

Stages of Ancient Israelite Religion: From Polytheism to Monotheism

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Abstract

In the past scholars traced monotheism to the time of Moses, around 1200 BC. But in the last decades that date changed to 7th-6th century BC. Further, the discovery of the Ugaritic texts in 1928 on the north coast of Syria has helped historians of religion to notice the development of Israelite religion from a polytheistic Canaanite stratum to monotheistic Yahwism. Through examining biblical and extra-biblical texts, archaeological material, and inscriptions, this study traces the religious similarities of the Israelite and Canaanite culture. Genesis 49, Psalm 82 and Deuteronomy 32:8-9 are thoroughly analyzed and conclusions are made about Israel's original God, and the original tiers of the pantheon. In the pre-exilic period (and perhaps as early as the 8th century BC) Israel enjoyed perhaps a lesser pantheon than that in the Ugaritic texts, but certainly it was considerably more extensive than what the biblical record reports. The God of Biblical Israel may not actually be very different from the gods of the neighboring nations, but claiming that he is, is an important part of the rhetoric promoting devotion to that God alone.

Keywords: Canaanite religion, Ugarit religion, El, Yahweh, polytheism, monolatry, monotheism, history of religion.

1. Introduction

This study straddles the line between theology and the academic study of religion. Theology generally asks normative questions of what should be believed and, correspondingly, who God was and therefore is. Theology usually works on the assumption that the investigator defends the superiority of the particular deity.¹ In contrast, the study of religion asks descriptive questions about what people believed, and further about what goddesses and gods including Yahweh were or were considered to do and be. Religious research may presuppose that the investigator at least sets aside his belief in the object of inquiry.² It is not the historian's job to produce data to justify any particular theological system.

¹ Dever (2005: 38) notes that from the very beginning biblical theology has been characterized by inherent weaknesses: "lacking sound historical foundations", "clerically dominated", "oblivious to revolutionary archaeological data", etc.

² Smith, 2001: 19.

- According to Mark S. Smith, worship of Yahweh went from polytheism in the 12th century BC, through monolatry during the later monarchy, to monotheism after the Babylonian exile.
- Yahweh was unknown to the patriarchs. Rather, they are depicted as worshippers of El.
- During the Judges period, the major deities in the territory of Israel included Yahweh, El, Baal, and Asherah.
- With the advent of monotheism all other gods were treated as either non-entities or created by Yahweh. Former gods, just as the lowest tier of gods in the Ugaritic texts, acted as messengers, the literal meaning of the English word “angel”.

In the past scholars traced monotheism to the time of Moses, around 1200 BC. But in the last decades that date changed to 7th-6th century BC. Further, the discovery of the Ugaritic texts in 1928 on the north coast of Syria has helped historians of religion to notice the development of Israelite religion from a polytheistic Canaanite stratum to monotheistic Yahwism. But how did the rhetoric change from “Who is like you, O Lord, *among the gods?*” (Exod. 15:11) to “the Lord is God; besides him there is *no other*” (Deut. 4:35) and “the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is *no other*” (Deut. 4:39)?

According to Mark S. Smith, the worship of Yahweh went from polytheism in the 12th century BC (Yahweh was already the most important God, but one of several acknowledged gods), through monolatry during the later monarchy (Yahweh was the only God to be worshipped, but other gods existed; after c. 800 BC all of them condemned as bad) to monotheism after the Babylonian exile (587-538 BC). This process was shaped by two major lines of development, which he calls *convergence* and *differentiation*. Convergence involved the coalescence of various deities and/or some of their features into the figure of Yahweh. Differentiation was the process of Israel rejecting its Canaanite heritage.³

2. Similarities in Israelite and Canaanite culture

The material culture of the West Semitic region exhibits numerous common points between the Israelites and Canaanites in the Iron Age I / Judges period (c. 1200-1000 BC). The record would suggest that the Israelite culture largely overlapped with, and derived from, Canaanite culture.⁴ This extended to the realm of religion, evident from the terminology for cultic sacrifices and personnel.⁵

According to the Hebrew Bible, Gibeonites (Josh. 9:15; cf. 2 Sam. 21), Jerahmeelites (1 Sam. 27:10; 30:29), Kenites (Judg. 1:16; 4:11; 1 Sam. 27:10; 30:29), the descendants of Rahab (Josh. 6:25), Caleb the Kenizzite (Josh. 14:13-14; 21:12), and the Canaanite cities of Hopher and Tirzah became part of Israel (cf. Exod. 6:15). Presumably other groups and places were absorbed into Israel as well. The people of the highlands who came to be known as Israel comprised

³ Smith, 2001: 7-8.

