

# 1

---

## An Essay on Israelite Religion\*

Gary A. Rendsburg  
Cornell University

In the study of religion it is important to distinguish between "official religion," by which is meant the official beliefs and practices of a religion, and "popular religion," by which is meant the beliefs and practices as they actually are held or practiced by the adherents of the religion. A modern example is convenient: the Roman Catholic Church officially opposes birth control and abortion and does not allow non-priests to celebrate the Eucharist. Yet, in actual practice many Catholics, especially in the United States, use birth control and to a lesser extent undergo abortions, and in certain parts of the world such as Latin America and Africa, where there are insufficient numbers of priests, laymen officiate at the mass.

Such dichotomies can be found in all religions, and it is important to keep this distinction in mind as we turn to the religion of ancient Israel. What I shall describe in this essay is the official view of ancient Israelite religion as presented in the Bible. As this sentence implies, I understand the Bible as embodying the official beliefs and practices of ancient Israel. This may be a difficult position to hold, either because it is unprovable or because we may be imposing an "official religion" on ancient Israel when none existed. But, without entering into a long discussion about authorship and canonicity, I think it is safe to assume that the biblical authors were individuals who crafted or held to the dictates of what later emerged as official, or shall we say, normative, Judaism.

---

\*The intention of this essay is a general presentation, unencumbered by scholarly jargon and apparatus. Thus, for example, I deliberately have excluded all references to secondary literature. The essay contains footnotes, but these notes serve only to clarify various points raised in the body of the article.

The popular religion of many Israelites is another topic altogether. It can be reconstructed from biblical references to popular practices and from archaeological evidence. But I restrict myself in this essay to the official beliefs and practices, with special attention to the conception of God, and only at the very end of the essay will I say a brief word about popular religion.

It is important to bear in mind that never does the Bible present ancient Israelite theology systematically. Such theological writing arose only in the wake of Greek philosophy, and, with the possible exception of Philo (1st Century C.E.), not until Saadia Gaon (10th Century C.E.) would the Beliefs and Opinions of official or normative Judaism (thus the title of Saadia's work) be presented in systematic fashion. The way of the Bible is different. In the main we have historiographic writing told through a theological perspective. That is, the Bible records Israel's understanding of its history, which at every turn is governed by God's hand in human history.

Thus the scholar who wishes to reconstruct ancient Israelite religion is forced to comb the Bible's diverse texts in order to extract from them statements which reveal the beliefs and practices of ancient Israel. Accordingly, in what follows, note that we shall jump from this text to that text. Yet by synthesizing this material into a whole, we shall see that a coherent and understandable picture emerges.

I begin with three definitions: "polytheism" is the belief in many gods; "monolatry" is the worship of one god; and "monotheism" is the belief in one god. The distinction between the last two can be made clearer by expanding the definitions: "monolatry" is the worship of one god, but without denying the existence of other gods; "monotheism" is the belief in one god with a denial of the existence of all other gods.<sup>1</sup>

At first glance many readers of the Bible simply believe that Israel was monotheistic while all its neighbors were polytheistic. The second half of this statement is true, but the first half presents too simplistic a view. The move from polytheism to monotheism is not a direct jump; instead there is a long period of about 850 years, that is, most of the biblical period, in which the intermediate step of monolatry characterizes ancient Israelite religion. Accordingly, in our tracing the development of ancient Israelite religion, we will concentrate mainly on monolatry and

---

<sup>1</sup>Some scholars prefer the term "henotheism" instead of "monolatry" (while others will attempt to see a fine distinction between them), but I eschew the term. "Monolatry" is much to be preferred because its etymology means "worship of one," while "henotheism" etymologizes as "belief in one" and thus does not differ from "monotheism" (also "belief in one").

only towards the end of the biblical period will we enter into a discussion of monotheism.

The biblical tradition recognizes that Abraham's father and earlier ancestors were polytheists: "In days of old, your forefathers, Terah, father of Abraham and father of Nahor, dwelled beyond the River [Euphrates] and worshiped other gods" (Joshua 24:2). The evidence from the ancient Near East bears this out, since all other ancient Near Eastern religions were polytheistic or pagan.<sup>2</sup> The biblical tradition further reckons that the break from polytheism and the move to monolatry occurred with Abraham. The date of Abraham is debated among scholars; some place him as early as 2000 B.C.E. though in my view a later date of c. 1400 B.C.E. is preferable. There are no biblical statements which declare plainly that Abraham was the first monolatrists,<sup>3</sup> but the follow-up sentence to the above quotation certainly implies such: "But I [God] took your father Abraham from beyond the River [Euphrates] and led him through the whole land of Canaan" (Joshua 24:3). Moreover, throughout the Bible Israel's history is traced as far back as Abraham – usually in conjunction with Isaac and Jacob in phrases such as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (see, for example, Exodus 3:6) – but no earlier.

