

The Construction of Biblical Monotheism: an Unfinished Task¹

CHIARA PERI

Monotheism, and Jewish monotheism in particular, is maybe one of the most analysed themes in Religious Studies: it would be impossible to recall even an essential history of studies on this subject. What I would like to present here are rather some considerations on the method of studying the history of Hebrew religion, which derive from my experience of working on mythological elements in the Old Testament and on the meaning that should be accorded to them.

The scholarly consensus on Jewish monotheism has been apparently steady for centuries, and even today it is quite common to read books that deal with the subject in a non-problematic way. A symbolic sentence for this consensus can be found in Albright's book *From Stone Age to Christianity*: "Moses was as much a monotheist as was Hillel"², a rabbi who lived in the year 30 of Christian era. In a recent and well documented work devoted to Israel monotheism, Robert Karl Gnuse has described very well what he calls a "paradigm shift" in this field³: the monolithic conception of Jewish monotheism has been gradually abandoned by a significant part of Biblical scholars to leave place to "a gradual evolution of a complex Yahwistic religion from a polytheistic past to the monotheistic values". The author suggests the date of 1975 with Thompson's⁴ and Van Seters's⁵ works as the starting point of this "shift". I would also point to a brief article by Raphael Patai, whose title is «What is Hebrew Mythology?»: it was the text of a paper given in October 1964 in the New York Academy of Science.⁶ In this brief article, maybe for the first time in an explicit way, the "premonotheistic age" is described as part of Hebrew religion (and not only something out of which that religion was born). As I have noticed elsewhere⁷, this change in perspective (to use Gnuse's words, this "paradigm shift") was the first step to bring the question of monotheism from the field of theology into the field of history. Since then, other important steps have been made in the analysis of the "complex" of Israel religion. In 1991 the title of a brief article by Paul Hayman, «Monotheism. A misused Word in Jewish Studies?»⁸, suggests

¹ Paper presented at SBL International Meeting, Berlin 19-22 July 2002.

² Baltimore 1940.

³ R. K. Gnuse, *No Other Gods. Emergent Monotheism in Israel*, Sheffield 1997, p. 14.

⁴ T. Thompson, *The Historicity of Patriarchal Narratives*, Berlin 1974.

⁵ J. van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, New-Haven-London 1975.

⁶ Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences, ser. 2, 27 (1964), pp. 73-81, reprint in *On Jewish Folklore*, Detroit 1983, p. 45-55.

⁷ C. Peri, «La Bibbia ebraica come fonte storico-religiosa», in *Le discipline orientalistiche come scienze storiche. Atti del 1° Incontro «Orientalisti» (Roma, 6-7 Dicembre 2001)*, Roma 2002, pp. 79-85.

[<http://purl.org/net/orientalisti/atti2001.htm>]

⁸ JJS 42 (1991), 1-15.

that doubts and questions on the unitary and unchanging nature of Israel religion have become so radical that they sound almost provocative. In order to understand the extreme relativization which brings to Hayman's question, it will be useful to briefly consider what we usually intend when we use the word "monotheism", paying particular attention to the concepts we somehow unconsciously imply with it.

In the story of the approach to the study of monotheism, so well delineated by Gnuse and by other scholars⁹, we may recognise a double "ideological" approach. The first one is the evolutionist view: according to this point of view, religions evolve from polytheism (or rather from "paganism") to monotheism, through a series of stages - animism, totemism, polytheism, enotheism, and finally monotheism. This evolution is implicitly read as a progress from a primitive to an ethically more advanced form of religion. According to this view, mythological elements have been considered as relics from the past, already deprived of their religious significance. From this kind of approach comes the definition of any form of mythology in the Old Testament as a mere literary image, just like the use of Classical mythology in modern and contemporary poetry¹⁰.



The second common view is the idea that monotheism comes as a new element, from a revelation or from a conscious rebellion and ethical reaction to polytheism by a single historical character. According to this second point of view, the story of monotheism arrived from original purity to its definitive affirmation through episodes of corruption deriving from the outside (paganism of the milieu or forms of popular religion). In this case, mythological elements in the Hebrew Bible have been considered influence of "Baalism", i. e. of the religion of "foreigners". A typical example of this approach may be found in the title of a famous book by George E. Wright, "The Old Testament *against its Environment*"¹¹. This pattern, apparently more "historical", is in fact more deceitful, because it takes as a starting point a sort of Platonic idea of monotheism which cannot be touched by any eventual contradiction in the sources: it is in fact possible to explain anything as a "corruption" of the "original" or "orthodox" form of religion we are postulating.

One important element is common to both approaches: they tend to consider their source (essentially the Hebrew Bible) as a complex of independent elements, which can be isolated one from the other in order to use some of them in the construction of a specific version of the history of Hebrew religion.

⁹ See in particular A. Rainer, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, Louisville 1994 and P. D. Miller, "God and the Gods: History of Religion as an Approach and Context for Bible and Theology", in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology. Collected Essays*, Sheffield 2000, pp. 365-96.