⁴ For example, some cooking pots and storage jars as attested at Giloh represent a pottery tradition continuous with the Late Bronze Age. Items such as the four-room house, collared-rim store jar, and hewn cisterns, once thought to distinguish the Israelite culture of the highlands from the Canaanite culture of the coast and valleys, are now attested on the coast, in the valleys, or in Transjordan. Both indigenous tradition and influence from the coast and valleys are represented also in burial patterns (Smith, 2002: 6, 20).

⁵ Biblical Hebrew sacrificial language with corresponding terms in Ugaritic and/or Phoenician includes *zebah*, “slaughtered offering,” a biblical term applied to sacrifices in the cults of both Yahweh (Gen. 46:1; Exod. 10:25; 18:12; Hos. 3:4; 6:6; 9:4; Amos 5:25) and Baal (2 Kings 10:19, 24; cf. CAT 1.116.1; 1.127; 1.148) (Smith 2002: 21).

numerous groups, including Canaanites, whose heritage marked every aspect of Israelite society. In sum, Iron Age I Israel was largely Canaanite in character.⁶

Although one may not identify the local deities prior to and during the emergence of Israel by equating Ugaritic religion with Canaanite religion, the Ugaritic evidence is pertinent to the study of Canaanite religion since inscriptions from the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age I period in Canaan indicate that the deities of the land included El, Baal and Asherah, all major divinities known from the Ugaritic texts.⁷ El was the aged and kindly patriarch of the pantheon; Asherah was his consort and queen mother of the divine family; Baal was the young storm-god and divine warrior.



Figure 1. Seated bronze figurine of El (Byblos, 14th-13th century BC. Negbi, 1976: Fig. 55)

Figure 2. Canaanite God, possibly El; bronze statue found at Mediggo (Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago)

The sacred tree – the *asherah*, the symbol named after the Goddess Asherah – is explicitly described in Judges 6:25-26, 1 Kings 16:33 and 2 Kings 21:7. An inscription from the 8th century BC in a tomb at Khirbet el-Qom, near Hebron, south of Jerusalem, reads: “May Uriyahu be blessed by YHWH, from his enemies he has saved him by his Asherah” (discovered in 1968). Another inscription from Kuntillet Ajrud (discovered in 1975-1976), a stopover for caravans in the Sinai desert, has a blessing formula, ending with the words “by YHWH of Samaria and his Asherah”.⁸

⁶ Smith, 2002: 25-26.

⁷ The proper name *y'l*, “where is El?” is contained in a 12th-century BC inscription from Qubur el-Walaydah, ten kilometers southeast of Gaza. Baal is mentioned in a 15th-century BC Taanach letter and in a 14th-century BC El-Amarna letter from Tyre (Smith, 2002: 26).

⁸ Collins, 2004: 182. Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. Asherah’s Ugaritic name is Athirat. “Th” is cognate with “sh”. It is the same name with a different line of development in the Semitic languages. William Dever (1983; 2005: 167) interprets the inscriptions as following: the Mother Goddess Asherah, having been consort of El, would have become Yahweh’s consort in Israelite folk religion.

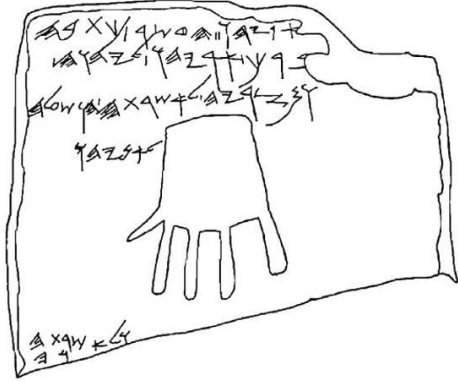


Figure 3. Inscription no. 3, from T. II at Khirbet el-Qom, c. 750 BC (Lemaire, 1977: 598)

