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Polytheistic Judaism and Jesus as an Initiate of the Mysteries

This essay will attempt to persuade the reader to consider two essential conclusions: that there is reason to doubt that YHVH is *the one true god*, and that Jesus of Nazareth was an initiate in the Mystery traditions. To help clarify and summarize these points, I will begin by placing these two theses into a pair of three-premise arguments, which are traditional syllogisms that have an additional premise added to each. My assertion herein is that the arguments are sound, meaning that they are valid (the conclusion must follow from the premises) and that their premises are true.

THESIS 1

*If the ancient Israelites believed in and worshiped multiple gods,
and a son (YHVH) of their highest god (El) later claimed to be the only god,
and scholars hid these polytheistic roots through translation-bias to promote monotheism,
then students of religion have reason to doubt that YHVH is the one true god.*

THESIS 2

*If Jesus' life and message were consistent with many Mystery traditions,
and Jesus demonstrated mastery over the Mysteries' greatest skills (siddhis),
and Jesus taught secret knowledge to the disciples with much more to impart,
then Jesus of Nazareth was likely an initiate of one or more Mystery traditions.*

For more than 2,000 years Christians and Jews seem to have espoused the worldview that the Holy Bible⁵ references only one god, YHVH, whom they view as *the one true god*, the creator of “the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:2) Yet do students of religion really have sufficient reason to accept this all-important claim about YHVH? Scholarly evidence arising in the 20th century as a result of the archaeological discoveries of the Ugaritic cycles and the Dead Sea Scrolls raises serious doubts on the issue.

If the early religion of the Israelites in Canaan (Jacob’s descendants) grew from polytheistic roots, (belief in many gods) through henotheism (worship of one god) and into monotheism (belief in only one god) over the course of a millennium (c. 13th through 1st centuries B.C.E.), would that be sufficient cause to doubt the accuracy of the biblical narrative that YHVH is the one true god? What if evidence was produced that proved the existence of translation-bias to promote YHVH monotheism, would that be sufficient cause to seek deeper into the issue? What if further research produced antecedent mythologies, such as the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Akkadian *Atra-hasis*, and other texts that closely parallel but predate those in the bible yet do not contain Israelite characters in them; would that prove to be sufficient cause to seek further answers?

These are neither trivial nor rhetorical questions because, as the 19th century mathematician W.K. Clifford categorically asserts, “It is wrong always, everywhere...to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards...pushes away any doubts which arise...the life of that man is one long sin against mankind.”⁴ In this essay, I will answer these questions in the affirmative and provide compelling

evidence to question the orthodox biblical narrative that the tribal god of Israel, YHVH, is the one true god.

Much of the research I will relate was not available until the 20th century, and therefore, many of the errors in past scholarship can be readily understood if not dismissed. Dating from the second millennium B.C.E., the *Ugaritic Baal Cycle*⁹ was unearthed in the northern Syrian city of Ugarit in 1928 by an Alawite peasant. It is important for many reasons, and chief among these is the clear distinction made between the god El (linked elsewhere in my research with the Mesopotamian sky-god Anu) and his 70 sons, one of whom was YHVH, who can be further linked to an amalgamation of the Mesopotamian brother-rulers Enki and Enlil or their sons.

Another important discovery occurred in 1947 when Bedouin shepherds alerted archaeologists to their discovery of Jewish texts ranging from the 3rd millennium to the first century B.C.E., which are known today as the *Dead Sea Scrolls*.³ These are significant because they demonstrate irreconcilable differences between their translations and the scholarly translations that have been provided to the world for about two-thousand years.

Over one-third of the global population accepts the creationist story contained in the book of Genesis, where we are taught in the opening verse that “God created the heavens and the earth.” Yet in Genesis 2:4, it states that “the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.” (Gen.2:4) Who is this entity referred to as “the Lord God?” Can we be certain that this is the same being as the aforementioned God, or may “Lord God” refer to another entity entirely? This is no small question, as behind it lies the legitimacy behind the mainstream interpretation of the Abrahamic traditions. According to religious historian Basem L. Ra’ad, writing in his 2010 book, *Hidden Histories: Palestine and the Eastern Mediterranean*,⁸ there is a great deal of difference between

the translation of *God* and *Lord*. He identifies ‘God’ as the word English translators originally used for El Elyon, the Canaanite god of creation, while the word ‘Lord’ may denote YHVH, Baal or Adonai; sometimes referring to a single being but often understood to be different entities altogether, as the sons of El. Ra’ad references the scholarship of E.C.B. MacLaurin, who remarks on the “attempt in official religion to conceal the fact that El and YAHWEH were once worshiped as separate deities.” (p.56) In Psalm 82 and other places in the Hebrew Bible, Ra’ad claims to discover textual evidence of a council of gods, or a pantheon; an important fact which was later altered to conceal the existence of other gods. As a result, Ra’ad states, “the full implications are diluted by evasive interpretation in commentaries, biblical scholarship, and the various Bible translations.” (p.57)

So perhaps historians and students of religion should consider viewing the early Israelites as a Canaanite offshoot of the religions of Greater Syria and that the god, YHVH, whom Israel later claimed as their personal tribal god, was only one of the many gods they believed in. This early evidence of henotheism seems to place a high degree of doubt on the later biblical narrative that YHVH is the one true god, since there appears to be little evidence that even the early Israelites believed their god was such a being. The implication here is that monotheistic belief within Judaism was an innovation that began in the 7th century B.C.E.

