

**BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND MONOTHEISTIC MYTH**

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My thesis is that the basic factor which molded the spiritual world of the Bible, the Apocrypha, Rabbinic literature and emergent Christianity was mythical thought and expression. I intend to outline the nature of this thought and point out several fundamental differences between pagan and monotheistic myth. Emphasizing these distinctions may give rise to a new kind of Biblical theology. It may also reveal the common basis shared by the Bible and the literature of the Second Temple period, but not by nascent Christianity, which diverged from the orbit of monotheistic myth. At the beginning of this century (1913), in his famous speech "The Myth of the Jews"<sup>1</sup> the young Buber criticized the rationalism of classical *Wissenschaft von Judentum* (modern research on Judaism), which had defined Judaism as an a-mythical historical creation. He did not, however, give a more detailed analysis of this kind of myth as opposed to pagan ones, despite the fact that the problem of myths occupied a central place in his thinking for the rest of his life.<sup>2</sup>

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Translation by Dorothea Shefer-Vanson.

1. For Buber's challenge to Cohen from the Zionist viewpoint, see his *Te'udah ve-Ye'ud*, Jerusalem, 1960, II: 147-156.
2. On this problem, compare my article, "Buber u-Meḥkar ha-Mikra ha-Yehudi ha-Moderni," in *Martin Buber: Me'ah Shanah le-Holadeto*, Beer-Sheba, 1980, pp. 157-196.

## I

The critical point of departure for this discussion is provided by the two central assumptions upon which is based Yehezkel Kaufmann's monumental work, *Toldot ha-Emunah ha-Yisra'elith* (History of the Faith of Israel).<sup>3</sup> Kaufmann in effect translated the inherent rationalism of nineteenth century research on Judaism, as defined and reflected in Hermann Cohen's philosophical work, into the language of historical-philological exegesis. In contradistinction to Cohen's spiritualist and universalist interpretation of prophetic and Jewish ethics, Kaufmann strove to restore to the Bible the concrete national basis of which it had been stripped.

Kaufmann's central assumptions, which will be discussed below, are:

1. That monotheism is anti-mythological by definition and that all myths are pagan because they deal with the life-stories and fate of the gods. The absolute otherness of the God of Israel and His transcendent nature precludes all possibility of weaving any kind of mythology about Him.

2. That, in accordance with historical-sociological thinking, monotheism cannot be accounted for by the concept of evolution, as Protestant research attempted to do in the last century. Rather, it constitutes a unique, intuitive idea which forged the spirit and nature of the nation from its very beginnings.<sup>4</sup> Because of its monotheistic mentality, Israel was unable to value the mythological basis of paganism. It rejected the very existence of the pagan gods, regarding their worship as futile fetishism. At times Kaufmann abandoned this interpretation of monotheism, attempting instead to explain it as the outcome of Israel's national spirit, as a historical product based on the work done by Moses, whose influence led to the elimination of the last remnants of pagan-mythological beliefs from the nation's mind. He went still further by maintaining that monotheism was so deeply rooted in Israel's national consciousness that it prevented the emergence of any religious syncretism, as was commonly assumed. He maintained that this commonplace of modern research, which construed an Israelite-Canaanite religious syncretism, was absolutely unwarranted by the sources.<sup>5</sup>

## II

Before applying ourselves to these two assumptions, we must clarify two essential questions:

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3. *Toldot ha-Emunah ha-Yisra'elit*, 8 bks. in 4 vol., Tel. Aviv, Mossad Bialik and Devir, 1937-56. (While not available in English as such, there is an abridged translation in English by Moshe Greenberg, *The Religion of Israel*, New York, 1972 — Ed.)

4. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, Bk.1, Introduction and Ch. 1, pp. 1-22; *idem.*, *Mi-kivshonah shel ha-Yezirah ha-Mikra'it*, Tel Aviv, 1966, pp. 11-47, 139-160.

5. *Mi-kivshonah*, *op. cit.*, p. 26ff.

1. What is the nature of myth in general?
2. Is there such a thing as monotheistic myth?

In recent years, many scholars have dealt with the questions of the nature and function of myth. Is it to be considered a literary category, i.e. a form of expression, or a mode of thought?<sup>6</sup> Are myths the product of the imagination or of memory? What are the social tasks of myths: are they explanatory (aetiological myths), or do they represent values (paradigmatic myths)? Is their significance limited to the sphere of human existence itself, or do they hint at something beyond it, becoming a religious category? The answers given by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and philosophers vary greatly, each scholar replying in accordance with his views and research leanings. Nevertheless, they are all agreed that the orbit of myths cannot be defined solely in terms of their content — i.e. the life-stories and fates of Gods, as the rationalists, including Kaufmann, would have it — but are a mode of thought and expression distinguished by their concrete-pictorial nature. Myths, moreover, are not mere stories, but rather are conceived as living realities which have a formative effect on the mind. Furthermore, they fulfill several social functions and cannot be restricted to one sphere. Certain myths arose out of someone's curiosity, and their function is allegedly 'scientific,' in that they explain natural phenomena, social features, etc. (aetiological myths). Some myths embody values and describe the exploits of individuals who have dedicated themselves to a specific ideal (paradigmatic myths). Still others deal with the basic problems of human existence, life and death, good and evil, man and his home, family relations, friendship and enmity, relations with the gods, etc. There are even myths which express formative events of individuals or groups which aroused awe and wonder and are described as being the work of the gods, their revelation or intervention in the course of events. This category includes those myths which relate or hint at an individual or collective encounter between man and god or celestial creatures. In these cases the myth is the vehicle for expressing an event which cannot be defined in terms of causality; it thus becomes a religious category.