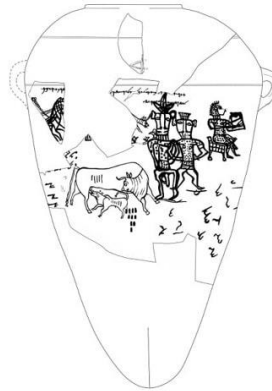


Figure 4. Painting on a jar found at Kuntillet Ajrud, c. 780 BC



Figure 5. Detail of Fig. 4 with an inscription

In addition, after the fall of Samaria in 720 BC, hundreds of 8th-7th-century BC pillar-base figurines of a nude female figure have been found in Judea, presumably of Asherah.⁹ The Bible records that “the Queen of Heaven” was worshiped in Judah at the time of the Babylonian crisis in the early 6th century BC (Jer. 7:18; 44:18).

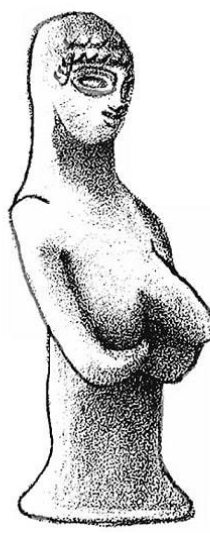
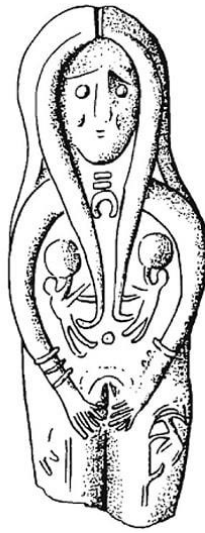


Figure 6. A terra cotta of the Great Mother, displaying her vulva and nursing twins (Revadim, Israel, Late Bronze Age, 13th century BC. *Israel Antiquities Authority* 1982: 219)

Figure 7. Drawing of Fig. 6 (Keel & Uehlinger, 1998: Fig. 82)

Figure 8. Pillar-base figurine. Jerusalem, 7th century BC (Becking et al., 2001: 13)

Figure 9. Nude female figure. Lachish (modern Tell ed-Duweir), Israel, 8th-7th century BC (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

⁹ All figurines emphasize the breasts. In the ancient world, breasts were associated with their most basic function – nursing an infant, whose very life depended upon the mother’s having sufficient milk. According to Dever (2005: 187) the figurines were used as talismans for conceiving babies, safe birth and successful rearing through infancy.

Baal had his own temple in the environs of Samaria (1 Kings 16:32), apart from the cult of the national God, Yahweh (2 Kings 10:21-27). The word *ba'al* forms the theophoric element in the biblical name Jerubbaal (Judg. 6:32; 8:35). Two members of the family of Saul, Eshbaal (1 Chron. 8:33; 9:39) and Meribbaal (1 Chron. 8:34; 9:40), likewise have names containing the element *ba'al*.

During the Judges period, the major deities in the territory of Israel included Yahweh, El (see below), Baal, and Asherah. In sum, the Israelites may have perceived themselves as a people different from the Canaanites. Separate religious traditions of Yahweh, separate traditions of origins in Egypt for at least some component of Israel, and separate geographical holdings in the hill country contributed to the Israelites' sense of difference from their Canaanite neighbors inhabiting the coast and the valleys. Nonetheless, Israelite and Canaanite cultures shared a great deal in common, and religion was no exception. Deities and their cults in Iron Age I Israel represented aspects of the cultural continuity with the indigenous Late Bronze Age culture and the contemporary urban culture on the coast and in the valleys.¹⁰

Given the above facts we might offer an evolutionary outline of four major periods in the development of Israelite monotheism:¹¹

(1) The period of the Judges (1200-1000 BC) may be called the stage of *convergence*, which continued down through the first half monarchy until El and Yahweh were identified (accomplished c. 8th century BC in Judah¹²). Features belonging to El, Asherah, and Baal were absorbed into the Yahwistic religion of Israel. As warrior fighting on Israel's behalf, Yahweh exercises power in Judges 5 against powerful peoples and deities.