Thus I conclude that in c. 1400 B.C.E. the religion of ancient Israel emerged as a monolatry, centered around the person of Abraham, even though we lack contemporary documentation to confirm this and instead must rely on biblical texts written four or five centuries later.<sup>4</sup>

The God of Israel was known by several names.<sup>5</sup> First and foremost is "Yahweh," the proper name of God. The exact meaning of this term is debated, but its root meaning is the verb "to be" and thus it means something like "the one who is," "the one who exists," etc., or with causative function "the one who brings things into being," "the one who brings things into existence," etc. The enigmatic phrase "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14) suggests that the former simple implication of the verb "to be" lies behind the name Yahweh, though an argument still can be made for the latter causative function. The form Yahweh is translated in most English Bibles by the word LORD, written in upper-case letters.

---

<sup>2</sup>I use the term "pagan" not in any pejorative fashion, but as equivalent to "polytheistic," and simply to vary my language in this essay.

<sup>3</sup>Later in Judaism various midrashim were written to fill in this gap; these stories describe with great flavor how Abraham came to the realization of the worship of the one God.

<sup>4</sup>I date the authorship of the book of Genesis to c. 950 B.C.E.

<sup>5</sup>In this essay I follow the convention of most scholars in using "God" (with upper-case "G") when referring to the God of Israel, but in using "god" (with lower case "g") when referring to another deity.

A second name for God is the term "Elohim" which is the generic word for "god" in Hebrew (with cognates in all the Semitic languages; compare, for example, Arabic "Allah"). Its generic quality is indicated by the fact that it is used also to refer to other gods, for example, Chemosh is called the Elohim of Moab (1 Kgs 11:33). Further complicating the use of the word Elohim is its plural grammatical form. Obviously, when Elohim is used to refer to a single deity, whether it be Yahweh the God of Israel or Chemosh the God of Moab, the noun is grammatically singular, and the verbs, adjectives, and pronouns that agree with it are singular. But there also are cases where the word Elohim is plural; this can be determined either by context or more explicitly by the use of plural verbs, adjectives, and pronouns in grammatical agreement. We shall have occasion below to show examples of this plural use of the word Elohim. In English Bibles "Elohim" is translated "God" when it refers to the God of Israel, "god" when it refers to a pagan deity, and "gods" when it refers to pagan deities in the plural.

The Bible also uses other names for the God of Israel, though they are far less frequent than Yahweh and Elohim. Among these are Shaddai, a term of unknown etymology, though traditionally translated "Almighty"; and El, which is at once a shorter form of the word Elohim, and thus also rendered "God" in English Bibles, and also the name of the chief deity of the Canaanite pantheon. Occasionally names can be fused, for example, in Genesis 2-3 we encounter "Yahweh Elohim," and occasionally we find "El Shaddai" (for example, Genesis 17:1).

If we seek some historical development in the use of these names, we can reconstruct the following scenario. Abraham knew God either by the generic words El (the shorter form) or Elohim (the longer form) or by the more specific and yet obscure term Shaddai. The name Yahweh seems to have been introduced at a later time, presumably by Moses; a key verse has God say to Moses "I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make myself known to them by My name Yahweh" (Exodus 6:2-3). Corroborating evidence for the suggestion that Yahweh was introduced to Israel only during the time of Moses comes from various biblical passages (Deuteronomy 33:2, Judges 5:5. etc.) and certain Egyptian texts that identify Yahweh with the Sinai desert. Accordingly, we conclude that the local deity of the Sinai region, perhaps worshiped by the Midianites as well, was Yahweh. Moses became a devotee of Yahweh during his desert experience among the Midianites; later Israel in general experienced the desert, adopted the worship of Yahweh, and fused this deity with El/Elohim/Shaddai of earlier Israel.

The worship of the one God became a distinctively Israelite religious feature. But the existence of other gods still is countenanced in the Bible, and thus we repeat our earlier statement that Israelite religion was a monolatry which only at a later stage evolved into a monotheism. I offer here a sampling of biblical passages which recognize the existence of other gods:

"Who is like You, O Yahweh, among the gods" (Exodus 15:11).<sup>6</sup> Note that other gods are believed to exist, but that Yahweh is superior to all of them.

"I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I am Yahweh" (Exodus 12:12). This passage is part of the forecast of the tenth plague; the gods of Egypt are reckoned to exist, but Yahweh will defeat all of them.

"You shall have no other gods besides Me" (Exodus 20:3). The first commandment in the Ten Commandments is as close a definition of monolatry that we find in the Bible; other gods exist but Israel is to worship only Yahweh.

