

Israel and Judah

The origins of the Yahweh cult and Israel

In the third quarter of the second millennium BC, the people who lived in the hills between Canaan and the desert worshiped - among various other deities - the war god Yahweh. Yahweh was just as anthropomorphic and anthropopathic as any of the other gods in the Bronze Age. The name *Yahweh sabaoth* meant "Yahweh of the Armies," and warlike societies were especially dependent upon him.

The most important of these was a coalition known as "the Sons of Israel." That there once was a man named Israel is not at all unlikely. The name *Israel* is a theophoric compound (meaning "El strives") and has parallels in the names of men and women known from the Bronze Age of the southern Levant. El was the senior god throughout the Levant, the benevolent head of a pantheon who could usually be counted on to rein in the younger and more headstrong gods. It thus may well be that a warlord or tribal chief named Israel had at some time gained a name for himself in the southern Levant, and that generations after his death hundreds and then thousands of warriors formed a coalition under the name "Sons of Israel" (*b'nē yisrael*). Although their ancestor or eponymous founder was named for El, the Sons of Israel also made frequent sacrifices to Yahweh. The coalition especially needed the war-god's assistance ca. 1200 BC, when it was sacking the cities of Canaan (and in so doing came into conflict with the king of Egypt, whose province Canaan was).

The main cult center for Yahweh was Shiloh, and according to a story in Judges 21 the Sons of Israel were accustomed to join the festivities when the daughters of Shiloh came out to dance for Yahweh. The war-god gave his oracular responses when his priests consulted his image or *ephod*, which during a campaign was carried along in the Ark of the Covenant. This was a portable and gold-covered chest, kept under a tent during a campaign and therefore immediately accessible when the commander needed divine approval for his plan of attack. In the Late Bronze Age the "covenant" of which the Ark was a symbol was probably little more than the warriors' vow of sacrificial victims to Yahweh *Sabaoth*, in return for his assistance in battle. At this early date the Sons of Israel and the war-god were equally dreadful. What ethical instructions he may have given, or whether he gave any at all, is not clear. Invoked by sackers of cities, Yahweh at this stage of his career was not likely to have instructed his worshipers, "Thou shalt not covet, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not kill..."

As the plundering and razing of cities grew less profitable and more difficult, the Sons of Israel appropriated the eastern edges of what had once been Canaan and became civilized, learning to read and write and planting vineyards and olive trees. In the Early Iron Age the cult of Yahweh coexisted with cults of El, of Asherah or Astarte (goddess of love), and of various local Baals (*Baal* is actually a title, meaning something like "Lord"). Names of early heroes such as Samuel and Jerubbaal ("Let Baal take Action") are evidence for the worship of El and Baal in pre-monarchic Israel. A graffito from the early first millennium BC hails "Yahweh and his Asherah," suggesting that at that time Yahweh was understood to have a female consort. All of these cults were initially aniconic and tended to remain so, although - as we have seen - a crude *ephod* or small image of Yahweh was consulted by his priests for oracular purposes, and

many Israelites kept *teraphim* - images of family gods - in their homes or took them with them while journeying. As in other cults in their day, at high places the Israelites offered their various gods sacrifice, music and dance, and in return received the desired temporal blessings.

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah

The kingdom of Israel was established ca. 1025 BC, and the initiative for its establishment came from the priests of the war-god. As a result, the first king of Israel - Saul - was indebted to the Yahweh cult and was careful to patronize it, although this did not prevent him from naming his son and crown prince *Ishbaal* ("Baal's Man"). At the beginning of his reign Saul brought the Yahweh priests from Shiloh to Nob, not far from his modest palace at Gibeah, so that they and their *ephod* of Yahweh were readily accessible when the king felt it necessary to ask for oracular guidance.

