

THE DYNAMIC JOURNEY OF ISRAEL TOWARD PURE MONOTHEISM AND THE FOREIGN INFLUENCES ON ITS FORMATION

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Abstract:

The article deals with a theological-historical analysis of the dynamic formation of monotheism in Israel. Israel and its perception of God has undergone a long journey of purification from the assimilationist efforts that strongly influenced this development in the periods in question. We have focused on the period of Abraham, as the progenitor of the faith, who emerged from the general cultural perception of polytheism. The next period is the time of the Israelites in Egypt, which was perhaps the most crucial for the formation of monotheism. It was during this period, when henotheism prevailed, that God revealed his name JHWH through Moses. Ultimately, this formation culminated in the Babylonian captivity, which established a clear and direct monotheism through the prophets.

Keywords: polytheism, henotheism, monotheism, Israel, JHWH.

Introduction

A superficial reading of the Old Testament may give the impression that the ancient Israelites were characterized by an exclusive faith in Yahweh. In reality, this is a view that prevails in the minds of believers and is even maintained in historical school knowledge that is taught. The aim of this contribution is to highlight the process of gradually building and purifying their faith under God's guidance, culminating in the acceptance of full and pure monotheism. This monotheism was the result of Israel's long historical and dynamic journey and the active presence of YHWH in its history [1].

These theories of exclusive monotheism often overlook or even exclude the dynamic process of faith formation that the Jews underwent until they recognized that YHWH is the one and only God [10]. This contribution aims to highlight this dynamic journey of faith formation—not in every moment of Israel's history, but by defining and analyzing key points. These include Israel from the time of Abraham in Haran, through Israel's sojourn in Egypt and the Exodus, and finally, the Babylonian exile and the work of the prophets.

The Old Testament is a period in which various deities and religious groups were present, many of which predate Israel itself. In this sense, epigraphic and archaeological sources are of great importance in demonstrating how the biblical text incorporates cultural elements from the societies surrounding ancient Israel. While these findings are common in academic research, they often come as a surprise to the general public, particularly due to the prevailing Christian cultural heritage, which has shaped a specific perception of biblical history. Many people hold the conviction that the biblical text is an authentic historical account of the relationship between YHWH and His „*chosen people*,“ and questioning this narrative is sometimes even regarded as morally objectionable [1]. In light of these facts, this contribution will seek to demonstrate how Israel dynamically progressed on its journey of forming and establishing a clear monotheistic theology. It will highlight the strong assimilative pressures and foreign religious influences of the time, which played a significant role in shaping this theological development.

Polytheism and the Formation of a Relationship with a Personal God

If we want to examine the initial formation of a relationship with a personal God and the perception of God as such, we must consider the context of Abraham, the patriarch of faith, whom Christians, Jews, and Muslims regard as the „father

of faith.“ The key text is a passage from the Book of Genesis, which describes how YHWH calls him to set out on a journey: „*The Lord said to Abram: ‘Go from your country, your kindred, and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*’“ (Gen 12:1-3). The Book of Genesis does not merely provide a historical account; rather, this passage must be understood on multiple levels. Abraham came from Ur of the Chaldeans. His journey began in Haran, in the northwest of Mesopotamia, from where he traveled to Canaan, then to Egypt, and back to Canaan. This journey had a significant assimilative influence on his formation and perception of faith. Abraham arrived in Canaan around 1800 BC [2]. It is important to recognize that, historically, this was part of a broader movement of Semitic tribes inhabiting the Syro-Arabian desert. The steppes of these desert regions were home to nomadic and semi-nomadic clans living in the poorer areas of the „Fertile Crescent“—the region bounded by the fertile Nile Delta, the coast of Canaan, and, to the east, the river basins of the Euphrates and Tigris. Especially in times of hardship, these nomadic groups would press into more settled and cultivated areas [5]. Regarding the religious concepts from which Abraham emerged and which shaped him, they shared many common elements and analogies with the cultures of the ancient Near East. Their religion was characterized by the cult of the „*God of the Fathers*,“ with many deities bearing the names of specific family lineages, such as „*the God of Abraham*,“ „*the God of Isaac*,“ and others. A defining feature of these deities was that by revealing themselves to their ancestors, they affirmed a kind of kinship bond with their descendants. This was the God of nomads—not tied to any particular sanctuary but rather to a community of people whom He accompanied, protected, and blessed [6]. A similar perception of divinity was encountered by Abraham and the Israelites when they arrived in Canaan.

