

*Text of the Fourth Annual E. Maynard Adams Lecture in the Humanities and Human Values,
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, September 23, 2001*

THE SEARCH FOR THE HEBREW GOD*

Jack M. Sasson
Vanderbilt University

Almost two weeks after the horrors that overtook us all and just before Yom Kippur, a day for reflection and atonement, my topic, *The Search for the Hebrew God*, could easily be a subject for anyone wishing to learn what God plans for us in the coming days. But we are here to celebrate Maynard Adams whose life work addressed the relevance of the humanities to understanding the human condition. For most of us, the human condition is still guided by truths developed millennia ago by the Hebrews, a materially impoverished population that was just transiting from tribal confederation to nationhood. It may be appropriate, therefore, to use the research tools developed by generations of humanists to uncover the identity of the Hebrew God, to inquire how the Hebrews adopted him as their God, and to suggest reasons why their theology about that God gained permanence and acceptance beyond the hardly promising acres in which it was born. At the outset, however, let me confess that I could not avoid gender connotation when mentioning the Hebrew God. I fault Hebrew for not having an adequate neuter pronoun and beg not to be consigned to the hell of unreconstructed male chauvinists.

Until the eighteenth century in Europe, there was no sustained search for the Hebrew God. Since the Renaissance, people had generally conceded the cultivation of the mind to the Greeks, the control of society to the Romans, the revelation of the only true God to Israel, and the path towards true salvation to the Gospels. Our own story about the search for the Hebrew God picks up when Europe began to dominate the world militarily and economically. Dominance fostered a missionary zeal to bring Christianity to cultures that were not raised on the biblical verities. To better understand beliefs that they wished to supplant, however, Europeans collected written and oral testimony about religious practices of many non-Christian cultures.

But there was also a parallel drive to penetrate sacred Scripture itself, to discover from it something about the truth that so inspired the Hebrews. Biblical scholars, therefore, began to focus attention on a God who, despite many setbacks, eventually inspired Israel to discover the logic of monotheism and gave it courage to broadcast it as a historical truth. Who was this Hebrew God and how did Israel and this God discover each other?

A God of Many Names

YHWH

Throughout antiquity, it was believed that *nomen est omen*, meaning that the names of people, places, or gods, give clues about their role and destiny. The name of the Hebrew God was written with just four consonants—so *Y[od].H[e].W[aw].H[e]*—not because Hebrews vied with Poles and Czechs in owning unpronounceable names, but because the scribes of the regions could write whatever they wished without using vowels. Unfortunately, no reliable tradition reveals how to pronounce Y.H.W.H., and the name "Jehovah," artificially created from the four consonants and widely used in Europe and America, has no basis in antiquity. For convenience, let me pronounce it YHWH, even if, as a sinful orthodox Jew, I must expect thunderbolts to strike me for doing so.

The Hebrews themselves were curious about their God's name. In the book of Exodus (3:13-15), we learn that Moses asked God:

Suppose I come before the people of Israel and I tell them that their ancestral god sent me to you, what if they ask me what is his name, what can I tell them? God replied, tell them 'EHYEH ASHER EHYEH,' adding, tell them 'EHYEH sent me to you' . . . This is my name from time immemorial and this is how I am recalled from one generation to another.

Despite the explanation that God gives Moses, the phrase *ehyeh asher ehye* remains enigmatic for it bears many translations. Presuming that the name is based on the verb *hayâ*, "to exist," we can render it as "I am who I am," "I am what I am," "I am because I am," "I am what I create," "I create what I am," and so forth... .

Not surprisingly, Semitic specialists are also divided on how to understand the meaning of the name YHWH, "The LORD" in our translations, and it does not help that we do not know how it was pronounced. It can mean simply "He is" or "He will be"; but it can also mean "I create what I am," or "I am what I create." A great scholar, William F. Albright, once even suggested it was an abbreviation for: "It is He who creates What Comes into Existence." (That so many words are needed to give meaning to so few consonants, gives you inkling of our quandary.)