(2) During the first half of the monarchy (1000-800 BC) first attempts at centralizing cults in royal sanctuaries and the development of royal theology brought Yahweh to unprecedented power as a unifying national deity and patron deity of the monarchy. During the 9th century BC, the role of Baal seems to have been perceived as a threat to the dominant status of Yahweh, thanks to the efforts of king Ahab and his wife Jezebel to elevate him in the northern kingdom. This led prophets and authors of early legal codes in the 8th to 6th centuries BC to criticize Baal and increasingly promote the exclusive worship of Yahweh (Hosea 2).

(3) The second half of the monarchy (800-587 BC) witnessed growing emphasis on *differentiation*, with most of the features of the practiced by the majority of people folk religion,¹³ traditionally considered as legitimate parts of Canaanite heritage and Israelite tradition, now being rejected as non-Yahwistic. A significant factor in the enforcement of monolatry is Josiah's reform in 621 BC – he abolished the high places, centralizing worship in Jerusalem (2 Kings 23), by removing the cults of Baal (23:4-5) and Asherah (23:4, 6-7, 14).

(4) The period of the Babylonian exile (587-538 BC) would lead Second Isaiah (Isa. 45:5-7) to unambiguous formulations of a monotheistic belief, relegating other deities not merely to an inferior status but to nonexistence altogether.

¹⁰ Smith, 2002: 27.

¹¹ Uehlinger, 2003.

¹² Smith, 2004: 403.

¹³ Dever (2005: 237) offers a list of proscribed activities, mostly derived from the Deuteronomistic and prophetic writings: frequenting local shrines (high places in all the cities of Judah and all around Jerusalem, even at the gates of the city); setting up standing stones; making of images of various deities; venerating the goddesses; burning incense to Baal; baking cakes for the "Queen of Heaven"; making vows; performing rituals having to do with childbirth and children; conducting funerary rites and "feeding the dead"; making pilgrimages to holy places and saints' festivals; engaging in various aspects of astral and solar worship; divining and "magic", except by priests.

3. El and Yahweh

Outside of proper names, the word *'el* occurs about 230 times in the Hebrew Bible. Israelite inscriptions include 557 names with Yahweh as the divine element and 77 names with **ʿl*.¹⁴ At some point, a number of Israelite traditions identified El with Yahweh or presupposed this equation. The Hebrew Bible rarely distinguishes between El and Yahweh or offers polemics against El. West Semitic El lies behind the God of the patriarchs:

He set up an altar there and called it *El Elohe Israel* [=El is the God of Israel]. (Gen. 33:20; cf. NABRE).

He said, “I am El, your father’s God.” (Gen. 46:3 CEB).

Later tradition clearly intended that this God be identified as Yahweh. For example, the priestly theological treatment of Israel’s early religious history in Exod. 6:2-3 identifies the old God El Shadday with Yahweh:

And God said to Moses, “I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El Shadday, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.”¹⁵

This passage shows that Yahweh was unknown to the patriarchs. Rather, they are depicted as worshippers of El.¹⁶ “El Shaddai” means “El of the mountains”. The title “Shaddai” is known outside of the Bible for mountain deities, belonging to the divine council or assembly, who meet on the divine holy mountain (thus resembling Mt. Olympus from Greek mythology). The most extensive Bronze Age source about El comes from Ugarit. In Israel El’s characteristics and epithets became part of the repertoire of descriptions of Yahweh. Both texts and iconography present El as an elderly figure with gray beard, enthroned sometimes before individual deities, sometimes before the divine council.¹⁷ Similarly, Yahweh is described as the aged patriarchal God, enthroned amidst the assembly of divine beings.¹⁸

4. Was El Israel’s Original God?

Biblical texts do attest to Yahweh and El as different gods sanctioned by early Israel. For example, Gen. 49:24-25 presents a series of El epithets separate from the mention of Yahweh in verse 18:

I wait with hope for you to rescue me, O *Yahweh*. (18)
... because of the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, (24)
because of the *El* of your father who helps you,

¹⁴ Smith 2001: 139, 141. There are also a handful of names with the divine component **bʿl*.

¹⁵ “El Shaddai” in Hebrew is conventionally translated as “God Almighty”.

