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An Early History of Yahweh

The origins of Yahweh, the national God of Israel in the Hebrew Bible, have long been a puzzle to scholars. The name is not found in any known texts before 1200 BCE, and is seldom seen outside of Israelite texts after that period (van der Toorn 1999, pgs.910-911). Israel was the only West Semitic culture to worship Yahweh even though they shared other deities with other Canaanite groups (van der Toorn 1999, p.910). The evidence suggests that Yahweh's introduction to Israel was molded by complicated historical processes, and that the original god of Israel may well have been El, as witnessed by the use of this name in the very name Israel (a name that might mean "El contends," or "El rules"), as well as the fact that it is El epithets that are used in Genesis (Smith 2002, p.32). This paper will explore the evidence that supports the so-called Kenite hypothesis in order to understand where Yahweh came from and who worshiped him before the ancient Hebrews did. After examining the Kenite hypothesis, the Canaanite origins of Yahweh's unique characteristics will also be explored in an attempt to understand how the God worshiped within the monotheistic religious traditions came into being.

The Kenite theory was originally put forth by the Dutch historian Cornelis P. Tiele in 1872 and expanded upon by B. Stade. The original version of this hypothesis posits that Moses learned Yahweh worship from his Midianite father-in-law, and the Bible provides quite a bit of evidence for this connection. The modern version of this theory now says that the Kenites brought Yahweh north to the Israelites who were already established in the hill country east of

the Jordan River (van der Toorn 1999, pgs.912-913). The Moses story is seen as a later tradition which was written to justify the Levitical priest class (van der Toorn 1999, p.912). The Kenites were a sub-group of the nomadic Midianites who worshiped Yahweh, as did the Edomites (van der Toorn 1999, p.912). It has even been suggested that the Kenites were Yahweh's ritual experts (Halpern 1992, p.19). This theory explains: Yahweh's absence from early West Semitic literature, Yahweh's connection to the area of Edom, Moses' connection to the Kenites, and the positive view of the Kenites found in the Bible. The major problem with the original Kenite hypothesis is that it does not fit well with the evidence that suggests Israel descended from Canaan (van der Toorn 1999, p.912). This theory has gained support from many modern scholars ever since its introduction (van der Toorn 1999, p.912).

The notion that the Kenites introduced Israel to Yahweh worship assumes that the Kenites worshipped Yahweh before there was any notion of a political entity called Israel. The existence of two early Egyptian texts found in temples at Soleb and Amarah-West explains why scholars believe Yahweh was not initially associated with the early Israelites. The first is from the time of Amenhophis III in the Fourteenth century BCE, and the second is from the time of Ramses II in the Thirteenth century BCE. The name Yahu appears to be used as a toponym in the phrase "Yahu in the land of the Shasu-beduins" (van der Toorn 1999, p.911). Exactly what specific type of geographic feature it refers to is unknown (Hasel 2003, p.29). If it is a place name, it may have been used as such before Israel emerged as a nation. It is also possible that Yahu is being used here as a personal name (Halpern 1992, p.20). Either way, it is considered reasonable that a deity shares the name, and it is not mentioned within a Palestinian or Israelite context (van der Toorn 1999, p.911). The group that the name Yahu is connected to, the Shasu, is considered by the Egyptians to be a social class of wanderers belonging to no particular tribe

(Ward 1992, p.1167). The Egyptians associated the Shasu with the area of Edom (Ward 1992, p.1165). Both of these inscriptions are dated well before Israel was first recognized as a separate political entity at around 1200 BCE.

There are many points of contact to be found between the Kenites and the Israelites, both biblically and extra biblically. It is known that the Kenites and relations of Edomites traded in North Israel (van der Toorn 1999, p.912-913). The Kenites also seem to have had regular commerce with Manasseh and Josiah in the Seventh century BCE, around Arad, and may even have traded as far as Jerusalem (Halpern 1992, p.19). An ancient temple at Timna has yielded some evidence from the Twelfth century BCE, which would be from long before any Israelite text mentions Yahweh, and suggests some interaction between Israel and the Midianites. A Bronze snake and some Midianite pottery have been found there, and though the serpent, being the only animal associated with the Yahweh cult, is suggestive of a connection with Moses via the copper snake in Numbers 21:8-9, this evidence is not conclusive (Halpern 1992, p.20). Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that the area now associated with Edom, which was not an actual state at the time in question, was occupied by a Midianite merchant culture. This would have been at the time when the story of the Exodus would have had the Hebrews passing through the area (Halpern 1992, p.20).