Be that as it may, this private name of the Hebrew God figures in the most famous article of faith crafted by Israel: *shema` yisra`el YHWH elohenu YHWH ehad* (Deuteronomy 6:4), commonly rendered as "Listen Israel, The Lord is our God, The Lord is One." But we must notice that this credo proclaims the incomparability, the supremacy, the lonesomeness if you will, of that God; but not his uniqueness. Another

passage from the same book even implies that God has assigned the sun and the moon to be worshiped; but not by Israel (Deuteronomy 4:19). Indeed, Israel undermines its conviction about the uniqueness of its God, when it chants *mî khamokha ba'elim YHWH*, "Who compares to you among the gods, Lord?" (Exod 15:11), when it praises YHWH as the "God of gods" (Josh 22:22; Ps 50:1), or when the first of its Ten Commandments privileges YHWH over any other god (Exod 20:2-5).

This contradictory information on Hebraic attachment to the notion of a single god has quickened the examination of YHWH's origins and of Israel's faith in that God, subjects to which I now want to turn.

YHWH and The Documentary Hypothesis

The Hebrews did not invoke God only as YHWH; rather, they called on him by several names, a few so obscure that their meanings continue to resist solution. *Elohim*, a plural noun literally meanings "gods," actually stands for invested godhood and so normally translates as the singular "God." But we also read, among others, about *El-Elyon*, "The Loftiest God," *El-Olam* "Eternal God," *Shaddai*, "The Almighty," and *YHWH Sebaoth*, "The LORD of Hosts." These many names for the Hebrew God seemed to betray multiple inspiration and so launched the first queries about God's nature. Researchers first sought their evidence within the Hebrew Bible itself. Already in the late eighteenth century, so even before the decipherments of records from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaan, it was suggested that the two most commonly used names for God, YHWH and Elohim, betray the presence of two distinct modes of conceiving of God. From this germ, scholars developed an elaborate scheme, eventually labeled the *Documentary Hypothesis*, that allocated the Five books of Moses to at least four discrete circles, active during as many centuries and produced in a specific sequence, the oldest of which cites YHWH as God. The story cannot be retold here; but suffice it to say that this theory found powerful support when Julius Wellhausen, using the achievements of the historians of religions of his days, divided the theological history of Israel into three major periods:

1. From Israel's beginnings until the 7th century BCE, when worship in Israel was loosely centered around YHWH, but under strong Canaanite influence;
2. From around 630 BCE, when King Josiah of Judah initiated feverish reforms to centralize worship in Jerusalem; and
3. After the Exile, so around 500 BCE, when priests established rigid class distinctions and legalized an exclusivist behavior.

Wellhausen's brilliant thesis has had its share of criticism: from conservative Christians, for presuming human, rather than divine, inspiration; from Jews, for suggesting the desiccation of its spiritual heritage; from scholars, for relying on a Darwinistic exposition of religious institutions. But most concretely, the thesis was faulted for ignoring the newly deciphered testimony from Israel's neighbors. What, indeed, have we learned about YHWH in nearly two centuries after these decipherments?

Extra-biblical YHWH

To be perfectly honest about it, the archaeological and epigraphic evidence has muddled our knowledge of YHWH and of his origins. We have so far found no credible information about the worship of a god by the same name outside of Israel's borders. And while we have names of people with components that sound like "YHWH," they tell us nothing about what kind of a god is at stake.