¹⁶ It has become a commonly accepted view both in Egyptology and Biblical studies that the name of the later god YHWH makes an early appearance in Egyptian topographical lists of the New Kingdom. From the putative Egyptian evidence and the perspective of Judg. 5:4-5 and Ps. 68:8-9, YHWH is grounded in a southern place outside of Israel. The Egyptian evidence would suggest at least a 15th century BC date for the cult of YHWH if not earlier, while the biblical references even in the most optimistic scenario would not date prior to the 12th century BC (Smith 2017: 23, 26, 28).

¹⁷ Gray beard: CAT 1.3 V 24-25, 1.18 I 11-12. Enthroned: 1.3 V, 1.4 IV-V. Before the divine council: 1.2 I.

¹⁸ Aged patriarchal god: Ps. 102:28; Job 36:26; Isa. 40:28; cf. Ps. 90:10; Isa. 57:15; Hab. 3:6; Dan. 6:26; 2 Esdras 8:20; Tobit 13:6, 10; Ben Sira 18:30. Enthroned amidst the divine assembly: 1 Kings 22:19; Isa. 6:1-8; cf. Ps. 29:1-2; 82:1; 89:5-8; Isa. 14:13; Jer. 23:18, 22; Zechariah 3; Dan. 3:25.

because of the *Shadday* who gives you . . . (25 NOG)

This passage does not show the relative status of the two gods in early Israel, only that they could be named separately in the same poem.

If El was the original God of Israel, then how did Yahweh come to be the chief God of Israel and identified with El? Smith posits three hypothetical stages (not necessarily discrete in time or geography) to account for the information presented so far:¹⁹

(1) El was the original God of early Israel. The name Israel points to the first stage. So do references to El as a separate figure (Gen. 49; Ps. 82).

(2) El was the head of an early Israelite pantheon, with Yahweh as its warrior-god. Texts that mention both El and Yahweh but not as the same figure (Gen. 49; Num. 23-24;²⁰ Ps. 82) suggest an early accommodation of the two in some early form of Israelite polytheism. If Ps. 82 reflects an early model of an Israelite polytheistic assembly, then El would have been its head, with the warrior Yahweh as a member of the second tier. Yet the same psalm also uses familial language: the other gods are said to be the “sons of the Most High”. Accordingly, Yahweh might have been earlier understood as one of these sons (see below).

(3) El and Yahweh were identified as a single God. In Judges 5 Yahweh, the divine warrior from the south, is attributed a victory in the central highlands. The merger probably took place at different rates in different parts of Israel, in which case it was relatively early in the area where the text was composed, but possibly later elsewhere.

El as a separate God disappeared, perhaps at different rates in different regions. In comparison, Yahweh in ancient Israel and Baal at Ugarit were both outsider warrior gods who stood second in rank to El, but they eventually overshadowed him in power. Yet Yahweh’s development went further. He was identified with El: here the son replaced and became the father whose name only serves as a title for the son. This paradigm of convergence of divine identities succeeded the older paradigm of divine succession in the ancient Middle East (for example, Ea’s replacement by his son Marduk in *Enuma Elish*). With a distinct father-God erased, the son’s identity as son was also erased. And then there was only One.²¹

5. Israel and the Tiers of the Pantheon

The evidence that Yahweh headed a pantheon consisting of other figures known from the second tier of the Ugaritic texts is unfortunately vestigial. In Psalm 82:6-8 the assembly of the gods consists of all the gods of the world:

I myself presumed that you are gods,
sons of the Most High (Elyon),
yet like humans you will die,
and fall like any prince.
Arise, O God, judge the world;
for you inherit all the nations.

According to Smith, here Yahweh in effect is asked to assume the job of all gods to rule their nations in addition to Israel (to fill the “power vacuum” created by the demise of all other

¹⁹ Smith, 2001: 143-144.

²⁰ Numbers 23-24 contain the name of Yahweh (23:8, 21; 24:6), but it is considerably rarer than the name of El (23:8, 19, 22, 23; 24:4, 8, 16, 23).

