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The (Historical) Origin of God

By Theodore J. Lewis

When a historian of Israelite religion talks of the origin of God, she certainly doesn't mean ontology. Proofs for the existence of God are above the historian's pay grade.

Moreover, historians of religion are not systematic theologians who weave all data into a unified whole. Even our skilled biblical redactors knew better when it came to the Almighty, as they left plural voices in our final dataset. Instead, historians undertake a messier task.

The historical origin of God has to do with wrestling with texts and physical remains of the past to reconstruct how the ancients thought about divinity and religious performance. Adding in archaeology, epigraphy, art history, and data from across the entire ancient Near East broadens the historian's scope even more. For ancient Israelite divinity, one logically starts with El, the deity whose name is found in the designation of the eponymous ancestor "Israel."

The Bible's varied El traditions (concentrated in the patriarchal narratives) did not arise in a vacuum. Ancient Near Eastern comparanda must be factored in, especially the Late Bronze Age kingdom of Ugarit on the northern coast of Syria. Here we have a West Semitic culture that shares close religious affinities with ancient Israel, and one which has the fullest representation of the deity 'Ilu (= El) both in word and object of any ancient Near Eastern society. Questions arise: Were Ugaritic 'Ilu, and Israelite El imagined as an enthroned, benevolent patriarch, a majestic bull, or even a solid block of stone?



Bronze statuette with gold foil from Ugarit likely representing the god 'Ilu.

Religious traditions from the northern Levant (including the Arameans) also resonate with Israel's deity Yahweh. Yahweh is a storm/warrior god with many of the features seen in Aramean Hadad and Ugaritic Ba'lu (Hebrew Ba'al). The Old Aramaic royal inscription from Bukan speaks of Hadad thundering with language (*ytn ql*) reminiscent of Yahweh-Elyon (*yittēn qōlō*; e.g., Ps 18:14 [Eng 18:13]).

The cultural continuum is also reflected in the reference to [Hadad]-Ramman (Hadad the Thunderer) in 2 Kings 5:18. Yahweh rides on the clouds like Ugaritic Ba'lu and fights the same cosmic foes as Ba'lu and the goddess 'Anatu (i.e. the Sea [Yammu/Yam], the Sea Dragon [Litanu/Leviathan], the god Death [Motu/Mot]).



Stele representing the storm god Adad brandishing lightning-bolts. Reign of Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 BC).



Ugaritic Ba'lu with thunderbolt.

Having learned lessons from “parallelomania,” we may no longer simplistically equate Ugaritic religion with early Israelite religion. Yet even factoring in culture-specific practices there was a demonstrable linguistic and religious Canaanite continuum between the northern Late Bronze Age Ugarit and Iron Age Israel. As a result, one could argue strongly for a northern origin of many of the key components that found their way into Israelite conceptions of divinity. The striking similarities are undeniable—*except for its most vital ingredient: the god Yahweh!* Yahweh appears nowhere in our northern Levantine sources.

Looking to the south proves tantalizing. Egyptian toponyms from the Shasu texts (and even for the name [Yah in the Book of the Dead](#)) provides the earliest data (Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties, fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE): a place yh(w)/ yhw₃ together with the term s'rr that may link to archaic biblical poetry (Judg 5:4; Deut 33:2) that describes Yahweh marching from Seir.

Definitive Northwest Semitic epigraphic sources documenting Yahweh include the Moabite Mesha stela, Kuntillet 'Ajrud, and Khirbet el- Qom, which bring the discussion down to the ninth and eighth centuries BCE. The Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions are especially tantalizing not only for their Yahwistic personal names (e.g., 'Obadyaw, Yaw'asah) but also for toponyms that locate Yahweh in both the north (Yahweh of Samaria) and the south (Yahweh of Teman). Moreover, one of the plaster inscriptions (KA 4.2) contains descriptions of God appearing along with an earthquake and mountains melting on a day

of war. Such depictions resonate with certain texts from the Hebrew Bible that form a corpus designated linguistically as Archaic Biblical Hebrew.



Mesha stele.



Ninth/early eighth century BCE Kuntillet Ajrud inscription. (Courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society)

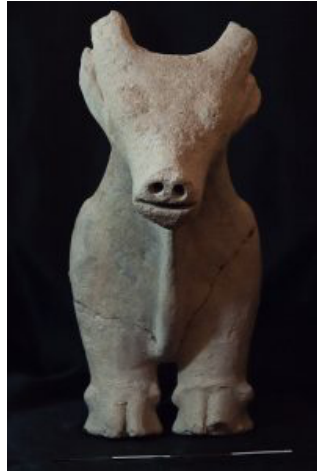
Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, texts such as Exodus 18 have fostered a cottage industry studying the so-called “Midianite” or “Kenite” hypothesis that probes whether Moses first learned of Yahweh through contact with his father-in-law who was a priest in Midian. Historians face messy data and reams of scholarship discussing the various names of Moses’ father-in-law (Jethro, Jeter, Reuel, Hobab), whether Jethro was a priest of Yahweh, how the tribe of Reuben may have served as a conduit of archaic southern Yahwistic traditions, how to relate the archaeology of Midian and “Midianite/Hijaz painted pottery” (“Qurayyah ware”), and if references to a caravan economy in Judges 5 provide a missing link.