In contrast, we have over 50 extra-biblical mentions of a YHWH who is clearly the god of Israel. The earliest such mention comes from the 9th century, ironically enough, when a king of Moab praises his own god for besting YHWH. These references to the Hebrew YHWH, however, show that monotheistic faith was soft, with acceptance of additional gods among a large segment of the population. But the real shock came about two decades ago. From an obscure site in the Sinai peninsula called Kuntillet Ajrud were uncovered jar fragments invoking the blessing of "YHWH of Samaria (or: of Teman) and of his Asherah," Samaria being the capital of the Northern, and more important kingdom, after the breakup of Solomon's empire. Inked with these inscriptions were grotesque cartoons of a (possibly) sexually aroused bull ogling a cow and her calf. Behind the bull stands an attendant and a lyre-playing musician. Do these finds prove that religiously Israel of the ninth and eighth centuries BCE was a child of its time? Could Israel have had a happy couple as deities, worshiping them as bovines? Or could the site have been a refuge for renegade worshipers? Perhaps Asherah was not a goddess but the feminine manifestation of YHWH, something like the *shekhinah* of medieval Judaism. Or perhaps she was just an emblem for God. These differing interpretations are all current in biblical scholarship.

Still, despite our rummaging into the dustbins of history, we must admit lack of solid evidence on who first worshiped YHWH and where. This failure should not shock us. The Hebrews came into view relatively late, no earlier than the twelfth century BCE, when many of their neighbors were already old cultures. For three more centuries, they hardly attracted significant notice. So, when everything is said and done, I fear that how the Hebrews came to YHWH as the sponsor of their destiny, or vice versa, remains a question for the theologian rather than for the historian.

The Search For Yahwism

Yahwism and other Near Eastern Theologies

But if our search has not delivered a definite answer on the origin of the Hebrew god, have we been more successful in determining what made Yahwism, that is Israel's faith in YHWH, so distinctive? People in antiquity, including the Hebrews, shared many notions about the gods, for example, their eternal nature, their capacity to create, to hurt, and to heal; their control of the cosmos and of destiny; their eagerness to take sides, and to support or abandon their favorites. Also Israel was not unique in shunning the worship of idols, in having prophets, in crediting their laws to the gods, in accepting covenants drafted in heaven, or in conducting Holy Wars (an oxymoron) under divine banner. Even the once-widely disseminated distinction between Israel's "God of history" and everyone else's "gods of nature" has proven no longer tenable.

Yet, it cannot be denied that in certain practices Israel marched to a different drumbeat. Israel was indeed unique to have the Sabbath; so unique in fact, that Israel invented the seven-day week, with which to sanctify it. Likewise, no other people circumcised their males on the eighth day after birth. No other priesthood was as relentless in codifying food and purity taboos. No other culture was as intent on regulating the most personal aspects of lives, such as with whom to be intimate, what to wear, how to shave, and what to think. To our discomfort, too, we find Israel practically alone in denying women direct access to God.

But what ultimately distinguishes Israel from all other cultures in antiquity is its espousal of monotheism. If we can offer a reasonable explanation of how Israel arrived at its conviction that its god is unique, perhaps we might compensate for our failure to identify the origins of YHWH. As it happens, the rise of monotheism was an issue around which a discipline called history of religion crystallized in the nineteenth century and it is still a major issue today. So we need to backtrack before proceeding.

The History of Religion(s)

Since the days of exploration, missionaries, antiquarians, and travelers had brought back to Europe knowledge about polytheistic religious practices. As Europeans examined their belief in one true God, they found two possible explanations for how it was achieved. Some proposed that monotheism was natural and primordial and that over the course of history people had degenerated spiritually. In this explanation, Israel was thought to have *rediscovered* monotheism; but its version remained incomplete until Christianity contributed a vehicle for redemption. The dominant view

about monotheism, however, was evolutionist. In this hypothesis, human beings moved from *animism*, the worship of natural phenomena, to *polytheism*, the worship of gods with human shapes and emotions. Progressively more refined belief were said to include: *henotheism*, the worship of all the gods though just one, *monolatry*, the supremacy of one god within one national border, and *monocratism*, the dominance of one, but by no means unique, god. *Monotheism* was declared the final stage, but it itself included additional steps, some positive and attributed to an alleged Israel's prophets, such as *ethical monotheism*; others negative and attributed to an alleged Jewish arrogance, such as *radical* or *uncompromising* monotheism.

