

## EL, YAHWEH AND THE EMERGENCE OF MONOTHEISM IN ISRAEL

### Abstract

This study explores the evolution of monotheism in ancient Israel, focusing on the names El and Yahweh as primary designations for the divine. It analyses how biblical texts reflect varying theological perspectives that emerged over time, indicating the coexistence of polytheistic traditions with the worship of Yahweh. The author argues that while the Hebrew Bible does not consistently present a monotheistic framework, specific passages point to an evolving belief system culminating in exclusive monotheism, particularly during the exile and post-exilic periods. The emergence of Yahweh as the singular God of Israel responds to sociocultural pressures and historical events, such as the conquest of the Promised Land and subsequent challenges from surrounding nations. The study synthesizes textual evidence from Ugaritic texts, prophetic writings, and archaeological findings to illustrate the gradual transition from a pantheon of gods to the centralized worship of Yahweh. It concludes that this process was characterized by a dynamic interplay of religious, cultural, and political factors, leading to a unified theological identity among the ancient Israelites.



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### Introduction

Biblical Theology has an important role in the study of theology. It first appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as an approach to Christian Theology, equivalent to systematic and scholastic theology. Systematic Theology accepts a given belief system and searches the

texts to support it, while biblical theology focuses on the biblical text in search of the foundations of a Theology.

The biblical text was not written as a systematic theology but consisted of books containing, among other things, stories, hymns, prophecies, and ritual instructions. However, this does not mean that the Bible is an outdated source of theology, as in all text forms, a particular view of God is implied. The task of Biblical Theology is to map out the implied ideas concerning God while continuing the ongoing dialogue with the given texts. In other words, Biblical Theology seeks the belief system indicated in the Bible. A belief system is a coherent set of religious views held by society or religious community members.

Therefore, a more correct definition of Biblical Theology is that it seeks the belief system of the author of the texts and the communities to which they are addressed. However, this search indicates that more than one belief system is shown in the Bible. The various ideas regarding God depend on the time and place of writing, on the social position of the author, and on the social situation of the time (e.g., the differences presented between the verses Ps 72 and Mi 3). Some texts emphasize the idea of divine creation, while others do not mention it. Another goal of Biblical Theology is the constant effort to search for a conceptual continuity among the various testimonies of the biblical text. This coherence becomes apparent when we focus on specific themes, such as the Covenant, Election, the idea of the community of faith, and the name of God.

In daily life, Christians invoke the name of God many times. They rarely stop considering how the word name works regarding its lofty referent. What is the meaning of God's name? What does the name of God hide? Is it one or many? If Adam received the blessing to name all creations on earth, then is a man capable of understanding the name of his Creator?

This understanding concerns not only the meaning of his name but also how he developed. One should refer to the Old Testament to follow this evolution of the name of God. However, such a review is not easy at all since 72 different names of God are presented in the text of the Old Testament. So, while the God of the Old Testament is offered with 72 other names, nevertheless, these names identify the one and only God, leading to Monotheism. "The name of God," following the grammar of Monotheism, is single and singular. However, it is clear that the above picture seems illogical:

How the one and only single and singular God, the core of the Monotheism of the Old Testament, is combined with the mention of different names of Him.

Furthermore, while there are references in the Old Testament that forbid the invocation of the name of God, at the same time, in specific passages, the reader is urged to invoke the name of God. For example, the Third Commandment says, “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God” (Ex 20:7), and on the other hand, Psalmist’s exclamation is, “Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time on and forevermore!” (Ps 113:2). Furthermore, in the Gospel of Matthew it is written: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” (Mt 6:9). These constant references become increasingly frustrating the deeper we get into the scriptural world and its patterns of thought, for the Bible never reveals that name.

### **The question about the name of God**

In the biblical text, there are three instances in which the question of God’s name arises. The first is when Jacob asks the One, “Please tell “me your name.” He responds with a rhetorical question, “Why is it that you ask my name?” (Gen 32:29). The same icon appears in the dialogue between the angel of Yahweh, Manoah and his wife when the first wonders: “Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful” (Jdg 13:18). Finally in the famous dialogue between Moses and the Lord, before the Covenant when the leader of the people of Israel says “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God responds with the famous phrase, “I am who I am – אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (*’e|hyè ’áser ’e|hyè*) / *’Eγώ εἰμι ὁ Ὄν.*” “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’ ... This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.” (Ex 3:13-15).

God’s answer seems ontological as it includes totality. This ontological wholeness through the *I Am* / *’Eγώ εἰμι* provides everything, even what the human mind cannot comprehend and name. This ontological response on God’s part essentially conceals and overshadows God’s name. So what about the other 72 different epithets or names that present God? These are appellations mainly used in the liturgical life of the people of Israel to make it possible to refer practically to God, whose proper name remains incomprehensible.