"Elohim stands in the divine assembly, among the gods He judges" (Psalm 82:1), "I said, 'You are gods, divine beings all of you; however, like men you must die'" (Psalm 82:6-7).<sup>7</sup> Psalm 82 is a remarkable composition which has Elohim standing in the divine assembly, i.e. the pantheon of gods, and judging the other deities. He derides them for their inability to care honestly for mankind, and concludes that they must sacrifice their divine status and die like men.<sup>8</sup>

"The gods saw that the daughters of men were beautiful and they took them as wives" (Genesis 6:2). Typical of ancient mythological texts, gods (typically male) and humans (typically female) can have intercourse and produce offspring. Such is what the biblical text describes. Note that this story is used to epitomize the depravity of the world in need of destruction by the ensuing flood.

These five illustrations are only a sampling of numerous biblical passages which could be put forward to demonstrate the point. But by now the point should be clear. Israel was a monolatry which recognized the existence of other gods but which limited worship to Yahweh. Or to put in other terms, if you asked an ancient Israelite about Ra, the sun-god

---

<sup>6</sup>Most English translations, probably in a monotheistic mode, mistranslate the Hebrew word אֱלֹהִים here as "mighty, celestials, etc.," though clearly the term means "gods," i.e., the plural of El discussed above.

<sup>7</sup>Again, probably due to monotheistic tendencies, many English Bibles translate the word אֱלֹהִים in these verses as "judges," though clearly it can mean only "gods."

<sup>8</sup>In ancient Near Eastern mythological texts it is not uncommon for gods to die; sometimes they are resurrected but sometimes they simply die and remain dead.

of Egypt, about Zeus, the chief god of the Greeks, or about Baal, the storm-god of the Canaanites, the answer would have been: yes, they are gods, but they are not for us to worship, they are for the Egyptians or the Greeks or the Canaanites to worship.

Until now we have considered only the *quantitative* distinction between Israelite religion and other ancient Near Eastern religions. That is, Israel worshiped one deity while others in the ancient world worshiped large pantheons. But there is another aspect of Israel's distinctive theology which is just as important, the one which I call the *qualitative* distinction. This distinction revolves around the manner in which the deity was understood to manifest himself (or herself). In the pagan realm the gods were associated with aspects of nature, thus in the typical pantheon there was a heaven god, an earth goddess, a sun god, a moon goddess, a sea god, a desert god, a river god, planetary gods, a wind god, etc. To the polytheist no difference was felt between the deity and the natural item. Thus, for example, in ancient Egyptian, Ra is both the name of the sun-god and the common word for sun. The priest ministering in a temple of Ra and the astronomer charting the sun's progress across the sky understood their objects to be one and the same. In short, the pagan deities manifested themselves in nature.

In Israel, by contrast, Yahweh was not associated with nature, rather he was seen as the creator of all nature and as the one who ruled over nature. Instead of being a nature deity, Yahweh was perceived as a God of history. Yahweh manifested Himself not through natural occurrences such as sunrises, sea storms, and river inundations, but through His intervention in human history. The Bible notes the contrast between Yahweh, on the one hand, and the pagan deities, on the other, in the following episode. When Yahweh reveals Himself to Elijah, we read: "There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of Yahweh, but Yahweh was not in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake, but Yahweh was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, fire, but Yahweh was not in the fire. And after the fire, a soft quiet voice" (1 Kings 19:11-12). The voice, of course, is that of God, who is not to be seen in natural phenomena such as wind, earthquake, and fire, but who can be heard in direct speech to mankind.

God's identification as a God of history who involves Himself in human history is represented by two covenants, or bonds. The Israelites believed that God had established a covenant with Noah after the flood (Genesis 9:1-17), and since all human beings are descended from Noah, this covenant represents God's general concern for all humanity. But more central to the religion of ancient Israel is the second covenant that God established. The Israelites believed that this bond was forged between Yahweh and Abraham and that it was an eternal covenant

(Genesis 17:1-14). It does not supersede the covenant with Noah, which also continues for eternity, but it declares that God has a special relationship with a small subset of mankind, namely, the people of Israel.

God's intervention in human affairs is seen in various specific ways, especially vis-à-vis His relationship with Israel. He is the law giver (and only in Israel is the law considered divine in origin; elsewhere in the ancient Near East the king was the promulgator of law), He fights Israel's battles (Exodus 15:3 reads "Yahweh is a man of war"), and He is in full control of Israel's destiny. Further demonstration of this conception of God among the Israelites is the fact that all other peoples in the ancient world were governed by a king (this holds true naturally for large empires such as Egypt and Assyria, but also for exceedingly small city-states [see Joshua 12:9-24 in particular]), but Israel resisted this step. For Israel there could be no human king, because only God was king. Witness the major opposition to appointing a human king led by the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 8).<sup>9</sup> Of course, in the end political events turned the tide and eventually human kingship gained divine approval in the personage of David and in his royal line of descendants. Still, throughout the Bible one senses that human kingship is a compromise of Israelite theology. Only God should be king, a point which devolves from the perception of God as a God of history.