Monotheistic Inspirations in the Ancient Near East

At the same time, Western thinkers struggled with how to place the Biblical evidence within these stages in spiritual development. On the one hand, there was no denying the Bible's powerful and single-minded pleas for the uniqueness of YHWH, especially by the prophets. Yet, YHWH was depicted also as heavily territorial. We have this anecdote about Saul pursuing David so harshly, that David complained of being forced into a foreign land, and so to the worship of foreign gods (1 Sam 26:17-20). In Scripture, YHWH seemed treated as a male oriental potentate, brooking little opposition, exhibiting jealousies and petulance, and displaying favor and disapproval in predictably human fashion. How much of the Biblical gendering of YHWH as a male deity with human emotions can be attributed to the Hebrew language's difficulty with creating abstractions and how much it depended in fact on a pagan perspective of the divine became issues that are still unresolved in today's scholarship. Already in the past century, there was a readiness to ascribe the worship of YHWH to two levels. To the priests and elite of Israel were assigned a henotheistic or monocratic notion of YHWH, a High God who was all powerful within his domain. The masses, however, were said to follow a popular religion that included a happily married God who never stopped competing with deities such as Baal and El. The Kuntillet Ajrud material only sharpened this last view.

The Kenites, Akhnaten, and Assur

But what about monotheism as we have come to understand it? When did it dawn in Israel's past? Practically extinct now (except at Harvard) is the notion that Moses learned much of his theology from his father-in-law, Reuel, a priest of the Medianites. Aside from having seven daughters, Reuel was alleged to believe in a god of the desert that was fiercely lonesome.

Much more currently under debate are two other theories that depend on documents from the ancient Near East. It was recently proposed by a highly respected scholar that in the waning days of the Assyrian empire, so about 650 BCE, royal ideology,

priestly theology, and mystery practices combined to promote a rarified form of monotheism that even displayed kabbalistic aspects. A second theory proposed that monotheism was first conceived and activated in Egypt around 1350 BCE by a god-crazed pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty, Akhnaten. Many thinkers, Sigmund Freud among them, have been so intrigued by the linkage among Akhnaten, Moses, and monotheism, that they have created a veritable industry around the circumstances, in novels, movies, and even in a Philip Glass opera with, of all things, an ancient Egyptian libretto.

Polytheism

These attempts at locating the birth of Yahwism beyond Israel are themselves interesting, because they are driven by the certitude that monotheistic belief is a moral, spiritual, or intellectual advance over polytheism. There is no evidence, however, that anyone in ancient times thought monotheism was better than polytheism. In fact, just ask people in India, China, or even at your local Hindu temple, whether they feel their theology is inferior to ours.

Generally, people in the ancient Near East certainly enjoyed the myths of their many gods, and may even have taken them literally. But their theologians crafted the cosmos to mirror human sensibilities. Human kinship was their model for how the gods, and therefore the cosmos, was organized. Human experience and emotion were not foreign to the gods; for this reason, the gods remained within human comprehension and responded to human entreaty. But the multiplicity of gods hardly compromised the prayers and hymns of Egypt and Mesopotamia, for they could match the psalmist's best in their piety and nicely duplicate the intimacy with the divine that mystics and Sufis achieve.

For a polytheist, however, even the immortal gods operated under a morally supreme order that might be called fate. Effectively, gods were cogs in a large cosmological wheel, and they were subject to causes and consequences that, albeit pre-destined, were within comprehension. In monotheism, when bad events overtake good believers, the range of explanations is limited, at best to the notion that we are being tested; at worst, that we are paying for our sins. Polytheists, however, did not have to accept blame for faults not felt to be theirs. Rather, they found an explanation in a destiny that was forever choreographing the changing fates of each and all.

