

# ANCIENT ISRAEL: FROM POLYTHEISM TO MONOTHEISM

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## *Introduction*

Charting the development of deities is no easy task. It is difficult enough for the historian to determine the truth of specific events as they relate to people who left behind archaeological evidence, let alone the truth of the thoughts or beliefs they held. The difficulty of the task becomes compounded when studying ancient cultures, of which comparatively little evidence remains. In the case of ancient Israel, historians possess many written documents from which to draw evidence, but even this is a tricky task. The Hebrew Bible, far from being a singly composed body of work, was written by several different authors over a time span of nearly a thousand years. Inevitably, the culture of the peoples described in it changed over this time, along with their beliefs. In addition, different authors brought different ideologies and influences to the table, further muddying the water for historians concerned with Israelite beliefs. Traditionally, the Israelites are thought of as having been the first culture to practice true monotheism, or belief in one exalted, all-powerful deity. To some extent this is true; however, the road to monotheism for the ancient Israelites was a long and complicated one.

This paper will examine the cultural background of the ancient Israelites in an attempt to shed light on their religious beliefs. It will consider the polytheistic beliefs of the ancient Canaanites, who occupied the same geographic area as the Israelites, and may in fact have been ancestors to the Israelites, or even the Israelites themselves.<sup>1</sup> It will examine the identifications of Israelite deities with those of the Canaanite culture and any possible religious syncretism that occurred by drawing largely from the texts of the Hebrew Bible. It will be argued that historically a trend can be discerned that moves from polytheistic practices toward emerging ideas of monotheism. However, the Hebrew Bible was not written in a chronological manner and thus the final challenge will be to unravel the various texts and the motives of the authors behind them to gain insight into the social and political movements that shaped religious belief. Historians must take care not to confuse the actual past with what a written account says of it. In examining these issues a picture will emerge of Israelite religious practices closely intertwined with political motives, which in turn, ended up shaping the beliefs that led to monotheism.

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1. There are many scholarly opinions regarding this issue, which will be explored later in the paper.

*Identifying the Ancient Israelites*

First an inquiry must be made into who the ancient Israelites were. As William Dunstan clearly catalogues, many different cultures populated the area west of the Euphrates and east of the Mediterranean Sea between the fifteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C.E.<sup>2</sup> A major challenge faced by historians is attempting to determine the geographical boundaries or even the very definitions of these cultures. Because historians often disagree on definitions, they are often provided for the purpose of

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putting forth an argument, which ultimately renders them subjective. The term “Israelite” is nothing more than a concept, usually used to refer to the people who eventually composed the

Hebrew Bible. But, labels are necessary for concepts and an examination of the “Israelite” label will prove useful for our purposes.

Robert D. Miller notes that the term “Israelite” has often been used to denote a particular ethnicity.<sup>3</sup> But how does one determine an ethnicity? Is it biological? Cultural? Genealogical? Geographical? Or, is there no such thing – the term being nothing more than a scholarly construct? Once again, this is contingent upon definitions. To avoid getting bogged down in a discussion on theoretical semantics, we can acknowledge that differences in artifacts are apparent at least among large geographical regions. Miller notes that material culture such as pottery, settlement pattern, architecture, burial customs, and metals can be useful evidence in determining a culture or ethnic group.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, it is the historical continuity traced through these artifacts that European scholars have traditionally used to define ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> Approaching the issue more genealogically, Elizabeth Bloch-Smith defines *ethnos* as “a group of people larger than a clan or lineage claiming common ancestry.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it is the “fabricated collective memory... or putative myth of shared descent and kinship” that reinforces the lineages.<sup>7</sup> This provides a more internal definition of “ethnicity” – how the culture defines itself, whereas Miller’s definition is more external – how foreigners would define and classify it. In either case, both approaches are equally valid for their own purposes.

Ultimately, what the historian must recognize is that the past is constructed in the modern mind. Yes, artifacts such as pottery, architecture, and texts have been found and can be dated with reasonable accuracy, but the context for those artifacts is largely constructed. It is the inferences about these very

2. William E. Dunstan, *The Ancient Near East* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1998).

3. Robert D. Miller, II, “Identifying Earliest Israel,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 333 (Feb., 2004), 55-6. [JSTOR](#). CSUS Lib., Sacramento, CA. November 17, 2009.

4. Miller, 63.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, “Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I: Archaeology Preserves What Is Remembered and What Is Forgotten in Israel’s History,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 122 (Autumn, 2003), 402. [JSTOR](#). CSUS Lib., Sacramento, CA. November 17, 2009.