As regards the epistemological significance of myths, some scholars have regarded myths as providing evidence of pre-logical thinking, evincing primitive or savage thought (Lévy-Bruhl). However, scholars of the previous generation (Cassirer) and of our own in particular (Claude Lévy-Strauss) have demonstrated

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6. Space does not permit me to cite the extensive literature, and I will mention only two informative volumes: S. S. Kirk, *Myth*, Berkeley, 1970; *Myth and Philosophy: Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 14 (1971). Many of the questions discussed in these books are not relevant to the present analysis. Both books lack contributions from German-speaking scholars, particularly their theological discussions. The reader will find some information about these scholars in my article, "Buber u-Meḥkar ha-Mikra," op. cit., particularly from p. 176ff.

that the thought structure of the various forms and types of myths stands firmly on the foundations of logic, and that in this respect there is no difference between mythical and conceptual thought. Although the contents of myths are mostly determined by historical and social components, the mythic mentality as such is independent of any given historical period or social framework, being a basic function of the human mind.

Attempts have also been made to locate the mental powers giving rise to myths. Freud perceived them as a product of the imagination. Buber, on the other hand, contended that the very core of myth, its specific nucleus, was *primaeva* memory. It seems to me that neither of these alternatives fits the reality, as both these mental forces combine to differing extents in creating myths. Some myths are the product of imagination alone, such as magical myths, those dealing with the creation and the various kinds of aetiological myths whose task it is to explain incomprehensible aspects of nature and the environment. Historical myths, on the other hand, namely, those woven around an ancient, primitive event, are built around a nucleus which is a *primaeva* memory handed down from one generation to the next. Nevertheless, we should take note of the fact that there is no rigid connection between their mental origin and their social and psychological impact, since both memory and imagination are necessary to nourish man's mind and maintain society.

### III

What, then, characterizes the myths of the ancient eastern religions? What distinguishes them from monotheistic myths and what do they have in common with them? It would seem that there are four features which typify the pagan myths of the ancient Near East:

1. The universe as well as natural forces and phenomena are explained as having a personal character, and their functioning is accounted for in voluntary terms.
2. Being is based on an ontological continuum, namely, there is a natural, organic connection between man, gods and nature, all of them being formed from the same substance and governed by the same causal framework.
3. The formation of the world is explained in two ways: either the development and function of the universe and mankind are depicted in terms of *primaeva* sexual intercourse and birth by the gods or between gods and human beings (theogony), or they are the outcome of dramatic events, such as wars and struggles between the gods and ancient monsters (theomachy). In certain myths both kinds of explanation are intermingled. The common basis for both approaches is the principle of the ontological continuum.
4. In some cases the pagan ritual is primarily the representation of the dramatic events associated with the formation of the world. These ceremonies are imbued

with magical powers which aid the good, benevolent gods in their battle against the powers of disorder and death, which disturb the cosmic-social harmony.

Let us examine these features briefly. As regards the personal nature of the universe, the cause of events is not the immanent laws of matter but the wishes and aspirations of the gods and their associates. Thunder, lightning, clouds, rain, floods, drought, etc., are connected with the deeds of the gods. The sun, moon and stars are not mere heavenly bodies but personalities, i.e. gods or the sons of gods, and constitute part of the celestial family. Even the winds are regarded as individuals with personal qualities of their own.

As outlined above, the ontological continuum means that the world of man and gods is hewn from the same matter. To be more precise, the human world is derived from divine matter, a fact which is sometimes explained by theogony (most of the Sumerian myths)<sup>7</sup> and sometimes by theomacy, the final outcome of which is the slaying of a monstrous god or goddess and the creation of the earth and sky from his or her body (the Babylonian myth of creation)<sup>8</sup>. According to one Sumerian myth, even plants are of divine substance, since they grew from divine sperm.<sup>9</sup> One of the Babylonian myths maintains that the human body is divine too because it was formed from the blood of a murdered god and mixed with clay. All this means that the world and everything in it, as well as the gods, were formed from the same material substance, which is divine *per se*. Consequently, there are frequent transitions between the three spheres: the divine, the human and the natural. Gods who fell or were overthrown became mortal; gods and goddesses engaged in sexual intercourse with human beings and gave birth to gods, demi-gods, giants, heroes, etc. Nevertheless, despite the divine substance of the universe and the frequent transitions from one sphere to another, the creators of pagan myths were aware of the fact that ordinary human beings could not rise above their mortality. Even the epic hero Gilgamesh, who was privileged to enter the garden of the gods, where he heard about the plant which bestowed immortality, failed in his mission because a snake snatched the plant away from him when he attempted to bring it up from the depths of the sea.<sup>10</sup> Another myth, that of Adapa, tells how man lost his opportunity to gain immortality because of his suspiciousness of the god Anu, which was aroused by the evil counsel of his god, Ea.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the various myths of creation, like the myths dealing with the efforts to attain immortality, simply illustrate the principle of the ontological continuum,

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7. S. N. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, New York, 1961, pp. 30-75.

8. J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (ANET)*, Princeton, 1950, pp. 60-72.

9. *ANET*, pp. 99-100.

10. *ANET*, pp. 96-97.

11. *ANET*, pp. 101-102.

which is explained as the universal rule of biological-organic laws. At times the continuum functions in accordance with psychological-dramatic laws to which gods, mortals and the universe are subject both in war and in peace.