²¹ Smith, 2001: 144.

gods).²² Verse 6 addresses the gods as “the sons of Elyon”, probably a title of El at an early point in biblical tradition (cf. El Elyon mentioned three times in Gen. 14:18-20 NOG). If this supposition is correct, Psalm 82 preserves a tradition that casts the God of Israel in the role not of the presiding God of the pantheon but as one of his sons. Each of these sons has a different nation as his ancient patrimony (or family inheritance) and therefore serves as its ruler. Yet verse 6 calls on Yahweh to arrogate to himself the traditional inheritance of all the other gods, thereby making Israel and all the world the inheritance of Israel’s God.

This family view of the divine arrangement of the world appears also in the versions of Deut. 32:8-9 preserved in Greek (Septuagint, or LXX) and the Dead Sea Scrolls:

When the Most High (Elyon) allotted peoples for inheritance,
when he divided up humanity,
he fixed the boundaries for peoples,
according to the number of the divine sons [gods]:
for Yahweh’s portion is his people,
Jacob [Israel] his own inheritance.

Until the recent NRSV translation, the traditional Hebrew text (Masoretic text, or MT) perhaps reflected a discomfort with this polytheistic theology of Israel, for it showed not “divine sons” (*bēnê ’ēlōhîm*), as in the Greek Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls,²³ but “sons of Israel” (*bēnê yiśrā’ēl*). E. Tov labels the MT text here an “anti-polytheistic alteration”.²⁴

Another example is Deut. 32:43 preserved in the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls (until NRSV):

Rejoice, O heavens, together with him; [MT: O nations, with his people]
and bow down to him all you gods, [not in MT]
for he will avenge the blood of his sons, [MT: his servants]
and will render vengeance to his enemies,
and will recompense those who hate him, [not in MT]
and will atone for the land of his people.²⁵ [MT: his land, for his people]

The number of gods in Deut. 32:8 is the basis for the number of peoples and countries in the world. The final phrase implies not only that there was an identical number of gods, peoples and territories, but that each people received its God as well as its territory (or each God received his or her people and territory). According to Simon Parker, as one of the divine beings, Yahweh received Israel at the hands of Elyon, as each of the other gods received his or her people and land from the same source.²⁶ Of course, later tradition could identify the figure of Elyon with Yahweh,

²² Smith, 2001: 48.

²³ For the evidence, see Tov, 1992: 269.

²⁴ Tov, 1992: 269.

²⁵ Abegg, 2002: 193.

²⁶ Parker, 1999: 796. Parker (p. 797) assumes that in Deut. 32:8-9 the divine beings appeared originally as Yahweh’s peers, but the text is reread and eventually rewritten to make Yahweh the supreme, and then the only, deity. In Psalm 82 Yahweh again appears as one of the divine beings, but only to expose his peers as total failures and to displace them as ruler of the world. In the remaining cases, the divine beings appear as Yahweh’s court – his servants and worshippers.

Other passages, while not using the specific term, nevertheless seem to refer to these divine beings as Yahweh’s peers. In Gen. 3:22 Yahweh says: “The human has become like one of us”. Only two kinds of being are envisaged here: divine and human. The human has acquired one of the divine characteristics (knowledge) and is threatening to acquire another (immortality, 3:22b; cf. 11:6-7). The phrase “one of us” clearly refers to anyone of the group of divine beings, of whom Yahweh is first among equals. In the priestly text, Gen. 1:26, Yahweh again uses the first person plural when proposing to make humanity “in our image, according to our likeness”. In this case, human beings are modelled on the divine beings.

just as many scholars have done. However, the title of Elyon (“Most High”) seems to denote the figure of El, presider par excellence not only at Ugarit but also in Psalm 82.²⁷

The author of Psalm 82 deposes the older theology, as Israel’s deity is called to assume a new role as judge of all the world. Yet at the same time, Psalm 82, like Deut. 32:8-9, preserves the outlines of the older theology it is rejecting. From the perspective of this older theology, Yahweh did not belong to the top tier of the pantheon. Instead, in early Israel the God of Israel apparently belonged to the second tier of the pantheon; he was not the presider God, but one of his sons. Accordingly, what is at work is not a loss of the second tier of a pantheon headed by Yahweh. Instead, the collapse of the first and second tiers in the early Israelite pantheon likely was caused by an identification of El, the head of this pantheon, with Yahweh, a member of its second tier. This development would have taken place by the 8th century BC.²⁸