7. *Ibid.*

ideas – how a culture defined itself, other cultures with whom they frequently interacted, indeed the specific cultural and ethnic labels ascribed to them and all the connotations those labels imply – that are

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modern constructs. They can likely be *inferred* from other archaeological or textual evidence but cannot be known with certainty. With this in mind, we can now turn to an examination of the

labels used for the people of the northern Levant in the fifteenth to thirteenth centuries.

The term “Canaanite” simply refers to the people occupying what is now Lebanon and Israel from roughly 1500-1200 B.C.E.<sup>8</sup> Most of the information and evidence scholars have about the Canaanites comes from the city of Ugarit, several miles northwest of what is typically designated as Canaan.<sup>9</sup> One text found at Ugarit makes mention of the term “Ugarit” as distinct from “Canaan,”<sup>10</sup> while others seem to imply that they were the same people, as they shared a common linguistic background.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, there are no records of Canaanites referring to themselves as such; the term comes from documents recorded by foreign cultures, such as those found in Egypt, Hatti, and Mesopotamia.<sup>12</sup> Yet it is widely used to refer to the people described in Ugaritic texts and occupying land shared by the Israelites. It is just as likely that the people commonly referred to as “Ugaritic,” “Canaanite,” and “Israelite” were, in fact, one culture at some point. Miller, in examining the ethnic origins of the early Israelites, suggests that frequent trade and interaction between regions in the Iron I highlands points to a cultural stylistic homogeneity among the residents.<sup>13</sup> However, he argues against the idea that any specific artifact can be used as an ethnic identifier.<sup>14</sup> It is the style – the “part of the formal variability in material culture” – that communicates a shared and developing social networking strategy, not only to the surrounding cultures of the time, but to the modern archaeologist as well. Indeed, archaeological evidence from Ugarit suggests the people there were successful traders, interacting with Mycenaean Greece, the island of Cyprus, and Egypt.<sup>15</sup>

External influence from other cultures inevitably affects the original culture and often changes it drastically. Cultures often adopt ideas and practices of their neighbors; this makes it very difficult to draw conceptual boundaries around a specific culture. To aid in understanding this problem, Marian Feldman distinguishes between “indigenous” and “international,” with the former referring to “features

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8. Dunstan, 179.

9. Dunstan, 180.

10. Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 15.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Miller, 57.

14. Ibid.

15. Dunstan, 180.

found almost exclusively in a single, bounded geopolitical area,” and the latter referring to “features that have been hybridized to the extent that they can no longer be attributed to a single specific regional tradition.”<sup>16</sup> Tracing material artifacts such as statues, stele, plaques, and pendants in Ugarit and the Levant between 1400 and 1200 B.C.E., she concludes that an “identifiable indigenous artistic tradition” existed in the region.<sup>17</sup> This is in agreement with Miller’s idea that style (within reasonable variation) can contribute to our understanding of culture and ethnicity. With this homogeneity of artistic style in mind, we can turn now to religion and argue that the religious beliefs of the Canaanites and the Israelites merged over time, and evidence of this merging can be found in the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

### *The Canaanite “El”*

But first, an examination of Canaanite religion is needed. The Canaanites believed in a pantheon of deities, but one god, El, presided over them all.<sup>18</sup> The name “El,” in fact, is found throughout the texts of the Hebrew Bible and there is much debate about what is meant by the term. “El” is simply the word for “god” in many West Semitic languages,<sup>19</sup> which begs many questions. Was the Canaanite “El” so pervasive that other cultures began to adopt the term to refer to their own concepts of deities? Or was the word used by the Canaanites to embody the deistic pinnacle of their religion? Unfortunately, the answers to the origins of El are unknown, and perhaps these questions are too provocative and presumptuous. With respect to the first question, however, we may tone it down a bit and say that the culture that came to be known as the Israelites certainly knew of El, as we shall see, and referred to their own supreme deity using the name “El.”

The Ugaritic texts refer to “El’s family,”<sup>20</sup> “Kind El, the Compassionate,”<sup>21</sup> and “ageless one.”<sup>22</sup> El is understood as often presiding over a divine council and is depicted as an elderly, bearded figure.<sup>23</sup> He is highly anthropomorphized, described as engaging in social activities such as drinking, belonging to clubs, and having affairs with women.<sup>24</sup> He is described as having a wife, Athirat, and many children, the most prominent of which is Baal.<sup>25</sup> He is associated with a bull, likely due to his strength and status as chief of gods.<sup>26</sup> Some of these descriptions fit with those found in the Hebrew Bible, such as the deity

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16. Marian H. Feldman, “Redefining a Mediterranean ‘International Style,’ 1400-1200 B.C.E.,” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (Mar., 2002), 7. [JSTOR](#). CSUS Lib., Sacramento, CA. November 17, 2009.