As a result, the main question, which is God’s name, can not be answered if the various names attributed to him by the human mind and the popular tradition that

the people of Israel cultivated about God are not taken into account. In other words, systematic research about the name of God should be a negotiation between theology and the demands shaped by the people's traditional rhetorical practice.

### God El

The search for the answer leads us back to the source, the text of the Old Testament. There are two prominent, primary names with which the author of the text refers to God: El and Yahweh. The analysis of these two names indicates that the information about El originally comes from Ugarit's records. This ancient Syrian city flourished during the Late Bronze Age. For most scholars, the connection between Ugarit and ancient Israel is undeniable (Loretz 1990). A pantheon is recorded in her texts, in which El, the father of the gods of the Ugaritic pantheon, El, is the father of gods and men and is given designations such as 'Father of Years,' El, creator of Earth.

In the texts of the book of Genesis, we often find the name El Siadai (17:1; 35:11, 48:3), as in the more significant part of Job's poem, and it seems to be the main deity that forms the book's core. In Genesis 14:18, the deity "El Elyon" is introduced, for which it is mentioned nowhere else. Exodus 6:3 states that God appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with the name El Shaddai (God Almighty), but he was not known to them by the name of Yahweh. The names El Shaddai, El Elyon, and El Bethel of the biblical testimony are indeed connected with the higher Canaanite deity El. Still, there are myths of Ugarit, which influenced the image of Yahweh, "the merciful and long-suffering El" (Ex 34:6) (Craigie 1983, 68). So, if these passages have some weight, they indicate that the name of God was not known to Israel before the time of Moses.

Some other biblical texts indicate a time when Yahweh was not a deity along with other deities but subordinate to Elohim. The scholars wondered whether the interpretation of the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 32:8 they were not due to later editing because of the Septuagint text. This text seemed to presuppose a different Hebrew original: God Elyon "established the boundaries of the nations according to the number of his angels God." The suggestion of a more authentic Jewish interpretation of the text has been confirmed by a Jewish manuscript of Qumran, in which the sons of God are mentioned. It is also said that Jacob was part of it, Yahweh. The text is as follows:

"When Elyon delivered the inheritance of the nations,  
When he separated the sons of Adam (or man)  
Establish people's boundaries

According to the number of the sons of Elohim.  
Sufficient for Yahweh are his people  
And Jacob his inheritance.”

So, the text hints that Yahweh inherited Israel as a specific part of it. Such a state, in which Yahweh is chiefly one of the sons of Elohim in the divine assembly, is found in Psalms 89:7-8, which is the following:

“For who can be compared to Yahweh?  
Who is like him among the sons of Elim (gods)?  
El creates awe in the council of the saints.  
He is great and causes fear in all about him.”

Yahweh here appears as one of the sons of Elohim, even if it is mentioned that he cannot be compared to them. Similarly, Psalm 82:1 speaks of one God judge among the gods. The concept of divine assembly, or council, is widespread among the Semitic pantheons. Later, the heavenly council was interpreted as consisting of angels surrounding Yahweh, but generally, angels have little place in Israelite tradition. In Hebrew, the angel is called מַלְאָךְ (*mal'ak*) – ‘messenger’. The studies on the Southwest Semitic pantheons showed that the gods had various ranks, with the lowest being that of the messenger gods. Exodus 3:2-5 states that God’s messenger appeared to Moses about angels in the Bible, but the rest of the text seems to be Yahweh speaking. Not in later Judaism, they were now called messengers of the Lord, angels, yet the layout of the original polytheistic divine council was preserved despite the monotheistic aspirations of the final editors of the tradition.

### **El and Yahweh**

According to M. Korpel (1990), the attributes of the “father of all gods and men” El, such as wisdom, goodness, fatherhood, blessing, and creativity, belong to the characteristics of El-Yahweh, Ugarit, and Israel. Yahweh’s blessing (and sometimes His Asherah) meant that this would pass for the ancient Israelites. The cultural and religious environment of the Ugarit legends reflects the traditions and institutions of the proto-Israelites of central Palestine.

The religion of the Patriarchs is placed at the center of the research to clarify if Yahwism developed during this period or existed alongside the popular Israelite religion, which contained many elements of comparison. It is possible that an early clear

Yahwism did not exist except in the belief of a small social group or the minds of the authors of Deuteronomistic History. As for the events of the Exodus, it is a fact that they have been attributed to a later tradition in the light of the historical assumptions of the authors of the biblical text. Indeed, there is the passage of Numbers 23:22, according to which El Yahweh was the God of Israel from the time of the Exodus. However, the relevant teachings of Moses were never universally accepted by the people of Israel, except perhaps by a small section of the Levites who kept in memory the traditions about Moses and a God.

