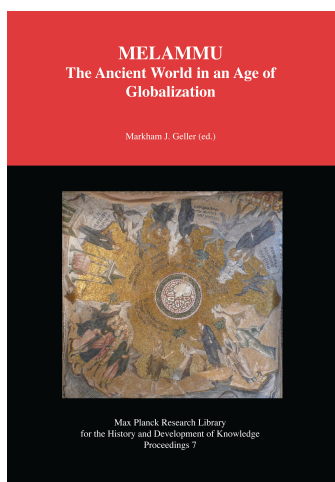


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Chapter 2

Global Monotheism: The Contribution of the Israelite Prophets

Baruch A. Levine

In his recent book, *The Post-American World* (2008), Fareed Zakaria explains that after the end of the Cold War there was a brief “American interlude,” when the United States enjoyed a uni-polar status of unrivaled dominance, but that this phase has already come to a close. For about a half century, US-Soviet *détente* had produced a bi-polar, international power structure, whereas the present growth of markets and finance, of production and communications, has come to be known as “globalization,” a network that embraces new power-centers. Globalization not only sets the agenda of current political and economic discourse, but it also permeates virtually all areas of culture and expands the human horizon of identification. In the effort to understand what is transpiring before our very eyes, Zakaria cites a statement by the historian, Arnold J. Toynbee, written in the years just prior to World War II:

Growth takes place whenever a challenge evokes a successful response that, in turn, evokes a further and different challenge. We have not found any intrinsic reason why this process should not repeat itself indefinitely, although a majority of civilizations have failed, as a matter of fact.¹

Applied to the present global situation, Toynbee’s dictum, filtered through Zakaria’s discussion, means that, in principle, what we are witnessing has happened in the past, and will predictably recur in the future. It represents an unending process of growth, even with downturns such as we are now experiencing (winter-to-spring, 2009). As an historian, Toynbee displayed a deep interest in exploring the causes for the rise and failure of civilizations in the past, depending on whether or not they had responded effectively to new challenges. In this quest, he placed great importance on the power of ideas, utilizing insights afforded by the myths and narratives of diverse cultures. He was no stranger to

¹ See (Zakaria 2008, Frontwork).

the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, or to the chronicled imperial history of the ancient Near East, as known in his day. It is my purpose here to apply Toynbee's "challenge-response" hypothesis to the emergence of global (often called "universal") monotheism in ancient Israel. The present study is the latest in a series of inquiries into the history of Israelite religion.²

Although some repetition will be necessary for purposes of review, I hope to say more on this occasion about the earlier phases of Israelite religion, namely, the transitions from what I would call "selective polytheism" to henotheism (late ninth to early eighth centuries BCE), and subsequently, from henotheism to global monotheism (late eighth to early seventh centuries BCE). This background of religious change is essential for an understanding of the ultimate triumph of monotheism. By "global monotheism" I refer to the concept, expounded in parts of the Hebrew Bible, that there is only one God, Yahweh, God of Israel, who rules over all nations. It follows that claims to divine power pressed by the exponents of other religions are to be regarded as false. It will be argued here that in expanding the Israelite God-idea in this way, biblical prophets of the mid-to-late eighth century BCE, were responding with urgency to the challenge of changing power alignments in the larger Near East. They were proclaiming a God-idea broad enough to stand up to the singular power and prestige of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and its successors.

In contemporary Assyria, during the reign of Sennacherib, we witness the exaltation of Aššur at the expense of Marduk, the venerable god of Babylon, in sync with that king's aggressive policy toward Babylonia. This development, usually referred to as a "reform," was paralleled in Israel by the universal configuration of Yahweh, expounded by First Isaiah of Jerusalem during the reign of Hezekiah, king of Judah, Sennacherib's contemporary. The new Israelite doctrine proclaimed that Yahweh ruled over empires, and directed their fortunes. It is this conviction that ultimately enabled the Israelite-Jewish people to survive both the Assyrians and the Babylonians. An important corollary of the prophetic doctrine is a policy of submission to imperial rulers who, in the prophetic view, had been commissioned by the God of Israel, variously to punish, or to protect and restore Israel as part of his plan for all the earth.

The term "monotheism," as just defined, is to be differentiated from "henotheism," a belief system that legitimates the worship of only a single God, the God of the group, but which acknowledges the existence and power of other gods, most notably the gods of other nations. Some scholars prefer the term "monolatry" because it incorporates the Greek verb *latrueō* "to serve the gods, to

²See the listing in Reference Bibliography, under (Levine 2003a; 2003b; 2005; 2007; 2009). An abridgment of the Arnold Toynbee's history, in 2 volumes, was utilized (Toynbee 1951; 1957).

worship,” thereby concretizing the practical application of the doctrine.³ I will employ the term “henotheism” for the sake of symmetry, while remaining aware of the particular nuances and the different histories of the two terms in modern scholarship. Be it understood that I am seeking to locate the inception of these religious movements, to identify the earliest promulgation of their respective ideologies, conceding all the while that it takes generations and more, for new belief-systems to unseat earlier ones, and to be accepted and institutionalized.

