HEAD OF THE PANTHEON

A transformation ultimately occurs within a subsequent stage of Israelite religion: (1) although there is no denial of the existence of other deities, (2) Yahweh becomes the head of the pantheon. That is, the biblical corpus still refers to בני האלהים or the cognate *b³ne’ēlīm* (בני אלים), but Yahweh has now become the chief deity. An archaic psalm, for example, begins with the following exhortation: “Ascribe to Yahweh, O sons of god (בני אלים), ascribe to Yahweh, glory and strength” (Ps 29:1). Within this text, Yahweh is the head of the pantheon, and the בני אלים are commanded to laud him. Similarly, within the prose prologue to the book of Job, the narrator states that one day בני האלהים “came in to stand before Yahweh and the adversary (Hebrew: השטן, *hasāṭān*) also entered with them” (Job 1:6; cf. also 2:1).³² Within this narrative, Yahweh is the head of the pantheon, and he is surrounded by בני האלהים and השטן. Various additional poetic psalms retain similar conceptions and phrases as well, with Yahweh always as the head of the pantheon (Ps 82:1; 82:6,7; 89:7), regardless of the divine name used.³³ At this

(“Moses”) to Mnsh (“Manasseh”). Because Manasseh’s cultic culpability was well-attested, this seemed to be a brilliant (pseudo-) “correction.” However, subsequent scribes were well aware that this was not the actual name written by the original writer, so they made the *nun* supralinear (M^{sh}) in the Masoretic Text, thus signaling to the reader that a minute change had been made in the consonantal text, that is, a single letter had been added (to protect the reputation of Moses from having a “deviant” grandson). This, of course, created a chronological problem for the ingenious ancient scribe(s), but that was apparently more acceptable to him (or them) than was the fact that Moses’ grandson was functioning as a priest at an “illicit” cult site.

32. Note that *hasāṭān* (השטן) has the definite article “the adversary,” and so the term denotes a function, not a proper name. For a detailed discussion of this subject, see especially Peggy L. Day, *An Adversary in Heaven: Satan in the Hebrew Bible* (HSM, no. 43; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

33. Sometimes within the Hebrew Bible, writers use the term אלהים or a cognate term, for Yahweh, making the context of fundamental importance for understanding the referent of the var-

typological stage in Israelite religion, Yahweh is the supreme head of the pantheon, and no divine being is considered his equal.³⁴ Yahweh, the God of Israel, to whom the nation of Israel owed covenant loyalty, has become the supreme.³⁵

Before focusing primarily on the rise of monotheism itself in ancient Israel, some relevant epigraphic evidence in Old Hebrew must be considered: the inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom (both Judean sites).³⁶ These inscriptions date to the 8th century BC, and mention Yahweh;³⁷ however, various Old Hebrew inscriptions mention Yahweh, so the inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom are not unique in this regard (some of the Arad and Lachish ostraca from the early 6th century mention Yahweh).³⁸ Nevertheless, the inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom are rather unique in certain

ious terms. Psalm 82:1 refers to a *ʿādat-ʿēl* (עֲדַת־אֵל) that is a “council of ʿEl. Such terminology is semantically cognate to Ugaritic terms such as *phr ʿilm*, *phr bn ʿilm*, *phr mʿd*, *dr ʿil*, *dr bn ʿil* and Phoenician *kl dr bn ʿlm*, cited earlier.

34. The Song of the Sea asks the rhetorical question (Exod 15:11), “Who is like you, O Yahweh, among the gods (בְּאֱלֹהִים, *bāʿēlīm*),” and the answer to the rhetorical question is, of course: “No deity is like you, O Yahweh.”

35. Plural references such as “Let us make humankind in our image” (Gen 1:26) and “Whom shall we send and who will go for us” (Isa 6:8) should be understood within this framework.

36. The *editio princeps* of the Kuntillet 'Ajrud epigraphs has not appeared. For the present, see especially Zeev Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud: A Religious Centre from the Time of the Judaean Monarchy on the Border of Sinai* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1978). See also the photographs in Shmuel Ahituv, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions* (Jerusalem, 1992) 152-162. For the *editio princeps* of El-Qom, see William Dever, “Iron Age Epigraphic Material from the Area of Khirbet el-Kom,” *HUCA* 40-41 (1969–1970) 139-204. The literature on these inscriptions, and their implications for biblical studies, is voluminous. For a recent treatment, with extensive bibliography of many previous studies, see Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications, no. 57; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

37. For a discussion of the dating of these inscriptions, based on their archaeological context and palaeography, see Christopher A. Rollston, “Northwest Semitic Cursive Scripts of Iron II: The Morphology and Development of Hebrew, Aramaic, Phoenician, and Ammonite,” in *An Eye for Form: Epigraphic Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003).