Researchers hypothesize that Yahwism derived from the religion of the Canaanites, as many relevant archaeological finds attest, more to a gradual transition from Canaanite religion to extreme Yahwism rather than a parallel coexistence with elements of syncretism. The scandalous question of the credibility of the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophetic writing and Deuteronomistic History does not affect this because the biblical writers turn against paganism as they anxiously try to keep the traditions of the past alive.

At that time, deities worshiped, according to the biblical text, seem to have been Baal and Asherah (Jgs 2:13), a god for whom there is a lack of information from mythology regarding her character and divine powers, both in the Ugaritic texts as well as in the later sources. The parallel existence of the deities Baal and Asherah is also noted by Kitchen, extending it in time from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> century. According to Smith, these deities (including El) were inextricably linked to Yahweh and his worship in that early period of the Judges, which seems to explain the cultural continuity between the native culture of the UE. X. and of the modern urbanite of the coasts and plains.

However, according to J. Hackett (1998, 348), information about the early religious beliefs of the people of Israel can be drawn from poems of Israelite historiography (e.g., Ex 15:1b-18, Jgs 5, Dt 33, Gn 49). Briefly commenting on some of these passages, as they refer to events outside the examined period, the following can be said: (a) in the Exodus, Yahweh is described with characteristics of a storm god, an image already known in texts of the Ancient Near East, especially where the deity is presented as a warrior, (b) in that of the Book of Judges, in the song of Deborah (Jgs 5:4-5), Yahweh is again presented as a warrior God, an image typical of the myths of the Ancient Near East and (c) in that of Deuteronomy 33:2-3 vocabulary is used similar to the passage above of the book of Judges, but also to the Crit. 5, 11, 5, 19-21.

However, as Walls notes, how Yahweh is depicted in the biblical texts differs from that of the pantheistic deities in Canaanite literature, as the dramatic exaggerations involved in these polytheistic myths are avoided.

More specifically, L. Grabbe (2008, 120) argued that the people of Israel had been polytheistic for a long time but that perhaps Yahweh functioned, in a way, as a national god and was the most widely worshiped deity. In the same pattern, Hackett adds that for the Near East at that time, belief in a national god was linked to a people's national identity. According to M. Liverani (2007, 76), the people took a long time to establish this recognition of Yahweh as a national god. In contrast, His adoption as the only god from the beginning of the history of this people is an interpretation of later historiography.

W. Zwickel (2012, 592) also favors the later recognition of Yahweh as a national god based on the presence of the theophoric element in the personal names of the Late Bronze Age. According to him, perhaps Yahweh was worshiped by some groups of people of the Iron Age I. Still, he was a newly arrived god who emerged from the traditional religious systems' crisis. In contrast, his evolution into a central god of the people of Israel – and probably his worship by people of a lower social class – took place during the time of David with the formation of the state. Perhaps again, Yahweh was the national god of the people of Israel as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC, with his worship tolerating, or even officially accepting the existence of other deities, a view expressed by Preuss, noting that the monotheistic religion of the people of Israel did not punish apostasy, as it was an environment with tolerance in religious choices, also because heathen nations surrounded it. To the above, it is worth adding the reference to Yahweh's relationship with El, with R. Albertz (2012, 165) arguing that the religion of Yahweh and that of El had merged before the formation of the state, an opinion that J. Pakkala (1999, 228) also cites, adding that this merger enabled the new god Yahweh-El to fully meet the requirements and perform more functions than the other simple deities. Equally interesting seems to be the perspective of M. Dijkstra (2001, 104-5) here, who argues that El was the worshiped deity of the early Israelite tribes in the region of the tribe of Ephraim, the later Northern Kingdom, while “revolutionary”, finally, seems to be the view of Gnuse that there is no need to speak of two different religions, that of the Canaanites and that of the Israelites, which were in dialectical confrontation with each other.

Although J.C. Moor (1990: 233-45) believes Yahweh was the only God in the earliest period (before 1000 BC), the name El was still popular before the eighth century. This is obvious because, in the prophecy of Balaam, which is placed on Mount Nebo, it is clarified that the group of Exodus believed that his God was El/Yahweh. Nebo is in Moab, where the Column of King Mesha (850 BC) was found. This is the oldest extra-biblical evidence that mentions Yahweh without a doubt. According to 2 Kgs 3:4-5, during the reign of Joram (852-841 BC), King Mesha conquers Nebo and declares himself independent from Israel. Then, he destroys vessels that were dedicated to Yahweh. A fascinating text (800 BC), which mentions El and Ishtar, fertility goddess, was found in Deir 'Alla, an Israelite area. This text proves that some Israelite communities worshipped during the 800 BC El.