2.1 On Methodology

2.1.1 The Political Approach

In surveying the many studies on the origins of Israelite monotheism it became clear to me that new methods were needed to address the political aspects of this complex problem. A political approach to the history of religious ideas proceeds on the theory that developing conceptions of the divine cannot be explained solely as the consequence of the innate human urge to seek after truth, and to comprehend the universe and the mysteries of life. Whereas an awareness of the unity of the cosmos was early in coming, attribution of a global, terrestrial domain to chief deities, ruling over all nations and lands, was fairly late in coming. To sense the unity of the cosmos one had only to look up at the heavens. In contrast, the terrestrial horizon only expands in rhythm with social horizons of identification, as the units of social and political organization grow progressively larger, from tribes and city-states, to nations and kingdoms, all the way to world empires. It was thus that the global horizon was, appropriately, a feature of state religion in the imperial, Neo-Assyrian period, when a uni-polar, international power alignment actually existed.

In ancient Israel, evolving biblical conceptions of Yahweh show him to be a national deity with a tribal background, who became a universal deity. The Israelite national agenda was realized in the establishment of two monarchies after the Israelites gained hegemony over large parts of Canaan. This agenda later morphed into a supra-political vision, but it was not a vision of an Israelite empire, nor did it conceive of Yahweh as an imperial deity, as was true of the god Aššur in Assyria. Yahweh is rather configured as a transcendent divinity, whose power nullified the presumed power of other gods, in effect denying their existence as such, while predicting the downfall of empires that ruled in their name. The people of Israel, with their national capital in Zion, would enjoy a

³See the entry “Henotheism,” by Michiko (Yusa 1987), and bibliography cited, on the usage of this term in modern scholarship. Also note the periodization adopted by (Knauf 2003), who refers to “*residueller Polytheismus*,” and “*programmatischer Henotheismus*.”

special place in the hoped-for world order, to be sure, but not as a result of military dominance, or territorial conquests. “For instruction shall go forth from Zion, and the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2: 3).

In Israel, the credibility of the nationalist God-idea had run its course in the Neo-Assyrian period, because in terms of military might, withstanding the Assyrian onslaught was impossible. Yahweh as national God had come through on his promise by enabling the Israelites to secure victory over Philistines, Midianites, even Arameans, but not over the Assyrians! Viewed in this manner, monotheism, as a new religious idea, represented a response to the challenge of Assyrian power, and it remains the task of the historian to evaluate the effectiveness of that response.

In my previous studies, I favored this political approach to the study of monotheism over thematic interpretations, such as had been espoused by Simo Parpola in his Introduction to the volume on Assyrian prophecies from the reign of Esarhaddon, Sennacherib’s successor (Parpola 1997, xii–cviii). I now realize, more clearly than before, that the two approaches, the political and the thematic, are necessary complements of each other, and that they do not conflict with each other. As I understand Parpola, he seeks to reveal the inner process by which Aššur came to be conceived as *gabbi ilāni* “the totality of gods,” the ultimate source of power. The other deities were “conceived of as powers, aspects, qualities, or attributes of Aššur.” Aššur’s unity “mirrored the structure of the Assyrian empire—a heterogeneous multi-national power directed by a superhuman, autocratic king, who was conceived of as the representative of God on earth” (Parpola 1997, xxi). As Parpola notes with respect to the role of the powerful goddess Ištar: “the identities of Aššur and Ištar blend in an unexpected and absolutely baffling way” (Parpola 1997, xix). In effect, Parpola is describing the dynamic of the inner process, with its theological, mythological and cosmic implications, as he points to the political consequences of these processes.

The methodology of Mark S. Smith in investigating the background of Israelite monotheism, applied in his work *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (2001), parallels Parpola’s thematic approach to religion in the Neo-Assyrian Empire in important ways. Smith describes models of West-Semitic conceptualization, especially those at Ugarit, which determined the rank, station and functions of deities of the pantheons. In so doing, he has, indeed, documented his own sub-title: “Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts.” Like Parpola’s characterization of the god Aššur, Smith analyzes the inner process by which attributes of many gods and goddesses were absorbed and synthesized in the divine nature of Yahweh. Smith’s tracing of this process complements the political approach to religious development being pursued here. In his earlier work, entitled *The Early History of God* (1990), Smith had pursued an essentially his-

torical methodology, with some attention to phenomenology. His major chapters explore the interaction of Yahweh with other gods known in Canaan, yielding separate treatments of El, Baal, and Asherah.

It has been my goal to connect developments in religious thought directly to proximate events and changing challenges in the political sphere. The Hebrew Bible lacks the kinds of original, datable documents available from Mesopotamia and from the West-Semitic sphere, especially from the Middle Euphrates and coastal Syria, but it is uniquely rich in response literature. Israelite authors and compilers—priests, prophets, royal chroniclers, and other narrators—endeavored to make sense of Israelite political fortunes in conflicts with warring nations in Canaan and the Transjordanian interior, and later—in confronting the Assyrian threat. They sought to canonize certain versions of past history and current experience in writings to be transmitted to future generations.

2.1.2 The Problem of Evidence

Recourse to the Hebrew Bible as primary evidence raises serious methodological issues, especially in the current scholarly climate, where the historicity of the biblical record on pre-exilic Israel is being discounted in a virtually nihilistic manner. We are being led to question whether it is valid to adduce biblical sources as evidence in reconstructing the history of ideas, not to speak of historical events. I have been questioned on this matter repeatedly, making it necessary to respond in greater detail. I concede that we have no way of knowing for certain when, for example, Isaiah (10: 5–19, 11: 1–9, or 14: 24–27), which I regard as central statements on Israelite monotheism, were composed, or their contents known in any form. Nor can we ascertain for whom they speak. I am aware that Isaiah 1–39 contain substantial interpolations that are properly dated to the exilic and post-exilic periods on the basis of language and content. Critical biblical scholarship, represented early on by George Buchanan Grau (1912), and more recently by Anton Schoors (1997), has been able to differentiate credibly between these later passages and those that ring true for the period of reference.

