

### 3. Many Gods

There are spirits in every patch of ground, and gods in every grove. Everything in nature has contact with the divine; only man is an outsider.

#### The First-Born

The old gods god hated intruders who farmed some god's patch of ground. To avoid being killed, an intruder might symbolically *kill himself*, sacrificing to that god his oldest son, the one who would have continued his family line. On a larger scale, we see the sacrifice of a first-born son to the god of a *nation*. Mesha of Moab, at war and losing, averted defeat by sacrificing to Chemosh:

**2Kgs 3:27.** Then he took his eldest son, that would have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt-offering upon the wall.

First fruits could also be due to Yahweh. Jephthah promised to sacrifice the first thing he met on returning home, if Yahweh gave victory. Yahweh did:

**Judg 11:34.** And Jephthah came to Mizpah unto his house, and behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances; and she was his only child, beside her he had neither son nor daughter. [35] And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! Thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me; for I have opened my mouth unto Yahweh, and I cannot go back. [36] And she said unto him, My father, thou hast opened thy mouth unto Yahweh, do unto me according to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth . . . [37] Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, that I may depart and do down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my companions. [38] And he said, Go. And he sent her away for two months, and she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains. [39] And it came to pass, at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed . . .

In the valley of Hinnom, near Jerusalem, lived the god local Molech.<sup>1</sup> Sacrifices to that Molech were forbidden by the Yahweh party:

**Lev 18:21.** And thou shalt not give any of thy seed to make them pass through the fire to Molech.

Yahweh himself intervened to halt the sacrifice of Abram's son Isaac (§12). But the practice continued, right down to the time of the Exile. Says Jeremiah:

**Jer 7:31.** And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I commanded not, neither came it into my mind.

Despite this widespread disapproval, the sacrifice of the first-born continued. But sacrifice as such has its appeal, especially if sacrifice is made to Yahweh, and we soon find sacrifice of the firstborn as part of standard Yahweh practice.

<sup>1</sup>For a "reassessment" of this practice, see Heider **Cult of Molek** (1985).

A firstborn might be offered *while alive*, being devoted to Yahweh by vow. Hannah prayed for children, and the future priest Samuel was given in answer:

**1Sam 1:24.** And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her . . . and brought him unto the house of Yahweh in Shiloh . . . [27] For this child I prayed, and Yahweh hath given me my petition . . . [28] therefore also I have granted him to Yahweh; as long as he liveth, he is granted to Yahweh . . .

Property could also be devoted to the benefit of the Temple. Could these dedicated things be redeemed? No; devotion to the Temple was permanent:

**Lev 27:28.** But no devoted thing that a man devotes to the Lord, of anything that he has, whether of man or beast, or of his inherited field, shall be sold or redeemed; every devoted thing is most holy to the Lord.

But as the money economy continued to affect the law, it came to be allowed:

**Lev 27:14.** And when a man shall sanctify his house to be holy unto Yahweh, then the priest shall estimate it, whether it be good or bad, as the priest shall estimate it, so shall it stand. [15] And if he that sanctified it will redeem his house, then he shall add the fifth part of the money of thy estimation unto it, and it shall be his.

In such ways did earlier practices gradually give way to later conceptions.<sup>2</sup>

### Images

Bull worship was widespread in ancient times. Calf images appear in the most public contexts. Aaron made one during the Exodus, and the people said:

**Exod 32:4.** . . . These are thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt [5] And when Aaron saw, he built an altar before it . . .

In household context, we have Micah's calf – made, no less of *stolen silver*:

**Judg 17:2.** And he said unto his mother, The eleven hundred of silver that were taken from thee, about which thou didst utter a curse . . . behold the silver is with me: I took it . . .

He made the image, consecrated his son to be its priest, and then replaced him with a wandering Levite. Danites, passing by, offered that Levite better terms. He went with them, taking the image, which became the god of the Danites.

Jacob and his wives are fleeing Laban; Rachel has stolen Laban's household gods. Laban overtakes them, and searches for his gods; his teraphim:

**Gen 31:34.** Now Rachel had taken the teraphim, and put them in the camel's saddle, and sat upon them. And Laban . . . found them not.

He found them not because Rachel was then menstruating, and being unclean, she and her camel were not searched.

Yahweh himself dwelt in an image, in a box called the Ark,<sup>3</sup> kept at the sacred city of Shiloh. It was once carried into battle by Hophni and Phinehas, sons of priest Eli. Unfortunately, the battle was lost, and the Ark was captured.

<sup>2</sup>This is the last chapter of Leviticus, and it is not surprising to find updates there.

<sup>3</sup>Hb 'arōn; not to be confused with the ark of Noah, Hb *tēbāh*.

The Philistines took it back to their city Ashdod . . .