This brings us to the fourth point, namely, that certain rites and rituals connected with myths served a magic purpose. Thus, one of the myths concerning the creation of man from divine blood and clay constituted an incantation for women giving birth.<sup>12</sup> According to Frankfort, Pharaoh's participation in the Seth ceremonies<sup>13</sup> was intended to maintain cosmic harmony and to ensure that the Nile would not flood the fields or natural disasters harm the farmers' livelihood. It has been claimed that during the Mesopotamian Akitu festival the creation story was recited, accompanied by symbolic magic participation in Marduk's struggle.<sup>14</sup> It can be assumed, moreover, that the weeping for Tammuz described in the Bible (Ezek. 8:14) denoted Tammuz's descent into hell.<sup>15</sup> There is a connection between this myth and the Ugaritic one of Baal's murder by his brother Mot, his descent into hell and return to life in the spring. The hymns provide a basis for assuming that some of the songs were perhaps chanted at the festival of Baal's return to life.<sup>16</sup>

#### IV

These are the outlines of the pagan myth which constituted the phenomenological background of the Bible and its monotheistic outlook. Before discussing the foundations of monotheistic myth, we must refer to Kaufmann's historical and sociological arguments outlined above. First of all, let us examine his assertion that monotheism was the intuitive creation of Israel's national spirit. In his view, this belief was so deeply ingrained in the popular consciousness that Israel did not

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12. *ANET*, pp. 99–100.

13. H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, Chicago, 1948, pp. 79–88.

14. H. Tadmor, vid. "Rosh Ha-Shanah: Be-Mesopotamya," *Entseklpedyah Mikra'it* (Encyclopedia Biblica), Jerusalem, 1950–82, VII: 305–312.

15. In Zechariah 12:11, there is a reference to the mourning for Hadadrimmon in the valley of Megiddo. According to Jerome, Hadadrimmon was the ancient name of the city of Maximianopolis of his day, which was Legio (Lajun), the city which took over Megiddo's pre-eminence. It is assumed that for hundreds of years it was customary to mourn there for King Josiah, who had been slain at that spot (II Kings 23:29; II Chron. 35:25; Targum Yonatan to Zech. 12:11). For identification of the site see M. Avi-Yonah, *Geografya Historit Erez-Yisrael*, Jerusalem, 1949, pp. 74, 144–145; F. M. Abel, *Géographie de la Palestine*, 2v., Paris, 1933–38, II: 340. It may be surmised that this name hints at the Mesopotamian god Hadadrimmon, who was brought to Israel by the inhabitants of Mesopotamia who settled in the kingdom of Israel. The reference is to a mourning ceremony which commemorated his descent into She'ol. See W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, Baltimore, 1940, pp. 16ff., 186ff., 306; Idem., "A Votive Stele Erected by Ben-Hadad I of Damascus to the God Melcarth," *BASOR* 87 (1942), pp. 23–29.

16. F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, Cambridge, Mass.–London, 1975, Comp. General Index.

have the slightest understanding of the mythical nature of paganism. Even the prophets and writers condemned it as the futile, fetishist worship of trees and stones without mentioning its mythical qualities. Even were this argument of Kaufmann's correct (and this is not accepted by Bible scholars), it would be irrelevant to the issues he raises, for the prophets' condemnation of paganism merely expressed their own evaluation of it.<sup>17</sup> However, this does not imply that they or anyone else in Israel did not know about the mythological qualities of paganism. On the contrary, the pagan fertility rites, which involved sexual licentiousness, as is indicated by Hosea 2:3, Jer. 2, etc., were undoubtedly not fetishist, since they were intended to increase fertility by a magic-sympathetic imitation of the intercourse between a god and a goddess. It can be assumed, therefore, that pagan rites in Israel were also rooted in pagan mythological consciousness. Moreover, the story of Micah's graven image (Jud. 17:4) indicates that the people sometimes even worshipped God with graven and molten images, in contravention of the explicit ban in the ten commandments (Ex. 20:4). The prophet Micah also relates that the people sometimes adopted the practise of the worshippers of Molech, who sacrificed their firstborn.<sup>18</sup> Nor was it only the ordinary people who engaged in pagan rituals, for Ezekiel describes the secret pagan rituals practised by the elders of Israel in the courts of the temple (Ezekiel 8:10–12).

Thus, the assumption concerning the anti-mythological monotheistic mentality of the people of Israel can be rejected. On the contrary, the Sages were nearer the historical truth when they said that the desire to engage in idol-worship was "uprooted" during the Babylonian exile, in the time of Mordechai and Esther, or at the beginning of the period of the Second Temple.<sup>19</sup> In other words, Israel became a monotheistic nation during the course of a long historical process, which ended only after the psychological shock of the Destruction of the Temple. Only after the Babylonian Exile did paganism cease to be a national problem. Nevertheless, we fully agree with Kaufmann that the monotheistic idea is an ancient one and was the formative factor in the development of Israelite culture during the period of the First Temple.

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17. Josh. 24:14, 23; Jud. 6:30–32; Isa. 2:8, 20; 42:8; 44:9–20; 46:1–2, 6–7; 48:5; Jer. 2:27; Ezek. 8:10; etc.

18. Micah 6:7: "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

19. See Yoma 69b; Sanhedrin 64a; Judith 8:18. Compare E. E. Urbach, "Hilkhoth 'Avodah Zarah v'ha-Mezi'ut ha-Arkhi'ologit v'ha-Historit ba-Me'ah ha-Sheniyah uva-Me'ah ha-Shelishit," in *Eretz Israel* 5 (1958) (Volume Dedicated to... Prof. B. Mazar), pp. 189–205, see p. 191, n. 15. There, on pp. 190–191, Urbach writes: "The general opinion held by the Sages during the third century was that the urge to worship idols had been exorcised from Israel as early as at the beginning of the period of the Second Temple."