When discussing the uniqueness of Israel's religion in the ancient world, most people emphasize the quantitative distinction discussed earlier, the issue of one vs. many, and then forget to mention the qualitative distinction, the issue of God of history vs. gods of nature. The latter is as important if not more important than the former, however. And we can illustrate this point by referring to an attempt at monolatry in ancient Egypt. In the 14th Century B.C.E. Pharaoh Akhenaton suppressed the worship of all the deities in the Egyptian pantheon with the exception of Aton, the god of the solar-disk. So we here have another example of monolatry (though a short-lived one, since it lasted only during this monarch's reign), but note how qualitatively it is very different than Israelite monolatry. In Akhenaton's brand of religion, the one deity worshiped is still a nature deity. Only in Israel was the move to the worship of one God accompanied by a new understanding of the divine.

---

<sup>9</sup>During the course of this essay, I will mention various prophets. These individuals served as spokesmen for God (that is the primary definition of prophet in the biblical context; forecasting the future is a secondary issue). The Israelites believed that God made His will known directly to these selected individuals, and that they in turn were granted the gift of transmitting the divine message to the populus at large.

This conception of God as a God of history as opposed to a god of nature explains Israel's prohibition against making an idol of God. The polytheists often portrayed their nature deities in the corresponding forms of nature. For example, the Canaanite god Baal was depicted as human in form, but as one holding lightning bolts in his hands; thus he is limited to this aspect of nature in keeping with his role as storm-god. Or, the Egyptians portrayed Ra as the ever-shining sun, but this limits the deity to just that aspect and causes one to wonder what power Ra might have during the night hours.<sup>10</sup> Yahweh, however, as a God of history and as a God supreme above nature, is limitless; an idol would by necessity limit Yahweh to the function implied by the idol. In this manner we can explain the very wording of the prohibition against idols: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters beneath the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them" (Exodus 20:4-5). Ancient Hebrew did not possess a word for the abstract concept "nature," so instead the passage delineates the tripartite division of nature into heaven, earth, and water.<sup>11</sup> In short, nature gods can be portrayed by idols; the God of history cannot.

This understanding of God permeated Israelite religious life. A comparison of holiness in the pagan world with holiness in Israel is revealing. In the pagan world holiness is ascribed primarily to particular places, whether natural places like high mountains or man-made places such as temples. In Israel holiness is attached primarily to time. The first and foremost thing considered holy in the Bible is the Sabbath day (Genesis 2:3, Exodus 20:8, etc.). Of special note is the fact that the creation story of ancient Babylonia ends with the construction and sanctification of the temple to Marduk in the city of Babylon, whereas the creation story in the Bible ends with the sanctification of the Sabbath. Nature gods translates to holiness in physical space; a God of history translates to holiness in time. And while it is true that eventually Jerusalem comes to be considered the holy city, Mt. Zion the holy mountain, and the Temple the holy site, these are secondary developments in ancient Israel. Long before Jerusalem was even an Israelite city, the religion already had developed the notion of holiness in time. Moreover, when Jerusalem was destroyed, the religion, culture, and people of Israel were able to persevere and continue. This notion

<sup>10</sup> Is this why the tenth plague strikes at midnight? Certainly the eighth and ninth plagues (locust swarm and darkness [the latter presumably caused by sandstorm]) are attacks at Ra since they blot out the sun even in the daytime.

<sup>11</sup> Compare the creation story in Genesis 1 with a similar partition of the natural world.



also explains why later Judaism had no interest in locating as important a site as Mt. Sinai,<sup>12</sup> and why already in the biblical period the site of Moses's burial spot was forgotten (Deuteronomy 34:6). The locations of these places simply are unimportant. No holiness should be ascribed to them,<sup>13</sup> because the primary venue of holiness in Israel was situated in time, namely, the Sabbath.

A second arena in which the perception of God as a God as history manifests itself is the calendar of ancient Israel. Other peoples in the ancient world had festivals associated with nature's cycles. Harvests were celebrated, new moons were occasions for feasting, in Egypt the annual inundation of the Nile River was a festival, etc. In Israel certain holidays originated as agricultural festivals and retained such significances, but historical commemorations were attached to them. Today we take for granted that holidays commemorate historical events (for example, Thanksgiving, Independence Day, etc.). But in the ancient world this was not the case, until Israel began celebrating historical events. The crucial event which formed Israel's national conscience was the Exodus from Egypt; aspects of this historical event became associated with different holidays. Passover, celebrating the spring harvest, became the commemoration of the Exodus itself; and Sukkot, celebrating the fall harvest, became the commemoration of the wandering in the desert. Later, Shavuot, celebrating the summer harvest, became associated with the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

Other holy days in ancient Israel were the new moon and the Sabbath. The new moon, of course, marks an event in nature, and thus may appear to disprove the point. However, it is noteworthy that as Israelite religion developed, the importance of the new moon festival decreased, so that in later Judaism it was relegated to a minor festival.