In a polytheistic system gods rise and fall, requiring theological explanation. The change in prestige of particular gods was related invariably to the fate of the city-states over which they presided. In a polytheistic worldview, therefore, the human and celestial spheres of activity were parallel. Thus, when Assyria or Babylon was

politically in ascent, it was because its main deity now ruled the gods of subordinate powers.

Such theological cannibalism is manifest, for example, in the famous "Enuma Elish," cited often as the Babylonian Creation Epic. Deeply rooted in the second millennium BCE, this text opens with a *theogony*, focusing on the birth of the god Marduk. It then turns into a *theomachy*, a cosmic battle in which Marduk defeats Tiamat, representing consciousness without desire or purpose. Victorious, Marduk rules the gods, deploying them into a new cosmic order. His triumph explains why his city, Babylon, is queen of the world.

If gods can rise and begin to rule the cosmos, it follows also that other gods must fall or step aside. In Mesopotamian lore, this principle is best expressed through a category of texts we call "city laments." In this genre, poets reflect on the horrors that occur when the gods, acting in assembly, decide to shift their support from one deity, hence also from one city, to another. The poetry can be heart-rending, as the deity begs for survival or even surcease; but to no avail. Innocence notwithstanding, the verdict cannot be changed. Here, for example, is what the Moon-god Nanna is told about the fate of his great city, Ur:

The verdict of the assembly cannot be turned back,
The word commanded by the god Enlil knows no overturning:
Ur was granted kingship, it was not granted an eternal reign.
Since days of yore when land was founded and people multiplied,
Who has ever witnessed a reign of kingship that has maintained preeminence
[Ur's] kingship has indeed been long, but is now drained.
O my Nanna, do not exhaust yourself; just leave your city.

The poet draws a lesson about the impermanence of power, strongly suggesting that reckoning is the lot of all. Paradoxically, the poet also comforts the listeners, for, if gods cannot change fate, what is there for humans to do? Let's keep this observation in mind as we return to Yahwism and the faith of Israel.

The Hebrew God

The God of Hebrew Scriptures

For the poets of Israel, the whole cosmos attested to God's presence and only fools denied divine existence (Psalm 14). Yet, it is striking that in the Hebrew Bible God is given no pre-history and no antecedence. In contrast, the myths of antiquity are full of explanations on how gods came to be. Charting the bloodline of the gods was no sacrilege, because in this way were provided a map of the universe, a key to the mystery of creation, and a blueprint for human endeavors. Israel, in contrast, finessed the issue of God's birth by recalling that when God began to create the heavens and the earth (that is the cosmos), four primal elements were available: earth, darkness, wind, and water. Not very promising. But out of nothing God created light and, placing it in oscillation with darkness, established "one day," a basic measure for time. Eventually, the year, the month, and the week were constructed on this basic measure, creating the remaining calendric units. But because God anteceded time, the Hebrews might argue, no genealogy could be forged for him, and the whole issue of his pedigree, therefore, was moot. By eschewing any kinship ties for their god, Israel's theologians had thus claimed two major components of monotheism: the singularity as well as the transcendence of God.

The Great Hebrew Myth

In addition to lacking a genealogy for God, Hebrew scripture also lacks that other great theme in ancient near eastern theology: the great battle that explains how one god rose above the others. In its best poetry, Scripture does indeed glorify a warrior God who battles such primordial entities as Leviathan, Rahab, Yam, Sheol, and Mot. Most of these powers appear as deities in near eastern myths; but among the prophets and the psalmists, they were not active deities and were never worshiped. Instead, they served to forge metaphors and to enrich imagery, much as Venus and Jove served the poets of Christian Europe. Therefore long before the end of Judah's independence another element of monotheism was in place: the characterization of God as omnipotent.

