

Monotheism and the Redefinition of Divinity in Ancient Israel¹⁾

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Abstract

Biblical monotheism remains central in contemporary discussions concerning Israelite religion and identity. This essay discusses scholarly objections about the use of the term; the importance of the seventh-sixth century for the emergence of monotheistic rhetoric and worldview in Israelite texts; and the subsequent shifts in the definition of divinity in Israelite texts.

Keywords: Assyria, divinity, Israel, monotheism, polytheism

I. Introduction

Monotheism, commonly defined as the belief in only one god or goddess, has long been thought to constitute a hallmark of ancient Israelite religion. Roman authors singled out monotheism as one of Judaism's admirable features. In several older scholarly accounts,²⁾ monotheism in biblical tradition was traced back to Moses, as expressed in the Ten Commandments: "you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 5:7). For many, if not most, scholars today, this view of early biblical monotheism has been overstated, as monotheism would not acknowledge "other gods" who would be "before" Yahweh (or "besides," in some translations). Exodus 15:11 likewise shows a less than monotheistic understanding of divinity, since the verse takes note of other "gods": "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?" The older view that monotheism is to be traced back to Moses has been replaced by a reconstruction that situates the emergence of monotheistic discourse in the seventh-sixth centuries, based on the critical density of monotheistic texts attested at this time and later: "there is no other besides Him" (Deuteronomy 4:35); "The Lord is God in heaven above and on earth beneath; there is no other" (Deuteronomy 4:39); "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you" (1 Samuel 2:2, possibly a later gloss interrupting the verse's poetic parallelism); "there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears" (2 Samuel 7:22 = 1 Chronicles 17:20); "you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth... You, O Lord, are God alone" (2 Kings 19:15, 19; cf. Isa 37:16, 20). These and other biblical

passages, particularly in Isaiah 40-55 or “Second Isaiah” (Isaiah 43:10-11, 44:6, 8, 45:5-7, 14, 18, 21, and 46:9), as well as other biblical works (Jeremiah 16:19, 20; Nehemiah 9:6/Psalm 86:10; Psalm 96:5 = 1 Chronicles 16:26), suggest an articulation of a monotheistic worldview in the seventh-sixth century context and later.³⁾

The term monotheism is not an ancient term. Although the term “monotheist” is attested earlier in the work of the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth,⁴⁾ the word “monotheism” is considered to be the coinage of Cudworth’s friend, another Cambridge Platonist, Henry More (1614-1687), in his 1660 work, *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness; or a True and Faithful Representation of the Everlasting Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*.⁵⁾ The term developed in the Enlightenment to provide a comparative grid for mapping religions inside and outside of the European context. This coinage came “at about the time when the terms ‘deism’ and ‘theism’ were first introduced into scholarly and popular parlance.”⁶⁾ The same applies to the modern use of the term, polytheism, although it appears to be older. Apparently coined in antiquity by Philo of Alexandria, polytheism is thought to have entered modern vocabulary first with Jean Bodin in 1580 in French, who used the term in conjunction with atheism.⁷⁾ In the seventeenth century, polytheism was, like monotheism, part of the verbiage of philosophy of religion and interreligious polemics. Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, monotheism continued to serve in scholarly efforts to classify religions worldwide. Additionally, these forms were assigned relative value or importance. In this approach, monotheism (and particularly Christianity) represented the highest form of religion.

For much of the twentieth century, monotheism continued to constitute a distinctive cornerstone in scholarship of ancient Israelite religion and the Bible. In the 1970s, the discussion shifted, with efforts made to locate biblical monotheism within the wider context of the ancient Near East. On the one hand, ancient Mesopotamian texts that represent other deities as the manifestations of one god or goddess came to be compared with biblical representations of monotheism.⁸⁾ On the other hand, social and political developments in the seventh and sixth centuries came to be seen as influential in the development of Israelite monotheism.⁹⁾ These developments are important, as they issued not only in a new understanding of Israel’s central god but also in the nature of divinity itself. Before presenting these developments in the part III and this redefinition of divinity in part IV, we turn in part II to objections to the application of the term monotheism to Israelite understandings of divinity.

II. Monotheism’s Modern Discontents

In recent years, scholars have offered reasons for discarding the term, monotheism. Each of these will be reviewed very briefly.