In Kuntillet el 'Ajrud (Conrad 1988, 563), a text from the 9<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century BC was found. The most probable date is 850-837 BC when the dynasty of Omrides from the North Kingdom of Israel ruled or at the time of Josiah (801-786 BC), who conquered Judah. This text came from a shrine in the wilderness on a trade route to Sinai. The inscription says: "I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria, and by his Asherah, and Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah."

The Pillar of Mesha and the inscription of Kuntillet el 'Ajrud prove the pluralism in the names of God and the variety of worship. Against this pluralism are fighting the prophets to establish true Yahwism, the faith in the one and only God of Israel.

The examination of the question of the deities worshiped is followed by that of the cults, which demonstrate the influence above that the people of Israel had received from the surrounding nations in the matter of their religion, with Hackett arguing that there is evidence that the ancient cults were part of the belief system of ancient Israel both in that period and later, also noting the differentiation between the concepts of "ancestor cults" and "ancestor worship" and providing examples from the biblical texts, where polemics against the worship of dead ancestors are answered (e.g., Dt 26:14, Ps 106:28, Jer 16:5-9).

The existence of ceremonies related to ancestor worship is also discussed by H.J. Marsman (2003, 611-2), noting that this was a religious practice accepted in early biblical times. At the same time, it is unknown if only a family or even a tribe participated in it (with a gathering of people in a tomb), with R. Albertz (1995, 106) arguing that perhaps this ceremony played an essential role in strengthening the identity of the members of the nuclear family of that time. For their part, however,

King and Stager report that, in ancient Israel, the worship of the dead was condemned by official monotheism (Lv 19:31, Dt 18:10-11). However, in popular religion, it is acceptable, as the practices of the Canaanites influence it. At the same time, it is the way of obtaining the favor of their ancestors, but also of appeasing them. Thus, the reference to the prohibition of worshiping the dead in the legislation of the people of Israel means its continuous performance. An end to ancestor worship, which, according to Marsman, was the responsibility of women in the absence of the eldest son of the family, seems to be given by the prevalence of monotheism, as this seems to oppose the belief that Yahweh is the only master of the fate of the people. For Smith, however, the only ceremony related to the dead was necromancy, a practice that was probably prohibited until the period before the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

Therefore, as P.H. Preuss (1995, 106) also notes, the worship of the people of Israel had absorbed elements of the pre-Yahweh period (e.g., the paschal lamb) and had incorporated elements of the Canaanites (e.g., many sacrifices, agricultural festivals, the presence of Yahweh in the Temple). He also sought to introduce theology from the worship of El (e.g., Yahweh as king) but rejected orgiastic ceremonies, conjurations, and magic.

### **Yahweh and Yahwism**

According to Mihalik, Elijah played a significant role in establishing Yahweh's name and Yahwism. His name means "My El is Yahweh." It signifies the change from El to Yahweh. The people in Canaan who viewed El as a prior deity started following the conception of those who believed in Yahweh. Although there was a time when both deities' names were worshipped against Baal of the dynasty of Omrides, the name of Yahweh gradually became more powerful.

M.S. Smith (2010, 66-7), who studied the Ugaritic texts and the West Semitic pantheon, argues that El and Asherah were at the top of the hierarchy of gods and then followed the second level with Athirat. The whole council constitutes a royal supreme court, and at this stage, as (Nm 23:24, Dt 32, Jgs 5, and Ps 82) point out, Yahweh belonged to the second level of deities. This picture remains unchangeable during the period of Elijah, Amos, and Hosea, although they tried to introduce the worship of one God, Yahweh (Stolz 1970; Stolz 1980, 144-89).

The sociological factors that gradually took shape, as well as the threat from foreign peoples (Assyrians), gradually changed the perception of the ancient royal

court and prepared the entry into the foreground of the name of Yahweh as an exclusive name of God (Theissen 1985, 51-81). The people of Israel need one God, Yahweh, not a pantheon, to protect and guide them through the threats and the difficulties. This God, Yahweh, was the same God that marched through the desert of Sinai and conquered the Promised Land, saved Israel from the alliances, and inhabited the prominent place of worship, the Temple of Jerusalem.

