CHAPTER 19

Monotheism and Ancient Israelite Religion

The peoples of the Ancient Near East remain a source of fascination to moderns. No one can fail to be impressed by the pyramids, the ziggurats, and the artistic monuments of ancient Egypt and western Asia. But the interest in these great ancient civilizations is antiquarian. In contrast, ancient Israel, which was never the home of a great ruling power or of monumental architecture, is the ultimate birthplace of the monotheistic religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For good and ill the stories of Abraham and not those of Gilgamesh remain sources of inspiration and guidance for moderns. As such, the recovery of ancient Israelite religion is relevant within the academy and without, and therein lies a problem.

Scholars with personal religious attachments to the Bible must always exert themselves to avoid the kinds of apologetics that they would never offer in other fields. They must resist the temptation to explain away elements in Israelite religion, child sacrifice for example, if they find them abhorrent. Contrariwise, scholars with the opposite bent must resist emphasizing the Bible’s nefarious support of ideologies and institutions of which they disapprove, if such disapproval impairs understanding of what the texts meant in their time of composition and early reception.

A second problem is the paucity of primary data, a situation in stark contrast to Mesopotamia, Egypt, Ugarit, Anatolia (Turkey), and Greece, which, in addition to their literary productions, have left us temples and temple offering lists telling us which gods were worshiped and what attention they received. Assyrian sources for example, provide detailed information on the practice of divination.¹ These same “extra-biblical” cultures have provided a wealth of pictorial representations of their divinities enabling us to visualize their gods the way they did. Different size temples to different gods in the same geographic area are another indication of relative importance, and these too are lacking in ancient Israel. Ancient Israel has thus far provided no undisputed pictorial representations of the Hebrew god Yahweh. Our only offering list from the biblical period comes from the fifth century Jewish temple at Elephantine in Egypt, a structure destroyed by hostile Egyptians in antiquity. The list indicates that offerings were made to YHW/YHH (forms of Yahweh) along with the

Although we have ancient Hebrew letters, inscriptions, and artifacts, most of our information about Israelite religion comes from the Hebrew Bible, a selective anthology containing material written over a period of some eight hundred years and completed late in the first pre-Christian millennium. As such, the Bible’s religion is not necessarily ancient Israelite religion but a later understanding of it. In contrast to the situation of other ancient Near Eastern texts, we have no originals of the Bible, only copies far removed chronologically from their original authors or scribes.

The greatest problem in studying Israelite religion is the figure of the Hebrew god, the hero of the Bible, absent only from the books of Esther and Song of Songs. Within the Bible the Hebrew god is depicted as creator, lawgiver, provider, and director of all the events of what would later be called “nature” and “history,” Biblical Hebrew having no word for either concept. At some point this Hebrew divinity came to be viewed by followers as the sole god in existence. His proper name is Yahweh, usually translated “Lord,” or “Eternal,” the god of “Israel,” a small politically insignificant people in western Asia first attested in the late second millennium BCE. Yahweh has thus far not been found in any pre-Israelite pantheons. Yahweh was known by various names and epithets, among them Adonay, El, Eloah, Elohim, Shadday and Elyon, some of which were originally the names of other gods absorbed into the figure of Yahweh. In the course of time Yahweh became simply the only “God” of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The figure of El is the best documented of those divinities folded into the god of Israel. In a complicated process, El, once head of a North Syrian pantheon, became so thoroughly identified with Yahweh that his separate existence was virtually unacknowledged by the Hebrew writers.

The name Yahweh is a scholarly reconstruction of the consonant cluster YHWH attested more than 6,600 times in the Hebrew Bible, and in the Moabite

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3 For theories about the origins of Yahweh and the meaning of his name see K. van der Toorn, “Yahweh,” DDD, 910–919 (with bibliography).
7 See van der Toorn, “God (I),” DDD, 352–365.