Late in his reign, however, Saul had a falling-out with the Yahweh priesthood. According to I Samuel 22, when the king of Israel learned of the priests' assistance to David, ruler of Judah, he sent his troops to Nob and slew eighty-five of the priests who had earned the right to carry the *ephod*. When Saul himself was killed in battle against the Palestinians - or "Philistines," as they appear in our English Bibles - the kingdom of Israel temporarily devolved upon Ishbaal. After reigning a very short time Ishbaal was assassinated by his generals, who then offered the throne of Israel to David of Judah. Judah (the name may have meant "place of gorges" or "hollows") lay just to the south of Israel, and David - a warlord with a formidable reputation - had made himself king there, with his capital at Hebron. David accepted the offer of the Israelite regicides, and became king of both Judah and Israel. He then attacked the tiny Jebusite kingdom of Jerusalem, atop Mt. Zion. Taking the citadel, he abandoned his headquarters in Hebron and made Jerusalem the capital of his combined kingdom of Judah and Israel.

What cultic obligations David may have had as king of Judah are not known, but as king of Israel he was greatly beholden to those few Yahweh priests of Yahweh who had survived Saul's purge. In gratitude for the support of Israel's Yahweh cult David appointed Abiathar (who had escaped from the slaughter at Nob) to preside over sacrifices for Yahweh in Jerusalem. Eventually David brought to Mt. Zion the cult's most sacred object, the Ark of the Covenant, although David did not build a permanent structure to house it. Since the Ark spent much of every year under a tent and in the open air, many Israelites believed that Yahweh did not wish to be cooped up in a temple.

Solomon (ca. 960-925 BC), David's son and successor, broke with that tradition. Unlike his father, who had been a warrior king, Solomon did not go forth to battle but made his mark in other ways. As a wealthy king with pretensions of grandeur, and living in a palace that by the standards of Judah and Israel must have been sumptuous, Solomon decided that Yahweh too should have a "house" as grand as those of the gods in the Phoenician and Palestinian cities along the coast. Solomon therefore saw to it that a temple was built in Jerusalem for Yahweh, and spared no expense in the construction.

Although the Judahites were as proud of their temple as of their kings, the building of a

temple did not please the tribesmen of Israel. Solomon himself was able to keep the Israelites in line, but when he died they refused allegiance to his son and to the Judahite dynasty (“To your tents, O Israel!”). The northerners restored their own Israelite kingdom, with the capital first at Shechem, then at Tirzah, and finally at Samaria. Loathing temples, the Israelites continued their traditional practice of making sacrifices to Yahweh at high places, and the kings of Israel gratified their subjects by providing - in addition to the traditional high place on Mt. Gerizim, at Shechem - two new high places, each of which could accommodate several thousand people. At the northern edge of the kingdom a royal high place for Yahweh was prepared at Dan, and in the south at Bethel. At smaller and shabbier high places the people continued to make sacrifices to El, Baal and Asherah, but these cults do not seem to have enjoyed any royal patronage. At almost every excavated site from tenth- and ninth-century Israel and Judah, including Jerusalem, archaeologists have found fertility figurines of Asherah, indicating that the common people continued to worship other gods in addition to Yahweh. El too continued to have his worshipers, although some of them began to suppose that El was simply another name for Yahweh.

“Yahweh only”

Royal religious policy in Israel changed in the ninth century BC, under Omri and his son Ahab, two of the most capable of Israel’s kings (although excoriated in the literary tradition of the Yahweh cult). Omri arranged the marriage of his son Ahab to Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of Sidon. With their Phoenician connections, the Omrids were as generous to the cults of Baal and Asherah as to the cult of Yahweh. Such royal evenhandedness ignited one of the bloodiest instances of cultic or religious violence that the ancient Near East had seen, and also launched the prophetic tradition in Israel.

