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### The Polytheistic Roots of Ancient Israel and the Birth of Monotheism

The ancient religion of Israel moved through three distinct phases: from its *polytheistic* roots in the mists of the Bronze Age; through a distinct period of *henotheism* during the period of the Judges up to the early monarchical period; to the advent of *monotheism* during the later monarchical and exilic periods through the 1st century B.C.

More than half of the world's population considers themselves to belong to one of the three Abrahamic faiths, that is to say that they are monotheistic; they worship the God of Abraham and do not believe in the existence of other gods. Yet, difficult questions can be asked that many adherents to the institutional religions would be hard-pressed to answer. Chief among them might be, "Who exactly is this God and how have the beliefs about him changed?" As one might expect, the answer is not as definitive as historians and zealots alike would prefer it to be.

Semitic religion in the Bronze Age Levant included localized deities in regions from Ugarit in northern Syria, through the Canaanite lands of modern day Israel and Palestine, and the coastal Phoenicians of modern-day Lebanon who also ruled the north African coastline from Carthage. The entire region of the Eastern Mediterranean was polytheistic, meaning that they believed in and worshipped many gods. Chief among them was the Semitic El Elyon, El Shadday, Il, or simply El, who was known as the Father of the Gods. Together with his wife, Asherah, they presided over the entire pantheon of gods, which numbered seventy and were called the "Sons of

El.” Their son, Baal, was a god of storms, fertility, and both he and his sister, Anat, were considered to be divine warriors. Another son and storm god, Yahweh, originally received cult in Arabia but moved northward with the proto-Israelites. It is this god, Yahweh, that eventually becomes the god of monotheism by absorbing the attributes of all the other gods along the way. Yet modern scholarship asserts that the early Israelites worshipped a pantheon of gods, including Yahweh, El, Asherah, and Baal.

An extreme amount of convergence (the reattribution of traits from one god to another) or “sharing” occurred between the various Semitic regions, with Baal being supreme in Canaan, Ugarit, and Phoenicia. In fact, so many traits are shared between the gods of the Levant, Greece, Anatolia, and those of Mesopotamia, that one may instinctively comprehend the possibility that all of the mythical traditions are referring to the same group of beings. Many scholars point to strong correspondences between the language and customs first associated with El, and their later association with Yahweh. Theonyms can be traced between the Sumerian god Ishkur/Hadad and the god known in the Levant as Baal; with the Sumerian Innana and the Semitic Ishkur; Sumerian Utu and the Semitic Shamash. Many Sumerian stories appear to be conflated, particularly between the brothers Enlil and Enki, and with Yahweh by later writers, while earlier evidence of convergence is observable as the traits originally associated with El and Baal, and even Asherah and Astarte, are later claimed to be associated with Yahweh.

According to one leading scholar of Biblical and Ugaritic texts, Mark S. Smith, writing in his remarkable book, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*,<sup>8</sup> “Israelite monolatry developed through conflict and compromise between the cults of Yahweh and other deities.” (p.8) This took part in three movements as Israel began to distance itself from

its Canaanite heritage, beginning the second movement with the rejection of Baal worship in the 9th century B.C. It continued through the sixth century B.C. with the prophetic condemnations of Asherah/asherah worship, solar worship, the high places, as well the extremely controversial *mlk* or Moloch sacrifice. The movement from polytheism to a stricter form of henotheism began during the monarchical period (1000-587) when “the monarchy fostered the inclusion of various deities, or their features, into the cult of Yahweh.” (p.9) This form of convergence, Smith assures us, is not unique to Israel but was common across the greater region of the Middle East.

The convergence that occurred throughout the late Bronze Age period did not begin in earnest during the earlier period of the Judges, but with the later period of the Kings of Israel, beginning with Saul circa 1000 B.C. According to Smith, “It was during the second half of the monarchy that the Judean kings Hezekiah and Josiah contributed to the differentiation of Israelite religion from its ‘Canaanite’ past.” (p.11) This is significant because it signals the departure from henotheism, and eventually led to the birth of monotheism. Yet the literature of the period is rife with inconsistencies that make it difficult to find firm footing. Smith reports that, while Yahweh was the national god and patron of the monarchy, “the monarchs of Israel were the most guilty in tolerating and sometimes even importing deities and religious practices allegedly alien to Yahwism.” (p.11) The final stages toward monotheism occurred during the exilic period (588-548 B.C.) and the Covenant at Sinai.<sup>4b</sup>