1. Monotheism as an anachronism

It has been objected that the term is anachronistic and therefore inappropriate to use in discussions of Israelite religion. However, biblical scholars and historians of religion use several anachronistic terms, including Bible, religion, book, and monotheism. In reaction to the criticism of employing the term religion, Jonathan Z. Smith suggests its positive value when used critically:

‘Religion’ is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore it is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as ‘language’ plays in linguistics or ‘culture’ plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon...it will not do...to argue that the modern sense of the word, as a generic term, bears no relation to its Latin connotations. It is the very distance and difference of ‘religion’ as a second-order category that gives it its cognitive power.¹⁰⁾

The biblical field uses several anachronistic terms, both to serve as entry-point into ancient cultures, and to gain a critical sense of the distance and difference between the modern and ancient contexts. Accordingly, anachronism does not constitute a serious objection in itself. Instead, it points up the importance of distinguishing indigenous understandings of the ancients (what anthropologists called the “emic”) from modern interpretations of these indigenous understandings (the “etic”). Such a procedure provides a critical basis for probing the ancient cultural and religious contexts that informed such terms in the modern context.

2. Monotheism used to assert religious superiority

It is rightly objected that the term monotheism may encourage a championing of modern religious traditions that understand themselves as monotheistic. In addition, monotheism is part of the modern heritage of western imperialism and colonialism; it served as a polemical term and seems hardly a neutral term suitable for scholarly usage. When scholars use the term, they may become complicit in its polemical purpose inherent in “monotheistic” religious traditions.

From an educational — and ethical — perspective, there is a counter-consideration: avoiding the term may have the opposite effect of what is desirable, namely critical awareness and discussion. The issue is not simply a scholarly one. People outside the scholarly field know this term. Without some acknowledgment of the term, scholars may miss an opportunity to show the critical issues with the term. One might argue that its familiarity outside of academic settings suggests retaining it as part of a larger academic effort to engage society in a critical manner about ancient religion. The term’s familiarity as well as its problems arguably provides a teaching moment about the religion of ancient Israel. How the term is handled can serve to

educate people, professionals and non-professionals alike, in seeing the term's methodological difficulties and the critical considerations faced by modern scholarship. Taking cognizance of the term may serve to show the critical issues involved, thereby offering a deeper understanding of the ancient sources bearing on divinity. This is a particular value that scholars should not relinquish too hastily. Indeed, the ancient and modern usages of the word would suggest instead that scholars need to recognize its polemical force in both contexts.

3. The dualistic opposition of monotheism versus polytheism

Many scholars object to the term's dualism as constructed with its counterpart, polytheism. Jonathan Z. Smith regards the two terms as one of "the host of related dualisms, all of which finally reduce to 'ours' and 'them.'"¹¹⁾ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza would deconstruct the dualistic categories in these terms: "We also have to relinquish the colonialist-theoretical model that constructs the relation between *Monotheism* and *Polytheism* in oppositional dualist terms, valorizing either *Monotheism* as was done in the colonial period or *Polytheism* as is the case in post-modernism."¹²⁾ It is true that the terms monotheism and polytheism construct too sharp a contrast in the ancient data. As noted below, there is something "mono" in ancient polytheism and something "poly" within ancient monotheism. Scholars have noted how the divine council and divine family serve as "mono-concepts" with multiple deities. In turn, scholars are giving thought to the problem of the many within a single deity.

Speaking from the opposite end of the theological spectrum as Schüssler Fiorenza, Brevard Childs remarked on the term's flattening of biblical data: "Although the historian of religion has every right to employ the term monotheism to the religion of Israel in contrast to polytheistic religions, the term itself is theologically inert and fails largely to register the basic features of God's self revelation to Israel."¹³⁾ Childs is critical of history of religion and sociological reconstructions as reductionist not only on theological grounds, but also with respect to historical and literary issues. For MacDonald,¹⁴⁾ monotheism is an intellectualized or philosophical term of the Enlightenment that does not speak sufficiently to the nature or character of the biblical God. Despite these objections, it may be asked why a single term should be expected to cover the nature or character of any given deity. In short, the past history of the term need not be the meaning that it carries in present or future discussions.

As a related objection, it is claimed that theoretically in antiquity monotheism as a term does not make sense until the term developed in opposition to the term polytheism. It is assumed in the scholarly discussions that the use of these terms mars the ancient evidence. Depending on how the terms are used, there is some truth to this claim. At the same time, it is possible to detect the emergence of monotheistic representations of the Bible with older expressions of Israelite polytheism. Deuteronomy 32 is sharply monotheistic (see "no god" in v. 21; "there is no god beside me," v. 39). Yet this passage contains the older world theology of the seventy gods in vv. 8-9 (especially in the Greek version and one Hebrew version in the Dead Sea

Scrolls). The opening of the book of Job uses an older polytheistic “mono-concept” of the divine council along with an assumed single God over all. In other words, biblical texts sometimes in their expression of monotheism stand between the older, limited polytheism and the new monotheistic worldview. Even Deuteronomy 4:19, much heralded for its seeming acceptance of polytheism or concession to polytheism, seems to be drawing on the older family worldview of the gods of the nations to explain the idolatry around Israel that Israel must avoid. In short, monotheistic texts in the Bible draw on older polytheistic representations of divinity even as they re-situate these within their monotheistic contexts. Overall it seems that the objection of the complexity of monotheism and polytheism is suggestive more of an interesting research agenda rather than a reason to discard the terms.