Precisely because I advocate a political approach to the emergence of Israelite monotheism it might be helpful to inquire how a politically oriented historian would evaluate the reliability of prophetic texts taken from the Hebrew Bible. We are most fortunate in having Mario Liverani's recent work, *Israel's History and the History of Israel*, which includes a chapter entitled: "The Impact of the Assyrian Empire (740–640)" (Liverani 2005, 143–164). Based on Assyrian (also Egyptian) and also biblical sources, both narrative and prophetic, Liverani is able to profile the events of the period in question, and in so doing, to cite passages from the major prophets of the period, even highlighting First Isaiah. Liverani

locates the so-called eighth century prophets where the Hebrew Bible, itself, positions them. What is more, Liverani treats certain religious issues historically, speaking of “debate” on the question of the *bamot*, the local cult-installations. He examines the motif of divine abandonment, which was expounded by both Assyrian and Israelite authors, and refers to the famous speeches of the Assyrian Tartan (2 Kings 18), best understood as Judean reflexes of Assyrian propaganda. He makes one reference to monotheism in his discussion of Josiah’s reforms, near the close of the seventh century BCE, thereby reflecting the prevalent current view that universal monotheism is, at the earliest, a response to the Babylonian threat, as confronted by Jeremiah. At one point he mentions Isaiah’s famous declaration: “Ah, Assyria, rod of my wrath!” (Isaiah 5:10), but offers no further comment. Liverani does not take up the ideological response to Assyrian imperialism that I am proposing here, but his treatment of the period of 740–640 BCE factors-in biblical sources in reconstructing what he calls the “normal” history of that critical time.

So much for what is arguably the best-documented period in ancient Near Eastern history. It is another matter to identify in time and circumstance the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the authors and redactors of biblical texts that refer to earlier periods of Israelite history. These include the “heroic” literature of Judges and 1 Samuel, and the early strata of Pentateuchal sources, usually known as the Jahwist (J) and the Elohist (E), which preserve versions of the Patriarchal Narratives. Liverani classifies the tradition of an early period of governing “Judges” as an invention of the Achaemenid period, and similarly, regards the saga of the Patriarchs, as imagined (Liverani 2005, 250–307). Because I will attach importance to both of these literary frameworks in the discussion to follow, it would be useful to address the issue of their realism at this point.

There is, first of all, a critical difference between the two biblical collections. The notion that the Israelites of Iron Age I were descendants of settlers who had inhabited Canaan at an earlier period, but had later departed, is transparently imagined. The critical task is to attempt to locate in time when the relevant Pentateuchal sources were composed; to identify for whom they speak and to decode their message. Classifying a literary tradition as “invented” does not mean that it lacks any historical context at all; it merely means that its literary *mise en scène*, and the claims made for it, are fictive. In fact, the depiction of Israelite religion in the imagined Patriarchal age, by J and E, as redacted by priestly authors, may tell us something of importance about the first phase of Israelite religion.

In contrast, the period of reference of core-Judges, although admittedly reaching back quite far, still falls within the historical limits of Israelite societal formation in Canaan. In his chapter entitled: “The Formative Process (1050–930)” Liverani (2005, 77–103) speaks of Gideon and Abimelekh as real

leaders, and regards the recorded wars with other peoples of Canaan and with neighboring peoples as historical. As will become apparent, I disagree with Liverani's judgment that the heroic tradition of Judges lacks an historical basis. In this instance, Liverani may have understated the realism of the warrior class, the *gibbôrîm*, while overestimating the redacted structure of the Book of Judges, which is largely the "invention," if you will, of the Deuteronomist (Levine 2009).

2.2 The Three Phases of Israelite Religion

The canonical arrangement of biblical books and their contents is hardly chronological in its particulars, so that when one proposes that first Isaiah was the first Israelite spokesman to proclaim global monotheism, this conclusion is based on critical methods for dating biblical texts. In the present case, it means that in no biblical text that can reliably be dated prior to the mid-to-late eighth century BCE, does one find similar expressions of global monotheism. The consequence of such literary sequencing is that when we study First Isaiah's pronouncements against the background of earlier, biblical conceptions of God, we can point to three, progressive phases in the development of Israelite religion, each a response in its time to a particular set of challenges.

2.2.1 Phase I: Selective Polytheism: The Challenge of Integration in Canaan

In attempting to define the phases of Israelite religion, it would be well to state my "take" on the nature of the Israelite presence in Canaan during the early Iron Age. I hold to the view that the Israelites were not native Canaanites, but rather West-Semites who originated outside of Canaan, probably in parts of Syria. They did not arrive in Canaan in a wave, or waves of invading armies, but in waves of immigration, part of the extended population shifts that occurred in the eastern Mediterranean and Western Asia after 1200 BCE. The battles that we read about in the Hebrew Bible, with Canaanites, Philistines, Midianites and others, ensued when the immigrant populations grew to the point that they threatened, or "crowded" the native population in the Canaanite city-states, as well as rival groups of settlers. This reconstruction would obtain in large part even if one held to the unlikely view that the Israelites were just another Canaanite group.