The most serious doubts arise, however, in connection with Kaufmann's definition of monotheism as an anti-mythological belief and his identification of paganism with mythology. It is unreasonable to assume that faith in the supremacy and uniqueness of the God of Israel would be the achievement of the people who left Egypt, as Kaufmann implies. An abstract faith of this kind could not attract a nation of slaves, whose bondage extended back for several generations. What would have fired the imagination of a nation in those circumstances was the message of deliverance, namely, the concept of a god who would liberate them and lead them to freedom. This is indeed the way God defines Himself at the beginning of the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2). This motif recurs innumerable times in the Torah and the historical books. There is no hint of him being the one and only god. On the contrary, the Song of the Sea contains the phrase, "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods?"<sup>20</sup> indicating that, although the gods exist, the Lord is stronger than them. Furthermore, during the Exodus from Egypt the Lord punished not only the Egyptians themselves (Ex. 6:6; 7:4) but also their gods (Ex. 13:12; Num. 33:4). In the second commandment, which forbids the worship of other gods, we read: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," (v. 3) meaning that other gods exist but their worship has no place alongside Him (compare Gen. 11:28). Thus, these early texts refer to the *exclusive worship* of the Lord, but not to the uniqueness of His *existence*.<sup>21</sup> Later on, another prohibition is added in this connection: the ban on making graven images or pictures of "anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." (v. 4, 5).

This prohibition appears to be directed against the "other gods" mentioned previously. Other passages provide evidence of their existence. Thus, Deuteronomy 4:19: "And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the Lord thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven." The host of heaven, then, are the gods which the Lord has given to all the nations on earth. In Deuteronomy 32:8, we find: "When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the sons of God."<sup>22</sup> The number of nations accords with the number of their gods, each nation having its own gods, as is foreseen in Isaiah's vision of the last days in the Book of Micah: "For all people will walk *every one in the name of*

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20. Rashi interprets *el* in its secular sense, i.e., "power," but this does not seem to be the original meaning of the text.

21. Nahmanides explains "other gods" as divine creatures, such as angels, meaning that it is forbidden to worship them. However, there is no linguistic basis for this interpretation.

22. According to the Septuagint, in contrast to the Masoretic text, which reads, "Israel."

*his god*, and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever” (Micah 4:5).

Thus, in its initial stages, monotheism emerged as a faith which centered on the monotheistic *worship* of the Lord, the principal justification for this being historical by nature: He took Israel out of Egypt, led them through the sea and destroyed their enemies (Ex. 15; 20:2; etc.). This focus on the monotheistic worship of the Lord did not involve belief in His monotheistic existence at the outset, however. This awareness was the outcome of historical experience, which has been explained at length by Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40:12ff.).

## V

In comparison with monotheistic myth, pagan myth is essentially based upon two fundamental assumptions: the ontological continuum and the personalization of the universe. Monotheism, by contrast, is based on the complete ontological detachment of God and His associates from the world and the reduced personalization of the universe, to the point where only two characters exist: God and man. Nevertheless, personalization recurs from time to time in poetry, particularly when the writer addresses the denizens of the upper and lower regions, calling upon them to join with him in praising God (Psalms 93; 96:1; 98:7–8; 114; 148). Likewise, many hymns mention nature’s trembling before the Lord.<sup>23</sup> Personalization recurs in prose for the purpose of generating intimacy and making the world Israel’s associate in shaping its life. Thus, the land vomited out the inhabitants of Canaan because of their abominations (Leviticus 18:25, 28). Israel is warned not to do as the nations, lest the land vomit them forth too (Ibid., 18:28; 20:22). The land shall lie fallow (“keep a sabbath”) in the seventh and fiftieth years, together with man and beast; the term “keep a sabbath” applies to everyone, without exception (Leviticus 25:2, 4, 5, 6). If Israel does not keep the seventh and fiftieth years God will scatter them among the nations: “Then shall the land enjoy her sabbaths.. As long as it lieth desolate it shall rest; because it did not rest in your sabbaths, when ye dwelt upon it” (Lev. 26:34–35, 43). Despite the frequent personification of nature in poetry and in certain prose passages in the Bible, it may be said that the general trend in the Bible is towards the depersonification of the universe, particularly in comparison with the pagan view.

The foregoing leads us to two conclusions:

1. God and man are distinguished from the cosmos by their personal nature, the

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23. S. E. Lowenstamm, “Ra’adat ha-Teva’ bi-sha’at Hofa’at ha-Shem,” *Oz le-David*, Jerusalem, 1964, pp. 508–520; Jörg Jeremias, *Theophanie, die Geschichte einer alttestamentlichen Gattung*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1965, pp. 73–117.

universe losing all its divine and personal characteristics, becoming dead matter, of a physical or organic nature.

2. There is no ontological connection, however, between God and his world, including man. On the contrary, there is an unbridgable gulf between them. God is outside His world, and totally different from it by His very nature. He and His celestial host are devoid of any material or biological essence whatsoever. These have no male or female qualities; quarrels, envy, competition, intercourse, birth or death do not exist there. Angels or the sons of God never engage in sexual intercourse with one another or with members of the human race. The passage in Genesis 6:1–4 is an isolated fragment which has entered the text, though originating in a pagan environment. The author, moreover, *neutralizes* its living meaning, fossilizing it by referring to God's decision to restrict man's span of life to one hundred and twenty years and by stressing the fact that the offspring of these alliances, the giants, have long since ceased to exist.