In the 8th century BC, the neo-Assyrian empire presented a new world order – in Babylon, the traits of numerous deities were attributed to Marduk, not only in the fifty names that he receives in *Enuma Elish*, but also in the characterizing of over a dozen deities as aspects of Marduk in a small god list.²⁹ One might assume that after this alteration of the world scene Israel needed a different “world theology” in order to centralize and strengthen its political power. That not only advanced Yahweh to the top but eventually eliminated the second tier altogether insofar as it treated all other gods as either non-entities or created by Yahweh. By the last centuries BC the dominant view of gods among Jews was that they were angels, a lesser order of heavenly beings at the one God’s command. A common task for such former gods, just as the lowest tier of gods in the Ugaritic texts, was to act as messengers, the literal meaning of the English word “angel”.³⁰

²⁷ Smith, 2001: 48. David Frankel (2010) argues that El is the speaker of Psalm 82:6-8, playing the role of the high judge, in which he condemns the gods and appoints Yahweh to rule in their place. According to Frankel (p. 4), the one who presides as head of legal proceedings, which is what Psalm 82 clearly depicts, is generally presented as seated, while the litigants stand before him. Yahweh, however, is said in v 1 to *stand*, not sit. Also, Yahweh is situated not in front of the council, but *in the midst* of the council. These formulations most naturally imply that Yahweh is a litigant or accuser in the ensuing legal exchange. The Psalm is a visionary report of a mythological drama in the cosmos. It depicts a trial against the gods of the nations, in which these foreign gods are condemned to death.

Frankel concludes: “Psalm 82 reflects an extreme version of nationalism. It seeks to have all the territories of the nations annexed to Israel, the national ‘inheritance of Yahweh’” (p. 8); “we may well assume that Psalm 82 is programmatic in orientation, seeking to justify the king’s aspirations to conquer the world for the dominion of Yahweh” (p. 14).

²⁸ Smith, 2001: 49.

²⁹ Aspects of Marduk: “Urash (is) Marduk of planting. Lugalidda (is) Marduk of the abyss. Ninurta (is) Marduk of the pickaxe. Nergal (is) Marduk of battle. Zababa (is) Marduk of warfare. Enlil (is) Marduk of lordship and consultations. Nabu (is) Marduk of accounting. Sin (is) Marduk who lights up the night. Shamash (is) Marduk of justice. Adad (is) Marduk of rain. Tishpak (is) Marduk of troops. Great Anu (is) Marduk of . . . Shuqamuna (is) Marduk of the container. [. . .] (is) Marduk of everything” (Smith 2001: 87-88).

The Israelite presentation of the divine council differs little structurally from the Babylonian presentation of Marduk in *Enuma Elish*. Both *Enuma Elish* and the Hebrew Bible present a divine ruler surrounded by subservient divinities. Many (though hardly all) Israelite texts differ from *Enuma Elish* in neither the notion of assembly nor the radical polarization between Ruler and ruled (Smith 2001: 51).

³⁰ According to John Day (2000: 232), once monotheism took over Israel, the seventy sons of God, originally denoting the gods of the pantheon under El, with whom Yahweh became identified, now became demoted to the status of angels, the seventy guardian angels of the nations attested in *1 Enoch*. Greenstein 1997, 50: “There is a distinct trend toward monotheism and a reduction of the various deities to the status of angels or nothings”; West 1997, 123: “In more orthodox parts of the Old Testament the lesser divinities surrounding Yahweh are reduced to emissaries and agents of his will, his “messengers” (*mal’âkim*, the so-called “angels”),

6. Conclusion

In sum, in the pre-exilic period (and perhaps as early as the 8th century BC) Israel enjoyed perhaps a lesser pantheon than that in the Ugaritic texts, but certainly it was considerably more extensive than what the biblical record reports.³¹ Edward Greenstein concludes: “The God of Biblical Israel may not actually be very different from the gods of the neighboring nations, but claiming that he is, is an important part of the rhetoric promoting devotion to that God alone.”³²

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but this shift does not always succeed in concealing their originally independent status”. See also Parker 1999: 798.

³¹ Smith, 2001: 49.

³² Greenstein, 1997: 58.

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