The relevance of positing the sequence: (a) settlement (b) war, is brought out by Biblical reports on the beginnings of Israelite life in Canaan. These narratives, infused with later, priestly input, depict the first settlers (= "the Patriarchs") as El worshipers, who were, at the same time, worshipers of Yahweh, the Israelite national God. This pattern is recorded without disapproval, as part of a portrait

of Israelite co-existence with Canaanites, and other more established immigrant groups, such as the so-called Hittites, before the wars began. The “Patriarchs” enacted treaties with Canaanites, and joined alliances with them, and did business with them over rights to property. Correspondingly, the biblical narratives depict selective polytheism as a feature of this socio-political and economic integration. It is ironic when we consider that these Israelites were guilty of just about everything the Deuteronomic School, aggressive in its attitude to the other peoples inhabiting Canaan, would later condemn!

In the late ninth to early eighth century BCE, to which period I would assign the early strata of the so-called Patriarchal Narratives, cults of some West Semitic deities were localized, but at the same time transnational, cutting across political and demographic boundaries. As a result, certain cults were shared by Israelites with Canaanites and neighboring peoples. Identifiably “foreign,” national gods and goddesses, such as Kemosh of the Moabites, Milkom of the Ammonites, and Ashtoreth of the Sidonians, were probably disqualified from the outset. Internally, there is an additional contrast to be drawn between biblical attitudes toward Baal worship and El worship on the part of early Israelites, as recorded. Biblical references to past Baal worship are invariably disapproving, which is significant. It is worth mentioning, however, that Baal names were referenced in biblical sources without disapproval until the generation of Saul’s son and grandson.⁴

To return to the same Patriarchal Narratives, we note that Abram feasted with Melchizedek, the Canaanite priest of El Elyon, and that he was allied with Canaanite petty-kings in war (Genesis 14). “El of Bethel,” introduces himself to Jacob at Beth-El, formerly Luz (Genesis 31: 13), and Jacob dedicates a cultic stele to him, and contributes to an El temple. This deity is elsewhere identified as El Shaddai (Genesis 17: 1, 28: 3, 35: 11, 43: 14, 48: 3). There is never any disapproval expressed over this cultic behavior. Instead, it appears that some biblical authors and redactors camouflaged the transition from El worship to exclusive Yahwism. Genesis (14: 19) has the Canaanite petty-king invoking “El-Elyon, creator of heaven and earth” (*ēl -‘elyôn qōnēh šāmāim wā’āres*) whereas when Abram responds, he takes an oath in the name of “Yahweh, the supreme God, creator of heaven and earth” (*YHWH ‘ēl ‘elyôn qōnēh šāmāim wā’āres*—Genesis 14: 20). In effect, divine names have become epithets of Yahweh! As is well known, this complex of epithets is paralleled in Phoenician, in the Azatiwada inscription where we read: *b^cl šmm w’lqn’rs* “Baal of the heavens, and El, creator of earth.” Closer to home, an ostrakon discovered in the upper city of Jerusalem

⁴In addition to the name *Yerubba‘al*, itself, note the following Baalist names: ‘*Ešba‘al*, son of Saul (2 Sam 2:8, *et cetera*, with the derogatory substitution of *bōšet* “shame,” and see 1 Chron 8:39), and *Meriba‘al*, son of Jonathan (1 Chron 9:40, written as *Mepibōšet* in 2 Sam 4:4, *et cetera*).

by Nachman Avigad, and dated to the late eighth to early seventh century attests the divinity: *ʾl/qnʾrs* “El], creator of earth.”⁵ Similarly, Exodus (6: 3) has Elohim saying to Moses that he appeared to the Patriarchs by the name of El Shaddai, without revealing his true name, Yahweh. These statements express what has been called the “the El-Yahweh synthesis.”⁶ In other words, El (and the designations Shaddai and Elyon) merely identify Yahweh by different names, and in the process, Yahweh assumes the attributes of El.

To add to the complexity of the Patriarchal Narratives, we note that the pre-henotheist report of Jacob’s theophany at Bethel functions positively as a *hieros logos* of the cult-site of Bethel (Genesis 28: 3, 35: 7, 11, 48: 3). In Exodus (32) we have, in contrast, a later, henotheist polemic against reversion to the worship of El, materialized in the image of a golden bull-calf, targets the Northern-Israelite cult initiated at Beth-El by Jeroboam I (1 Kings 12: 26–33). It is also important to recall that the cult of Yahweh was aniconic from the outset, and although Jacob erected a cultic-stele to El, he never has recourse to iconic representations of El, the likes of the golden bull-calf. It is an iconic El cult, after all, that is being denounced in Hosea (8: 5–6), which refer to “the bull-calf of Samaria” and in Hosea (10: 5), referring to “the calves of Beth El” (cf. Hosea 6: 8, 12: 12). It is reasonable to suggest that in narrating the cultic activity of the Patriarchs, biblical authors stopped short of accusing them of outright idolatry!

There is pre-henotheist El literature in the Torah itself. In my Anchor Bible commentary to Numbers I hypothesized that the poetic orations of Balaam speak for what I am here calling Phase I. In these poems, El, Shaddai, and Elyon are to be understood as the proper names of deities of the West Semitic pantheon, not as epithets of Yahweh, as they were later interpreted in the blatantly monotheistic prose rubric of the Balaam Pericope. It was powerful El who brought the Israelites out of Egypt, and Shaddai and Elyon shared divine knowledge of things to come with Balaam in the encounter with Moab. The name of Yahweh is repeated a few times in these poems, where, indeed, powerful Yahweh is acknowledged, fighting at the side of Israel, his people (Levine 2000, 225–233). This mentality can be compared with the predicates of the Jerubbaal-Gideon narrative of Judges 6–8 (see further). At the moment of his conversion, the hero declares that he has heard about Yahweh’s great acts on Israel’s behalf at the Exodus, but he is not yet a confirmed Yahwist. Contrast such statements with what we read in Deuteronomy (32: 12): “Yahweh alone guided him, with no alien god at his side.”