38. For the Arad Ostraca, see Yohanan Aharoni, *Arad Inscriptions* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981). For the Lachish Ostraca (1-18), see Harry Tur-Sinai (Torczyner), *Lachish I: The Lachish Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938). As noted earlier, the Mesha Stele also refers to Yahweh.

ways: (1) they refer to “Yahweh and *his* ʿAsherah” (2) and those from Kuntillet 'Ajrud refer to “Yahweh of Teman” and “Yahweh of Samaria” (local manifestations of Yahweh from the South and North, respectively).³⁹ Based on the content of these inscriptions, some ancient Israelites believed that Yahweh had a consort of some sort: ʿAsherah.⁴⁰ Moreover, thousands of female figurines have been excavated in Palestine, and it has been argued that these are ʿAsherah figurines.⁴¹

Some might wish to state categorically that “orthodox” Yahwism, even from the earliest period of Israelite religion, always rejected the veneration and worship of ʿAsherah (regardless of whether ʿAsherah was a cult object or goddess).⁴² The inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom would thus be framed as aberrant, reflecting the views of a minority of people, at the periphery of 8th century Israelite religion. After all, it could be argued, Kuntillet 'Ajrud appears to have been a caravanserai (i.e., an occupational site resulting from caravan traffic) and Khirbet el-Qom was located near an ancient trade route, and thus neither reflects normative “orthodox” Yahwism. Moreover, clear evidence

39. For a discussion of the nature of this ʿAsherah (goddess or cult object), as well as a discussion of “local manifestations” of a deity, see P. Kyle McCarter Jr., “Aspects of the Religion of the Israelite Monarchy: Biblical and Epigraphic Data,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, 137-155.

40. The Hebrew Bible often mentions Baʿal and ʿAsherah together (Judg 3:7; 6:25-30; 1 Kgs 18:19), hence, it is probable that these references should be seen as evidence that some ancient Israelites believed ʿAsherah was Baʿal’s consort. Some text-critical problems occur with some of the references to ʿAsherah, hence, it has been suggested that some of the references to ʿAsherah are secondary. Most convincingly, ʿAsherah is peripheral in the Mount Carmel narrative (1 Kgs 18:20-40) and so is probably a secondary addition in this narrative.

41. See discussion and bibliography of Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 348-352. In my opinion, it is plausible that these figurines represented the patron goddess of the worshiper (which could vary from person to person, or from group to group), rather than simply a single specific goddess. The evidence available does not permit a decisive conclusion.

42. The term “orthodox Yahwism,” is that of Miller, *Religion*, 46-62. Miller, *Religion*, 47, justifies this term by stating that, although defining “orthodoxy” is difficult, “there is some justification for suggesting that the tradition that became the end point of Israelite religion, or more accurately, the character it had as it moved into its two primary and immediately continuing streams, Judaism and Christianity, serves to define—in retrospect—what was orthodox and normative.” Miller’s term is probably anachronistic (indeed, Miller himself suggests as much), but it is quite functional and so is used here.

exists for decisive royal repudiation of the worship (or veneration) of 'Asherah during the reigns of Hezekiah (r. 715–687 BC) and Josiah (r. 640–609 BC) from the Deuteronomistic History (2 Kgs 18:4; 23:5-7).

Nevertheless, it is not likely that a complete rejection of 'Asherah was always, everywhere, the norm for “orthodox” Yahwism during its earliest phases.⁴³ Regarding the evidence from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, for example, these sites are geographically separated by significant distances, with Khirbet el-Qom in the Judean hill country (about 11 kilometers from Lachish, a city that often served as a military outpost for the protection of Jerusalem) and Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the Northern Sinai (but still under Judean control), some 150 kilometers away from Khirbet el-Qom. Moreover, the inscriptions themselves date to different periods of the 8th century, with those from 'Ajrud dating to approximately 800 BC (± 25 years), and those from el-Qom dating to the second half of the 8th century. Furthermore, the inscriptions from Khirbet el-Qom are etched in the walls of a tomb (intended by the tomb owner to be permanent), and those from Kuntillet 'Ajrud refer to Yahweh of Teman and Yahweh of Samaria (that is, regions from the North and South). This information, combined with the fact that there are not an enormous number of Iron Age Hebrew inscriptions dealing with religious themes in the first place, makes rather tenuous any suggestion that the inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom simply reflect aberrant, ephemeral religious practices in the periphery. Of course, the suggestion that religious inscriptions from heavily traveled areas *must* or *probably* represent aberrant, peripheral religious views is quite absurd: people of various ilks travel.