¹⁰ For an analysis of the different approaches to the study of mythology in the Old Testament, see C. Peri, *Il regno del Nemico. La morte nella religione di Canaan*, forthcoming.

¹¹ London, 1950.

This process could be defined as “scholarly construction of Biblical monotheism”. In this perspective no room is left for the Hebrew Bible as a unitary product, conceived in a specific period of history and with a conscious religious and ideological finality. Wellhausen’s Documentary Hypothesis encouraged scholars to neglect the “final redaction”¹² and to individuate “archaic elements”, traces of “prophetic monotheism”, and “syncretistic aspects”. They are in fact deconstructing their source, to discuss only its constitutive parts, just as their unity was no more than a later accident without any cultural relevance.

Interesting analogies may be noticed in the study of another ancient/modern religion, Zoroastrianism-Mazdeism¹³. Even in this case, like in the study of Jewish religion, we have a sacred text, or rather a corpus - the Avesta - whose parts seem to be quite independent one from the other and whose date of composition appears highly uncertain. Moreover, there are many important contradictions between the message attributed to Zoroaster and the historical form of the religion, documented by other (later) texts. According to a famous definition by Alessandro Bausani¹⁴, Mazdeism is “a primary monotheism that failed”. This definition reflects the current opinion about the history of the religion of ancient Iran: after the predication of Zoroaster, Mazdeism has reintroduced under the guise of Yazatas the deities of ancient Iranian polytheism and has become (again?) a polytheistic religion¹⁵. This evolution may be traced in different sections of Avesta. Ilya Gershevich has even suggested two different names to the forms assumed by Zoroastrian religion, which correspond to different section of Avesta: Zarathustrianism (whose message can be read in the Gathas) e Zarathustricism (documented in Younger Avesta and “later” texts)¹⁶. Once again we have a postulated “pure” monotheism, isolated and recognised in a particular section of a composite text (considered, of course, the “most ancient” section). This monotheism is seen as the core of a new message, directly derived from Zoroaster’s individual and conscious rebellion to the religion of his own time.

¹² For a paradoxical but instructive critic of the excesses of Documentary Hypothesis, J. T. A. Clines, “New Directions in Pooh Studies: Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien zum Pu-Buch”, in Id. *On the Way to the Postmodern. Old Testament Essays 1967-1998*, II, Sheffield 1998, pp. 830-39. See also A. Catastini, “L’attribuzione letteraria degli scritti biblici”, *Materia Giudaica* 6/1 (2001), pp.16-27 (in particular pp. 22-25).

¹³ Considerations on more recent trends in Zoroastrian studies and their analogy with Biblical studies can be found in J. R. Hinnels, “Postmodernism and the study of Zoroastrianism”, in *Zoroastrian and Parsi Studies*, Aldershot 2000, pp. 7-25.

¹⁴ A. Bausani, “Note per una tipologia del monoteismo”, *SMSR* 28 (1957), pp. 67-88.

¹⁵ For such a reconstruction of the history of old Iranian religion, see G. Gnoli, *Zoroaster’s Time and Homeland. A Study on the Origin of Mazdeism and Related Problems*, Naples 1980, pp. 218 ff.

¹⁶ I. Gershevitch, “Zoroaster’s Own Contribution”, *JNES* 23 (1964), pp. 12-38.

In a famous article on the typology of monotheism, Alessandro Bausani defined Judaism, as well as Islam and Mazdeism (limited to Zoroaster's predication), "primary monotheisms", opposed to "secondary monotheisms" (Christianism and Bahaism). It is quite interesting to notice that "primary monotheisms" are described by the Italian scholar mainly by the contrast with the "secondary" ones: the main characters of God are absolute transcendence and *tremenda majestas*, while the God of secondary monotheism seeks the contact with men and He is a loving God more than a *tremendus* one; the uniqueness of God is absolute, while the secondary monotheism is characterised by a phenomenon which Bausani calls "fermentation of the one God", i.e. the existence of secondary divine characters, such as angels, personified attributes of God, or other kinds of theological entities. But maybe the main difference between the two forms of religion is the attitude towards the past: the primary monotheism cuts bridges with the past, which has ceased to have any value after the foundation of the "new" religion; secondary monotheism tends to assimilate it with a new meaning, according to the principle "this too is ours"¹⁷.

Now the question is: does this primary monotheism, as Bausani has described it, exist in historical reality? Leaving aside Islam, which from this respect poses anyway several problems, not unknown to Bausani himself¹⁸, let us consider the historical forms of Zoroastrianism and Judaism. Zoroaster's message, as we have seen, is in fact something we reconstruct without any degree of certainty, isolating it from a text of composite nature and probably written many centuries after the time in which Zoroaster lived (which is, by the way, absolutely hypothetical). The form of Mazdaic religion attested later on, at least from the Islamic conquest onward, is sensibly different. But, after all, Mazdaism was only a failed monotheism!