The most important biblical evidence supporting the connection between Israel and the Kenites is the tradition that Moses the law giver married into a family of Midianites. This idea is presented in detail in the Tanakh, and the biblical evidence is considered to be strong (Mendenhall 1992, p.816-817). In the tradition that calls Moses' father-in-law by the name Jethro, he is specifically referred to as a "priest of Midian" (Exod. 3:1 and 18:1). In the tradition that names Moses' father-in-law as Reuel, he is again referred to as a "priest of Midian" (Exod.

2:16-18). The book of Judges relates that Moses' father-in-law is named Hobab and that he is a Kenite (Judg. 4:11). This story also tells that some of the Kenites had split off and were allied with Deborah, the famous female Israelite Judge, and her general Barak. Another story, earlier in Judges, explains that the Kenites helped conquer part of the Promised Land south of Arad. These Kenites were specifically descended from the father-in-law of Moses, who is unnamed here (Judg. 1:16). This comparison displays not only Moses' family connections with the Kenites, but also shows that the Kenites and Midianites were considered to somehow be the same group of people. Probably, the Kenites were a sub-group within the Midianite structure (Halpern 1992, p.20).

Further biblical evidence displays connections between the two groups that are not dependent on the Moses story. Two locations are mentioned in a list of towns near the southeast border of Judah and Edom, in the book of Joshua 15:22 and 57. The towns Kinah and Kain are considered to be Kenite territory (Halpern 1992, p.18). The tradition of a strong friendship between the Kenites and Israelites even extends as far as the rise of the first Hebrew king, Saul. While Saul was laying siege to the city of Amalek, he allowed the Kenites to withdraw from the Amalekites' military alliance for the sake of their former alliance with Israel (1 Sam. 5-6). The amount of evidence supporting a positive relationship between the Kenites and ancient Israel is quite significant.

Though closely allied throughout Israel's early history, the Kenites are considered a group separate from them. Presently, the archeological and linguistic evidence suggests that early Israelite culture was strongly intertwined with Canaanite culture at its inception (Smith 2002, p.19-24). However, these two cultures are politically separate by around 1200 BCE as witnessed by the Merneptah Stele, which, in its inscription, designates Israel as a separate people within

Canaan, hence on the eastern side of the Jordan River (Hasel 2003, p.27). Visually, the stele portrays the Israelites as stereotypical Canaanites (Hasel 2003, p.36). Interestingly, the Merneptah Stele does not relate the Israelite's social structure, referring to them simply as a people (Hasel 2003, p.27). The Kenites, who are associated with the Edom region of the Transjordan, may be one of the groups of Shasu who were known to live there at the time (Blenkinsopp 2008, p.150). Another region the Kenites are associated with, called Seir, is also assumed to be located somewhere to the west of the Jordan River (Hasel 2003, p.29).

In fact, Seir is traditionally considered to be one of the mountains associated with Yahweh in the Bible, along with Sinai, Paran, and Teman, as well as the land of Edom (Smith 2002, p.80-81). Seir seems to be presented as if it is somewhere in Edom, and Yahweh's presence there is associated with storm symbolism in Judges 5:4. In the next verse, He is associated with Sinai, which is even further south (Judges 5:5). Earlier in the Tanakh, Yahweh is spoken of, with more storm language, as coming from Sinai, as well as appearing at Paran and Seir (Deut. 33:2). In the Prophets, Yahweh is said to come from Teman and Paran (Hab. 3:3). Paran is a wilderness south of Israel and is considered to be on the route of the Exodus (Hamilton 1992, p.162). Teman may refer to either a southern region within Edom, or it may simply refer to the cardinal direction of south (Knouf 1992, p.348). The association that Yahweh has with these mountains to the south is an indication that He may have originally been a god among the Kenites, who, as has already been established, are many times associated with the south (Halpern 1992, p.18).