A similar approach is apparent in Psalm 82, in which the poet assumes that in ancient times the gods and the sons of gods were set over men as judges, as is also hinted in Deuteronomy 32:8: "... he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel." As stated above (see note 22), according to the Septuagint and the fragments found at Qumran, the original version was: "the sons of God," (*bene 'el*) and not "the children of Israel" (*bene Yisra'el*); that is, the number of nations for which God set boundaries matched the number of gods appointed over them. According to Psalm 82, however, God deposed them and made them ordinary mortals because of the injustice and oppression they had caused, taking the reins for Himself in order to mete out justice.<sup>24</sup>

In brief, God the creator now stands alone facing His handiwork. He uses thunder, lightning, winds and natural phenomena for His purposes, these being objects totally devoid of all personal nature. The heavenly host, whether as celestial servants surrounding God's throne or as emissaries sent to man on God's errands, has been deprived of its voluntary aspect, which is an integral part of personality. Its members have no will of their own, no individuality or name. The meaning of their titles — Ofanim, seraphs, holy creatures, sons of god, assembly of saints, etc. — are obscure. It is obvious that these are not personal names.<sup>25</sup> Angels appear on earth as emissaries of God, and disappear once their errand is completed. They appear in "human" form, and sometimes their supernatural nature is revealed only after they have vanished or when they accomplish miracles (Gen.

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24. This psalm has occupied the author intensively during the past few years. While this is not the place to cite the extensive literature on the subject, the reader is advised to consult S. E. Loewenstamm, "Nahlat ha-Shem," in the forthcoming Cassuto Memorial Volume.

25. On this subject, see J. Licht, *vid.* "Malakh Adonay," *Entseklpedyah Mikra'it* IV, pp. 975–990.

18–19, Jud. 13, etc.). In some instances the Bible does not make a clear distinction between God and his minions or the angel of the Lord (Exodus 3, 2, 4, etc.), so that it is even difficult to discern the separate existence of the angel. On one occasion, the Bible deliberately intermingles two parallel narratives, one concerning the personal appearance of the Lord and the other the arrival of three men-angels, in order thereby to obscure the anthropomorphic nature of God and the distinction between the Lord and His angels (Gen. 18–19).<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the prohibition on making idols or graven images, namely, attempting to reproduce God's form in any way, whether as a statue or a carving, the Bible abounds in graphic and anthropomorphic descriptions of God. This trend recurs several times in Exodus: According to Exodus 23:20–21, 23, the Lord promises to send an angel: "Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared. Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not; for he will not pardon your transgressions; *for my name is in him.*" This assurance is based on the assumption that the angel symbolizes the presence of God; thus, this passage reflects the lack of distinction between God and His angels. In contrast, in Exodus 32:2–3, we find: "And I will send an angel before thee. . . for I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiff-necked people; lest I consume thee in the way." In this case it is obvious that the assumption is that a clear distinction should be made between the personality of the lord and that of the angel. Moses responds by charging: "If thy presence not go with me, carry us not up hence" (33:15). And he requests: "I pray thee, go among us; for it is a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin. . ." (34:9). These verses also deal with the direct presence of the Lord, though this time the motif of the angel is absent. This indicates that the angel motif is omitted and direct reference is made to the "face" (*panim*) or "glory" (*kavod*) of the Lord when the objective is to eliminate all doubts regarding His direct presence. It would seem that ancient folk legends tended to confuse these two spheres, while theological reflection gradually drew a distinction between the Lord and His angels. God walks in the garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8); He descends from heaven in order to see the men of Sodom and the builders of the tower (Genesis 11:5; 18:2); He appears to Abraham as he sits at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day (Genesis 18:1), walks about with him and answers his penetrating questions. The passage concludes with the words: "And the Lord went his way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham" (18:33).

At the ford of Jabbok Jacob remains alone ". . . and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day" (32:24). When he is unable to defeat Jacob, the

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26. B. Uffenheimer, "Genesis 18–19, A New Approach," *Mélanges André Néher*, Paris, 1975, pp. 145–173.

mysterious man blesses him, changing his name to Israel "... for you have striven with God (*elohim*) and with men and have prevailed" (29); he leaves without disclosing his name: "And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (31). It transpires that Jacob thought that *God* had fought with him and that he had seen Him face to face. According to the tradition reflected in the book of Hosea the 'man' was only an angel (Hosea 12:5), while the Bible maintains a certain lack of clarity on this point. Be that as it may, angels appear as men, and have no special distinguishing marks other than the fact that, according to certain legends, they were capable of performing miracles.

Nevertheless, the common feature of all these traditions is a total ontic differentiation between angels, *bene elohim* (divine beings), and human beings. Angels never became human beings, nor were human-beings elevated to a super-human divine status. The few exceptions, which will be dealt with in the following chapter, corroborate this basic trend in biblical myth.

In referring to Moses, the direct presence of the Lord is stressed in very concrete terms. We read that the Lord speaks to him "mouth to mouth" (Num. 12:8), and that the Lord "knew him face to face" (Deut. 34:10). On the other hand, God says to Moses, "Thou canst not see my face, for there shall no man see me and live. . . and thou shalt see my back parts; but my face shall not be seen" (Ex. 33:20, 23). The elders of Israel saw God in Sinai, ". . .and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness" (Ex. 24:10).