4. Reductionism of divinity to a matter of form

Discussions of monotheism, especially when it is praised as the cornerstone of both ancient Israelite religion and modern western religion, may reduce the understanding of divinity to a matter of form (what might be regarded as the problem of reducing any phenomenon to an “-ism”) without little or no reference to its content (what may be regarded as truth-claims about a deity) or attendant praxis. A similar reduction to form informs the uncritical correlation of monotheism with violence. For the ancient context, there is no ancient correlation of monotheism and violence: both ancient monotheism and polytheism entail violence. In fact, it is notable both monotheism and polytheism both involve the same sort of violence known as *herem*-warfare (or “the ban”). This tendency towards reductionism also is an underlying issue for the longtime comparison of biblical monotheism with the so-called monotheism of the Egyptian king Amenophis IV, better known as Akhenaten. This search was made infamous in modern times, thanks to Sigmund Freud. However, the strongly differing content of the so-called monotheism of Akhenaten and Israelite monotheism makes for a dubious comparison.

Biblical scholars who use the term monotheism today do not wish to restrict the understanding of any particular deity to the form of theism, but include further understandings about the deity as represented in the primary sources. This has been true for a long time. For example, W. F. Albright and Yehezkel Kaufman did not understand the monotheism centered on Yahweh in only general or abstract terms, such as the existence of only one deity.¹⁵⁾ It included other features, such as the deity’s lack of mythology, sexuality, birth or death. Despite difficulties incurred by their particular positions, their descriptions show that the use of the term monotheism need not cover all aspects of a deity, but may serve to show a distinctive dimension of that deity’s profile.

A focus on the form of divinity may also run the risk of ignoring the context of its production or the practices connected with it. A number of scholars, including Nathaniel B. Levtov and myself,¹⁶⁾ have related the expression of monotheism in Second Isaiah not only to

its polemical context, that the one-deity discourse of Second Isaiah is a polemical rhetoric that stakes a claim against other claims known in the environment of Second Isaiah's audience of Judeans. In addition, monotheism should not be presented and exalted as some sublime idea (as it has served at times in modern religious discourse). Instead, it should be understood in a broader religious and cultural context involving a more complex understanding of reality and a corresponding set of social and religious practices. Monotheism is only one part of the study of ancient Israelite divinity; it provides a threshold into a broader social and political context for Israel's self-understanding with respect to others as represented by a number of biblical texts. Just as importantly, monotheism is part of an inner community discussion that represents reality by reference to others in order to form and shape the identity of the texts' addressees.

5. Defining monotheism

Defining monotheism has been a challenging enterprise, as the quest for definition has often been shaped by additional concerns. It has served as a religious belief, even a "sublime idea," used to distinguish and exalt modern monotheistic traditions. It is clear that it is embedded in biblical texts as part of their rhetoric; it also is a central element in the worldview being represented. Defining monotheism is no less a problem because the ancient evidence may give the appearance of fitting poorly with monotheism as commonly defined. This is an area for exploration, which is addressed in the discussion below, but it is to be noted for now that definitional difficulty in itself does not seem to be a strong reason for discarding a term. This issue is illustrated well by the reflections of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz on the problem of defining the word, culture:

Everyone knows what cultural anthropology is about: it's about culture. The trouble is that no one is quite sure what culture is. Not only is it an essentially contested concept, like democracy, religion, simplicity, or social justice, it is a multiply defined one, multiply employed, ineradicably imprecise. It is fugitive, unsteady, encyclopedic, and normatively charged, and there are those, especially those for whom only the really real is really real, who think it vacuous altogether, or even dangerous, and would ban from the serious discourse of serious persons. An unlikely idea, it would seem, around which to build a science. Almost as bad as matter.¹⁷⁾

6. Monotheism as a sort of philosophical argument about divine ontology

It is sometimes thought that monotheism is at its heart a modern philosophical construct, one that should not be retrojected to the biblical context prior to Greek philosophizing. This is a view that depends on what constitutes philosophy. While biblical texts do not approach the question of reality in terms of abstract treatises associated with early western philosophy, biblical texts do narrate and discuss reality; within these texts are embedded either explicit

statements about reality or implicit representations of reality. Within such statements or representations are embedded presuppositions or notions about reality, in other words implicit theory or theories of reality. Whether or not monotheism constitutes or embeds philosophy, it is the task of scholars to understand the worldview of the texts with their operating assumptions and procedures, in other words, their theories. Such biblical theorizing entails biblical passages prior to the Greco-Roman philosophical enterprise. It is to be noted as well that the same point applies to polytheistic representations of reality outside of the Bible, not to mention non-biblical discourse focused on a single deity.