17. Feldman, 13.

18. Dunstan, 180-1.

19. Smith, 135.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Smith, 136.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. Smith, 135.

26. *Ibid.*

presiding over a divine council,<sup>27</sup> exercising kindness and compassion, as well as having connections to a bull.<sup>28</sup> The name El is referred to as the central Israelite deity many times throughout the Hebrew Bible in the forms of El-‘elyôn,<sup>29</sup> El-elohey-israel,<sup>30</sup> and El-Shadday,<sup>31</sup> to name a few. However, the traditional name for the god of the Israelites, expressed far more widely in the Hebrew Bible, is Yahweh.

So, why are references to a supreme deity named “El” in the Hebrew Bible? Is this Israelite “El” the same as the Canaanite “El”? Mark S. Smith seems to think so, and he provides persuasive evidence

**“Why are references to a supreme deity named ‘El’ in the Hebrew Bible?”**

to support this claim. Smith notes that the name “Israel” does not contain the divine element of Yahweh, but rather the element ‘el.<sup>32</sup> This implies that the central deity of the group “Israel” went by the name “El.”<sup>33</sup>

Smith argues that Yahweh was originally a lesser deity in Israelite religion, subordinate to El. He notes Deuteronomy 32:8-9:<sup>34</sup>

When the Most High (‘elyôn) gave to the nations their inheritance,  
when he separated humanity,  
he fixed the boundaries of the peoples  
according to the number of divine beings.  
For Yahweh’s portion is his people,  
Jacob his allotted heritage.

In this passage, ‘elyôn (or El) is the supreme deity, while Yahweh only has claim to a portion of humanity. In time, Smith argues, Yahweh assimilated El’s characteristics and status and came to be identified with him.<sup>35</sup> Support for this claim comes in the passage of Joshua 22:22 (cf. Ps. 50:1; 136:1-3):<sup>36</sup>

God of gods is Yahweh. (‘ēl ‘ēlōhîm yhw̄h)

This clearly implies not only an elevation of Yahweh’s status, but Yahweh’s identification with El. Indeed, Smith notes that there are no biblical polemics against El, suggesting the two deities were identified at an

27. Job 1:6, 2:1; Ps. 82:1, 6; 1 Kings 22:19-23.

28. 1 Kings 12:28.

29. Gen. 14:18-20.

30. Gen. 33:20.

31. Gen. 17:1; Exod. 6:2-3.

32. Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 32.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 33.

36. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 34.

early stage of Israelite religion.<sup>37</sup>

However, this passage from the Book of Joshua also implies that Yahweh was not alone among deities. Yahweh is clearly regarded as supreme, while other deities are acknowledged, suggesting that ancient Israel was a polytheistic culture. But, this suggestion requires careful examination. After all, the Hebrew Bible is largely the story of a culture of people struggling to reject other deities and worship Yahweh alone. If, as was suggested earlier, the Israelites and the Canaanites came from a similar background, then is this a story of one people warring ideologically with themselves and monotheism was the eventual result.

### ***Historical Origins of the Ancient Israelites***

Stephen L. Harris notes there are three scholarly camps when it comes to explaining the origins of the ancient Israelites. The first is that described in the Book of Exodus – the ancient Israelites, already monotheistic and enslaved in Egypt, arrived in Canaan led by their nationalistic god Yahweh and conquered the inhabitants.<sup>38</sup> The evidence for this lies in the text of the Hebrew Bible (the books of Exodus through Joshua), and ancient sites at Hazor and Debir appear to have been destroyed near the end of the Bronze Age.<sup>39</sup> However, there is no evidence that the destruction was caused by the Israelites and furthermore there is no archaeological evidence of a mass exodus of any peoples at any time out of Egypt.<sup>40</sup> The only reference made by the Egyptians to a people known as “Israelites” is carved on the victory stele of king Merneptah around the year 1200 B.C.E.<sup>41</sup> The inscription merely recognizes the Israelites as a people inhabiting the area of Palestine,<sup>42</sup> implying that they were already settled by that date. The Exodus from Egypt then, if there was one, likely happened in the mid-thirteenth century BCE. However, archaeological evidence at Jericho and ‘Ai, the cities the Israelites are described as having conquered in the Book of Joshua, suggests these cities were abandoned long before the end of the thirteenth century.<sup>43</sup>

A more likely scenario, backed by stronger archaeological evidence, proposes that the Israelites (whoever they were) gradually settled on the outskirts of Canaan and slowly and peacefully assimilated themselves into Canaanite culture.<sup>44</sup> According to this view, some Israelite immigrants may have come from Egypt, but largely the culture was one of gradual assimilation. This would explain the blending

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37. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 33.

38. Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible*. Sixth Edition. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 168.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Dunstan, 193.

42. Dunstan, 195.

43. Harris, 168.

44. Ibid.

of qualities between Yahweh and El, and the persistence of Canaanite deities such as Baal and Asherah in the Hebrew Bible, as well as the skepticism and distrust directed toward the monarchy in the tenth through the sixth centuries.<sup>45</sup> If the Israelites had gradually assimilated, the monarchy would largely have been Canaanite, ruling with reverence for Canaanite deities. Understandably, this would upset the more assimilated Israelites, who had their own religious ideas.

However, there is a third model for which I shall argue strongly later in the paper. This model holds that there was little, if any, distinction between the Canaanites and Israelites, and the tensions expressed in the Hebrew Bible are largely those of the underprivileged rebelling against the aristocratic elite.<sup>46</sup> In this model, the Canaanites would be understood as an outdated, conservative culture

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overthrown by a radical, reactionary movement – the Israelites. This would explain the common linguistic background of the two cultures, as well as adoption of old religious ideas reframed anew. Furthermore, it is

corroborated with archaeological evidence of weakening Egyptian control over the Canaanite region in the mid-twelfth century.<sup>47</sup> This weakening of centralized power would have been a perfect opportunity to stage a revolt and assert a new religious ideology. Finally, it again fits with the distrust of the kingship from the tenth to the sixth centuries since centralized power was the problem in the first place.

This view, however, leaves numerous gaps when looking at the Torah in particular. Why is there such heavy emphasis on an exodus from Egypt? Why is Yahweh constantly singled out for exclusive worship? Why is the bull seen as an idolatrous figure if Yahweh and El are the same deity? Furthermore, is there any evidence of the Israelites staging a revolt? These questions will be addressed a bit later, but first let us focus on further ways in which religious pluralism was expressed in ancient Israel, beginning with the idea of the bull.

### ***Baal Worship in Ancient Israel***

If the social uprising theory of Israelite origins is correct, we would see resentment directed towards deities associated with the older culture. Indeed, this is precisely what we find, particularly with Baal. The Canaanite deity Baal, as mentioned earlier, was the most prominent of El’s sons, and was likely a storm god with strong associations with fertility.<sup>48</sup> Baal was often represented by a bull, a powerful Canaanite symbol of fertility.<sup>49</sup> Smith argues that by the time Israel established a monarchy in the tenth century, El and Yahweh had been merged into one deity, but Baal was still distinct.<sup>50</sup> In fact, Baal was

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45. Harris, 168-9.

46. Harris, 169.

47. Ibid.

48. Dunstan, 198.

49. Ibid.

50. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 57.

likely worshiped throughout the monarchy, up until the sixth century. Evidence for this is abundant in the Hebrew Bible. The first notable instance is in Exodus, when Moses comes down from the mountain and sees the Israelites worshipping a golden bull-calf.<sup>51</sup> The Book of Judges describes the settled Israelites turning away from Yahweh and toward the “baalim,” or many forms of Baal.<sup>52</sup> Just a few chapters later, Gideon is called by Yahweh to destroy the temple of Baal, and does so.<sup>53</sup> Later in the Kingly Period, Jeroboam erects statues of golden calves for worship – one at Dan, the other at Beth-El.<sup>54</sup> King Ahab and his wife Jezebel in the mid ninth century are described as active worshipers of Baal and are demonized.<sup>55</sup> Again, reform is enacted when Jehu has all the local worshipers of Baal killed.<sup>56</sup> These are only a few examples. Perhaps the most sweeping reform (at least as depicted in the Hebrew Bible) is at the end of the Kingly Period, with King Josiah destroying the temples to Baal at Beth-El and in Samaria.<sup>57</sup>