The dispute between these traditions relates to the question whether it is *permitted* to see Him, though all are agreed that it is *possible* to see Him. At Mount Sinai He reveals Himself before the people as a king. Elsewhere Israel is depicted as His 'children' (Deuteronomy 14:1), His 'peculiar treasure' (Exodus 19:5)<sup>27</sup> and his 'inheritance',<sup>28</sup> and He dwells among them (Exodus 29:45 etc.).

Micaiah the son of Imlah saw Him sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him (I Kings 22:19), in similar terms to those we find in Job, Ch. 1-2. Isaiah saw Him sitting "upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple" (Isaiah 6:1). Ezekiel saw Him in His celestial chariot and His appearance was "of a man above upon it . . .as the appearance of fire round about within it, from the appearance of his lions even downward" (Ezekiel 1:26, 27). Daniel beheld the "Ancient of days" sitting on his throne, "whose garment

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27. For the theo-political significance of the term *segulah*, see my article, "Segulah," in *Beth Mikra* 22 (1977), pp. 427-434.

28. See Deut. 9:26, 29; I K. 8:51-53; Isa. 63:17; Joel 2:17; Micah 7:14, 18; Ps. 28:9; 74:2; etc.

was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool” (Daniel 7:9). Deutero-Isaiah saw him as a man of war (compare also Exodus 15:3) coming “with dyed garments from Bozrah... glorious in his apparel, travelling in the greatness of his strength” (Isa. 63:1). He answers the prophet’s question himself: “I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me; for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment” (Ibid., v. 3).

Thus, the natural tie based on common material ground between God, man and the world is replaced by a voluntary relationship deriving from God’s concern for His world and His explicit demands on man in general and Israel in particular. This relationship may take on different forms.

The patriarchal stories refer to a personal covenant between God and the Patriarchs (see Genesis 15, etc.). In the biblical references to the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Mount Sinai, the covenant between God and His people is described in terms of the vassal treaties of the ancient Near East. This is the foundation of the divine kingdom in Israel, with its theopolitical and social implications. God is perceived literally as Israel’s king, lawgiver and military overlord. Another form of relationship is the paternal one: “You are the sons of the Lord your God,” (Deuteronomy 14:1), “Thus says the Lord my God, Israel is my first-born son,” (Exodus 4:22), etc. A fourth relationship is of an erotic character, as that between man and woman (Hosea 1–3; Jeremiah 2:1ff.). Hosea and Jeremiah describe Him in erotic terms as the husband of Israel the bride, as the husband of her youth. The bond between them is compared to that between a man and his wife or a bridegroom and his bride (Hos. 2:3–22; Jer. 2:1–2). In this connection, we ought to mention Ezekiel 16, in which the relationship between god and Israel is depicted with great concreteness, which gave rise to the later Midrashic interpretation which expanded these anthropomorphic elements in an unprecedented way.<sup>29</sup>

Special emphasis should also be placed on the erotic motif in the mystic Midrash, *Canticles Rabbah*, in which the relations between god and *Knesset Yisrael* (the Community of Israel) are depicted as those between two lovers.

From all this we learn that the uniqueness of the Biblical God is very far from being the result of abstraction. This contrasts with pre-classical Greek philosophy, where the concept of the divine is devoid of any personal character, its outstanding feature being ontological unity.<sup>30</sup> This is not the case with biblical

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29. Deut. R., ed. S. Lieberman, Jerusalem, 1949, p. 14. Cf. below, n. 33.

30. Y. Amir, “Die Begegnung des Biblischen und des Philosophischen Monotheismus als Grundthema des Jüdischen Hellenismus,” *Evangelische Theologie* 38 (1972), pp. 2–19.

monotheism, which refers not to a divinity which is the result of philosophical contemplation by individuals but to a god who has revealed himself to an entire nation. He has become known to it through its historical experience as a redeeming and delivering God with a strong and outstretched arm, "a man of war" (Exodus 15:3). He is not a pure, metaphysical concept but a concrete, dynamic figure to whom prayers may be addressed and requests made, who makes explicit demands on the nation as well as on each and every individual within it. He is not an abstract idea concealed behind phenomena but a personality who reveals Himself to man and to the children of Israel in a direct way, applying to everyone, without exception. He is a jealous person who is on no account prepared to tolerate their worshipping anyone else but Him. Every individual in the nation must devote himself to Him alone, "with all your soul and with all your heart and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5). From this we learn that the concretization or personalization which was attacked so scathingly by the medieval philosophers is in fact the kernel of the Biblical god, since only by being a paradigmatic personality can He command people to follow Him. Only because He is a "man" can it be said that man was created "in his image and likeness." Only for this reason can He command the individual and the community: "Ye shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2), and it is in this vein that Abba Saul says in Sifra (Parashat Kedoshim, par. 2): "What should the entourage of the king do but imitate the king?" Israel is regarded as God's entourage, they are the closest to Him, consequently they must imitate Him in their way of life.

The pictorial contours of God are outlined more emphatically in the Midrash. There we read that God revealed Himself on the sea "as a young warrior" and on Mount Sinai "as a merciful old man."<sup>31</sup> As the foregoing has shown, the Midrash translates the erotic allegory of Ezekiel 16 into the language of mythic realism. Moreover, in the Midrash there is both a distinct tendency towards democratization of the experience of revelation and a daring expansion of the mythical elements already contained in the biblical story, which shocked the medieval philosophers.<sup>32</sup> This kind of re-mythologization bear witness to those qualities of

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31. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *Ba-Hodesh*, Par. 5, pp. 219–220; Tanhuma, ed. Buber, *Yitro*, Ch. 16, p. 40. In Tanhuma we find the following passage: "On the sea the Holy One, blessed be He, appeared to them as a young warrior, and on Mt. Sinai as a scribe teaching the law."