The discovery of the Deir ʾAlla inscriptions at a site just east of the Jordan on the Jabbok/Zerqa river opens a window onto the currency of El worship in Gilead near the close of the ninth century BCE. Although it remains uncertain as to

⁵For text, bibliography and notes see (Ahituv 2008, 40–42).

⁶See the pioneer study by Otto Eissfeldt (1956, 25–37).

who authored these poetic texts which mention Balaam, son of Beor, it is entirely possible that they were composed by Israelites, even though the name of Yahweh is thus far unattested in them. In any event, they correct for the mistaken notion that the cult of elderly El was no longer practiced in Canaan or Transjordan.⁷

As regards Baal worship on the part of Israelites, there are only tangential references in Torah literature, associated with locales such as Baal-Peor, as an example (Numbers 25). There is no suggestion that Baal worship was an enduring societal phenomenon, only a record of sinful incidents resulting from engagement with non-Israelites. To learn about the status of Baal worship among the early Israelites, we turn to the Yahwist authors of Judges-Samuel-Kings, who report disapprovingly on the currency of Baal worship to the point of obsession. The closest we come to a glimpse of Israelite Baal worship in the early settlement period is in the narrative of Jerubbaal-Gideon, already referred to above. Jerubbaal is a Baalist name meaning; “Baal has raised, reared.” The hero was instructed to tear down the Baal altar and its accompanying Asherah image, or post, maintained by none other than his own father, Joash (a Yahwist name meaning: “Yahweh has strengthened”) prior to doing battle with the Midianites (Judges 6). We have a curious situation where an Israelite with a Yahwist name maintains a Baal altar and an Asherah in connection with it, while his son, bearing a Baalist name, destroys these cultic accoutrements, sacrifices to Yahweh, and takes up the sword with Yahweh at his side. Such narratives about “charismatic leaders” were intended, apart from recording the fortunes of war, to endorse the henotheist doctrine, and to explain the breakaway from the regional pantheon at a critical juncture in the wars fought by the Israelites.

It remains to explain the difference between the respective fates of El and Baal in biblical religion of the pre-henotheist period, since both deities were, in fact, widely worshiped by Israelites, and were shared with Israel’s neighbors. As we know from countless extra-biblical sources, most prominent among them the Ugaritic myths, both El and Baal were “good” deities, one old and the other young. Baal triumphed over evil forces like Yamm, and Baal Shameim was worshipped as a benevolent chief god by the early Phoenicians. Why then was El synthesized in the biblical ethos, made into a common noun, an epithet, so that it remained prominent in Israelite personal names, and in the name of the people, itself, whereas references to Baal worship were consistently disapproving? As I have speculated in previous studies, it may be a matter of timing. It seems that the Baal cult posed a serious threat to the henotheist movement, especially in Northern Israel, at the time of its inception in the late ninth century BCE. Ahab, with some help from his queen, Jezebel, had persecuted the prophets of Yahweh

⁷For a discussion of the overall relevance of the Deir ‘Alla inscriptions for an understanding of Israelite religion see (Levine 2000, 241–275, “Comment 5: The Balaam Inscriptions from Deir ‘Alla.”).

and actively sponsored the Baal cult, which situation produced the confrontation between Elijah and the priests/prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). When Jehu, son of Nimri, subsequently staged his palace revolution, he went after the Baal priests (2 Kings 9). It is interesting that for First Hosea (Hosea, chapters 1–3), a product of the ninth century BCE, the target was Baal worship, whereas the target for Second Hosea (6: 8, 12: 12) of the eighth century had become the discredited El cult of the Northern Kingdom, of its dependency, Gilead in Transjordan.

The Hebrew Bible also attests to the persistence of the cult of Asherah among the Israelites, which raises the question of the status of goddesses in the prehenotheist phase. The goddess Asherah is best known at Ugarit as El's consort, a mother-figure in the pantheon, creator and queen of the goddesses. As we have seen in the Jerubbaal-Gideon narrative, Asherah is associated with Baal, not El in biblical literature. Some have suggested that Asherah was configured as Yahweh's consort. This is different from affirming the currency in ancient Israel of the cult of Asherah as Baal's consort! The closest we come to seeing Asherah as Yahweh's consort is in the Hebrew blessing inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, a caravan site on the southern border of Judah, and dating to the end of the ninth century BCE, possibly a bit later. They preserve the following repeated statement, with variations: "I have commended you for blessing to Yahweh of Samaria and to his goddess" (*lyhwh šmrn wl'šrth*). A variant at Kuntillet 'Ajrud has the toponym Teiman instead of Samaria, and at Khirbet el-Qom (Maqqedah) the preserved version of the same blessing lacks mention of any locale, between the words *yhwh* and *wl'šrth*. This more or less confirms that the antecedent of the genitive, pronominal suffix *-h* is masculine: *wela'ašērātōh* "and to his goddess," namely to Yahweh's goddess. It would be imprecise, however, to identify the proper name, Asherah, in these formulas, because what we have are declined forms of an originally divine name, which had been generalized, and made into a common noun, meaning "goddess." (Proper names are not declined in Biblical Hebrew). So, whereas we cannot be certain that reference is to Asherah, specifically, we can say that the authors of these blessings, who invoked Yahweh's name, believed that he had a consort, most likely Asherah.