7. Biblical monotheism as a mistaken claim

The claim that ancient Israel is monotheistic seems misplaced, as there are other divinities within the religion of ancient Israel. This objection has gained a great deal of traction in recent discussions. The basic issue in this matter is not whether or not Israel's one-god discourse was characteristic of ancient Israel in general, but whether or not it is observable in texts of the seventh-sixth century or later. The issue is in the first instance a textual issue. How it did or did not work itself out in Israel's society remains part of the research agenda. A further objection sometimes arises as a matter of definition involving the word, *'elohim* ("gods, divinities") and its related forms. In other words, if other phenomena are labeled with this term, then as the objection goes, there is no monotheism. This approach misses the point about a number of important texts of the sixth century and later – and here I am thinking of Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55), Ezekiel, and Genesis 1, among others. They are making a basic representation about Yahweh vis-à-vis other deities. For these texts, Yahweh is the only one that is indispensable in the picture of reality, that other forms of divinity are at best relatively minor and only make sense with Yahweh as the god beyond their power, that they only have agency thanks to this one deity permitting them or giving them power. In other words, from the perspective of such authors, if Yahweh is removed from the picture of reality, then the picture of reality does not stand.

8. The ongoing debate about the biblical texts claimed to be monotheistic

Some scholars object to the application of the term to the ancient textual evidence claimed to be monotheistic. In recent decades, it has been popular to pick away at the monotheistic biblical passages noted at the outset of this essay. These, for MacDonald,¹⁸⁾ are to be viewed not as claims as to a single deity in reality, but instead as statements about Israel's singular allegiance to one god. It seems that despite some well-placed criticisms, both points are embedded in these biblical expressions. The overall picture in these texts represents all reality as dependent on this one deity. Furthermore, there are other biblical texts that represent other deities as lifeless (Second Isaiah) or missing from the picture of reality (Genesis 1). These, too, presuppose a monotheistic worldview, or what in the next part of this essay I call "one-deity

discourse.”

III. The Context for Monotheistic Discourse in the 7th-6th centuries

This section sketches an historical reconstruction for the emergence of the ancient Israelite monotheistic worldview. Israel emerged between two times of periods of empire. At Israel's beginning was the end of the Late Bronze Age and at the other end was the rise of the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians beginning in the eighth century and down through the seventh and sixth centuries. The monotheism of Israel emerged in the context of these later empires, and they will leave their mark on Israel's expressions of monotheism. The period entailed several momentous events for Israel: the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel (the so-called “the lost ten tribes”) to the Assyrians in the year 722; the deportation of over two hundred thousand Israelites in 701; and the fall of Jerusalem and Judah to the Babylonians in 586; the exile of the Israelites in Babylonia in the 590s and 580s; the initial return and settlement of exiles under the Persians in 538; and the rebuilding of the temple in 518. These events produced some of the most heart-wrenching poetry of the biblical corpus, such as the book of Lamentations and the book of Jeremiah with its own laments (which is unusual for prophetic books). This was also the time of some of the most inspiring poetry of the Bible, namely Isaiah 40-55 also called Second Isaiah, with its references to Cyrus the king of Persia and the promise of God leading Israel home. This period also produced some of the most sustained reflections on God and reality, from the book of Deuteronomy's reformulation of the Sinai covenant in Exodus-Numbers, to the priestly composer that produced the vision of reality in Genesis 1.

The biblical literature of this period, the seventh and sixth centuries, seems to have been participating in a wider international discussion over the nature of reality and the gods. Biblical authors, such as the priestly authors of Genesis 1 and Ezekiel, may have been familiar with some of the wider currents of thought about reality known during the sixth century BCE. This sense of biblical authors working with knowledge of international literature is perhaps best seen in the highly literate book of Ezekiel, which reflects knowledge of various facets of Phoenician and Egyptian culture. A comparable case has been made for seeing Second Isaiah both as a priest and as a literate figure aware of wider international currents of thought. Broadly speaking, the priestly work of Genesis 1, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, works all rooted in the sixth century, spoke to the same imperial world emanating out of Mesopotamia. All of these great biblical works also contain important creation passages, which probe the nature of God's power and the reality of God for Israel in a time dominated by foreign powers. All of these writings explore God's relationship with Israel, and all of them condemn or leave other deities out of the picture.¹⁹⁾

With the sixth century and especially the exile to Babylon, Israel stood at a major turn in its sense of the world, and it was not simply because its experience of the world was so

different from the time of David, Solomon and their successors. The world was in the middle of dramatic change, and Israel was drawn into that change. Israel's world at this time became an empire world, something that it had never experienced before. Empires changed the world of the time, and they also influenced thinking about reality. This is not only true for ancient Israel; it was also true for thinking about reality taking place within the empire powers. The one feature that seems common to the larger international discussion is a particular focus on a single deity, or what we may call a one-god or one-goddess vision of reality. In most cases, it is a male "one-deity" discourse, though the discourse sometimes involves a goddess.