**1Sam 5:2.** And the Philistines took the ark of God, and brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it up by Dagon.<sup>4</sup> [3] And when they of Ashdod arose early on the morrow, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face on the ground before the ark of Yahweh. And they took Dagon, and set him in his place again. [4] And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground, before the ark of Yahweh. and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands lay cut off upon the threshold; only the stump of Dagon was left to him.

They return the Ark, and it is taken back to Shiloh.

### Persons

Spiritual power is possessed by gods, but also by persons, where it may appear as the power of prophecy. Some think that “prophecy” is knowing the future. That is not correct. The future, that which has not happened yet, does not exist as an object of knowledge, either for gods or for men.<sup>5</sup> Here is an example of prophecy. Captive Jesus is being taunted by the Romans guards:

**Luke 22:63.** Now the men who were holding Jesus . . . also blindfolded him and asked him, “Prophecy! Who was it that struck you?”

Prophecy is not knowledge of the future. It is *total knowledge of the present*.

Some have power in their own right, and can bless or curse. There is Elijah, who saves a starving woman by giving her an inexhaustible cruse of oil (§51), or Balaam (§29), hired by the King of Moab to curse the attacking enemy.

Others may be indwelt by a spirit they have summoned from the dead; they then acquire all the knowledge of that particular spirit.<sup>6</sup> Saul had banned all irregular contacts with gods. Then Yahweh abandoned him, and he received no more divine messages. Needing to know the outcome of the morrow’s battle, he went by night to the necromancer of Endor:

**1Sam 28:11.** Then said the woman, Whom shall I bring up unto thee? And he said, Bring me up Samuel. [12] And when the woman saw Samuel, she cried with a loud voice, and the woman spake to Saul, saying, why hast thou deceived me? for thou art Saul!

Being indwelt by Samuel’s spirit puts her in possession of all Samuel knows, and instantly enables her to recognize Saul, *and to realize that her life is forfeit*. This is easily the most terrifying moment in the Bible.

<sup>4</sup>Those who ascribe *all knowledge* to god destroy the whole theological enterprise. One whose deeds are known in advance lives as a mere puppet on the stage of his life; he cannot be held responsible for those deeds, and there is thus no such thing as sin.

<sup>5</sup>What *can* be known is the outcome of events already in progress, a planned trading venture, or a battle already pending but not yet joined. These are exactly the questions asked in the old Chinese divination method, as recorded in the famous “Oracle Bones.” The supernatural too has its limits. On the whole, ancient traditions respect those limits.

<sup>6</sup>So also the summoned and indwelling spirits of the Chinese and other shamans.

### Summoning a God

The arts of invocation include heightened speech, song, and dance. The Psalms, essentially prayers, were sung. In any context, if prayer was offered, a reciter was required. Others might *respond*, some Psalm texts indicate where that response should be made.<sup>7</sup> But the singing must be by the skilled singer.

The most effective were the dances. Here are the priests of Baal – furiously dancing to summon Baal, and mocked by Elijah as they do so:

**1Kgs 18:27** And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is musing, or he is gone aside, or he is on a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth and must be awakened.

David, girt with an ephod<sup>8</sup> (2Sam 6:14), danced as he escorted the Ark from Shiloh to Jerusalem. Says Arnold (p8), “David was not a priest, and had no conceivable use for an oracle pouch.” But he did. He was making Jerusalem more sacred than Shiloh. A kingdom’s power depends on the favor of its god. If necessary, that god could be someone else’s, enticed from its former home.

### Anointing

Anointing is for kings. It is also a blessing that can be given to any person:

**Psa 23:5b.** Thou hast anointed my head with oil,  
my cup runneth over.

Why oil? Because oil, and the fragrance sometimes mixed with it, are an offering suitable to a god. When Jacob wakes from dreaming on a certain stone, he knows he is in the presence of a god, and anoints the stone to bless that god:

**Gen 28:18.** And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil on the top of it.  
[19] And he called the name of that place Beth-El . . .

Fragrance is Canaanite, like the “sweet savor” of Yahweh’s animal offerings.

### And

With the Kingdom, and the Kings’ politically wise patronage of other kings’ gods, we first hear of gods located further away, including Ashtoreth or Astarte, who was worshiped all over the Mediterranean as the Queen of Heaven:

**1Kgs 11:5.** Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. . . [7] Then did Solomon build a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab . . . and for Molech the abomination of the children of Ammon . . .

And from the western commercial centers Tyre, Sidon, and Ugarit, came Baal (“The Lord”), brought to Canaan with Jezebel, the Tyrian bride of Ahab (§50).

With that on record, we conclude with a longer look at Yahweh and El.

<sup>7</sup>See Brooks **Selah**, and for more on the domestic singing of Psalms, §44.:

<sup>8</sup>A pouch containing stones for divination, the “Urim and Thummim.”

## Yahweh

Yahweh is the portable god whom the southern pastoral folk brought with them. El, a sky god, could be worshiped anywhere. Yahweh dwelt in *one place*: the Ark, the Tabernacle, for many years, in various approved local shrines,<sup>9</sup> or, the last of them all, the one Jerusalem Temple.