Additional evidence in this connection must be considered. For example, the goddess 'Asherah was a dominant goddess in Levantine religion for centuries, and it is quite conceivable that this component of Levantine religion was considered to be acceptable in early Israelite religion (as a consort, or cultically available presence). Moreover, the biblical text may contain subtle indications that veneration or worship of 'Asherah was actually acceptable in an early period. For example, note that Jehu's zealous purge included Baal worshipers but not those worshipping 'Asherah (2 Kgs 9, 10).

Furthermore, certain things were considered acceptable during the early period of Israelite religion, but in later periods they became unacceptable. For example, Solomon (late 10th century) offered a “thousand” burnt offerings upon the altar of a “high place” at Gibeon, even though the “ark of the covenant” was in Jerusalem, and “high places” were the subject of condemnation in certain (later) texts (e.g., Deuteronomy, Kings). Nonetheless, according to the narrative, Yahweh appeared to Solomon in a dream at Gibeon and promised him great wisdom, wealth, and fame (rather than condemnation for not offering the sacrifices in Jerusalem). Naturally, the Deuteronomist (7th–6th centuries) frames this text with a certain amount of opprobrium, but the fact remains that the narrative states that Yahweh appeared to Solomon in a dream and promises of blessing were made (2 Kgs 3:3-14).⁴⁴ In addition, although David was not a Levite, he sacrificed and even wore the priestly ephod (2 Sam 6:13,14), and the sons of David functioned as priests (2 Sam 8:18; cf. 1 Chr 18:17). Indeed, even Eli is not described as a Levite (1 Sam 1:1). Late First Temple Israelite religion did not tolerate such things, but early Israelite religion did. In short, early Israelite religion was more tolerant of certain regional cultic activities and high places than was late(r) Israelite religion (cf. 2 Kgs 18:4).⁴⁵ The inclusion of the worship of 'Asherah, as a consort of Yahweh was probably another component of early Israelite religion that was ultimately rejected in later periods.⁴⁶

44. For the date of the Deuteronomist, see Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 278-289.

45. The veneration of Nehushtan (the bronze serpent) was also permissible for some time within official circles, but ultimately banned during the time of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:4). Note that things such as the worship of the Queen of heaven (Jer 7:18; 44:15-30) or the burning of incense to the “Sun, Moon, and Stars” (2 Kgs 23:5-7) were not foreign to Levantine religion, but do not appear to have been as central to certain components of Yahwism as was 'Asherah. See J. Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel* (JSOTSup 111; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993). However, some aspects of Israelite religion are more clearly syncretistic (non-Levantine elements incorporated into Israelite religion). The weeping for the Mesopotamian god Tammuz in the Jerusalem temple (Ezek 8:14) is an example. In this connection, see especially, Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (HSM, no. 46; Atlanta: Scholars, 1992).

46. The choice of 'Asherah as the consort of Yahweh in the Old Hebrew inscriptional materials is interesting. 'Asherah was the consort of the head of the pantheon at Ugarit ('El's consort). It

43. See also Miller, *Religion*, 51-52.

THE RISE OF MONOTHEISM IN ISRAELITE RELIGION: YAHWEH IS THE ONLY GOD

Evidence for pure monotheism in Israel appears in the late 7th and 6th centuries BC. An oracle of the prophet Jeremiah (late 7th and early 6th century), for example, reads as follows:

For the carved images of the nations are vanity; they are timber cut from the forest, the work of a craftsman's two hands, with his chisel, and decorated with silver and gold. They are fastened with hammers and nails so that they do not wobble. They are like a scarecrow in a plot of cucumbers, and they cannot speak. They must always be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them: they cannot do evil, but they are not able to do good either. Where is One like you, O Yahweh? You are great, and great is the might of your name (Jer 10:3-6).

Isaiah 44:14-20 (mid 6th century) contains a similar idol satire:

A man plants a cedar, and the rain nourishes it, so that later he will have a tree to cut down; or he chooses from the woods an ilex or an oak which he raises into a strong tree for himself. It becomes fuel for the man's fire: he takes some of it to warm himself, some he kindles and bakes bread on it. Some he even makes into a god ('El), and he bows down. He forms it into an idol and bows down before it. Half he burns in the fire, and on this he roasts meat, so that he may eat this and be satisfied; he also warms himself and he says, 'Good! I am warm and I can see the light.' Then with its remainder, he makes a god, and to its image he bows down and prostrates himself. He prays to it and says, 'Save me; for you are my god.' They do not know and they do not understand, for their eyes are too blind to see, their hearts too narrow to discern . . . and he cannot recover his senses and say, 'This thing I am holding is a lie.'