Here we see that, in its early stages, Israel’s religion was continuously shaped in an environment of ongoing struggle with polytheism and under its constant influence. Therefore, the popular religion of pre-exilic Israel may appear as a „flirtatious“ faith, incorporating syncretic elements that blended with surrounding religious traditions [7]. On the other hand, we must clearly state that Israelite religion was often considered the complete opposite of other prevailing religious systems of that time and place [15]. In any case, we must acknowledge that Canaanite culture had a significant influence on Israelite religion, which became evident in many ways.

The land of Canaan had its own pantheon, shaped largely by historical factors, as multiple nations had crossed its territory over time, leaving a strong imprint on

its religious landscape. At the head of this pantheon stood *El*, to whom kingship in its fullest sense belonged. Alongside him, we find his consort *Asherah* (Aširat = Ašerah). Asherah is one of the most well-documented figures, mentioned in two primary ways—as a goddess and as an idolatrous cult object. She was identified as the „*Queen of Heaven*,“ and her worship was widespread, especially in the north and south of Canaan. She had her own prophets and cult, with women playing a key role in the expansion of her veneration [1]. Archaeology has brought to light evidence of inscriptions referring to „YHWH and His Asherah,“ indicating the belief in a divine consort. Additionally, various depictions of goddesses have been discovered at multiple scattered sites, further confirming the presence of such religious concepts in ancient Israelite and Canaanite contexts [9].

The most widely worshiped deity was not El, but Baal. The term baal directly means „lord.“ He was regarded as the god of fertility, and his primary symbol was the bull—a representation of strength and virility [12].

Throughout Israel's history, there is a constant struggle of faith between the uniqueness and divinity of God and, on the other hand, the worldliness of surrounding nations and their deities. This tension shaped the religious identity of Israel, as it navigated between fidelity to YHWH and the influence of neighboring gods. Even after arriving in Canaan, Abraham integrated his worship of God with existing sanctuaries in the land. The first instance of this occurred at Shechem, near the „terebinth of Moreh“ (cf. Gen 12:6), where YHWH appeared to him, and Abraham built an altar. He then moved to Bethel, where he likewise erected an altar, continuing this pattern wherever he settled (cf. Gen 12–13).

Another significant moment is when Melchizedek blesses Abraham. This raises the question: By what name did Abraham call his God? Whom did he worship? The biblical text suggests that Abraham used two divine names: El-Shaddai and El-Olam.

El-Shaddai was associated with the religious language of Aramean paganism. Scholars differ on its meaning. Some interpret it as „Almighty,“ emphasizing God's power and strength. Others link it to the Akkadian word *šadu*, meaning „mountain,“ identifying El-Shaddai as the „God of the Mountains,“ a title commonly attributed to supreme deities in the pre-Mosaic period. He was also perceived as a storm deity. This name appears notably in Gen 17:1; 28:3; 35:11, and other passages.

El-Olam belongs more distinctly to Abraham's evolving faith. Abraham invoked this name in Beersheba, where he planted a tamarisk tree and called upon „the Everlasting God“ (cf. Gen 21:33). The eternity of the God of the Fathers implies that past, present, and future are all open before Him.

If this interpretation is correct, then Abraham's faith was not about inventing a new divine name but about filling an existing name with a new theological meaning [13].

Here, we can observe the connections and cultural environment that influenced the formation of Israel's concept of God as the one true God. It was through the beginning of this interpersonal communication between God and the patriarch Abraham that the process of purification and clear definition of monotheism commenced. Over time, this process became more distinct and intensified. In this context, God's dialogue did not begin solely with Abraham—it marked the beginning of a renewed conversation with all of humanity, which had been nearly lost due to the original sin of the first parents. Alongside this almost personal communication between God and the patriarchs, their descendants grew in number, and the religious experience of the patriarchs was gradually embraced by an entire people. Through this unfolding history, God guided His people from one event to the next, shaping their faith and leading them toward the full realization of His divine truth.

Henotheism and the Revelation of the Name YHWH

Another powerful experience that shaped the Israelites' view of religion was their time in Egypt. The period of Israel's stay in Egypt and the subsequent Exodus must be linked to a crucial phase in the history of forming faith in the one true God. Key events include the settlement of Jacob and his sons in Egypt, Pharaoh's persecution with the decree to kill all firstborns, Moses' upbringing at Pharaoh's court, the Exodus of the Israelites, the revelation of the name Yahweh in the burning bush, the theophany on Mount Sinai, the journey through the wilderness, and the entry into the Promised Land. In Egypt, the Israelites remained highly isolated with the status of foreigners. However, this had a positive effect, as it allowed them to preserve their racial, linguistic, social, and religious distinctiveness. On the other hand, strong religious and national assimilation influences from Egypt played a role in shaping their understanding of worship. This became particularly evident during the difficult moments of their journey through the wilderness. Moses' role was to lead them and continually awaken and strengthen their faith in Yahweh [5].