Up to the time of the Assyrian expansion in the west in the eighth century, ancient Israel had a national-god, Yahweh, the great warrior-king. This male god was monarch over the other divinities, who were minor compared with Yahweh. This Yahweh seems to have been identified with El by this time (see Exodus 6:2-3). El's consort was Asherah, and perhaps as a result of Yahweh-El merger, it seems that this Yahweh-El had Asherah as his consort. In addition, other deities become regarded either as secondary in status, such as Baal and Astarte, and the Sun and Moon; other deities seem to have dropped out of the picture, such as Anat; and still other deities become servants of Yahweh, such as Resheph and Deber in Habakkuk 3, where these two gods are depicted as part of Yahweh's military force. There are still other deities as known from personal names, such as "Dawn" and "Dusk"; it is hard to know how active these deities were considered to be. As these deities undergo changes in status or acceptance, their language and imagery became associated with Yahweh, or one might say incorporated into the nature or character or Godhead of Yahweh. Even the language associated with Baal and with Anat is incorporated into the imagery of Yahweh, sometimes with considerable modifications, and at other times with only minor differences. The notion of the divine council or assembly of the gods led by the monarch Yahweh-El also remained in use, while divine family language is becoming more of a cliché. The divine council continues to serve as an expression of the chief god's status as the unrivalled monarch. At the same time, Israel recognized that other nations had their main, national gods who ruled over those countries. This "world theology" just before the rise of the Assyrians in the west was centered on the notion of a large royal, divine family consisting of the seventy-gods ruling the seventy countries of the world (this would later become the idea of the seventy guardian angels of the seventy nations, as seen in the book of Daniel); Yahweh was the royal god ruling Israel (Deuteronomy 32:8-9 in the Septuagint and one of the Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts; cf. Psalm 82). As long as there was relative parity between Israel and its neighbors, this "world theology" seemed to work. When there are negotiations between Israel and its neighbors, their gods are recognized sometimes as doing for them what Yahweh the god of Israel does for Israel. For example, in Judges 11:24, Jephthah sends a message to the king of Ammon and asks him: "Did you not inherited what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So we inherit everything that Yahweh our god gives us to possess."²⁰

The impact that the Assyrian empire had on Israel changed its traditional "world theology."

When the armies of Assyria moved west in the ninth and eighth centuries, there was no longer parity. Assyria conquered and incorporated other lands to Israel's north, until the northern kingdom of Israel itself was swept into the Assyrian empire. Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom, fell to Assyria in the year 722, and about 28,000 Israelites were taken into captivity to Assyria; initially Jerusalem and the small kingdom of Judah survived the Assyrians. At first glance, it would seem that Judah managed fairly well, since it would last another 150 years until the fall of the city of Jerusalem in the year 586.

This reading of history misses a crucial point. In the year 701, the Assyrian army led by Sennacherib swept into Judah and conquered the country, with the exception of the besieged Jerusalem. Matters in Mesopotamia called the Assyrians back home, and it seemed like a miraculous victory for Israel (Isaiah 37:36a, 37). Despite an apparent divine intervention, there were devastating consequences: according to Assyrian records, 201,150 Judeans were taken to Assyria. If exiles means the loss of people and not only land, then the exile of Judah to Assyria began already in the year 701, for the numbers of people lost were about seven times the number taken from the northern kingdom in 722. By occupying the northern kingdom of Israel and turning it into part of an Assyrian province, Assyria remained on the doorstep of Judah, which was required to produce monetary tribute to the Assyrian empire. Thus Assyria loomed very large over the society of Judah from 701, until the fall of Assyria itself ca. 630 or so; the Babylonians and Persians would follow in succession. One of the results of these losses of land and population was the loss of traditional family structure: the loss of family land and family members decimated Israel's traditional family structure, and the seventh-sixth centuries witnesses the individual taking its place alongside the family as an important expression of social identity.

The individual according to changes taking place within Israelite society is to be responsible for her or his own sins and no longer the sins of the parents. According to three great works on this period, children no longer responsible for sins of parents: "In those days, they shall no longer say, 'Parents have eaten sour grapes and children's teeth are set on edge.' But every one shall die for his own sins: whoever eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set of wedge" (Jeremiah 31:29-30; cf. Ezekiel 18 and 33:12-20; Deuteronomy 24:16). As a matter of general correlation, a society that would begin to see individual persons as responsible for their own actions in their sphere of activity could also see a single national god as responsible in the sphere of divine activity, namely the universe as a whole. In short, this was the internal societal context for Israel monotheism for asserting a single god over the entire universe. Monotheism was an assertion of identity in the face of tremendous loss.