That was the main goal of the reform of Josiah, who tried to unify the two names under one cult and one ritual place (Lang 1983, 13-59). Josiah pushed through his reform to eliminate El's presence, associated with the region of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Shechem, and to bring forth Yahweh of Jerusalem. El became Yahweh and Yahweh, the God of all Israel. This Israel was the kingdom of Judah. The Israelites of the South Kingdom and Jerusalem had a long history that should be associated with the only God of Israel, Yahweh. An excellent example is the name El Elyon, which was used by Abraham and Melchizedek, king of Salem (the ancient name of Jerusalem), and perhaps with the centralization of Josiah's reform to the Temple of Jerusalem, Yahweh adopted the throne, sanctuary, and attributes of the god El Elyon.

### **The emergence of Monotheism**

True monotheism under Yahweh emerged, as H. Saggs (1984, 257) suggests, "with the oracles of Jeremiah and Second Isaiah." Exilic and post-exilic passages such as Is 43:10-13, Dt 4:35,39; 6:4, 32:12,39, and 2 Sam 7:22 reflect the idea of Monotheism after a revision. Monotheism was mainly cultivated by the exile community trying to give it an identity. This community of exiled Israelites had a glorious past, with a God who was always present from the Exodus and the conquest of the Promised Land until the destruction of Jerusalem and God's temple.

This God was the creator God, the providential god of Israel, and at the same time, a universal God whose power and influence were not limited to the permanent national contexts of the land of Judah but also included the lands of Exile and Diaspora. This almighty, universal God, Yahweh, who manifests his presence and power in alien lands, remains holy, unchanging, the same God who created the world in wisdom and became Israel's guide in its historical path. This perception constitutes the response of the spiritual leaders of Israel, the prophets, to the worldview and religious beliefs of the pagan peoples. In a globalized environment, Yahweh is both the national god of Israel

and the only holy God, who does not stand as the highest of all deities but is the one and only God, as all other gods essentially do not exist.

### Conclusions

The Hebrew Bible is not a monotheistic book. Of course, some passages refer to a monotheistic belief system. Deuteronomy 6:4 and the texts of Deutero-Isaiah testify to the attempt for religious unity. From Isaiah 40 ff., Yahweh is glorified as the only deity worthy of worship by the Israelites, while all “other gods” are pushed aside as human constructs, and the whole earth is called upon to worship Yahweh. This belief system is characterized as exclusive monotheism. Although some continued to worship the other deities, they were considered weak entities.

However, other ideas are also mentioned in the Bible. In the Exodus, Moses does not teach exclusive Monotheism, as it seems that he did not want to preach to the people a specific idea about God but wanted to witness the encounter with a liberating God who acts in history. Moses preaches that Yahweh is a living divine being who saves His people and wants to establish ties with them through a covenant. However, he does not explain whether this divine being is the only one that exists in the entire universe. Of course, several elements lead us to the conclusion that Moses Yahweh was the only God worthy of worship by him and the Israelites. The biblical text reflects the path from encountering this God-Savior to accepting monotheism in an exclusive form.

Essential parts of the biblical text testify to a belief system characterized as Monotheism, Monoyahvism, or inclusive Monotheism. “Mono-worship” means that the existence and value of other gods are recognized, but their worship by community members is prevented. For example, the Ten Commandments begin in both accounts with the exhortation not to worship other gods (Ex 20 and Dt 5). So, their existence and the possibility of worship are admitted, but it is forbidden to the Israelites. An exciting example of the worship of one god among many others occurs in 1 Kgs 11:24. Also, in this chapter, where the exploits of Judge Jephthah are presented, it is implied that in the Ancient Near East, the various deities had their territory. Hamosh is presented as the Savior-god of Moab, as Yahweh is correspondingly seen for Israel. The idea of the territorial delimitation of the deity can also be seen from the passage 1 Kgs 26:19.

The idea of “Mono-Yahvism” presupposes the possibility that the worship of Yahweh varied across the regions of Ancient Israel, which is very likely to have been the case given recent archaeological findings. The form of Yahvism that developed in

Jerusalem after the fall of the Northern Kingdom and was greatly supported by the reformation of King Josiah is presented as the only acceptable form of worship of Yahweh, as “Mono-Yahvism.” The idea of “inclusive Monotheism” refers to a form of religion that claims the universal worship of one god by the community.

Gradually emerges the idea of the mobilization of God in favor of His people. Because of divine love, Yahweh is interested in His people and remains close to Israel. This idea is found in Isaiah 9:1-6, where in the problematic situation that the country and the people have sunk into, the prophet receives the joyful message of the birth of a royal child who will relieve the people from oppression, Emmanuel. He is the Messiah, the true God, who will come to fulfill all the prophecies and give the answer about the role that the people of Israel played in the apocalypse of the divine plan to the whole of humanity.

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