All of this is seen through the filter of the author of the Deuteronomistic History (the books of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings). For this person, likely writing in the seventh century,<sup>58</sup> Baal worship was viewed quite negatively. Smith, attempting to reconstruct the actual history of Baal worship in ancient Israel, paints a different picture. First, with respect to Gideon, the author of the book of Judges claims that he was renamed Jerubbaal – a taunting of Baal to “plead his case” against Gideon, who had just destroyed his altar.<sup>59</sup> However, Smith notes that the name incorporates *Ba'al* as its theophoric element and would thus suggest someone who is a worshiper of Baal, not a ridiculer.<sup>60</sup> Smith sees the religious program of Ahab and Jezebel elevating the status of Baal as a way of promoting theopolitical unity in the north, where many people still worshiped Baal.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Smith supplies evidence that Ahab was far from abandoning the cult of Yahweh – his sons Ahaziah and Joram bear Yahwistic names.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, the associations between Baal and Yahweh in the Davidic conquests are difficult to deny. Smith notes the Canaanite imagery associated with Yahweh in Psalm 18, depicting Yahweh as a storm god, a common characteristic of Baal.<sup>63</sup> In Psalm 89, the language recalls Baal as well: “I shall establish

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51. Exod. 32.

52. Judg. 2:11-13, 3:7.

53. Judg. 6:25-32.

54. 1 Kings 12:28-32.

55. 1 Kings 16:30-33.

56. 2 Kings 10:18-29.

57. 2 Kings 23:4-15.

58. Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 135.

59. Judg. 6:31-32.

60. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 43.

61. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 72.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Ps. 18:7-19.

his rule over the sea, his dominion over the rivers.”<sup>64</sup> Smith notes that Sea and River are titles of the enemies of Baal in the text of the Ugaritic Baal cycle, and by using them to suggest David’s rule over these lands, the author is attributing Baal’s warrior qualities to Yahweh.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, when David defeated the Philistines, the book of 2 Samuel quotes David as saying, “The Lord has broken through my enemies’ lines... as a river breaks its banks.’ That is why the place was named Baal-perazim.”<sup>66</sup> It is curious that a place would be named Baal-perazim as a consequence of the powers *Yahweh* conferred on David. Smith suggests that associating Yahweh with a warrior-god such as Baal would have appealed to a great warrior such as David, and furthermore the accompanying imagery blurring the lines between Yahweh and Baal would have encouraged worship of Baal alongside Yahweh at this early stage.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, it was not until a hundred years or so later in the ninth century that Baal was seen as a threat to Israelite religions.<sup>68</sup>

Baal worship, then, far from the depictions presented in the Hebrew Bible, can be understood as flourishing productively throughout ancient Israel, up until the sixth or seventh century. It likely posed little to no threat to worshipers of Yahweh for the most part; indeed the same people likely worshiped both deities without problem. But, the authors of the Hebrew Bible certainly had a problem with Baal worship. To examine why this may be, we must turn our attention to unraveling the various texts of the Hebrew Bible in an attempt to uncover the biases and motives of the authors while keeping in mind the social uprising theory posed earlier.

### *The E Source*

Biblical scholars largely agree that the Hebrew Bible is composed of many different sources, and in the case of the books from Genesis to 2 Kings, the redactors are narrowed down to four.<sup>69</sup> This is called the documentary hypothesis, which goes against the traditional view that Moses wrote the Torah in its entirety. The four agreed upon sources vary in style and substance. The first four books of the Torah – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers – are an intricate weaving together of three different narrative sources, referred to by scholars as J, E and P.<sup>70</sup> Deuteronomy through 2 Kings are understood as largely the work of one author, referred to as D.<sup>71</sup> The letters are used to denote certain characteristics about the authors: the author who refers to God as Yahweh is called J (in German, the name of God is translated as Jehovah, hence the J); the author who refers to God as Elohim is called E; the author

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64. Ps. 89:25.

65. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 92.

66. 2 Sam. 5:20.

67. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 94.

68. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 75.

69. Harris, 100.

70. Friedman, 24.

71. Friedman, 117.

known as P is understood to have been a later priest, since priestly issues are of prime importance in that narrative; and the author who wrote the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy through 2 Kings) is referred to as D.<sup>72</sup>

For now, we will primarily concern ourselves with the E author, since it is in this narrative where the first instance of overt Baal worship is found – when Moses sees the Israelites worshipping the golden calf. It is worth noting the importance the E author places on Moses in comparison to other authors. Richard Elliott Friedman astutely notes that the E author sympathizes far more with Moses than the J author does.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the E author stresses the covenant God makes with Moses and *never mentions* the covenant made with Abraham.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, the J author heavily emphasizes the Abrahamic covenant and vastly downplays the role of Moses.<sup>75</sup> Friedman makes the claim that since the J author stresses the promise God made to Abraham, which was realized under King David, J was a writer probably living in Judah in the south after the kingdoms divided.<sup>76</sup> The E author, by contrast, likely lived in the northern kingdom of Israel says Friedman, and he explains this by examining the golden calf story.