32. See, for example: Ex. R. 23:15, "After crossing the Sea, each one points with his finger and says, 'This is my God and I will glorify Him'"; JT Sotah 5:4, "When our forefathers were in their mothers' arms and infants suckled their mothers' breasts, when they saw the Divine Presence (*Shekhinah*) the babes raised their heads"; Mekhilta de-R. Ishmael, *Shira*, 3, pp. 126–27, "Rabbi Eliezer comments, 'How do we know that a handmaiden at the Sea saw more than Isaiah or Ezekiel? From the phrase, 'I speak through the prophets in parables'; Sotah 11b "Because they had seen him (i.e., the children), they recognized Him and burst into song, saying, 'This is my God and I will glorify Him!'" Cf. Ex. R. 1:16; Deut. R., op. cit. Regarding the issue of anthropomorphism in Rabbinic literature, see E. E. Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and*

living faith which require an atmosphere of intimacy that can only be created by a concrete, personal presentation of God.

## VI

It is generally accepted by scholars that the Biblical idea of creation is merely a secondary *development*, since the fundamental basis of monotheism lies in historical experience. In more precise terms, the covenant between the nation and its God is the kernel of this belief and its formative basis.<sup>33</sup> It is only by accepting this assumption that the relative significance of the idea of creation can be assessed. In the earliest sources, the principal reason God gives for His demands on Israel is His having “brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage,” but not His being the creator of the world. The latter aspect is recognized by the poets and prophets who observed the universe and its marvels. This subject is also raised in Wisdom Literature, among other places in Prov. 8 and Job 28, where the descriptions are taken from early traditions and are the outcome of poetic intuition and theological reflection. The features of monotheistic myth which have been sketched above are also evident in the world-picture which emerges here. The formation of the world is not a matter for intercourse and birth, as depicted in the theogonies of the other nations; nor can one find here the theomachic simile which is another element in creation stories. The ontological detachment of the God of Israel from the universe obviates the theogenic motifs *a priori*, and the absolute supremacy of His will inevitably annuls any dramatic explanation of the formation of the world through battles between gods. The references to wars against the sea monsters, which originated in Canaanite literature and apparently won a place in the minds of ordinary people,<sup>34</sup> were modified so that the great sea monsters were depicted as God’s creatures which undertake a hopeless rebellion. There is no dramatic tension in these passages because their outcome is a foregone conclusion. The prophets, poets and authors use various devices to neutralize this myth. The author of the creation narrative adopts the most extreme course by stressing the fact that “the great whales” (Gen. 1:21) are not monstrous, unnatural creatures but were created on the fifth day together with the other denizens of the water. In Isaiah 27:1 “Leviathan, the piercing serpent, even Leviathan the crooked serpent” and “the Dragon that is in the sea” no longer signify creatures but symbolize the forces of evil which the Lord will one day destroy. It is on the tradition concerning God’s primeval battle with these forces that Deutero-Isaiah and the author of

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*Beliefs*. Jerusalem, 1975, pp. 135–213. On this entire complex of midrashim, see A. Green, “The Children in Egypt and the Theophany at the Sea,” *Judaism* 24 (1975), 446–56.

33. See my book, *ha-Nevu’ah ha-Kedumah be-Yisra’el*, Jerusalem, 1973, and also G. Fohrer, “Studien zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie und Geschichte,” *BZAW* 115 (1969), p. 163.

34. See, for example, Isa. 27:1; 51:9–11; Ps. 74:12–17; 89:10–14; 93:3–4; Job 7:12; etc. Cf. U. Cassuto, “The Israelite Epic,” in his *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, Jerusalem, 1975, v. 2:69–109.

the Psalms base their request that God should put on strength and show his might again (Isaiah 51:9–11, Ps. 74:12–23).

The completely new approach which emerges in comparison with the legends of the ancient Near East is the idea of *creation*. This is not the outcome of a biological or physiological process, i.e. intercourse or birth, nor is it connected with the drama of war. It is an *event* initiated by God. In other words, the act of creation is evidence of God's free, unrestricted will, an expression of His loving-kindness and concern for His world. The motif of creation *ex nihilo* which was to occupy Jewish and Christian thought is still far removed from the world-picture of the Bible. The main point is that *ontological detachment* is accompanied by the *voluntary relationship* between God and His world, a fact witnessed by Israel through its own fate. This is the common ground of all creation traditions in the Bible. Israel's primaeval experience during the Exodus from Egypt, the wanderings through the desert and the revelation of God on Mount Sinai are concrete expressions of this voluntary relationship. This is the infrastructure of the entire Bible, ranging from the narratives of the patriarchs, which were apparently derived from ancient historical traditions, to the historiography of the Chronicler. According to these traditions, God first revealed Himself to Abraham and made a covenant with him assuring him of descendants and land. The Midrashic legends which relate that Adam and Abraham *discovered* God through observing nature date from a later period and arose from the encounter between the culture of Israel and the observing, reflective culture of Greece. The origins of monotheism lie in revelation rather than observing and discovering; and this is not intrinsically connected with a new cosmological truth but with the transmission of commandments and precepts. The uniqueness of this faith lies, therefore, in the obligations imposed on the individual and society rather than in the resultant intellectual cognition. According to this schema, all the literary, religious and social achievement of Israel was formed during the period of the First Temple.