I close the review of selective polytheism by citing the remarkable theophanic hymn from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, that addresses both Baal and El. The opening verse of the hymn is broken, but probably reads: "When El shines in the firma[ment]." Further we read clearly:

To bless Baal on the day of battle, To (bless) the name of El on the day of battle.⁸

⁸For annotated texts, see (Ahituv 2008, 313–329 (Kuntillet 'Ajrud); Ahituv 2008, 220–232 (Khirbet el-Qom (Makkeedah)). Also see (Ackerman 2006) and bibliography cited, especially the monograph (Olyan 1988).

The above epigraphic evidence also impacts our understanding of the eventual rejection of Asherah, formerly exalted in the West-Semitic pantheon, in the henotheist phase of Israelite religion. In my view, that policy requires an independent explanation; it is not an inevitable consequence of Yahwist henotheism. The fact that at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, Yahweh is addressed as a deity who has a consort, whether specifically Asherah or not, means that Yahweh was not configured as a "bachelor" deity. Nor is there validity to the suggestion that the cult of Asherah was rejected because it was depraved in some way, just because the goddess bespoke fertility. The elimination of the goddess might be attributable to the patriarchy so dominant in the Israelite ethos, so that when Baal was cast off, Asherah, was, as well. Inevitably there is something that we fail to comprehend about Israelite attitudes in this regard.

What is needed is a comprehensive phenomenological analysis of Yahweh's *persona*, if one may use that term. Such an investigation, along the lines of Mark Smith's treatment, would trace the synthesis of divine traits in Yahweh, including the female element represented by Asherah. It has been the purpose here to deal with the political realities that stimulated this synthesis in the henotheist period, a process which, in turn, helped to compensate for the rejection of the West-Semitic pantheon.

2.2.2 Phase II: Yahwist Henotheism and the Israelite Wars: The Challenge to Identity

The religious policy of Phase I, representing the first response to the challenge of Israelite life in Canaan, soon ran into trouble as a result of continuing wars with other nations residing in Canaan and Transjordan—Canaanites, "Amorites," Philistines, Amalekites, and Ammonites, Midianites, Edomites, Moabites, Arameans, and undoubtedly others. I posit that leading spokesmen for Israelite religion were determined to break away from the regional pantheon, and to endorse a henotheist belief system. The Israelite wars in Canaan and Transjordan had the effect of identifying even the shared, common deities of the West-Semitic pantheon, like El and Baal, directly with the enemies of the Israelites. Moreover, it was feared that continued affiliation with the regional, West-Semitic pantheon would threaten the loyalty and cohesion of the embattled Israelites at times when unity was indispensable. This challenge reverberates in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), where those who failed to answer the call to battle against the Canaanites, issued in Yahweh's name, were either chided or cursed. There are similar indications, including records of early internecine wars, as between Gileadites and Ephraimites, for instance (Judges 12).

To maintain national unity it was claimed that Yahweh, alone, can grant the Israelites victory over their enemies, and entitle them to the lands they had settled. Thus, Elijah, confronts the cult prophets of Baal at the Muhraqa, an event referenced to the reign of Ahab during the ninth century BCE (1 Kings 18). The prophet demands that local Israelites choose between Yahweh and Baal, and cease their prolonged “hedging,” implying that his Israelite audience did not share the prophet’s sense of urgency, and had felt no need to choose. Gideon and the Israelites required signs from Yahweh, and had to be aroused to action against the Baal cult. Note that the Israelites of Ophrah were aggrieved over Gideon’s destruction of the Baal altar and its Asherah (Judges 6: 26–31).

With escalating aggressiveness, the Israelite prophets, starting with the cult prophet, Samuel, attributed victory to Yahweh, alone. In 1 Samuel 7 we are told how the Ark had been captured in battle by the Philistines twenty years earlier, when, for reasons unexplained at the time, its power had failed to assure the Israelites of victory over the Philistines. Now the people yearned for Yahweh to rescue them from the Philistines. Here is what the prophet had to say, in words of a later time:

Then Samuel spoke to the entire House of Israel as follows: If with all your heart you are returning to Yahweh, remove the foreign gods from your midst, and the Ashtoreth-images, and direct your heart to Yahweh and worship him alone. He will rescue you from the power of the Philistines. Thereupon the Israelites removed the Baal-images and the Ashtoreth-images and worshiped Yahweh alone. (1 Samuel 7: 3–4)

The Deuteronomic school went territorial, prohibiting worship of any god except Yahweh even by non-Israelites who inhabited the land, God’s country. This ideology did not prevail until the near-exilic period in Judah, and in effect, the Hebrew Bible, if read with a magnifying glass, documents the long, internal struggle over strict henotheism. We ought not to underestimate the hold exercised by the earlier cultic pattern, which at least partially accounts for the stern efforts undertaken in mid-to-late seventh century BCE Judah to put an end to local cult sites.