Some of the scholarship that has shone light on these matters has only been made possible through the archaeological discovery of the second millennium B.C. *Ugaritic Baal Cycle* in modern Ras Shamra, Syria and the later so-called *Dead Sea Scrolls* found in Qumran caves in 1946-1956 which date from the 3rd century B.C. These discoveries have helped scholars decipher

Israel's evolution through polytheism into monotheism, and which they assert contain clues to greater understanding of Israel's complex system of beliefs, rituals, and politics.

Basem L. Ra'ad, writing in his 2010 book *Hidden Histories: Palestine and the Eastern Mediterranean*,<sup>5</sup> presents an alarming array of evidence of the important distinction between the scholarly translations of *God* and *Lord*, especially when compared to the recent translations available from Ugarit and Qumran. Ra'ad 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 or acting as a title, but usually 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 points toward 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) Psalm 82 in the Septuagint begins with, "God stands in the assembly of gods; and in the midst of them will judge gods," and verse 6 states, "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you children of the Most High."<sup>3</sup>

This perspective results in an apparent contradiction with the assertion in monotheism, which is that *YHVH is the only god in existence*, even though modern scholarship informs us that he used to be considered just part of a colorful pantheon of gods. YHVH seems to acknowledge a polytheistic reality himself when "the Lord" of the Old Testament issues the monolatrous

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 very heavens and the earth. Thus the monotheistic claim made in YHVH’s name appears to be logically problematic.

Another striking example of convergence can be observed in the form of antecedents to the bible, such as the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*,<sup>4a</sup> and *Atra-Hasis*. In these heroic tales, dating as far back as the end of the second millennium B.C., we find tales of a great flood that washes over the land by the will of the god Ellil, or Enlil. Yet, in defiance of these orders, the Sumerian god Enki/Akkadian Ea whispers to the Sumerian Ziusudra/Akkadian Utnapishtim or Atra-Hasis, to build an ark, stuff it with pairs of animals, and weather the storm. In the Sumerian Epic, preserved and translated in the Akkadian language, the storm lasted only seven days but in the biblical epic, the flood lasted forty days and nights. The same story is clearly being related in the two texts, but the Sumerian epic is credited by scholars as being the original model, yet it doesn’t reflect Israelite characters, nor does it relate in any way to Yahweh.

In his newer book, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*,<sup>7</sup> Mark S. Smith explains that, “the oldest biblical traditions place Yahweh originally as a god in southern Edom,” and this argues against the later conflation of El with Yahweh. Indeed, Exodus 6:2-3 indicates that Yahweh was unknown to the biblical patriarchs. “And God said to Moses, ‘I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El Shadday, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.’” This eventual identification of Yahweh with El results in the goddess Asherah becoming the consort of Yahweh, but her role is downplayed in traditional texts, and the worship of the Goddess Asherah, and the enigmatic wooden poles known as the asherah, became taboo

by the time of the Babylonian exile circa 587-548 B.C. Another problematic inconsistency between Israel's polytheistic roots and its later monotheism, can be observed in Deuteronomy 32:8-9, which according to Smith, "cast Yahweh in the role of one of the divine sons, understood as fathered by El, called Elyon..." (p.143) Deuteronomy 32:8-9 explains how El divided humanity among the gods, and describes Yahweh's portion as being "his people, Jacob His own inheritance."

Thus it can be shown that the ancient religion of Israel can be perceived as having evolved from its polytheistic roots in Canaan, where its beliefs nearly paralleled their neighbors in Phoenicia and Ugarit. They moved towards a henotheistic belief during the early monarchical period, and toward monotheism during the later monarchical period and during the course of the wandering after the exodus from Egypt, which remains an important but controversial event for which little archaeological evidence exists. Whether for good or ill, or some divine combination of the two, this remarkable religion of Israel, though directly adhered to by only .2% of the world's population today, has captured the hearts and minds of more than 50% of humanity for nearly two millennia.

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  - b) 2-2 Monotheism and Mosaic Law. (pp.40-42)
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