There is also an outsider context to consider for Israelite monotheism. The Assyrian empire developed a new world-view that corresponded to its place in the world, and followed by the Babylonian empire, which would assume Assyria's place by the end of the seventh century. In both Assyria and Babylonia, texts emerge showing what is called above a "one-deity

discourse.” The best-known example of this worldview is found in the so-called Epic of Creation or *Enuma Elish*. According to *Enuma Elish*, Marduk defeats the personified cosmic waters, Tiamat, and then Marduk receives the acclamation of divine kingship from all the deities and builds the universe out of the dead corpse of Tiamat. In addition, the other deities are given their places in the universe that Marduk has now created. Crucial for this discussion, the final portion of *Enuma Elish* presents the names of the other gods as Marduk’s own names. He is the sum of divinity relative to them.

Another text given its modern name based on its first line, “I will praise the lord of wisdom” (*Ludlul bel nemeqi*), shows Marduk’s “super-god” status in a different manner. The “one-god” vision is expressed here largely in terms of the divine mind and thought:

The lord [Marduk] divines the gods’ innermost thoughts,
(but) no [god] understands his behavior.
Marduk divines the gods’ innermost thoughts,
Which god understands his mind?

The mind of Marduk penetrates into the minds of the other deities, but they cannot grasp even the external manifestation of his behavior. Marduk is far beyond all other deities. Elsewhere, other deities are understood as aspects of Marduk’s supreme rule:

Sin is your divinity, Anu your sovereignty,
Dagan is your lordship, Enlil your kingship,
Adad is your might, wise Ea your perception,
Nabu, the older of the tablet stylus, is your skill,
Your leadership (in battle) is Ninurta, your might, Nergal,
Your counsel is Nus[ku], your superb [minister],
Your judgship is radiant Shamash, who arouses [no] dispute,
Your eminent name is Marduk, sage of the gods.

Another text discusses all the deities as functions of Marduk:

Urash (is)	Marduk of planting
Lugalidda (is)	Marduk of the abyss
Ninurta (is)	Marduk of the pickaxe
Nergal (is)	Marduk of battle
Zababa (is)	Marduk of warfare
Enlil (is)	Marduk of lordship and consultations
Nabu (is)	Marduk of accounting

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Sin (is)	Marduk who lights up the night
Shamash (is)	Marduk of justice
Adad (is)	Marduk of rain
Tishpak (is)	Marduk of troops
Great Anu (is)	Marduk...
Shuqamuna (is)	Marduk of the container
[] (is)	Marduk of everything.

Marduk was not the only deity who could be recast in these terms.

Parts of the bodies of a supreme god, whether it is Marduk or Ishtar or Ninurta, could be identified with other deities. For example, in the case of the warrior-god Ninurta, there is this hymn:

O lord, your face is the sun god, your hair Aya,
Your eyes, O lord, are Enlil and Ninlil.
The pupils of your eyes are Gula and Belet-ili,
The irises of your eyes are the twins, Sin and Shamash,
The lashes of your eyes are the rays of the sun that...
The appearance of your mouth, O lord, is Ishtar of the stars
Anu and Antum are your lips, your command...
Your tongue (?) is Pabilsag of the above...
The roof of your mouth, o lord, is the vault
Of heaven and earth, your divine abode,
Your teeth are the seven gods who lay low the evil ones.

In these cases, this one-deity discourse remained grounded in traditional Mesopotamian polytheism; other deities remain recognized, and the devotion to them in the form of sacrifices and temples continued. In these texts, their representation of their major deities as THE deity corresponded with the place of Assyria and Babylonia in the world.

As this discussion over divinity was taking place in Mesopotamia, a corresponding discussion was taking place in Israel. As the Mesopotamian empires swept up the northern kingdom of Israel and then the southern kingdom of Judah, the world definitively changed for Israel. A vision of a more restricted pantheon, in effect a monotheistic vision emerged in Israel at this time. There is no goddess, and Baal and Asherah are criticized; the sun, moon and the stars are not to be regarded as deities; and the asherah becomes a symbol of blessing from God and God's teaching. In effect, there is only one god, with angelic divinities viewed as only having any reality because they work for the one god; in other words, their being is entirely dependent on the one god. In sum, for Israelite monotheism, the "head god" became

the “Godhead.” Where Mesopotamian “one-deity discourse” allowed for the divinity of other deities even as extensions of a super-god, Israelite monotheism excluded the sacrifices and temples of such extensions.

