

Monotheism and the Redefinition of Divinity in Ancient Israel

Introduction

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On December 15, 2012, CISMOR invited two guest speakers, Prof. Mark Smith (New York University) and Prof. Elizabeth Bloch-Smith (Union Theological Seminary) and held a public lecture and workshop on the theme “The Concept of Monotheism in the Time of the Hebrew Bible,” at the School of Theology, Doshisha University.

The 20th century brought new perspectives to the study of the religion of the Hebrew Bible (=HB) due to new interpretations using new methods, which were introduced to the research of the religions of Ancient Israel. A great part of this development is due to the availability of new texts and artifacts of the ancient cultures that neighbored Ancient Israel. Texts from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia and the Levant (i.e. Syria-Lebanon) that have been deciphered and studied, have allowed scholars to trace the origins and background of some biblical stories concerning historical events, as well as ideas and beliefs expressed in the HB. Further, the intensive archaeological activities in all these regions, and especially the region of Ancient Israel itself, opened new doors to our understanding of the complicated religious picture drawn in the HB texts. One of the central questions in the study of the ancient Israelite religion was the understanding of the origin of “Monotheistic belief” – the belief in one exclusive God, the creator and ruler of the universe, who chose for himself the people of Israel as a nation. The more texts from the Ancient Near East are studied, the more the uniqueness of this belief becomes apparent.

The study of the HB texts shows that a clear change in religious beliefs occurred at the time of kings Hezekiah and Josiah in the 7th century BCE. Different interpretations have been given to this change, one of which was a historical interpretation based on international developments of that time. This topic has occupied much of the research in the past thirty years or so, and several attempts have been made to describe the state of the religious world of Ancient Israel during the first half of the first millennium BCE.

Prof. Mark Smith has been one of the leading scholars during these past thirty years in the quest for understanding the question of the rise of the belief in YHWH. His work has focused on the comparison of YHWH with the other deities of Canaan as they appeared in texts from Ugarit, and his studies have enabled us to see the background of the HB portrayal of YHWH. His studies also led him to search for the origin of the monotheistic definition of YHWH. The

results of his recent studies on which he elaborated in his lectures delivered at our workshop, point to the transitional period of the 7th century and the appearance of Assyrian dominance of the entire Ancient Near East as a crucial turning point for the origin and creation of Israelite Monotheism. Smith indicated the new, shaky social situation of Israelite families that echoed in the new concept of individual responsibility for one's own sins. The concept of individuality was projected into the understanding of the divine as a "single national god responsible in the sphere of divine activity."

Prof. Elizabeth Bloch-Smith brought the archaeological perspective, based on excavations in the land of Israel, into the discussion. She presented evidence of changes occurring during the 7th century BCE by the appearance of the Assyrian army, which brought about the centralization of the cult in the kingdom of Judah. In her paper she presents two aspects of Assyrian influence: one being the impact of the Assyrian war campaign on Judean cities and the total devastation it caused, and the other, by presenting the archaeological findings from the town of Arad, she argues that it resembles the Deuteronomic demand to abolish cult centers outside of Jerusalem i.e. "the place God chose to place his name upon."

In addition to the papers delivered in the lecture and the workshop I have added a paper on our ability to grasp the concept of divinity in the HB taking into consideration the concept of divinity in the Hittite culture. This paper aims at examining the Israelite religion as part of the religious beliefs of its contemporary Ancient Near Eastern neighbors. In this paper I did not try to explain the concept of "Monotheism" but rather wished to point to the existence of one special, mostly personal, deity worshiped separately, but not exclusively.