The archeological site at Kuntillet 'Ajrud provides evidence connecting Yahweh who was worshipped in Samaria, with Yahweh of "the south" (Meshel 1992, p.109). This ancient site appears to have been a place of worship at a crossroads, near some wells, in the Sinai (Meshel

1992, p.103). The site seems to have supported priests and did receive pottery from Jerusalem (Meshel 1992, p.106-107). Plaster found near some of the doorways has Hebrew inscriptions written on it in Phoenician script, and this suggests the practice of writing on doorposts found in Deuteronomy 6:9 (Meshel 1992, p.105). The most important find at this site, however, is a two line inscription which reads “Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah” (Meshel 1992, p.107). This is important physical extra-biblical evidence associating Yahweh worshipped by the Samaritans, with the southern Yahweh originally worshipped by the Kenites, in both the name “Yahweh of Teman”, as well as the fact that Kuntillet ‘Ajrud is in the Sinai.

Although the Kenite hypothesis is very likely, it is not yet considered to be proven. The earliest mention of Yahweh connects him to the Shasu, a group probably synonymous with the Kenites. Physical evidence, whose existence is not hinted at in the Bible, tells a possible story of interaction between Israel and the Kenites in a religious context. Of course, the Bible says much about Moses’ familial relationship with the Kenites, or Midianites, but also has other clues about the close interrelationship between the Kenites and the Israelites that do not rely on the Moses story. Some of this same evidence also suggests that the Kenites and Midianites were the same people. The Merneptah Stele, which is the earliest historical mention of Israel, also proves that they were not the same group as the Kenites. Finally, Yahweh is associated with several geographical locations to the south of Israel, which are the same regions with which the Kenites are associated, and traditionally have nothing to do with Canaan (Smith 2002, p.25). There is even physical evidence to suggest that the Yahweh of Israel is the same as this Yahweh of “the south”.

There is no evidence to suggest what Yahweh’s attributes were before Israel adopted Him (Smith 2002, p.55). In order to understand how Yahweh attained some of his more popular

attributes, such as being a father god, a warrior god, and a storm god, it is necessary to first understand how the ancient Israelites viewed their relationship with their Canaanite neighbors. As mentioned above, the earliest Israelite settlements in the hills east of the Jordan River were physically indistinguishable from the rest of Canaan. Despite this lack of hard evidence, it would appear that the Israelites considered themselves quite separate from the rest of Canaan, as witnessed in Judges 5, an older section of the Tanakh (Smith 2002, p.28). They may also have shared a sense of separateness based on the Moses and Exodus stories, as well as the on the fact that they, among all the Western Semites, worshipped Yahweh (Smith 2002, p.31). However, despite their probable self-identity, it is very likely that Ugaritic religion, which influenced Canaanite religion prior to and during the time of the Israelite emergence, influenced the Israelites' earliest polytheistic religion (Smith 2002, p.28). This influence was brought in the forms of El, Baal, and Asherah from the Canaanite/Ugaritic pantheons (Smith 2002, p.30).

Yahweh's relationship with El is presented early on in the Tanakh. In Deuteronomy 32:8-9, Most High, an epithet for El, has parceled out the various nations to different deities. Israel is the nation assigned to Yahweh, while El is spoken of as if he is a separate deity (Smith 2002, p.32). While the lack of biblical polemics against El is seen as evidence that the two became identified early on, we find further evidence for conflation in Exodus 6:2-3. Here, Yahweh admits to having identified himself as El Shadday to the earlier patriarchs, but is now revealing himself as Yahweh to Moses (Smith 2002, pgs.33-34). Of course, this identification takes place to the south of Israel, in Sinai, an area associated with the Kenites, and is a central event within the Moses story.