Long after their entry into the Land, the Hebrews worshiped Yahweh alongside the older worship of El. Even in the Temple, when it was built, there was an Asherah (a pillar, the stylized consort of El), from Canaanite practice. At some point this amicable mixed worship was condemned, and so it happens that the Book of Kings knows no sin but worship of the Baals.

Yahweh is the god of one people; the “covenant” is the terms on which they acknowledge him as their sole god (§21). Their obedience was never complete, leading, in the official account, to Yahweh’s abandoning them, destroying his own house, and having his people carried off to Babylon. The nation’s troubles, in this view, are due solely to its sins and to Yahweh’s resulting anger.

Yahweh was the god of a pastoral people. Like his people, he was portable; at one point, he is carried into battle in the Ark. His origin has been traced to Midian, which may have been the common ritual center of many pastoral tribes (traders and metalsmiths as well as herdsman), though not the home of any.<sup>10</sup> One figure whom the Biblical texts recall is Jethro, a *priest* of Midian.<sup>11</sup>

It was claimed that Yah had given the Land, to Abram and his descendants this is the Promise narrative. It led to rewriting, substituting “Yahweh” for “El” in many Canaanite texts, including the Psa 29 hymn we have just seen.<sup>12</sup>

Yah was a war god. As the Hebrews approach the Land, they meet foes whom Yahweh will “give into your hand,” in one-sided victories (§36). In the time of the kings, he is “Yahweh of Hosts” (*Yahweh tseva’ot*, 1 Sam 1:3).<sup>13</sup> When his own powers are exceeded, he has “the King of Babylon, my servant” (Jer 25:9) do his punishing for him by attacking his own people (Jer 25:12); Yahweh’s real-world military power has been exceeded, but noting (Jer 25:12) that this King will be duly punished, when Yahweh is done with him.

After the Exile, Yahweh was worshiped in the restored Jerusalem Temple, in Elephantine in Egypt, and in Samaria (§64) – mostly as the Giver of the Law; but no longer as a force in the fates of nations.

<sup>9</sup>This point, almost needless to say, is furiously disputed; see §22 and §33.

<sup>10</sup>The complicated data have been carefully sorted out by Miller **Yahweh** (2018).

<sup>11</sup>Jethro’s second role, as the father-in-law of Moses, is less convincing; see §16. There is also Reuel (including the sacred name El) as Moses’ father-in-law; Exod 2:18. These old traditions have become much garbled over time.

<sup>12</sup>Hence, in part, the difficulty in distinguishing “J” from “E” in the 4DH.

<sup>13</sup>For all his wielding of rain and storm, nothing of the kind is ever posited of El.

## El

El was a sky god, giver of rain; the festivals of El are those of planting and harvest. This hymn<sup>14</sup> (with original “El” restored) celebrates him in that role:

- Psa 29**
- 03 The voice of El is upon the waters,  
the god of glory thundereth,  
even El, upon many waters.
- 04 The voice of El is powerful,  
the voice of El is full of majesty.
- 05 The voice of El breaketh the cedars;  
yea, El breaketh in pieces  
the cedars of Lebanon.
- 06 He maketh them also to skip like a calf;  
Lebanon and Sirion, like a young wild-ox.
- 07 The voice of El cleaveth the flames of fire,
- 08 The voice of El shaketh the wilderness;  
El shaketh the wilderness of Kadesh . . .

The title El-Shaddai, “El Almighty,” sees El as most powerful of the gods. So he appears in this northern hymn, which exceptionally still has the name El:

- Psa 82**
- 01 The gods (Elohim) take their places in the assembly of El;  
he judgeth among the gods:
- 02 “How long will ye judge unjustly,  
and respect the persons of the wicked?” *Selah*
- 03 Judge the poor and fatherless,  
do justice to the afflicted and destitute.
- 04 Rescue the poor and needy;  
deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.
- 05 They know not, neither do they understand,  
They walk to and fro in darkness,  
All the foundations of the earth are shaken.
- 06 I said, Ye are gods,  
and all of you sons of the Most High.
- 07 Nevertheless, ye shall die like men.  
and fall like one of the princes.
- 08 Arise, O God, judge the earth,  
for thou shalt inherit all the nations.

El finally destroys these unjust gods, and reigns alone.

Biblical names are often *theophoric*: they contain a divine element. Personal names with “Yah” (Yahweh) and “El” both occur in the Bible. For example:

Isaiah “Yah saves” ~ Samuel “El has heard”  
Hezekiah “Yah strengthens” ~ Israel “El strengthens”

But of 502 attested *place* names,<sup>15</sup> not one has a “Yah” element; all are “El.”

The Hebrews were strangers in the land, and the land itself knew them not.

<sup>14</sup>For its northern origin, see Terrien 279, and more generally O’Callaghan **Echoes**.

<sup>15</sup>Zevit **Religions** 587.