IV. Monotheism and the Redefinition of Divinity

Israelite monotheism did not just redefine the profile of the older, traditional Yahweh-El. It also redefined divinity. First and foremost, all positive divine power and character resided in this God or Godhead. Whatever could be said positively about divinity in ancient Israel was predicated only of Israel’s god. In turn, other divinity is abolished. The older middle levels of divine hierarchy were eliminated: sun, moon and the stars as not divinities. Angels served as divine accompaniment to humans (as opposed to the “personal god” or “household god”), and they are not regarded as divinities. The “seventy” gods became seventy angels. Divine military retinues were also identified as angels (see “angels” Genesis 19:1 regarded as “destroyers” in 19:13). Accordingly, the divine council or assembly was viewed as populated only by angelic “sons of God” (see Job 1-2). In other words, “sons of God,” formerly important members of upper divine hierarchy, were demoted to angels, and the divine council became a new vehicle for reflection on divine agency of a single deity (again Job 1-2). Language of divine family became residual. In sum, there was a *total polarity* between the top and bottom of divinity such that the bottom is no longer recognized as divine, with angels as a category between divinity and humanity. Oneness of divinity was located in a single divine figure, with the remainder being angelic figures drawing their reality from this one.

As a corollary, all other divinities apart from Yahweh were defined in utter opposition from Yahweh; in short, they were redefined precisely as “*other gods*.” (The roots of this development can be seen already in the separate worship of Yahweh expressed in the Ten Commandments, noted at the outset of this essay.) Stated differently, other deities were regarded as absolutely other from Yahweh in that they were demarcated as not deities, but as illusions or nothing. For Second Isaiah, God and not Marduk is the super-god in the universe. Isaiah 46:1 mentions Marduk (under his title Bel) as nothing other than a lifeless idol that weighs down those who carry it, unlike the living God who bears up the House of Jacob whom this God created (see vv. 3-4). This approach to other gods is consistent with the genericization of the names of some deities (e.g., Astarte as term for fertility of flocks; Resheph as flame and Deber as pestilence). With the denial of “other gods” as not Israelite (see Judges 2:13, 3:7, 10:10, and Hosea 11:2), there emerged claims that older traditions formerly associated with Yahweh did not belong to Yahweh, e. g., denunciation of the asherah and of the “sun, moon and the stars.” Similarly, symbols were divorced from other deities: the asherah was no longer a symbol of goddess, but a symbol of Yahweh (“his asherah”) and the divine torah (cf. the possible wordplay on the asherah in Proverbs 3:18).

With other gods defined as not gods, the redefinition of divinity had further repercussions. Apart from angels, other former divinities moved from the category of the uncreated to the created order. While being created need not necessarily entail a redefinition of divinity in general,²¹⁾ it does seem to be the case in several biblical texts. First, the sun, moon and stars were no longer viewed as lower level divinities but as created (Genesis 1:16 and Psalm 148:2-3, 5). Second, angels were no longer regarded as lower level divinities but as created (Nehemiah 9:6 and Psalm 148:2-5; see also Jubilees 2:1). Third, cosmic waters were no longer divine (much less personified as in Psalm 104:7), but created (Psalm 148:4-5; see also Jubilees 2:2). Fourth, cosmic enemies such as Leviathan are represented as created (Psalm 104:26). The overall result seems to be a *total polarity* between other deities as non-divine individuals or as members of the divine collective *versus* total individuation of divinity in Yahweh and also of notions of divinity in Yahweh.

This survey suggests that monotheism is not an unreasonable label for some Israelite expressions of ancient Near Eastern one-deity discourse. This Israelite subset of ancient Near Eastern one-deity discourse was arguing for a redefinition of divinity via the one divine figure over and against other deities. This was not a wholly new turn, but one building on many older strands. This subset of Israelite discourse in this period differs from what is seen in Mesopotamia, with its continuation of the deities predicated as manifestations or parts of a single deity. In the polemics against other deities that accompany the expressions of monotheism in biblical works, there seems to be a redefinition of both major deities and divinity taking place in tandem in both Israel and Mesopotamia (and perhaps elsewhere as well). In ancient Israel, it occurs with its national god and that one deity only (this is something that could be happening with some of Israel's immediate neighbors, but nothing is known about it). Perhaps as a clarification of older tradition or its implications from a later perspective, this interpretive turn created new possibilities and new problems in understanding divinity. At this time, Yahweh seems to become an individual deity with a depth and difference. A number of literary critics speak of Yahweh becoming a real character in the Bible; this representation of this deity may be tied to the larger literary and religious picture.