As for material culture and the origins of Judean/Israelite divinity, our best sources are the “standing stones” (*masseboth*, sing. *massebah*) that represent, according to Biblical scholar Tryggve N.D. Mettinger, a type of “[material aniconism](#).” The ubiquity of standing stones in cultic space is striking. Standing stones known as betyls or “houses of El” (*bēt-’el*) are attested archaeologically in the Southern Negev [as early as the sixth through third millennia BCE](#) and throughout Iron Age Israel’s history. We have no *explicit* archaeological indicators that help us to identify the deity or deities at these Iron Age cult sites. *Masseboth* could even be used to mark encounters with a deity and not the deity per se. The phenomenon is widely attested geographically and chronologically; for example, Hazor attests numerous standing stone installations from the Middle Bronze Age to the Iron Age. Some standing stone installations are plural in nature (Hazor Area M, Tel Dan, Tel Moza) while others are singular in focus (Shechem, the Bull Site, Hazor Area B, Hazor Area A, Arad, and Khirbet Ataruz.



Arad sanctuary showing masseboth. (Courtesy of Zeev Herzog)

Iron Age animal images are far fewer but recent evidence suggests thriving bull cults at Iron Age II Khirbet Ataruz in central Jordan and ancient Pella in the north Jordan Valley quicken our imagination as to what these may have entailed. The depiction of a painted bull-man figure on a LB IIA cult stand from Pella hints how humans may have worn bull masks in ritual performance. As for Israelite divinity, the exquisite bull figurine at the Iron Age I Bull Site is universally seen as a divine image—though once again we have no *explicit* archaeological indicators that would help us to determine the deity it represented (El? Baal? Yahweh?).



Bull figurine from Khirbet Ataruz.



Figure 5.75 A photograph of a painted bull-man figure on a Late Bronze Age IIA cult stand from ancient Pella in the north Jordan valley.
© Pella Excavation Project, University of Sydney.

Painted 'bull-man' mask from Pella.



'Bull site' bronze figurine.

In the southern Levant, anthropomorphic male bronze figurines thought to be divine are abundant in the Late Bronze Age but curiously absent in the Iron Age. What accounts for this absence? Were fewer (if any) figurines produced due to economic reasons or was there an ideological motivation such as the aniconic traditions attested in the Hebrew Bible? That we have female divine figures in terracotta but not male ones suggests some ideological motivation. Rainer Albertz and Rüdiger Schmitt [suggest that this is a part of a broader trend](#): “There appears to have been a definite aversion to anthropomorphic representation of major deities in national panthea, including Israelite/Judean YHWH, Moabite Chemosh, Ammonite Milkom, and Edomite Qauš, as well as the major deities of Philistia, Phoenicia, and the Aramean states.”



Seated Late Bronze II seated deity from Megiddo.

From its earliest to its latest writings, the Hebrew Bible has no qualms about describing Yahweh in human terms and with human body parts (apart from genitalia). In contrast, other voices emphatically underscore that Yahweh is God and not human (e.g. Hosea 11:9, Num 23:19, Job 9:32). Conceptually, the editors of the Hebrew Bible found it perfectly acceptable to juxtapose an embodied Yahweh in literature with denouncements of anyone attempting to craft such a body in physical form.

Yet even within the aniconic tradition's assertion that Yahweh is not to be portrayed in concrete form, we see diversity. Strikingly different portrayals are woven together in the Hebrew Bible's composite picture. Consider how the picture of Yahweh majestically (and invisibly as at Syrian Ayn Dara) enthroned above the winged cherubim contrasts with the altogether different abstract notion of him taking up divine residence via his sacred "Name" (*šem*). This is conceptually distinct from the notion that Yahweh's "Radiance" (*kābôd yhw̄h*; cf. Akkadian *melammu*) represents his tangible presence. And we've yet to mention how the numinous, ethereal quality of fire is one of, if not *the* most, enduring of images used to depict divine presence. Finding archaeological correlates for these abstract expressions, the pragmatic focal points for the performance of cult, is incredibly challenging.



Iron Age Syrian temple of Ayn Dara showing footprints of the deity.

What can we conclude? For one thing, the data resist simplistic conclusions. We stand at such a great distance from these ancient cultures, and our source materials (textual and archaeological) are sparse. If forced to provide a soundbite on the (historical) origin of God, our first words should be: “It’s complicated. History is messy—especially the history of religion—and let’s next talk about adding the goddesses into the overall picture.”

Secondly, historians should underscore the substantial evidence (linguistic data, geographic determinants, and material culture) of a widespread and enduring Canaanite cultural continuum between Syria and Egypt from the Middle Bronze Age on and especially in the Late Bronze Age. *This Canaanite cultural continuum continues into the Iron Age is especially apparent in the realm of religion, except for a single datum: the complete absence of Yahweh.*

Here the historian of Israelite religion must remain agnostic. We simply do not know the social settings and mechanisms by which pre-Israelite Canaanite lore (the family religion of El traditions and the storm and warrior themes associated with Baal) was thoroughly and unmistakably woven on to the god Yahweh of southern, southeastern, and Transjordanian fame. Yahweh’s geographic origin seems to be southern, yet many of his garments are sewn from northern and inland Canaanite cloth. Yet from there, the deity Yahweh would become central to the process whereby Israel’s ethnic boundaries were constructed and maintained.

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