The Sabbath, by contrast, is of crucial importance. The aforementioned Israelite festivals grew out of nature's cycle and were accorded historical significances as an overlay. The Sabbath, by contrast, is unique in the ancient world because for the first time we have a holy day not associated with nature's cycle at all. There is nothing in nature that operates on a seven-day cycle (not even the moon's phases, for after only a few lunar cycles no longer would the phases fall on the Sabbath). The Sabbath, as described above, is the classic instance of holiness in time, a holy day totally independent of anything in nature.

---

<sup>12</sup>Contrast Christianity whose Greek Orthodox branch founded a monastery on what it believed to be Mt. Sinai.

<sup>13</sup>I realize I am overstating the case since certain biblical texts refer implicitly or explicitly to Mt. Sinai as holy.

A third way in which Israel's view of God had a major effect on Israelite life is the role of history. Other peoples had royal annals, king lists, and other historical documents, but nowhere in the ancient world did history telling permeate a society as it did in Israel. Scholars often consider the Greeks to be the originators of history writing and refer to Herodotus as "the father of history," but neither point is correct. Before the Greeks began to write history, the ancient Israelites already had created historical texts telling the story of their nation.<sup>14</sup> The great narrative which spans Genesis to Kings antedates our earliest Greek historians. But more important for our present concern is the fact that the telling of history became a sacred act in Israel. Again and again we read of the importance of narrating history. Note the following sample passages: "Remember the days of old, consider the years of generations past; ask you father, he will tell you, your elders, they will inform you" (Deuteronomy 32:7); and "Relating the praises of Yahweh to the next generation, His might and the wonders He performed; He established a decree in Jacob, set a teaching in Israel, charging our fathers to make them known to their children, that a future generation might know, children yet to be born, and in turn tell their children" (Psalm 78:4-6). No other people in antiquity had the consciousness of history like Israel. This, I submit, results from the unique conception of a God who manifests Himself in history.

A fourth point which may be treated briefly is Israel's prohibition against all types of magic and divination. The former refers to attempts by humans to affect nature (i.e., gain power over the gods); the latter refers to attempts by humans to secure information about things hidden or about the future. In the polytheistic world such practices were accepted. But in the world of ancient Israel, whose God was not a nature deity but rather a God who revealed Himself in history, magic and divination could play no role. God was in full control and no amount of magic could alter things; and God communicated directly with His people so that divination was unnecessary.

We now turn our attention to what I call the geography of God, the meaning of which will become apparent. Although God was considered limitless and could not be portrayed by an idol, there is an aspect of Israelite religion in which a clear limit did exist. But it is interesting to note that the limit is one imposed on the worshipers, not on the deity. Although God can accompany His people Israel to Egypt and there

---

<sup>14</sup>The Greek historians may have written more objective histories (if such a thing as objective history writing exists). But the biblical works, even with their theological interpretation of history and overlay of epic material, remain history nonetheless.

inflict punishments on the Egyptian people and gods, Israel is unable to worship God in Egypt. God can be worshiped only in the land of Israel, or in the Sinai region, either because it was considered a sort of no-man's land or because Yahweh's origins are there. When Moses requests permission from Pharaoh to worship God, he says, "We need to go a distance of three days into the wilderness and sacrifice to Yahweh our God" (Exodus 8:23). It is true that in the preceding sentence Moses claims that what the Israelites sacrifice is an abomination to the Egyptians, and thus there is a good excuse to worship Yahweh outside the land of Egypt. But Egyptian records inform us that the most commonly sacrificed animals in Egyptian temples were sheep and cattle, as was also the case among the Israelites. Moses' claim is therefore subject to interpretation, but the resolution of this problem affects our discussion only indirectly. The point remains that the need was felt to sacrifice to Yahweh in the Sinai, and not in Egypt proper.

This geographical limit for the worship of God is made clear in another biblical story. When Saul pursues David and seeks to expel him from Israelite territory, David responds to Saul "they [i.e., Saul's men] have driven me out today, preventing me from participating in the inheritance of Yahweh, saying, 'Go worship other gods'" (1 Samuel 26:19). The implication is clear: leaving Israelite land, that is, "the inheritance of Yahweh," means having to worship other deities. In short, Yahweh can be worshiped only in the land of Israel. Incidentally, in addition, this passage is another example of a biblical text which recognizes the existence of other gods.