Prophets had been around for centuries. As we have seen, when a king or war-leader needed a yes-or-no answer from Yahweh, he ordered a priest to bring forward the portable *ephod* of Yahweh, and then proceeded to ask his question. When matters were too complicated to be answered with a yes or no, an Israelite could consult with the prophets who usually loitered at a popular temple or high place. For a fee, while some of the prophets played their pipes and other musical instruments, their colleagues would work themselves a frenzy, rolling naked on the ground and uttering unintelligible sounds. Emerging from their frenzy they would then give the god’s answer to the suppliant’s question. These “establishment” prophets found work not only at cult-centers but also in the king’s palace, because kings especially needed advice from the gods and so employed the best prophets they could find. Needless to say, successful establishment prophets were careful to give the king prophecies that he wanted to hear. Those who did otherwise were soon unemployed.

In stark contrast to the establishment prophets, there appeared in Israel in the ninth century BC self-proclaimed prophets who had no connection with either a cult-place or the king, and who in fact denounced both the cult-places and the king as the *cause* of whatever misfortune had befallen the community. When bad things happened in the ancient world - a famine, a defeat in battle, an epidemic - the universal explanation was that one or more of the gods were angry, and one of the gods most prone to anger was Yahweh. During Ahab’s reign a three-year drought afflicted all of the southern Levant. When Israelites began dying of famine, a renegade and charismatic prophet named Elijah boldly proclaimed that Yahweh was angry because King Ahab

was supporting the cults of Baal and Asherah alongside the cult of Yahweh. Enough Israelites believed Elijah's prophecies that the prophet was able to lead a band of vigilantes up Mt. Carmel and kill 450 priests and worshipers who were there performing a sacrifice to Baal.

As a result of the fulminations of Elijah and his successor, Elisha, a "Yahweh only" enthusiasm began, perhaps first among the Rechabites, a subculture of primitivists who despised agriculture, cities, houses and wine, and were sworn to nomadism, sobriety, and tents. Ca. 840 BC the "Yahweh only" zealots, led by Jehu, staged a bloody coup. Jehu shot King Jehoram with an arrow, killed all seventy princes of the royal Omrid family, and had the queen-mother Jezebel, the patroness of the Baal cult, thrown down from her tower-apartment to the pavement below. Once in power, Jehu's first action as king of Israel was to kill all the priests and prophets of Baal and Asherah whom he could find. Henceforth, he declared, only Yahweh would be worshiped in Israel. Under the patronage of Jehu the priests of Yahweh composed a history ("E"), the main point of which was that Yahweh had *always* been the one and only god of Israel.

The end of the kingdom of Israel, and the continuity of "the Samaritans"

Misfortunes of course were no less frequent after the suppression of the Baal cults than before, and militarily things became much worse than they had ever been under the Omrids. Jehu was forced to submit to Shalmaneser III and pay an annual tribute, as Israel became a vassal state of the Assyrian empire. Ca. 750 BC a new breed of charismatic and anti-establishment prophets came to the fore, declaring Yahweh's anger at not just the kings of Israel but most of the upper class. Hosea, Amos and Joel took it upon themselves to denounce, chastise and instruct the Israelites, including the royal courtiers and the priests at Dan and Bethel. Because the prophets had nothing to do with the royally subsidized cult they tended to downplay the importance of sacrifices. They proclaimed instead that what Yahweh wanted was righteousness, mercy, justice and charity, and that he hated greed, the abuse of power, and the oppression of the poor. At the outset this "liberation theology" was a marginal aspect of Israelite and Judahite religion, greatly overshadowed by the sacrificial establishment. But it took root and grew, and when the sacrificial tradition came to an end the demand for social justice and for charity became an important ingredient for Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The kingdom of Israel was twice as large as the kingdom of Judah. The two kingdoms were sometimes allies, sometimes enemies, but Israel was always much the stronger. The kings of Judah rather willingly submitted to the Assyrians, regarding the Assyrian overlord as a potential protector against the kings of Israel. The Jerusalem kings even saw to it that sacrifices for Ashur, the patron god of the Assyrians, were made regularly on an altar within Yahweh's temple precinct. While the kings of Judah faithfully paid tribute to Assyria, the eighth-century kings of Israel looked for opportunities to revolt. After several of these attempts, the Assyrians besieged Samaria, the capital of Israel, and after a three-year siege the city fell - in 722 BC - to Sargon II. Sargon deported the inhabitants of Samaria, taking them to Assyria and in their place installing a mixture of deportees from other lands. Most importantly, Sargon abolished the kingdom of Israel. The land of Israel was now a province of the Assyrian empire.