The stay in Egypt was like a time of temptation. Egypt, as a nation, represented an empire in love with its own power. This created a certain fascination for the Israelites regarding their own independence and strength [3]. The Israelites came to Egypt in a very small group of 70 people, as a clan of Bedouins. It was only

during their stay in Egypt that Israel grew into a great nation. Therefore, Egypt's fear was justified, as they were afraid that during war the Israelites might side with the enemy. That is why they were burdened with hard labor, and later with the killing of the firstborn boys [13]. Regarding the perception of religion, we must be aware that, according to the local people's beliefs, every country and nation has its own god. Meanwhile, Israel did not have a clear name [17]. This state of religious attitudes is called henotheism (gr. hen = one; theos = God). Therefore, Moses directly asks for the name of the God who cares for Israel. The core text of that period is the Book of Exodus: *"God said to Moses, 'I am who I am!' – and He added, 'This you shall say to the Israelites: „I am“ has sent me to you!' And God also said to Moses, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and thus I shall be remembered from generation to generation.'"* (Ex 3:14-15). Here, God reveals His name for the first time, placing it into the context known to Moses and the Israelites from their ancestors. The novelty of this fact lies in the fact that God directly reveals the specific name YHWH. It is only now that God disclosed His true and specific name [13].

Let's pause on another text that is very important in the dynamic formation of Israel's faith. It concerns the chapters of Exodus 19–24. Three months after the Israelites left Egypt, they came to Mount Sinai. Sinai is the place where God began to shape His people according to His plans – one of the most important acts in the formation of Israel's faith took place there: He concluded a covenant with Israel. This event was to be commemorated year after year. However, the texts show that the formation of the perception of the God YHWH was still fragile. *"When the people saw that Moses did not come down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make us a god who shall go before us; for we do not know what has become of this man Moses, who brought us up from the land of Egypt.' Aaron said to them, 'Take off the gold earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off the gold earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. Then he took the gold from their hands, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made a molten calf. And the people said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"* (Exodus 32:1–4).

The question is whether Israel, by this act, fell away from faith. According to the biblical text, it appears not; indeed, Aaron even proclaimed a feast for YHWH. The answer to Moses' anger when he saw the golden calf can be found in the fact that the calf cult originated in Canaan, an idea that they always carried within themselves. The golden calf is a cult image within the Semitic tradition. Among the Akkadians and Arameans, the golden calf was a representation of

the god of fortune Hadad; the Canaanites saw in the image Baal, while the South Arabs associated it with the god Shahaar. Therefore, in its early stages, this image was not exclusively linked to one deity—it was used as a general religious symbol of the presence of a god. Since the symbol was of a nature-animal type, Moses could not tolerate it. The reformation of Israel's faith had to remove these ideas from the cult of YHWH—an indication that Israel had not yet reached a full and pure monotheism centered on the one God YHWH [13].

There are many theories that try to date the cult of YHWH to periods other than this one. These attempts are based on various interpretations of the text, which, however, are not accepted by the broader scholarly community. It is precisely in the cult of YHWH that we see a strong beginning of the displacement of assimilatory accretions from the history of the cult of Israel. It was, indeed, a gradual and dynamic process that culminated in the Assyrian siege (701 BC) [1]. This change can also be described as a transition from „relative monotheism“ to „absolute monotheism.“ This „absolute monotheism“ can also be termed „exclusive.“ It outlined the first steps in understanding foreign deities [8].

The journey to the Promised Land was not straightforward, either physically or in the formation and purification of the perception of YHWH. The time spent in the wilderness was full of rebellion and temptations toward syncretism and the assimilation of the religions of other nations. The entry into Canaan marked another stage in the formation of the religion. We can summarize it as a schema and a recurring cycle, where the Israelites abandon their God and follow foreign deities, which results in their defeat by Canaanite armies. Subsequently, they call upon YHWH for help, and He sends them a deliverer.