Until now we have discussed how the Israelites conceived of their God and how this conception affected Israelite religious life. But we have not discussed how the Israelites actually worshipped God. The answer is, as implied above, through sacrifice. In this regard, the Israelites did not differ from their neighbors, because sacrifice was the commonest mode of worship in the ancient Near East. There is an inherent difference, however. Sacrifice begins in hoary antiquity, and the system most likely is based upon the notion that the gods require food and drink and that it is the duty of mankind to insure that such needs are met. Moreover, since a good meal also must smell good, the sacrifices were accompanied by incense. Still further, since we all enjoy musical background to a good meal, music became a feature of the cult as well.<sup>15</sup> In reading ancient Near Eastern texts, there is every indication that the polytheists believed that these notions about sacrifice were operative.

---

<sup>15</sup>We use the word "cult" here not in the contemporary sense of a non-normative religious group, but in its academic usage defined as the specific system of ritual or worship practiced by a religious group.

That is to say, they believed that their gods had the same needs as humans and that indeed they ate and drank the offerings presented by their worshippers.

When we turn to the Bible, one gains a different picture altogether. The sacrificial system common to the Near East was continued by the Israelites, but the notion that Yahweh actually ate and drank these offerings was foreign.<sup>16</sup> How then does one explain the use of sacrifice in ancient Israel? Religious ritual is the most conservative aspect of any culture or society, so much so that even after the significations of specific rituals no longer are meaningful, the rituals nevertheless are perpetuated (often with new significations attached to them). Thus, while the Israelites did not understand that Yahweh actually ate and drank the sacrifices and libations, sacrifice was so much a part of religious ritual in the ancient world that it remained an inherent part of Israelite religious life, too.

The locus of the cult was a portable tent shrine constructed in the desert (while the Israelites were en route from Egypt to Canaan) known in English as the Tabernacle, and the individuals who officiated at the cult were the priests. The Tabernacle included a variety of accoutrements, including an altar for the sacrifices, a laver for the priests to wash, a special lamp known in Hebrew as the menorah, and so on. At the center of the Tabernacle stood the ark of the covenant, housing the two tablets of the Decalogue (or Ten Commandments). This Tabernacle served for the Israelites, who were largely pastoralist and rural, in the manner that a temple served for a urban society. There is a major difference, however. At the center of an ancient Near Eastern temple stood the idol of the god or goddess venerated at the site. At the center of the Israelite Tabernacle, of course, could be no idol; instead the ark of the covenant, representing God's bond to the people of Israel, was the focus of the Tabernacle. This distinction is borne out in Exodus 25:8, where God tells Moses that the Israelites should "make for Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." If this were in a pagan context, the last words would be "in it," because the temple was viewed as the house of the deity. True, the Israelites used the same expression "house of the LORD," but at the same time they realized that no Tabernacle or temple could contain their God. Accordingly, the

---

<sup>16</sup>An exceptional statement is Genesis 8:21 that "the LORD smelled the sweet savor." But note that the same statement is made of the Babylonian gods in the Babylonian version of the flood story in the Gilgamesh Epic. Given the obviously close relationship between the biblical and Babylonian accounts, and given the high probability that the former is borrowed from the latter, this passage thus can be explained.

Tabernacle is a sanctuary but it shall house only the ark – and not God – and the ark will represent God's presence among His people.

Here in the Tabernacle the priests offered the various sacrifices for Yahweh. The book of Leviticus presents in great detail the various types of sacrifices. There were daily sacrifices, additional sacrifices on the Sabbath and on the holidays, sacrifices for special occasions, etc. The priesthood was hereditary and was limited to the tribe of Levi. In passing we may note that prayer (the commonest form of worship today in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) existed in ancient Israel, but only as a private matter. The public form of worship was the sacrificial system.

As noted above, the Tabernacle originated in the desert period of Israel's history. Once the Israelites entered the land of Canaan and settled there permanently, additional sites were available for sacrifice, but the Tabernacle at all times remained the central shrine.

At this stage it is worth summarizing the material. The picture which emerges from the above discussion is as follows. Israelite religion was a monolatry: one God, known formally as Yahweh, was worshiped, but the existence of other deities was accepted. Unlike the pagan gods and goddesses who were associated with nature, Yahweh manifested Himself through history. Yahweh could not be worshiped anywhere and everywhere, but rather only in Israel or in Sinai. This picture describes Israelite religion for the whole period from the slavery in Egypt (13th Century B.C.E.) through the end of the monarchy (586 B.C.E.). There were some changes and developments in Israelite theology through the course of time, but the picture portrayed here fits generally into this span of approximately 600 years.