In this story, it is Aaron to whom the creation of the golden calf is credited.<sup>77</sup> Moses is the one who gets upset and reprimands the Israelites.<sup>78</sup> After the kingdoms separated in 922, Jeroboam

became king of Israel in the north, while Rehoboam (the successor to Solomon) ruled in Judah in the south. Under Solomon, Shiloh priests (thought to have

***“It was Yahweh who gave the covenant to Moses and sparked a turning point in Israelite history.”***

descended from Moses) were expelled from their land, going north with Jeroboam, while Zadok, a chief priest thought to have descended from Aaron, remained in power in Judah.<sup>79</sup> If it was a Shiloh priest who composed the E narrative, Friedman argues, this would explain the hostility toward Aaron in the golden calf narrative. It would also explain the emphasis on Moses, since Shiloh priests were thought to have descended from him. If the author of E was a Shiloh priest, his real anger would have been directed at Zadok (a descendent of Aaron) for remaining in power in the south while he was exiled to the north. The golden calf story would then be understood as an allegory of the splitting of the kingdoms. But, why a golden calf? Interestingly enough, the king of the northern region of Israel, Jeroboam, erected two golden calf shrines – one at Dan and one at Beth-El.<sup>80</sup> This likely would have frustrated the Shiloh priests further if they understood themselves to be descendents of Moses. It was *Yahweh* who gave the covenant

72. Harris, 101.

73. Friedman, 80.

74. Ibid.

75. Friedman, 83.

76. Ibid.

77. Exod. 32:1-6.

78. Exod. 32:19-24.

79. Friedman, 72.

80. 1 Kings 12:28-29.

to Moses and sparked a turning point in Israelite history, according to the E author.<sup>81</sup> The erection of golden calves, symbols of Baal, would have been understood as heresy. So if the E author was a Shiloh priest, the golden calf story illuminates two historical factors – the rejection of their authority in the south, expressed by the hostility toward Aaron; and the rejection of their religious views in the north, expressed by the worship of the golden calf. The E author’s hero, Moses, takes care of both problems: he reprimands Aaron, and grinds the golden calf to dust.<sup>82</sup>

Taking a step back, we can see how this fits with Smith’s view that Baal worship started encountering difficulties in the ninth century. Fittingly, Friedman dates the author of E between the

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tenth and eighth centuries.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, the opposition to both the power structure of Judah and the religious worship as allegorized in the golden calf story can be understood as an expression of political resentment and religious

betrayal, lending support to the social uprising theory of Israelite origins. Here we must be very careful to not confuse the literary evidence with the archaeological evidence. The majority of scholars agree the earliest narrative in the Torah could not have been composed before the tenth century. Friedman says it was E,<sup>84</sup> Harris believes it was J.<sup>85</sup> In any case, the split between the north and the south in 922 had either already occurred or was showing imminent signs by the earliest composition. If this is right around the time that Baal worship started to become problematic, we would not expect to see any accepted worship of Baal anywhere in the Torah. And we do not. The narratives would largely be heavily biased accounts of highly politicized theology, since the splitting of the kingdom was a critical juncture in the monarchy. With this in mind, we can now turn to the earlier problematic question of why an exodus from Egypt plays such a large role in the Hebrew Bible.

### ***The Real Exodus?***

As noted earlier, there is no archaeological evidence of a mass exodus out of Egypt by Israelites or any other tribe of people. While it is certainly possible that a number of Egyptians assimilated themselves into Israelite culture, it is likely a small number. If the Israelites, as proposed, originated in the Canaanite region and perhaps came from the same people, why would a story of slavery and exile assert itself so strongly? A provocative theory comes from Michael Oblath, who argues that the Exodus possibly took place right then at the juncture of the ninth and tenth centuries, right before or during the

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81. Friedman, 78.