Absolute Monotheism and the True Place of YHWH in the History of Israel

The concept of Israel, in which we can directly define the clear shift of the Israelites toward the belief in absolute monotheism, only emerges during the Babylonian captivity in the 6th century BC. By absolute monotheism, we mean the belief that the God YHWH is the only God, and there is no other—not in Israel, nor among other nations or lands. After the destruction of the city—and especially of the temple in Jerusalem—and following the realization of the people's failure, new ideas emerged regarding an alternative path imbued with a true sense of a universal and eternal divine purpose. The reforms undertaken thus far to achieve pure monotheism, particularly through Hezekiah and Josiah, served as a prelude for the people to understand the true and unique place of

YHWH in their history. In the midst of an atmosphere of despair and oppression, it was Ezekiel who emerged as the forerunner of a renewed and universalist vision of God, recognizing that YHWH was not confined solely to Jerusalem but was also present in foreign lands, namely among the exiles in Babylon (cf. Ezekiel 40–48). This renewed hope was centered on the restoration of Jerusalem and the temple [11].

Such pure monotheistic faith was only achieved by the Jewish nation through the exile prophets, who introduced the monotheistic belief in YHWH and its highest, dynamic expression as the Creator and Lord of history—a God who redeems His people and saves all nations. Among the pioneers in establishing this faith were the prophet Deutero-Isaiah and Jeremiah. The certainty and clarity expressed by Deutero-Isaiah on this matter had already been prepared by previous prophets. Initially, the emptiness of idols was perceived as a reference point for divine presence and power, yet the existence of Baal was not yet denied. It remained a confrontation brought about by Israel's unfaithfulness, caught between Yahweh and Baal, a conflict the prophet regarded as insignificant because Yahweh was the only God that Israel had known from its time in Egypt. In the reflective context of the exile, however, faith took a further step. The final redaction of Deuteronomy, along with its inspired deuteronomistic work, and the contributions of Deutero-Isaiah and the prophet Joel, clearly moved towards monotheism. This is evidenced by the repeated declarations—albeit with slight variations—such as *“Yahweh is God and there is no other”* (cf. Isaiah 45:5, 6, 14, 18, 21, 22; 46:9; similarly Isaiah 43:10; 44:6; 1 Kings 8:60; Joel 2:27) [4]. Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah—who greatly contributed to this pure monotheism—in his letter to the exiles in Babylon wrote in such a way that he systematically explained, through various life examples, the complete passivity of pagan deities, repeatedly adding: *“...they are not gods, so do not be afraid of them”* (cf. Bar 6:14, 22, 28, 39, 44, 56, 64, 68). Jeremiah was convinced of the exclusive existence of one God, YHWH, who called him as a prophet to the nations. In his narrative, he employed images of powerless deities [8]. He explained the relationship with religion using the image of the relationship between YHWH and Israel as that of a marriage and infidelity within it (cf. Jer 3:6–11; 2:5; 2:9–13). In his words, he foretold judgment and called for repentance, which did not earn him popularity among the people. However, through his stance, he supported a definitive reform [14].

These statements are not merely understood as some abstract designation, but are a reflection of an event in which YHWH reappeared as the Creator and Lord of history. Just as the Exodus and the revelation of God's name in Deuteronomy marked a turning point, the prophets interpret these historical experiences as

a new Exodus, in which they will be delivered from Babylonian power. Here, a clear monotheistic affirmation was established, one that primarily proclaimed the “utter nullity” of the gods—since external influences claimed, as it were, the right to affect the life of Israel. However, Israel clearly defines that these deities neither created it nor saved it. In doing so, Israel finally and implicitly confirms their “philosophical nullity,” asserting that there is no other, neither any other. This might give the impression that this perception is the result of an intellectual struggle among the prophets. However, the first step towards this definition and acceptance is Israel’s openness to the enduring and dynamic accompaniment of God throughout history—in that, thanks to this accompaniment of YHWH, Israel no longer recognizes any other god [4].

Conclusion

We must acknowledge the importance of gradually clarifying all misconceptions that arise when reading the Old Testament and are accepted as true merely due to a lack of deeper understanding. Through this analysis, we must recognize that while explicit monotheistic expressions emerge at a decisive point in Israel’s religious development, this does not mean that the existence of other polytheistic religious forms is denied. Moreover, it does not exclude the possibility of a certain plurality within the divine reality in biblical monotheism [11].

We pointed out that the „*common misconception*“ of that time was the polytheistic idea of gods governing different realms (sun, moon, stars, sea, underworld...), as well as the henotheistic belief in gods over individual countries. One of the „*common misconceptions*“ of today, which we have depicted, is that Israel, from the very moment of its existence, held a monotheistic concept of God that was unaffected by historical influences.

From our perspective, we know that it was only Jesus Christ who revealed to the world the true faith in the one God, who exists in three persons. He demonstrated this faith through miracles and, after His crucifixion, His resurrection, as attested by the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament, Catholic doctrine, the testimonies of countless martyrs, and the intellectual clarity shaped by faith and religious experience.

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