Jewish and Christian believers have traditionally insisted that the people of Israel were deported by Sargon and either planted somewhere in Assyria or dispersed over the world, to become "the lost tribes of Israel." In fact, "the lost tribes" were not lost at all, because in 722 BC

most of the population of Israel stayed right where it had always been. The myth of “the lost tribes” began with the Deuteronomic History, composed by the priests of Yahweh at Jerusalem late in the seventh and sixth centuries BC. The Deuteronomic Historian invented the story that “all Israel” was hauled away by Sargon. The people of Israel had worshiped other gods and so - the D writer explained - the people of Israel had ceased to exist:

Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight: there was none left but the tribe of Judah only. (II Kings 17:18, AV)

Sargon’s own inscription records that he deported 27,290 people from the royal city of Samaria. Although the deportation was a tragedy for the city, it was no worse than Sargon’s deportation of the people of Syrian Carchemish a few years later, or of other cities that rebelled and were taken after a lengthy siege. If the population of Israel at the time was approximately half a million, the deportees would have constituted about 5% of the whole. In other words, 95% of the people of Israel stayed where they were.

Once the kingdom of Israel was abolished, however, the name “Israel” began to fall into disuse for the region, and much of the legacy and ideology of Israel was appropriated by its southern neighbor, Judah. King Hezekiah in Jerusalem and the priests at the Jerusalem temple saw the end of the kingdom of Israel as a great opportunity. Israelites who had worshiped Yahweh at Shechem, Dan and Bethel were now urged and instructed to worship him at Jerusalem (that Yahweh allowed Assyria to conquer Israel was regarded by the Jerusalem priests as proof that sacrifices performed at any of the northern high places had never pleased him, and that he wished to be worshiped only on Mt. Zion). By the end of the seventh century BC the view in Jerusalem was that Judah was not only part of Israel but had always been part of Israel, and was now the *only* part of Israel still in existence, the rest of Israel having been extirpated by Sargon. In the parlance of the Jerusalem priests, those Yahweh-worshippers to the north who still insisted on worshipping him at Mt. Gerizim or one of the other high places were not Israelites but mere “Samaritans”: people of mixed ancestry who had no claim to Yahweh’s covenant or benevolence. In fact, most of the people who were called “Samaritans” in the time of Jesus were the descendants of people who early in the first millennium BC had called themselves “Israelites.”

The kingdom of Judah in the seventh century BC

The small kingdom of Judah gave the Assyrians less trouble, and survived not only the kingdom of Israel but even the Assyrian empire. Although politically and militarily Judah was second-rate, as the centuries passed the Jerusalem temple had grown rich and its priesthood powerful. With the passing of time the belief arose that the two parties to the “covenant,” of which the Ark of the Covenant was the symbol, were Yahweh and David: Yahweh, the only god who had a temple in all of Judah, had cut a covenant with David, guaranteeing that David’s descendants would always rule Judah. In addition, after the fall of Samaria in 722 BC many of the “Yahweh only” Israelites moved to Judah, bringing their fervor with them. It seemed to them, and certainly to the priests at Jerusalem, that worshipping Yahweh at the high places of Dan, Bethel and Shechem (Mt. Gerizim) had not worked at all: far from pleasing Yahweh, sacrifices at the high places had obviously enraged him, and it was for that reason that the

kingdom of Israel fell victim to Assyria. The survival of Judah, on the other hand, proved that sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem was exactly what Yahweh wanted.