This consciousness of ontological detachment also constituted the infrastructure for the legislation and social institutions reflecting Israel's relation to its country and other nations. It was against this background that Biblical historiography and eschatology developed. This formed the framework within which differences between individuals and generations were revealed, some tending towards excessive anthropomorphisms while others, regarding this as a defect, attempted to avoid mythic expression by striving for conceptualization. Within this framework the Mishnaic and apocryphal literature developed.

The first break in this closed network is connected with the rise of early Christianity, since acceptance of the idea of incarnation — which was taken from the royal tradition of the ancient east and was widespread in various guises in the Hellenistic world — was the price Christianity paid for its sweeping success in

conquering the Roman empire. By doing so it placed itself beyond Biblical, Talmudic and Midrashic monotheism as well as that of most Jewish apocryphal literature, opening itself to a process of paganization from within. The attempt to come to terms theologically with the idea and meaning of incarnation occupies Christian theology and serves as a focus for its internal disputes to this day.

In conclusion: the unique characteristics of monotheistic myth, which changed in accordance with the requirements of time and place, were the image of God as a king who makes a covenant with His people, reveals Himself to it and to individuals in various forms, fights its battles and grants it law and statutes, on the one hand, and as the father who loves and tests His people, as well as the loving bridegroom and husband, on the other. This creative process was accompanied by a constant confrontation with the fragments of pagan myth which penetrated Israel from the Canaanite environment. The object of this struggle was to uproot pagan myth or to integrate it within the framework of the Biblical world. The Biblical writers adopted a variety of approaches to achieve this end:

1. Reduction: Some prophets and authors continued to accept the Sea myth, though reducing the sea and its denizens from a divine level to that of titanic monsters defeated and slain by God in *primaeval* battles (Isa. 51:9–11; Ps. 74:13–16; etc.), or repressed and imprisoned by God (Ps. 89:10–11; Job 38:8–11; etc.).

2. Depersonification: Another way was to alter myth in such a way as to remove the personal nature of its protagonists. The sea and the depths became *geographical concepts* (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 104:25; etc.), and the great whales changed from ancient monsters into ordinary creatures, created by God (Gen. 1:21).

3. Ironization: Some writers did not have recourse to these transformations, and simply ridiculed myth to deprive it of its seriousness, as in the words of the psalmist: “There is Leviathan, whom You have made to sport with” (Ps. 104:26), etc.

4. Allegorization: Another way of neutralizing pagan myth is through its *allegorical interpretation*, either regarding the ancient monsters as a symbol of the forces of evil whom God is to destroy in the end of days (Isa. 27:1), or through historicization, the exodus from Egypt and the passage through the Red Sea being depicted in terms of God’s struggle with the mythical forces of the sea (Isa. 51:9–11).

5. Antiquarization: In some cases pagan myth is eliminated by antiquarization, as is the case in Genesis 6:1–4 and Psalm 82. Gen. 6:1–4 indicates that the sons of God did indeed mate with the daughters of men in ancient times, but the results

of these unions have long since vanished from the earth, since the giants, who were “mighty men which were of old, men of reknown” (Gen. 6:4) no longer exist and human life has been restricted to one hundred twenty years, unlike former generations. According to Psalm 82, God removed the sons of God from their position of authority over the nations because of the injustice they perpetrated, and made them ordinary mortals. “But you shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes” (Ps. 82:7). Antiquarization deprives these myths of their contemporary significance.

These are some of the ways by which the Bible contends with pagan myth, while at the same time creating and expanding the monotheistic myth of God the king, the judge, the man of war and the loving God who is both bridegroom and husband.

## VII

Finally, a short remark about the relationship of Biblical monotheism to the long hymn to Aton, from the days of Akh-en-Aton (approximately 1380–1362) which has been considered by many scholars to constitute the earliest evidence of monotheism.<sup>35</sup> Aton is described in it as “The sole god, with whom there is no other.” He is the creator and supplier of the land of Canaan, Nubia and Egypt, the creator of everything, lord of the universe who gives life to all creatures. The great innovation in this hymn is the liberation from ancient Egyptian mythology: Aton created himself and his world. Nevertheless, the term monotheism as defined above does not apply here. Although his name is like that of one of the early gods, he is not simply called the sun but ‘the wheel of the sun’ (‘eten-aton’). This name, which had previously been used for religious purposes,<sup>36</sup> is firm proof that there was pantheistic-pagan identification of the god with the sun itself. Secondly, even afterwards the king was considered to be the embodiment of the sun-god on earth. The son of the king was “The eternal son who emerged from the sun... Who is reborn each morning like the sun (god), his father.” The Egyptian theologians developed a hierarchical trinity consisting of Aton himself, “Aton who dwells in the temple of Aton at Akhetaton,” namely, his hypostasis in the temple built by the king at his new capital, and the king himself.<sup>37</sup> These are indications of pagan pantheism. Moreover, the new religion contained no social or ethical message and should, therefore, be defined as proto-monotheism. It led to the most decisive turning point in human history, being borne along on the waves of the syncretist culture of the late bronze age.

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35. The translation of this text may be found in A. Erman, *Die Literatur der Ägypter*, Leipzig, 1923, p. 350ff.; *ANET*, pp. 367–368; J. H. Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*, New York, 1933, pp. 275–277.

36. A. Erman, *Ägypten und ägyptisches Leben im Altertum*, Tübingen, 1923, p. 298.

37. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, pp. 132–133.