One change centered around the sacrificial cult just described. When Israel settled in the land of Canaan, it underwent a sociological change in that the people became more and more urbanized. A shift to urbanization meant that the Tabernacle would have to be replaced by a more permanent structure. This structure took the form of a temple in the newly established capital city of Jerusalem. David had laid the groundwork for building a temple, but the construction project itself was carried out by his son and successor Solomon and was completed c. 950 B.C.E. Whatever symbolism was embodied in the older Tabernacle now was transferred to the new Temple. Most importantly, the ark now was situated in the center of the newly built Temple. Furthermore, in time, the additional shrines which dotted the countryside of the land of Israel came to be seen as obsolete. Scholars refer to this shift as the centralization of worship, meaning that only in the Jerusalem Temple could sacrifices to Yahweh now be performed. However, exactly when the move to centralization occurred is debated; some scholars would

date it as early as 950 B.C.E. when the Temple was completed, others see it as a gradual development which was not effected until c. 700 B.C.E.

Another change which deserves mention is a shift in the geographical limitations of Yahweh. The worship of Yahweh still was limited to the land of Israel (and indeed, as just noted, with the centralization of worship, the cult was further restricted to just the Jerusalem Temple), but Yahweh's concerns were expanded. It is true that Israel always saw God as the God of all humanity (represented by the covenant with Noah), but the Bible consistently emphasizes the point that God's single and special concern is the people of Israel (represented by the covenant with Abraham). The prophets starting with Amos c. 750 B.C.E. began to speak of God as having more international concerns. God could call to task not just Israel for its sins, but also foreign nations for their sins (Amos 1:3-2:3). Similarly, God was responsible not only for Israel's history, but he also destined other peoples' histories. In the words of Amos, "True, I brought up Israel from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and Aram from Kir" (Amos 9:7). That is to say, Yahweh is responsible not only for Israel's exodus, but also for the exoduses of other peoples as well.<sup>17</sup> Thus commencing with Amos and continuing with his successors, the prophets expanded the involvement of God in history from concern only with Israel to concern on the international scene. Most likely, the internationalization of Yahweh is the result of the historical circumstances of Israel's role in the international community. Until the reigns of David and Solomon (c. 1000-930 B.C.E.), Israel was a people restricted to the sparsely populated hill country of Canaan. Under these two kings, Israel expanded into an international empire ruling over neighboring peoples. And while this empire collapsed with the death of Solomon, there was no turning back. Though not to the same extent as under the united monarchy of David and Solomon, the two smaller kingdoms of Israel and Judah continued to play roles in the international scene. Eventually these political and historical factors effected Israel's understanding of its God, who now became a player on the international scene. This development would culminate with the understanding of God as a universal deity and the move to monotheism.

Again it was historical events which influenced Israelite religion and effected the changes noted in the previous sentence. In 586 B.C.E. the kingdom of Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians, and the Temple in

---

<sup>17</sup>The migration of the Philistines from Caphtor (the Aegean in general, or Crete in particular) is attested archaeologically. Unfortunately, we do not know the location of Kir and cannot place the Aramean movement in a historical context.

Jerusalem was burned to the ground.<sup>18</sup> Large numbers of Judahites were exiled to Babylonia where they began new lives. The question arose: how to worship Yahweh in exile? No longer could sacrifices be offered to God, especially since the only officially sanctioned locale for such worship was the Temple in Jerusalem, now lying in ruin. But there was another option, and that was prayer. As described above, for centuries sacrifice was the form of public worship in Israel, and prayer was restricted largely to private occasions. Although the evidence is scant, it appears that during the exile prayer developed as a public affair (Psalm 126 is a good example, praying for the restoration of Zion).

Yahweh could be worshiped in Babylonia, albeit through prayer and not through sacrifice, because the prophets already had expanded the notion of God from localized deity to one with international concern. The stage had been set, and Israel in exile grasped the difference. Contrast what was stated earlier, that during the period of Israel's sojourn in Egypt, the people could not worship Yahweh in a foreign land. Now if Yahweh could be worshiped in a foreign land, a new phenomenon for Israel, then the next logical step was to question the very existence of the Babylonian gods. And if the Babylonian gods do not exist, that is, they are merely figments in the imaginations of the Babylonian people, the same must be true of other pantheons. And if this is true, then there must be only one God. The Bible does not lay out for us the thought process that I have just outlined, but such can be inferred from the writings of the remarkable prophet known to scholars as Second Isaiah.<sup>19</sup> Here we read of the nothingness of pagan gods and the oneness of Yahweh, for example, "They carry it on their shoulder and transport it, they put it down, it stands, it does not budge from its place; if they cry out to it, it does not answer, it cannot save them from their distress.... For I am God and there is none other, I am God, there is none like Me" (Isaiah 46:7-9). The latter statement and many others like it in Second Isaiah are the earliest declarations of monotheism in the Bible. No longer are other gods countenanced, rather Yahweh is the only God, a truly universal God. The prophet emphasizes this new theology by reiterating the point throughout his writings. Note the following passages: "Before Me no god was formed, and after Me none shall exist,

---

<sup>18</sup>The kingdom of Israel had been destroyed in 721 B.C.E. by the Assyrians, but the main biblical tradition is that of Judah and its capital Jerusalem. Thus we concern ourselves here with the fate of Judah.