That Yahweh was holding up his end of the covenant in Judah seemed all the more certain when the mighty Assyrians went into a sharp decline. After the death of Ashurbanipal in 626 BC the Assyrian kings were in no position to collect tribute from any of their vassal kingdoms, and for all practical purposes Judah was a fully sovereign state. The “Yahweh only” party and the priests of the Jerusalem temple were quick to seize their opportunity. In 622 BC, by which time sacrifices to the god Ashur had stopped in Jerusalem, the Yahwists persuaded Josiah, the young king of Judah, to demolish the sanctuaries of all other gods in Judah, to tear down the Asherah poles, and to massacre the idolatrous priests. Henceforth no god other than Yahweh was to be worshiped anywhere in Judah. Secondly, nobody in Judah or in what had once been Israel was to make a sacrifice to Yahweh anywhere other than at the Jerusalem temple, which would therefore have a monopoly on sacrificial offerings. Likewise, the holy days were to be celebrated *at the temple*. Along with these reforms came ritual laws and regulations, meant to ensure the purity of the Yahweh cult.

Deuteronomy and the beginnings of scripture

The legislation was set forth in the Book of Deuteronomy (“The Second Law”). This book was purported to have been written by Moses himself, but then to have been “lost” until its rediscovery in 622 BC. In the three long discourses of Deuteronomy, Moses reveals the very words of Yahweh, a list of instructions that includes criminal and civil law as well as commandments and prohibitions about worship. The composition of Deuteronomy marks, in an important way, the beginnings of the scriptural religions of the Western world. Prior to 622 BC various texts were kept in the Jerusalem temple, but none of them claimed to be “the word of God.” Instead, they were either hymns *to* Yahweh (many of the Psalms were composed before this date), or stories *about* Yahweh, telling what mighty deeds he had done: his creation of heaven and earth, his unleashing of the Flood, his dealings with Abraham, his victories over the enemies of Israel and Judah, and so forth. In contrast to these earlier texts, Deuteronomy provided the words *of* Yahweh, as recorded by Moses after his descent from Mt. Horeb (or Mt. Sinai), where Yahweh had spoken all things to him. Deuteronomy was thus as “sacred” a text as anyone could write. Many equally sacred texts were to follow this one, but Deuteronomy pioneered the genre.

Judahite religion at the end of the seventh century BC has often been called “henotheism” but a more recent and more appropriate term for it is “monolatry.” The Judahites - at least in theory - now worshiped only one god. In earlier centuries they had given preferential treatment to Yahweh (“Thou shalt have no other gods *before me!*”), but they had not been kept from worshiping other gods. After Josiah’s reform, worship of any other god was regarded as a grave violation of Yahweh’s covenant. As rewritten by the Deuteronomist historian, Yahweh had from the very beginning been the one and only god worshiped by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all of Jacob’s descendants. Just as the Elohist had interwoven the worship of Yahweh with everything known about the history of Israel (the northern kingdom), so now the temple texts in Jerusalem told how the history of both Israel and Judah was synonymous with Yahweh’s blessing and punishing those kingdoms and their forbears.

Although Judahites recognized the existence of other aniconic gods in other kingdoms, in their own kingdom Yahweh became synonymous with deity. His very name became so sacred that to say it aloud was to profane it, and he came to be addressed instead with the title, *Adonai* (“My Lord”). The Deuteronomist was fanatical in his monolatry and his hatred of anyone in Judah who worshiped other gods. In Deuteronomy “Moses” commands the people to seek out and kill all those in “Israel” who worship gods other than Adonai. You were to slay such a person, regardless of whether he or she was your friend, brother, sister, son or daughter. Thus did the Deuteronomist try to give to Adonai in Judah the same “jealous” and bloodthirsty character that he had in Israel during the dynasty of Jehu. But Yahweh was about to evolve in a very different direction.