With this manner or method of redefinition, the one divinity/the divine appears as the divine paradox of ineffability and good, as known from older traditional divine roles, functions and emotions. When historians of religions look at divinity, they see a three-dimensional structure of the divine world. Jan Assmann speaks in terms of “shapes” (cult images and representations of a deity in the temple cult); “transformations” (cosmic manifestations as sun, moon, stars and the like); and “names” (linguistic representations that include not only proper names, but also titles, pedigrees, genealogies and myths).²²⁾ According to Beate Pongratz-Leisten,²³⁾ Mesopotamian polytheism is focused on “imagery, concepts, roles and functions,” which serve to delineate deities and often show overlap between them. These — and other — scholars see a multiplicity of alignments or even fluidity in a number of ancient Near Eastern

contexts with divine names, titles, and posited characteristics shared by various gods and goddesses and evidently moving between gods and goddesses. By this I do not refer simply to deities that display paradox or double-sides in their representation (Ishtar, Anat, Marduk in *Ludlul bel nemeqi*). I also mean the shifting use of titles and features moving across deities. In biblical monotheism, the “fluidity” across deities in divine representation “flows” to a single divinity, and in this sense monotheism reflects a process of differentiation or redefinition of prior norms for divinity.²⁴⁾ In the Israelite deity, whatever of these features and titles was available in the environment of ancient Israel became dimensions of this deity, even as these may also have been modified.

As a result, the names of deity and all the roles properly identified for divinity in these biblical representations constitute a single reality of a single deity. The result was not simply a concentration of divine names, titles and powers in a single deity. There were also the other remaining divine entities ultimately understood as having reality thanks only to this divine entity. The important corollary of this situation was that the one divine entity had the range of character elsewhere spread across a number of deities; and no less importantly, this deity had the range within the divine self or person. In other words, this deity was not more divine only in encompassing various divine characteristics, but this deity was also represented as more human than before in encompassing the human personalities seen across the range of other deities. The biblical God – and here I consciously am not suggesting that this is entirely the same as the Israelite God – perhaps seemed both more divine and more human compared with earlier versions of this God. If one may speak of a revolution of ancient Israel’s deity, it may involve the unity of not only of the deity’s roles and functions, but also the deity’s personality in the full range of available divine and human roles.

Notes

- 1) This essay is appearing (with minor differences) in *Companion to Ancient Israel* (ed. Susan Niditch; Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013). It appears here with permission of Wiley Blackwell.
- 2) See William Foxwell Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* (second edition; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1957); and Yehezkel Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginning to the Babylonian Exile* (Trans. and abridged by Moshe Greenberg; New York: Schocken Books, 1972).
- 3) See Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 149-94.
- 4) See Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of ‘Monotheism’* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 6 n. 4
- 5) MacDonald, *Deuteronomy*, 5-58. See also Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A*

- Theology of Multiplicity* (London/New York: Routledge, 2008), 19-25.
- 6) R. W. L. Moberly, "Is Monotheism Bad for You? Some Reflections on God, the Bible, and Life in the Light of Regina Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain*," in *The God of Israel* (ed. Robert P. Gordon; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 95 n. 4.
 - 7) See Francis Schmidt, "Polytheisms: Degeneration or Progress?" *History and Anthropology* 3 (1987 = *The Inconceivable Polytheism*, ed. Francis Schmidt): 9-60.
 - 8) Smith, *Origins*, 87-88.
 - 9) Smith, *Origins*, 163-66.
 - 10) Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 193-94 and 207-8.
 - 11) Smith, *Relating Religion*, 174.
 - 12) Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 220.
 - 13) Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 355.
 - 14) MacDonald, *Deuteronomy*, 2, 4, 210.
 - 15) Albright, *From the Stone Age*, 271-72; and Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel*, 29.
 - 16) Nathaniel B. Levtov, *Images of Others: Iconic Politics in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008); and Smith, *Origins*, 179-94.
 - 17) Clifford Geertz, *A Life of Learning* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1999), 9.
 - 18) MacDonald, *Deuteronomy*, 78-85, 209.
 - 19) For the points and data in this section, see Smith, *Origins*; and *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Second edition; The Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans; Dearborn, MI: Dove Booksellers, 2002). Note also Sven Petry, *Die Entgrenzung JHWHs* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).
 - 20) For this passage and others in this vein, see Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 99-126.
 - 21) This contrasts with the situation where the creation of the gods is not paired with any notion of the gods other than one as non-gods. For Marduk as creator of the other gods, see the bilingual Sumero-Babylonian incantation (CT 13, 35-38), translated by W. G. Lambert, "Mesopotamian Creation Stories," in *Imagining Creation* (ed. Markham J. Geller and Mineke Schipper; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 35-36. For the text, see Claus Ambos, *Mesopotamische Baurituale aus dem 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Dresden: Islet, 2004), 200-7, esp. 202. References courtesy of Saul Olyan.
 - 22) Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison,

Mark S. Smith

WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).

- 23) Beate Pongratz-Leisten, "When the Gods are Speaking: Toward Defining the Interface between Polytheism and Monotheism," in *Propheten in Mari, Assyrien und Israel* (ed. Matthias Köckert and Martti Nissinen; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 163, 166.
- 24) Smith, *Early History*, xxii, xxx, xxxvii, 189-90, 195-202; cf. Pongratz-Leisten, "When the Gods Are Speaking," 168.