The idol parodies of Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah are of critical importance for an understanding of Israelite religion.⁴⁷ For in these

seems plausible that once Yahweh became viewed as the head of the pantheon (within Israelite circles), it was only natural for these circles to affirm that it was 'Asherah who was his consort.

47. Isaiah 40–55 contains references and allusions to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC, and the ensuing exilic period. For this reason, it is convincing to affirm that the oracles of Isaiah of the 8th century were read, recontextualized, and augmented in later periods. That is, based on historical criteria, Isaiah 40–55 is normally dated to the 6th century BC and referred to in the scholarly literature as "Second Isaiah." There is also linguistic evidence for dating Isaiah 40–55 to the Exilic Period. For the historical evidence, note especially the following: (1) Jerusalem is referred to

texts, Yahweh is considered to be the sole deity: *This is pure monotheism*. As argued above, in the earlier periods, Yahweh was recognized as the national god of Israel, but there was no denial of the existence of other deities. Here, however, other deities are considered nonentities, just shams made of wood or stone. The veracity of monotheism is understood and affirmed. Yahweh alone is God.

Syncretism was sometimes still present in Second Temple Judaism at certain times, and in certain places. For example, components of the Jewish colony at Elephantine were polytheistic, embracing deities customarily associated with various areas of the ancient Near East.⁴⁸ Moreover, late Second Temple Literature (Maccabees) indicates that polytheistic Hellenistic religion was accepted within certain components of Judaism (including Palestinian Judaism). Nevertheless, the cumulative evidence suggests that monotheism was regnant and normative within Second Temple Judaism (and sometimes contemporary secular writers even lauded Judaism for its monotheism).⁴⁹

The Danielic narrative about Bel (among the Greek Additions, also in the Apocrypha) is a superb repository of late Second Temple Jewish monotheism, and is replete with vivacious religious parody and polemic

as ruined and desolate (Isa 44:26), (2) there are references to the hardships suffered at the hands of the Babylonians (e.g., Isa 44:22,25; 43:28; 47:6; 52:5), and (3) there are references to the prospects for return from the exile (e.g., Isa 40:1-2; 46:13; 48:20); that is, the exile is not something that is a threat, but rather an experience that has already occurred. Although (Israelite) Jerusalem was threatened at times (e.g., the Assyrian king Sennacherib in c. 701 BC), the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II was the first to destroy it (c. 587 BC). Isaiah 40–55 reflects the experiences of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and the Babylonian Exile (and refers to the destruction in the past tense); therefore, it cannot be dated to the 8th century. In sum, prophetic components of Judaeen society copied and perpetuated the oracles of Isaiah of the 8th century, and they carried on his tradition by augmenting and recontextualizing his oracles so as to fortify the faith of those that suffered the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and the Babylonian Exile; Isaiah 40–55 is the sacred product of these labors.

48. See the various volumes published by Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, entitled *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1986–1999). See also Miller, *Religion*, 61–62.

49. It has sometimes been stated in popular circles that after the Babylonian Exile, Judaeen religion (Judaism) was completely monotheistic. The evidence from Elephantine and, more generally, from the literature of Second Temple Judaism (the Apocrypha) is decisive, however, in revealing that this was not actually the case.

as well (against polytheists). The story, which merits recounting because it is largely unfamiliar to many Jewish and Christian readers, is set during the reign of Cyrus, who had recently received the throne. The narrative notes that the Babylonians had an idol called Bel (= Marduk), before whom, each evening, the priests put “twelve bushels of fine flour, forty sheep, and fifty gallons of wine” (vs 3). After depositing this superabundance of food each evening, the door of the inner sanctum of the temple was locked. The door was opened in the morning and the food was gone, unassailable evidence, believed Cyrus, that Bel lived. Daniel protests, however, arguing that Bel is simply clay and bronze and had never eaten or drunk anything. Cyrus is enraged by Daniel’s audacity. Daniel defends himself, however, stating that he can demonstrate that he is correct.

One evening, after the priests had gone, Cyrus and Daniel fill the inner sanctum with the normal fare, and then they sprinkle ashes on the floor, and depart closing and sealing the door behind them. Early the next morning, Cyrus and Daniel are at the temple and the sealed door is opened. Cyrus exclaimed “Great are you, O Bel!” for all the food was gone, demonstrating the fact that Bel was indeed a real god. Daniel then points to the floor and notes that there are human footprints in the ashes. The priests then confess that the inner sanctum has a secret passage and that they are the ones who had always eaten the food. The priests and their families are killed, and Daniel is permitted to destroy Bel and his temple.