A student might challenge these assertions with the question, “Just because a religion grew from polytheism, through henotheism and into monotheism, does this necessarily invalidate its modern monotheistic precepts?” In response, I offer an emphatic *yes* when it comes to this one question concerning ultimate reality, because the assertion is that YHVH is the *only god in existence*, even though modern scholarship informs us that he used to be just part of a colorful

pantheon of gods. YHWH seems to acknowledge a polytheistic reality himself when “the Lord” of the Old Testament issues the henotheistic demand in Exodus 34:14 that “...you shall worship no other god, because the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” This enigmatic statement would be even less coherent if the speaker considered himself to be the only god in existence, or if he created the heavens and the earth. Thus the monotheistic claim made in YHWH’s name seems to be irrational.

While this theory may regrettably send orthodox believers into paroxysms of sadness, anger or righteous indignation, this is not my intention. This information can also be interpreted as revelatory by the seeker of wisdom; as an emancipation from the slavery of inaccurate theism. Freed of the limiting belief that the angry, jealous and violent god observed throughout the Old Testament is the one and only god, students and adherents of religion can begin their search for God anew. It is precisely this search which will lead my query out of the Old Testament and into the New.

Evidence abounds that identifies Jesus of Nazareth as an initiate of one or more very ancient wisdom traditions; a fact that links Him with the various Mystery schools that abounded in Greece, Rome, Egypt and much of the Middle East. In the years of His earthly life, more than a millennium before Italy’s University of Bologna opened in 1088, the issue of higher education was handled by the Mystery schools. These enigmatic and secretive institutions existed to fill the human need to seek answers to life’s big questions, but they taught an intuitive curricula that was unique to each specific teacher, and thus little attempt was made to standardize the knowledge or to reconcile it with that of other schools. Ample evidence confirms that classical philosophers such as Pythagoras, Plato, and Plutarch all attended one or more Mystery schools before

founding their own traditions. Above all, vows of secrecy hushed the lips of scholars and adherents alike, who feared being misunderstood or misinterpreted by mainstream traditionalists and politically-minded sophists. Examples of influential Mystery schools included the Eleusinia, the Cults of Cappadocian Men, the Phrygian Sabazios and the Great Mother, the Egyptian Isis and Serapis, and the Samothracian Cabiri, the Dea Syria and the Persian Mithra. To illustrate their importance to the development of western thought, S. Angus, writing in 1928's *The Mystery-Religions and Christianity; a Study in the Religious Background of Early Christianity*,¹ asserts that, "For over eleven centuries Eleusis supported the hope of man..." (p.5)

Angus continues to build the case that the Mystery religions had a profound impact on early Jewish and Christian thought. He asks the student to analyze such traditions in three parts, "having to do respectively with candidacy for membership, reception into the religious brotherhood, and the privileges and blessings resultant therefrom. These divisions we shall consider under (1) Preparation and Probation, Katharsis; (2) Initiation and Communion, Muesis; (3) Blessedness and Salvation, Epopeteia." (p.72) While many aspects of Mystery cults varied widely, these three components were preserved in some form throughout most of the traditions. According to 20th century theosophist, Alice A. Bailey, writing in *The Rays and the Initiations*,² these three divisions are directly equatable to the first three esoteric initiations that all human beings eventually go through; *the Birth, the Baptism and the Transfiguration*. It is in the shadow of these Mystery traditions that the religion of Judaism evolved, and Jesus of Nazareth later served as the bridge between the old punitive dispensation of law in the Old Testament, and the New Testament with mankind which focused upon humility, forgiveness and love. These and many other virtues had long been the hallmarks of the wise in the Mystery traditions, and Jesus

wielded them before the world as timeless and public examples of spiritual initiation. As Angus eloquently phrases it, “the race of mankind was lifted to a higher plane when it came to be taught that only the pure in heart can see God.” (p.73)

There is a great deal more evidence in the New Testament that Jesus was acquainted with these Mystery traditions, including knowledge and mastery of the seemingly magical powers available to masters of wisdom; powers known to Hindu yogis as *sidhis*. Religious scholars note Jesus’ use of the Dionysian Mystery of turning water into wine, and have discovered similarities between the 6th or 7th century B.C. Homeric “Hymn to Demeter”⁷ and Matthew 17:1-13, as these passages describe both Demeter’s and Jesus’ *transfigurations* in similar terms, although they were written more than 700 years apart. This suggests that the writer of Matthew was well acquainted with the already-ancient cultish hymn. In Matthew 13, the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks to the people (not the disciples) in parables, to which He replies, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.” Thus Jesus makes a clear statement that He has taught them more than He has taught the *uninitiated* masses. John 16:12 provides further evidence that He had a great deal more that He would have liked to teach the disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” This and a great deal more biblical evidence all points to the idea that Jesus was a high initiate of the Mystery traditions.

In light of this scholarship, the time is now ripe for a new comprehension of Jesus and His mission, and I concur with Paramahansa Yogananda that, “The second coming of Christ is the awakening of the divine consciousness within each person.”¹⁰ This is not necessarily to be

understood as the literal return of Jesus to earth in physical form, but rather the fulfillment of His teachings through a greater human understanding of His consciousness, which is universal.

To summarize, I have shown that students of religion have just-cause to doubt the YHVH narrative, and to consider the role that the Mystery religions played in Jesus' life and teachings. If we now employ these conclusions as premises, the following syllogism logically follows and guides the student further upon the Path:

*If students of religion have reason to doubt that YHVH is the one true god,
and Jesus of Nazareth was likely an initiate of one or more Mystery traditions,
then students of religion should study the Mystery traditions to discern Jesus' teachings.*

Works Cited

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