For the Hebrews, God's greatest victories were not cosmic but occurred on earth. God defeated pharaoh's armies (Exod 15), battled the Amalekites (Exod 17:8-16), and discomfited the Amorites by stopping the sun in its course (Josh 10:10-15). God's deed in behalf of Israel filled a book now lost to us called "The Wars of the Lord" (Numb 21:14-15). If we are asked, therefore, to identify Israel's central myth about its God, it would be that this powerful God, creator of everything that ever was and will be, was devoted almost exclusively, even obsessively, to shaping the future of just one people.

The Democratization of Monotheism

The Promised Land

Indeed, the story that Scripture tells really has only two protagonists: God and Israel. The story itself is an optimized and didactic version of the past rather than one we can enter into our history books. Its vision is of a God who from the beginning of time had vowed a land to Israel's ancestors. The land is his and is only leased to those who deserve it. Too often, his chosen people prove themselves unworthy of the promise. Yet, even when he punishes them for abusing his trust by delivering the land to others, his covenant with Israel is eternal. Facing reality, however, the Hebrews knew that theirs was but a small sliver of a land where their powerful neighbors often met each other in battle. Periodically, the gods of Israel's enemies would bring huge armies to Israel and, more often than not, walked away with huge spoils. With a history so full of woes and defeats, with evidence of battle successes for foreign gods, the question for us is why would Israel place its fate in one God, when that God has not been especially successful against the competing gods? In closing this lecture, I speculate on this issue by focusing specifically on the fate of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem was founded by David when the Kingdom of Israel was united., let us say around 1000 BCE. But within a generation of the death of his son Solomon, the kingdom split into two parts. The North was called Israel and its capital was Samaria. The south became Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital. If we rely on the archaeological evidence assembled in recent years, two major cataclysms reshaped Jerusalem: The first occurred around 722 BCE, when the Assyrians swooped down on the Northern Kingdom, destroying its major cities, and deporting vast numbers of its prosperous and religiously cosmopolitan population to the Mesopotamian hinterland, so fostering the myth of the "Ten Lost Tribes." People from as far away as Babylon were brought to fill the emptied towns (2 Kings 17:24), among them the folks that were later known as Samaritans. Citizens of the Northern Kingdom who were not deported were quickly absorbed into the general population, reverting to a mode of life that was prevalent among Canaanites and Phoenicians.

But a significant group of elite managed to emigrate to the Southern Kingdom, settling in Jerusalem. They brought with them a strong conviction that their own fate was fully deserved, for they had repeatedly angered God (2 Kings 17). After these refugees arrived in Jerusalem, there was a palpable rise in theological fervor and a major drive to rid the capital, if not also the countryside, of any traces of pagan worship. With nostalgia, but also much embellishment, the inhabitants recalled the time of David, when Israel and Judah were united, and they told of a twofold covenant between God and his people: If Israel obeys the laws of God, God would protect it

eternally, his land forever willed to Israel. Moreover, even if its kings sin against God, sovereignty nevertheless would remain attached to the dynasty of David.

This reassurance of stability under God has led some scholars to locate the triumph of monotheism to this period; but while elements of monotheism abounded then, there is also too much contrary testimony, both textual and archeological, to permit unanimity on this score. For example, there are reports that some Judeans worshiped the Queen of Heaven (Jeremiah 44:24-25) and fertility figurines galore have been recovered from all over Judah. The cautious opinion is that, as Judah was enjoying its last moments of freedom, YHWH had come to be supreme in Israel, but not yet unique.

Exile and Restoration

The second cataclysm to shape Jerusalem occurred about 150 years after the fall of Samaria. Ignoring the warnings of Jeremiah, Judah challenged Babylon, which brought its armies and leveled Jerusalem, torching Solomon's temple. Archeologists do not agree about the extent of damage to the Southern Kingdom. The destruction seems to have been selective, occurring mainly around Jerusalem and in the foothills, while many regions of Judah were left untouched, probably because the population submitted to the conquerors. Yet there are also estimates that the population of Judah lost more than half of its total, shrinking from 100,000 to 40,000 residents. How many of them escaped to Egypt or were taken captives to Babylon is also disputed.