82. Exod. 32:20-21.

83. Friedman, 87.

84. Ibid.

85. Harris, 46.

composition of the J and E narratives.<sup>86</sup>

In the middle of the tenth century, the kingdom was united under Solomon. He underwent a massive construction campaign of a temple palace that covered 11,250 square feet and required a massive labor force.<sup>87</sup> 1 Kings 5:13-18 describes Solomon employing forced labor from thirty thousand of his own subjects, while 1 Kings 9:20-23 describes him using non-Israelite labor. However, his son and successor Rehoboam is described as having not only continued his father's forced labor policies but intensifying them.<sup>88</sup> A campaign such as this would likely have been widely unpopular, and the book of 1 Kings admits as much, describing a man named Jeroboam who fled to Egypt to take refuge from Solomon.<sup>89</sup> It is Jeroboam, encouraged by the Shiloh priest Ahijah, who succeeds in breaking away to the north, along with ten of the original twelve tribes, and is made king there by the people.<sup>90</sup>

This, Oblath suggests, is the exodus written about in the Torah.<sup>91</sup> It is the story of forced labor – virtual slavery – by a hard-hearted ruler and a migration of people to a different land, all the while questioning their national identity. More importantly, it is an epic tale of the Israelite supreme deity

***“Moses would be understood as the hero  
Jeroboam failed to become.”***

harnessing the power of the cosmos to wreak havoc upon the Egyptian pharaoh and free the Israelites, evoking the powerful imagery of the creation myth in Genesis in order to tell a creation myth of the

origins of the Israelites.<sup>92</sup> To strengthen his thesis, Oblath draws upon geography to point out the contradictions and inconsistencies between the sites described in the Hebrew Bible (particularly the Red Sea, or Yam Sûp) and the actual geography of the land. Oblath concludes that the path taken out of Egypt, as described in the Hebrew Bible, is not a plausible one.<sup>93</sup> Thus, drawing upon Bloch-Smith's idea of “ethnos,” one could understand the Israelite culture, however exaggerated or mythological it may be, as sharing a collective memory of the exodus. As Hendel notes, the pharaoh is not named in the exodus story, which thereby opens the collective memory to all Israelites who had felt the burden of oppression.<sup>94</sup>

If this is correct, it would corroborate Friedman's theory that the writer of the E source was a Shiloh priest in exile from the south and would explain the heavy emphasis on Moses, the liberator, written to stand in for Jeroboam, who was already hiding in Egypt from Solomon. But, Moses is still a

86. Michael Oblath. *The Exodus Itinerary Sites*. Guest Lecture at American River College. Sacramento, CA. 12 February, 2005.

87. Harris, 194.

88. 1 Kings 12:1-17.

89. 1 Kings 12:2.

90. 1 Kings 12:20.

91. Oblath, 12 February, 2005.

92. Michael D. Oblath, *The Exodus Itinerary Sites: Their Locations from the Perspective of the Biblical Sources* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 25.

93. Oblath, 98-105.

94. Ronald Hendel, “The Exodus in Biblical Memory,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 120, No. 4 (Winter, 2001), 604-5. [JSTOR](http://www.jstor.org). CSUS Lib., Sacramento, CA. November 19, 2009.

larger-than-life figure in E. Jeroboam, it should be remembered, erected golden calves at Dan and Beth-El. In this sense, Moses would be understood as the hero Jeroboam failed to become – maintaining his covenant with Yahweh and destroying the golden calves. Thus Moses is elevated to iconic status in E, a figure the exilic northerners could look to with reverence and hope. Indeed, Friedman notes that in the E version, Moses himself is emphasized as acting to free the people, whereas in the J version, it is God who brings about liberation.<sup>95</sup> One might then ask why the J version includes references to Moses and liberation from slavery if the author was from Judah. If Friedman is correct in dating the author of E between 922 and 722, and the author of J between 848 and 722,<sup>96</sup> this allows for plenty of time for oral circulation of the stories before being written down. If the kingdom split in 922, the seventy-four years until 848 is plenty of time for a Jeroboam-like figure to become elevated to a status occupied by Moses. While the two kingdoms were separate politically, the Israelites still regarded themselves as one people and it would be difficult for a compiler of history to omit a story held in such high esteem by a large number of people. Understandably, however, we would expect to find its significance downplayed somewhat, and this is exactly what we find in the J narrative.

Furthermore, if the narratives of the Torah began as a reaction to the socio-political events of the authors' time, the idea that the Israelites originated in the land of Canaan is given more support than theories of conquest or gradual assimilation. Here we find stories of social uprising and religious reform depicted within the same culture. However, it is important to note that the uprising was not necessarily one of class; rather, it likely originated among an educated, yet politically underprivileged marginal group. As we have seen, Baal worship and the Yahweh cult likely co-existed among the majority of the public for centuries. It was the Shiloh priests of Yahweh who began to criticize Baal after they were no longer recognized as a legitimate political force, likely long before kings or the general public felt it necessary. The social uprising theory of Israelite origins then would suggest a much later date for the development of monotheism than the conquest or assimilation theories. Indeed, up until the fall of Judah in 587, there is evidence in the Hebrew Bible of Baal and Asherah worship, although it is not depicted in a positive light.