Henotheism is proclaimed in the second commandment of the Decalogue: “You shall have no other gods in my presence” (Exodus 20: 3; Deuteronomy 5: 7). Yahweh is identified in the first statement of the Decalogue, as the God who liberated the people from Egypt. Yahweh will not countenance the worship of any other deity at his cult sites; he will not share the stage. The call to the Israelites likewise proclaims the singularity of Yahweh: “Give heed, O Israel! Yahweh is our God; Yahweh is the single God” (*YHWH `ehhād*—Deuteronomy 6: 4). Biblical

narratives of the Egyptian saga, telling of Israelite bondage and liberation, the defeat of the Egyptians and the punishment of their gods, likewise epitomize the henotheist mentality. Although Egyptian power was a chronic factor in Israelite history, it presented a different kind of challenge from that posed by Assyrian power, both in objectives and strategy.

The existence of the gods of Egypt is never denied in the henotheist phase, where it is emphasized that they are mighty and powerful. And yet, we read in the Song of the Sea “Who is comparable to you among the gods, Yahweh?” (Exodus 25: 11). The Egyptian agenda in biblical literature requires further study, but it can be said at this point that the treatment of the Exodus saga well expresses the henotheist agenda.

In summary, the first call to Yahwist henotheism was a response to the ongoing power struggle over hegemony in Canaan, and it preceded the Assyrian threat by quite a spell. It was an ideology of victory over nearby, national enemies. But, the henotheist belief system lost its credibility in the late eighth to early seventh century BCE as a result of disastrous encounters with Assyrian power, demonstrated by the failure of the Syro-Ephraimite alliance, and the consequent fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 721 BCE.

Before proceeding to the third phase, a word is in order about the phenomenology of Yahwist henotheism. If the challenge of national unity explains the rejection of the traditional West-Semitic pantheon, it may have been the Egyptian cult of Aten under Pharaoh Akhenaten of the Amarna period that provided an empirical model for the henotheist cult of Yahweh in Israel. At the very least, the aniconic character of the cult of Yahweh from its inception may reflect the same concept as the aniconic cult of Aten. Notwithstanding different time-frames and changing political situations, but given the ongoing contacts between Canaan and Egypt, the phenomenological resemblance between the two cults argues for a cultural connection between them, as anyone reading Psalm 104 alongside the Hymn to Aten might conclude. It is my view, however, that the Egyptian factor has usually been misplaced. It relates more properly to the earlier, henotheist phase, rather than to Israelite monotheism, as subsequently conceived.

2.2.3 Phase III: Global Monotheism as Response to the Challenge of Empire

In my study entitled “Assyrian Ideology and Israelite Monotheism” (Levine 2005), I read the message of First Isaiah of Jerusalem, *ex eventu*, as a response to Sennacherib’s blockade of Jerusalem in 701 BCE. The sparing of Jerusalem was regarded as a sign of divine providence. For a taste of what Isaiah would have been responding to, here is a passage from the annals of Sennacherib:

Sennacherib, the great king, the powerful king, king of the entire world (*šar kiššāti*), king of the land of Assyria, king of the four quarters [... pietistic titular]; consummate warrior, valiant man, foremost among all of the kings, the great king who swallows up those who do not submit, who strikes the wicked with lightning—Aššur, the great mountain, has handed over to me unrivaled kingship [^d *Aššur šadû rabû šarru-ut la ša-na-an ú-šat-li-ma-ni-ma*] over all who dwell in palaces; he has increased [the power of] my weapons. From the upper sea of the west to the lower sea of the east, all of the black-headed creatures has he placed under my feet, and powerful kings feared my onslaught.⁹

When we compare this passage from Sennacherib's annals to corresponding passages crediting divine powers for world domination, such as are found in the earlier annals of Tiglat-Pileser III and Sargon II, we read that Aššur shares credit with other gods, especially Šamaš and Marduk. Here, there is only mention of the god Aššur, who had been the empowering god of Assyrian military might at least since the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I, mandating successive Assyrian kings to enlarge the empire through conquest. But, as we now know, it was the thrust of Sennacherib's so-called "reform" to demote Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon, and to exalt Aššur, a religious policy reflecting his extraordinary militancy toward Babylonia, between 705 and 689 BCE. In my study, I surveyed numerous indicators of this shift, many brought to light by Hayim Tadmor (1989), and more recently reviewed by Eckart Frahm (1997, 220–229).

Beginning with First Isaiah, and anticipated to a degree by his contemporaries, Amos, Micah, and Hosea, the prophetic horizon expanded to global proportions in response to the immediate threat of a world empire, against which military resistance was futile. Implicit in the prophetic response is the conclusion that global monotheism would most likely emerge in a uni-polar imperial age, since it is the hypostasis of the *kosmo-krator* "world ruler," in the Assyrian tradition, *šar kiššāti* "king of the entire inhabited world," Sennacherib's own title. And if you ask: How is it that the Assyrian king, who worships Aššur, rules over the inhabited world, while the king of Judah, who devotedly worships Yahweh, has seen his land ravaged, and his capital, Jerusalem, blockaded? Here are parts of Isaiah's answer, in words ascribed to Yahweh:

a) Isaiah 10: 5–7 (with omissions):

Ah, Assyria, rod of my rage! He is an arm-staff of my wrath! I mobilize him against an ungodly nation, I deploy him against a people

⁹Cited from (Luckenbill 1924, 23–24, Oriental Institute Prism, H2, lines 1–16). Also see (Frahm 1997, 102–105).

who provoke me. To take spoils and seize booty, And to subject it to trampling, like the mire of the streets. But he does not perceive it thus, nor does he so comprehend; For it is in his heart to destroy, to terminate nations, more than a few.

b) Isaiah 14: 24–27:

As I have devised, so is it happening; as I planned, so shall it come about. To break Assyria in my land; to crush him on my mountains. His yoke shall be removed from him; And his tributary burden removed from their back. This is the plan devised for all the earth; And this is the arm outstretched over all the nations. For Yahweh of the heavenly hosts has devised it, who can foil it? And his outstretched arm—who can stay it?