Scripture's version of the defeat is didactic; but while not likely historically accurate, it is nevertheless ideologically compelling. We are told that the Babylonians not only emptied Jerusalem and its temples from their treasures, but that they also dragged into exile the flower of its people, leaving only the poor and destitute (2 Kings 24-25; 2 Chron 36; Jer 39-40). Either way, for the first time in nearly a half a millennium, the Hebrews had no land in which they were sovereign.

YHWH and the Land

You will recall the ancient near eastern literature of laments which attributed the fall of states to a shift in power from one deity to another. Theologically, the fate of Judah could have engendered the same explanation: YHWH lost his primacy to Marduk of Babylon, and any promises YHWH made to Israel, about land or sovereignty, had to be shelved. Had the survivors of the fall of Jerusalem adopted this way of thinking, they would have accepted their fate as dependent folks. And those exiled in foreign lands would have worshiped the local gods. Something like this had occurred to the people of Samaria. Surprisingly, however, the fate of Samaria was not duplicated in Judah.

Less than a half century later, Babylon too lost its heavenly support. Cyrus of Persia entered Babylon on October 12, 539 BCE. The Persians appointed exiles from Judah, Sheshbazzar then Zerubbabel, to govern what used to be Judah. The province was now called Yehud and its inhabitants henceforth were known as Yehudî, that is "Jews." These governors may or may not have descended from David; but they did not rule as kings of a sovereign kingdom. Rather, aided by a modest group of exiled followers but also opposed by the locales, they restored order and rebuilt a modest version of the temple, completing it around 515 BCE, so just over 70 years after its destruction. But Yehud continued to deteriorate, materially and likely also spiritually, the victim of political events outside its control and of internal strife. Hope for restored earthly sovereignty was fading.

Some 60 years later—there is much dispute about the length of the interval, even the historicity of the event— another wave of exiles returned, led by Ezra and Nehemiah. We do not know exactly how it worked, but the theology of the Hebrew God begins to play like a theme in a Sibelius symphony, in that fragments introduced earlier combine with new ideas to give us the big arching melody for which we have waited. Already before the fall of Judah, YHWH had come to be regarded as unbegotten and likely also unbecoming. Supreme locally, YHWH had been deemed transcendent, not yet immanent, but also omnipotent, omnipresent, (mostly) omniscient, and universal. The new features about YHWH now treat him as unique and, as important, international. Consequently, no event, political or otherwise, can ever be attributed to a heavenly struggle among the gods, for the simple reason that there are no other gods. Moreover, because YHWH is unique, none of his promises can ever forfeit. Fulfillment of his commitment to deliver land and sovereignty, therefore, remain potentially at hand. As propounded now, the two components of the argument—the uniqueness of God and the permanence of promise—are mutual and indivisible and anyone hoping for the end of exile and restoration of sovereignty, must believe in the one God of the unchanging pledge. In this symbiosis of beliefs there is also an added reciprocity: the longer the promise remains unfulfilled, the heavier becomes the dependence on the uniqueness of God. The deeper is the attachment to one God, the sharper is the conviction about eventual restoration.

So far the theological argument. And now we come to the crucial act that turned an esoteric theological elaboration into a broadly held-faith.

Public acceptance

The book of Ezra records the names of believers who returned with him and it describes the imposition of a regimen of purity. In Nehemiah (7-8), there is also a report of a remarkable scene that took place in Jerusalem when it was still in shambles. We are somewhere around 450 BCE. Gathering as one, the people, native

and returning, having prepared themselves with fasting, come to a square in Jerusalem. With Ezra standing on a dais, the people listen to what may be the first public reading of the laws of Moses in Hebrew history. Some scholars doubt the authenticity of this event. Others claim that it was reshaped to feature synagogue services that were yet to be established. For me the occasion is psychologically just right: In the absence of native rule in Jerusalem and in the uncertainty about religious leadership, this publicly proclaimed conviction about the unique God and the fulfillment of promise gained for monotheism organic coherence, constancy, structure, and goal. More importantly, a credo that was held among the elite came to be accepted by the multitudes, to have, to hold, and to proclaim wherever they happen to live.