### *The D Source*

Finally then, we may turn to the source that comprises the seven books of the Hebrew Bible known as the Deuteronomistic History. It is widely accepted (by Friedman, Harris, and others) that the books from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings were likely composed in the seventh century by someone who was very close to King Josiah.<sup>97</sup> The evidence is plentiful. Every king in the entire monarchy is criticized for not removing the golden calf shrines with the exceptions of Hezekiah and Josiah, who

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95. Friedman, 80.

96. Friedman, 87.

97. Friedman, 117.

removed them.<sup>98</sup> Josiah alone is described as having followed the whole Law of Moses.<sup>99</sup> The entire Deuteronomistic History culminates with the reign of Josiah, with the exception of two final chapters that appear tacked-on, as they lack reference to the “high places” of the calf shrines, which apparently were reinstated after Josiah’s death.<sup>100</sup> It seems the author of the D source was greatly concerned with Josiah’s religious reform, namely eradicating Baal worship. Friedman draws attention to the covenant Yahweh made with David in 2 Samuel 7:16: “Your family and your kingdom will be established for ever in my sight; your throne will endure for all time.” Here, then, Yahweh is depicted as having made a covenant with a king. Josiah reigned from 640-609, which would put the author of D considerably later than when the E and J documents were composed. This seems to suggest that Yahweh’s status gradually became more closely associated with the nation of Israel toward the seventh century. The author of D went to great lengths to link Yahweh with the monarchy of Judah in the south and strictly opposing the worship of other deities. Indeed, Josiah’s religious reform is a central theme in the Deuteronomistic History. The author even goes so far as to include a prophesy of the reform three hundred years before it occurs.<sup>101</sup> Yahweh, then, firmly linked in a covenant with the monarchy by the seventh century, can by this period be understood as a national god meant to promote the well-being of the state. The author of D sticks with all the kings of Judah, no matter how corrupt they ultimately became, because the religious reforms of Josiah fulfilled the Davidic covenant.<sup>102</sup>

### ***Final Considerations on the Emergence of Monotheism***

If it is to be argued that nationalism and political conflict contributed to the rise of monotheism, it must be remembered that twenty-two years after Josiah’s death, Judah fell to the Neo-Babylonians in 587. Large powers were on the rise and occupied large amounts of land. The Israelites had already seen this once before when the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722. Smith draws attention to the fact that these mighty empires dominating the seventh and sixth centuries attributed their conquests of other lands to the strength of their gods.<sup>103</sup> With Israel and Judah both conquered, the idea of a nationalistic deity seemed beside the point. Rather, Smith argues, “the rise of supra-national empires suggested the model of the super-national god.”<sup>104</sup> The Israelites’ god, Yahweh, then vaulted to all-powerful controller of the universe. Larger forces were at work than the Israelites were capable of grasping.

Along with this idea, we must take into consideration that the Israelites, like most cultures of the Levant, were great synthesizers. At the beginning of this paper, it was argued that the Israelites and

98. 2 Kings 23:15.

99. 2 Kings 23:25.

100. Friedman, 115.

101. 1 Kings 13:1-3.

102. Friedman, 115.

103. Smith, *The Origins of Monotheism in the Bible*, 165.

104. Ibid.

the Canaanites may have been the same people. We must acknowledge that this may not have been the case. There were many cultures interacting in that region in the twelfth and eleventh centuries and they undoubtedly influenced each other. With respect to religious beliefs, it is particularly difficult to pinpoint the essence of a unique culture, given the heavy interaction among the cultures. However, even if the Israelites and Canaanites were separate cultures, they shared religious ideas, motifs, and even names, as we have seen. The origins of specific deities, for the purposes of this paper, are less important than the synthesis of their traits. It is not, nor may it ever be, clear who the early Israelites really were. Indeed, as Bloch-Smith notes, it was not until the eleventh or tenth century that style of material artifacts “coalesce[ed] into forms continuous through the sixth century.”<sup>105</sup> What is clear is that polytheistic ideas were shared and synthesized for centuries until a specific (likely very small) group of people triumphed politically between the seventh and sixth centuries and established a religion with an elevated supreme deity.

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105. Bloch-Smith, 411.