Let us consider Hebrew religion then, a so called successful case of primary monotheism. The situation is not much different. The pure Mosaic or prophetic monotheism is again something we postulate, isolating some concept from the Old Testament. The sources in their complex offer, from Middle Judaism onwards, an explicitly "fermented" Judaism, rich in angelology and demonology. On the other hand, we have a corpus of texts, which we call Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, where many contrasting elements can be found, but that, considered as a whole, is a huge intellectual operation of reinterpretation of the past. The Old Testament is in fact the first document of Jewish monotheism, or, more properly, the first attested act of the building of Jewish monotheism. No need to say that, if we had to classify it according to Bausani's criteria, we would of course define it a "secondary monotheism":

¹⁷ Several examples in A. Bausani, "Can Monotheism be taught? Further Considerations on the Typology of Monotheism", *Numen* 10 (1963), pp. 167-201. See also A. Bausani, "I fondamenti culturali dell'Iran moderno: Maometto o Dario?", *AION* 9 (1960), pp. 40-41.

¹⁸ A. Bausani, "Integration of Archaic Elements in the Islamic Religion (or in Monotheistic Religions)", *SMSR* 37 (1966), pp. 189-209.

“this too is ours” is the leitmotif, despite of what it may seem at a first sight, of the writing of all Biblical history.

We might even say, following the suggestion of Shaul Shaked¹⁹, that the Bible is very similar, *mutatis mutandis*, to Middle Age Mazdean texts. The main text of Mazdean theology were in fact written after the Islamic conquest, when “the priests had the stage entirely to themselves, imposing their code of a monolithic Zoroastrianism”. The creation of a canon, of a static theology, was the product of the serious decline of the normal religious belief and practice. When a religion is alive, notices again Shaked, there is a certain freedom in its practice. More than theological definitions, we have “substandards”, different streams, and most of all large grey areas of “common religious practice”, which is not exactly orthodox but without serious deviations (or without deviation which were, at that time, felt as serious). This common practice was formed by magic, sorcery, old rituals which have been eliminated, or at least pulled out of the foreground of the official religion. It is this “grey area” which should be the real object of the study of history of religion: we should never forget that the “canon”, the official selection of a particular kind of religion as the “right” one, was established much later (decades, or more often centuries later) and should not influence our analysis of ancient religions.

To come back to Hayman’s question, Is Monotheism a misused word in Jewish study? It is clear that monotheism was a very strong ideal of the author/authors of Biblical texts. The ideal of Jewish monotheism is, in a certain sense, exactly described by the set of ideas which Bausani calls “primary monotheism”. Judaism is in fact a primary monotheism that never really managed to cease to be a secondary one. The break with the “pagan” past, or with the “foreign” milieu is no more than a pious wish, that never really took place in history. But the construction of an acceptable past was the crucial finality of the composition (or redaction) of the Old Testament. In the Biblical books we find a more or less coherent image of what was considered acceptable (or what was not noticed as not acceptable) in Jewish past, at the moment of the definition of the collection we have. What we find in the Hebrew Bible is what the authors felt as sufficiently monotheistic to be included in their religious past. Later authors and commentators will not always agree on their vision: some corrections will be made or, more often, a patient work of diffusion of the “right” interpretation will allow Judaism to increase its distance from a sometimes embarrassing past²⁰.

¹⁹ S. Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation. Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran*, London 1994.

²⁰ Several examples of the effects of ideological and religious interpretation in lexicography can be found in G. Garbini, *Note di lessicografia ebraica*, Brescia 1998. Something similar happened in folklore, where ancient ceremonies were given a different interpretation during centuries: see J. Z. Lauterbach, «The Ceremony of Breaking a Glass at Weddings», *Hebrew Union College Annual* 2 (1925), 351-80 e «Tashlik. A Study in Jewish Ceremonies», *Hebrew Union College Annual* 11 (1936), 207-340.

In its historical development, monotheism is a dynamic process rather than a static reality. Its asymptote is what may be described as primary monotheism, but in its historical reality it always assumes the form of a secondary monotheism. The natural evolution of monotheism explains its tendency to hide the tracks of preceding religious realities, but without deleting them completely. The daily life of a religion is made out of more or less evident legacies of its past. To borrow the words of a last century's scholar, «the religion of yesterday becomes the superstition of today».²¹

Writing the Biblical texts, the authors did not intend to cancel the religious and ideological past of their people, but they wanted to provide the “right” way of interpreting it. This, of course, implied a deep transformation of the data. The intellectual operation that was made in the Hebrew Bible was a process of “de-semanticization”: old words had to lose their original meaning to express a new one. But it was important to keep using the same words, not to break the tradition. A formal link to the tradition in the ancient world was the only possible way of legitimising a religious reform. Antiquity and tradition were guarantees of truth: we find an example of this when Herodotus²² describes in admiration the succession of the generations of the priests in Thebes, testified by the statues preserved in the temple, and takes its length as guarantee of the reliability of what the representatives of that tradition said to him. For this reason I believe that in the Hebrew Bible are still preserved important elements for the study of the history of Hebrew religion. Though written centuries later and in a completely new ideological perspective, the Old Testament can still be considered the most important indirect (or secondary) source for the study of ancient Hebrew religion.

²¹J. A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, Philadelphia 1913, 70.

²² *History II*, 143.