Of course, several of the narratives in the canonical book of Daniel contain similar emphases.⁵⁰ Again, pure monotheism is present here, and the true deity is Yahweh, the God of Israel.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to delineate the development of Iron Age Israelite religion, based on the available sources, and also made some reference to developments in Second Temple Judaism. This has been done with broad strokes, with the keen realization that substantial

50. For a fine analysis of this literature, see Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

variations must have existed in place, time, and within different communities. Moreover, it is certain that later biblical writers sometimes used grandiose poetry, imbued with religious imagery from surrounding cultures and from early Israelite religions for the purposes of producing a more archaic (earlier) setting for a later pericope or narrative.

Nevertheless, the essential typology of the chronological development of monotheism in ancient Israel is established with substantial certainty: (1) In the earliest stage of Israelite religion, Yahweh is considered the national deity of Israel, but not the head of the pantheon. (2) Subsequently, Yahweh becomes the head of the Israelite pantheon, but without a denial of the existence of other deities. (3) Ultimately, Israelite religion affirms the veracity of monotheism, with Yahweh as the sole deity, and with explicit denials of the existence of other deities. This reconstruction makes the best sense of all of the material available.

Patrick D. Miller’s sage summary of the data merits citation in this connection: “the center of Israel’s religion was the worship of a deity named Yahweh . . . other deities were worshiped at different times or by different groups . . . syncretistic movements took place from time to time.” But then he notes that this “cannot undermine the centrality of the worship of Yahweh through the course of Israel’s history.”⁵¹ That is, diversity and development are present in the history of Israelite religion, but the core was consistent: Yahweh was the central focus of the worship of Israel.

For those who might have difficulty integrating the conclusions of this study into their understanding of the Bible, please consider the following thoughts regarding my method. First, Christianity and Judaism have tended to dehistoricize the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), thereby leveling out the chronological developments, progressions, and differences within the text. This has resulted in such things as presuming that monotheism was an early component of Israelite religion, when historical evidence suggests that its cultural dominance occurs gradually. Israelite religion was, however, not static, and it is methodologically improper to dehistoricize the text for theological reasons (or non-theological reasons). The canon of the OT is the sacred result of many centuries of Israelite faith. Some of the material in OT derives from the

51. Miller, *Religion*, 1.

earliest periods of Israelite history (Exodus 15; Judges 5), and other derives from centuries later. Narratives originating from different periods and regions cannot (always) be expected to have identical affirmations.

Second, Jewish and Christian scholarship has tended to minimize Israel's cultural connections to the countries surrounding it. Although Israelite religion indeed contained unique features, Israel did not arise or exist in a cultural vacuum.⁵² For this reason, it is of fundamental importance that the biblical materials be studied with the assistance of the "window" of ancient Near Eastern cultures.

In sum, the voices of the biblical text are many, ancient, and foreign. The interpreter of the canonical text should, as Alexander Campbell wrote, strive to "come within the understanding distance."⁵³ That is, the interpreter of the text should attempt to understand the text of the Bible, its breadth, depth, diversity, and development.⁵⁴ Moreover, it should be affirmed that acknowledging the diversity and development of the biblical text cannot be considered synonymous with a rejection of the divine origins of the text. Rather, acknowledging the diversity and development of the text can be essentially an affirmation that there is also a human component to the text, a cultural context out of which Holy Writ arose. And ultimately, this affirmation magnifies Scripture as one of the greatest of the "*magnalia Dei*."⁵⁵ ^{SCJ}

52. J.J.M. Roberts, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 44-71, has argued this point extensively, and persuasively. He is particularly critical of the Biblical Theology Movement in this regard.

53. Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1980) 5.

54. I am reminded of an incident regarding a recent translation of the Bible. The translators of the New International Version were bothered (consciously or subconsciously) by the fact that Jesus had said "the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds" (Matt 13:32). After all, the NIV translators were aware that, strictly speaking, this was not an accurate botanical statement. For this reason, they changed the text slightly, adding in ". . . the smallest of *your* seeds." Several years ago, I heard Bruce M. Metzger quip that he found this bemusing, "for after all," Metzger said, "Jesus was not giving a lesson on botany." Confessional communities must acknowledge that there is a temptation to force a translation or interpretation on a text or phenomena (much as the ancient scribal transmitters of the text sometimes revised the received text), but this temptation must be resisted, so that the "voices" of the canonical text can be heard, not muted.

55. That is, "the Mighty Acts of God."