Coda

So there we have it: A single god, an eternal promise, a popularized and democratized conviction, a permanence of belief. These components did not come together in Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt or in Imperial Assyria; but they did jell in hapless Yehud, among people who had little to invest except faith and blind hope. There, monotheism took root and became difficult to reverse.

I should end here. Yet there must be this coda.

In the centuries since those apprehensive days, when a mutually affirming harmony was achieved between the hope for a restored land and the uniqueness of God, we can say that the idea of monotheism came to a rhetorical and ontological stability. For many Jews and Christians, the establishment of the State of Israel in our days is reward for staying true to the one God and to the promise of restoration. As we know too well, however, this reciprocity of commitments, to the unique god and to the fulfillment of earthly inheritance, has also been the inspiration for immense tragedy, most recently occurring in the modern Near East and now reaching our shores.

Yet, many times during the past centuries harsh political realities have stimulated other perceptions of God and of his commitment, for alteration in one component necessarily leads to adaptation in the other. Thus, under the influence of

Persian dualism, the God of the true promise was matched to a baneful Satan, setting up eschatological battles between Good and Evil. In such a vision, Jerusalem evolved into the center of a heavenly kingdom, rather than one on earth. We all know how this new perception of the promised inheritance allowed some Jews of the Roman period

to have a different notion of God, one in which he could beget a son who, through death and resurrection, redeems the faithful into eternal salvation.

But this constant balance between the single god and the singular promise has continued to shape the developments of monotheistic faiths. I need not tell you about the Puritans in the New Zion, about the Mormons in Utah, the Dutch in South Africa, and the Protestants in Northern Ireland. But in Judaism itself, a major replay of these components occurred during the Middle Ages. At that time, living in an increasingly inhospitable Europe, with Jerusalem beyond their reach, and God seemingly too remote, Jewish sages radically reconfigured God as well as the promise. In the Zohar, the famous anchor for the Kabbalah, they carved the body of God into 10 spiritual manifestations. Each of these manifestations had its concrete, earthly mirror, with each realm having the potential to reshape the other. The bridge for mutual harmony between and among the parts was to be the work of the *tsadiqim*, infinitely righteous mystics who discovered the way to erase the boundary between heaven and earth, the human and the divine. This particular movement had a spectacular collapse in the mid-seventeenth century CE, with the failed messianism of Shabbetai Zvi. Yet, since then, this failure has only invited other configurations, among them those of Frankists, Hassids, Zionists, and Schneersohnians, all of them meant to keep the believer fixed on the promise, earthly or heavenly, that a unique God is bound to deliver.

A parable replayed

You must recognize by now that, despite its many detours, this story of the search for the Hebrew God cannot have an ending. Yet my inspiration for it is not the soap opera of daytime TV, but the familiar Hebrew parable of the Tower of Babel. When people became wary of a God who could unleash a murderous Flood against them, they caucused and said, "Let us build for ourselves a towering city, its pinnacle in heaven. We shall thereby perpetuate our name, lest we be scattered all over earth." These people failed, of course, because God confused their tongues. What we must understand is that he actually multiplied their interpretive tools, and so guaranteed that their descendants—theologians, philosophers, scholars, and, for better or worse, political leaders—can never end the search for the Hebrew God or end the debate about the meaning of his promises.

*This address is an abbreviated version of a more developed essay to appear, with annotations, in **Hebrew Origins: Three Lectures on the Historiography, History, and***

the God of Ancient Israel (Chuen King Lecture Series, 4; Hong Kong: Theology Division, Chung Chi College).