<sup>19</sup>The canonical book of Isaiah is to be divided into two parts: First Isaiah (chapters 1-39) presenting the words of the prophet of Jerusalem c. 740-700 B.C.E. (along with an historical appendix), and Second Isaiah (chapters 40-66) presenting the words of the prophet of the Babylonian exile and the return to Judah c. 540-510 B.C.E.

I, I, Yahweh, and there is no savior but Me" (Isaiah 43:10-11); "I am the first, I am the last, and there is no god besides Me" (Isaiah 44:6); "I am Yahweh, there is no other, besides Me there is no god.... There is none but Me, I am Yahweh, there is no other" (Isaiah 45:5-6).

The shift from monolatry to monotheism has an effect on the understanding of the covenant. A tacit assumption of the covenant under monolatry is that other nations have similar arrangements with their gods, but that Yahweh is linked only to Israel and vice versa. But if there is only God, in what way does Israel remain special? Second Isaiah addresses this issue as well. True, Yahweh is now the God of all the world and of all people, that is, a truly universal deity, but Israel still has a special place in God's heart and indeed has an important role to play in God's plan. Israel is still God's special covenant partner, and because of this special relationship Israel must serve as the "light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6).<sup>20</sup> In other words, Israel alone knows of Yahweh as the only God of the universe; it now must shine forward and serve as an example to other nations to come to the same realization. Of course, history would not allow Israel this role directly, for it never possessed the political power necessary for the achievement of this goal. But in the sense that Christianity and Islam evolved from Judaism, the vision of Second Isaiah obtained some realization since large numbers of peoples in the world followed the lead of Judaism in adopting a monotheistic religion.

Within Second Isaiah's lifetime the Judahites were given permission by the Persians (who had conquered the Babylonians) to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple. Sacrifices to Yahweh were reestablished there. But the changes brought about during the exile remained. Worship of Yahweh no longer was limited to the land of Israel and to the Jerusalem Temple in particular. True, only in the Temple could sacrifices be offered, but the move to a universalistic monotheism meant that Yahweh could be worshiped anywhere in the world. That remains the belief of Judaism to the present day. Thus, even after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., Judaism could continue as a dynamic religion and as a way of life.

With the move to monotheism during the exile, ancient Israel's religious development was complete. It is also at this juncture that scholars begin to use the term Judaism to refer to the religion of the people of Israel. Throughout this essay I have used the rather cumbersome term ancient Israelite religion, a term which refers to the monolatry of the pre-exilic period. With the shift to monotheism it is

<sup>20</sup>Literally "light of nations," but the English expression "light to the nations" has developed over time and captures the intent more idiomatically.



convenient and appropriate to use the term Judaism. In addition, there is an historical reason for doing so. Previously Judah had been only one of twelve tribes, and although it developed into one of the most important tribes (for example, the royal family came from Judah), still it was part of a larger picture. After 586 B.C.E. Judah becomes more and more the focus of the Bible's attention, so that Judaism becomes an appropriate term as the "ism" of Judah. Similarly, the people who adhere to this religion no longer are called Israelites (or Hebrews), but rather Jews (derived from "clipping" the first syllable of Judaism<sup>21</sup>).

At the outset I promised a brief word about popular religion, so let me end with a few remarks. I emphasize once more that what I have described herein is the official religion, that is, what the biblical writers believed during the nearly one thousand years of their literary productivity. Did all Israelites adhere to these beliefs and practices? The answer is obviously no. Many Israelites were attracted to the paganism of their neighbors, in particular the worship of Canaanite gods and goddesses, especially Baal, the storm-god. Either Baal was worshiped as a totally separate deity, or he was fused with Yahweh so that Yahweh took on the characteristics of a nature deity. Idols were made of Yahweh. Yahweh was believed to have a consort, specifically the goddess Asherah. After the centralization of worship in Jerusalem, sacrifices were continued at other sites. Magic and divination were practiced. In other words, a whole plethora of non-normative practices is attested for ancient Israel, and together they comprise what we may call popular religion in ancient Israel. The Bible refers to all these beliefs and practices, as the sins of Israel (sins in the eyes of the biblical writers, to be more objective) are detailed throughout. Archaeological evidence confirms this picture. But eventually this leaning towards polytheistic religion died out in Israel, in no small part due to the unceasing efforts of Israel's prophets, who collectively represented the conscience of the nation. During the period before 586 B.C.E. the Bible is replete with references to Israel's sins in this regard; after 586 B.C.E. the references are far fewer. In this way, too, the events of the Exile and beyond forever changed Israelite religion as it entered into the period of Judaism in late antiquity.

---

<sup>21</sup> By contrast Hebrew יהודים (also German *Juden*) shows the connection to Judah more intimately.