Assyria has been granted victory over Israel because Israel needed to be punished for its sins, as is declared in Isaiah, chapter 1. Being an empire built on conquest, Assyria was the best possible weapon of Yahweh's wrath at Israel. But, Assyria's king does not comprehend that he is only an instrument of Yahweh's grand design; that just as Assyria tramples Israel now, so will it be crushed in due time. Reference to "the yoke of Assyria" is a tell-tale resonance of Assyrian diction in First Isaiah. The prophet counsels patience, for Yahweh will surely bring down even the greatest empire. In the interim, says Isaiah to Hezekiah, do not rebel. Submit to the king of Assyria, unnamed, who was Sennacherib. A century later, Jeremiah would similarly counsel Zedekiah to submit to Nebuchadnezzar II, but his refusal to do so made the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the Judean exile inevitable. Ultimately, Second Isaiah (45: 1–7) would regard Cyrus the Great as Yahweh's very anointed, commissioned to restore his people, Israel. Yahweh rules over empires, and their kings are his servants, even when they do not realize as much.

Until quite recently, I regarded the prophetic doctrine of relying on Yahweh as wide-eyed and unrealistic. That was before I realized that First Isaiah and his contemporaries were in the process of redefining power concepts; of divorcing divine power from political and military might. In the heroic tradition, preserved primarily in the books of Judges and Samuel, and in some early Hebrew poetry, prowess in battle and victory in war materialized for leaders who were infused with *rûah YHWH* "the spirit of Yahweh," which overtakes them and increases their strength. But in the post-exilic Zechariah 4, we find: *rûah* standing in direct opposition to "force" and "military might," as we read: "Not by military might and not by force, but rather by my spirit, says Yahweh of Hosts."¹⁰ It is my con-

¹⁰See the discussion of *rûah YHWH* "the spirit of Yahweh" in (Levine 2009).

tention that the spiritualization of power, so basic to Israelite monotheism in the long term, is heralded in First Isaiah (Isaiah 11: 2–5, and following), where we are given a profile of the ideal Judean king:

The spirit of Yahweh shall alight upon him; A spirit of wisdom and insight. A spirit of courageous counsel; A spirit of enlightenment and reverence for Yahweh. He shall sense the truth through his reverence for Yahweh, So that he shall not judge by what his eyes see, Nor decide by what his ears hear. He shall judge the poor equitably, And decide fairly for the lowly of the land. He shall strike down to the earth by ‘the rod’ of his speech, By the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Justice shall be the girdle of his waist, And faithfulness the girdle of his loins.

Sennacherib, so we have read, strikes the wicked like lightning, with invincible weapons, whereas the ideal Judean king uses no weapons and fights no battles. The heroic vocabulary is transacted to another dimension of power. The king’s war-belt signifies his sense of justice and his wisdom. His faithfulness and reverence for Yahweh empower him to strike down the wicked by the words of his mouth, by his command, thereby eliminating the need for physical attack. Parpola has called attention to the resonance between the vision of international peace in Isaiah 2/Micah 4, calling for the arbitration of international disputes, with a passage in what he calls “Prophecies for the Crown Prince Assurbanipal.”

[The kings] of the lands shall say to one another: “[Come, let us] go to Assurbanipal! The king has witnesses! [Whatever the god]s decreed for our fathers and forefathers [let him now] arbitrate between us. (Parpola 1997, 38)

It would appear that both in Judah and in Assyria there were prophets who acknowledged the limits of military power and political hegemony. In retrospect, First Isaiah’s monotheism must be adjudged an effective Israelite response. A diminished Judah endured for another century, allowing the kingdom to survive.

2.3 A Closing Reflection

Overall, I regard Mario Liverani’s study of Israelite history (Liverani 2005) as a paradigm of contextual method, and I have utilized it here as a benchmark in assessing the validity of biblical sources as evidence. I am not entirely comfortable, however, with Liverani’s bifurcation, whereby he distinguishes systematically between “normal history” and “invented history.” If by “invented” he means

“exceptional,” namely, what would not qualify for inclusion in a history of events, socio-political developments and economic trends, representing “the view from above,” then I agree in principle, if not in every instance. The Israelites, later Jews, created in the Hebrew Bible a narrative, some of it realistic and historical, other parts of it imagined, and virtually all of it ideological, reflecting “the view from below,” recording what was of primary concern to them. In my opinion, the transitions on which I have focused here constituted real turning points in the history of Israelite religion. Most of all, what the Hebrew Bible places in the mouth of First Isaiah was a remarkable religious response to the threat of the Assyrian empire, whose king’s patron was the god Aššur. Both king and deity were unrivaled! The prophetic response initiated the expansion and redefinition of the Israelite God-idea, yielding a policy that would resonate about a century later in the prophecies of Jeremiah. So it is that, allowing for a degree of disagreement, I find valuable insight in a statement from Mario Liverani’s Foreword:

While the real but normal history had no more than a local interest, the invented and exceptional one became the basis for the foundation of a nation (Israel), and of a religion (Judaism) that would have an influence on the subsequent history of the whole world. (Liverani 2005, xvii)

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