Yahweh also ends up sharing some attributes that were originally strongly associated with El. Both are considered to be compassionate or merciful. Both appear in dreams or visions

and act as divine patrons (Smith 2002, p.39). The dwellings of each are said to be tents placed in the midst of cosmic waters (Smith 2002, pgs.39-40). Both El and Yahweh are visualized as bearded and elderly fathers at the head of a pantheon of lesser gods (Smith 2002, pgs.35-37). This divine assembly reflects the existence, and in the few mentioned individual positions, the structure of royal courts in Canaan and Israel (Smith 2002, pgs.37-39). This is not the kind of cosmic structure one would expect to find among the nomadic Kenites. Here it can be seen that Yahweh has taken the place of El within the Israelite pantheon.

Another Canaanite deity associated with Yahweh is Asherah, though there is very little to suggest that Asherah was known as a separate goddess or consort to Yahweh in the Tanakh. There are some verses and epithets that do possibly refer to her as a separate being (Smith 2002, pgs.49-52). Her name does not appear as an element within any Hebrew names (Smith 2002, p.48). Her totems, a type of pole called an asherah, and possibly some religious objects known as asherim, appear to have been mere religious symbols within Israelite religion (Smith 2002, p.108-109). Another inscription at Kuntillet 'Ajrud also mentions asherah in connection with Yahweh of Samaria (Smith 2002, p.118). However, it cannot be ascertained whether the asherah is a goddess or an assimilated symbol (Smith 2002, pgs.124-125). Though often opposed, the asherah concept was associated with Yahweh and not Baal, as has often been stated (Smith 2002, pgs.115-116). The prophetic and legal condemnations of asherah refer to the symbol (Smith 2002, p.131). Mentions of the Goddess Asherah within the Bible are problematic and seem to be referring to her as El's consort (Smith 2002, p.130). In later traditions, Asherah is not viewed as a goddess, but instead, is seen as Yahweh's wisdom, which is personified as feminine (Smith 2002, pgs.133-135). Though scholars do not completely understand the biblical Asherah, it

seems she became associated with Yahweh because of her initial association with El, whose position Yahweh appropriated.

While El became identified with Yahweh early in Israelite history, Yahweh and Baal existed side by side within the culture, eventually competing with each other (Smith 2002, p.33). In fact, King Ahab's notorious promotion of Baal was probably not a radical concept at the time as cults for both Baal and Yahweh had been in peaceful coexistence up to that point. The crown supported both gods, though the repression of Yahweh's prophets is probably true (Smith 2002, pgs.71-72). The book of Hosea is written as if some worshippers in North Israel did not even distinguish between Baal and Yahweh at the time it was written (Smith 2002, pgs.73-75). In fact, Baal remained a popular divinity until the end of the South Kingdom, and was not seen as a threat prior to the Ninth century BCE (Smith 2002, p.75).

Baal and Yahweh did share some interesting imagery. Yahweh is sometimes addressed with Baal epithets (Smith 2002, pgs.82-83). Both are said to ride on clouds (Smith 2002, p.82). Yahweh's bull imagery is borrowed from both Baal and El (Smith 2002, pgs.83-85). Both gods are renowned for defeating monsters, as well as the same Canaanite gods, Yamm and Mot (Smith 2002, pgs.85-88). Though the Bible only speaks of Baal as a weather god, and Yahweh as a warrior god, it now seems that Yahweh borrowed his accomplishments as a warrior from Baal, who was known to the Israelites before Yahweh (Smith 2002, p.79).

The most important shared imagery, however, is mountaintops. Mountaintops are important for both the storm and warrior aspects of these divinities, for it is from here that storms were sent out, as well as the location of the gods' battles (Smith 2002, pgs.88-91). The important difference is that Baal was said to send storms in from the Mediterranean Sea to the

east, while Yahweh's storms come up from his traditional southern mountain abodes (Smith 2002, pgs.80-81). This detail, the southern mountains, neatly combines the association of Yahweh with the Kenites of the south, as well as coopts an important symbol of Baal, one of his most important competitors during the time of the Israelite monarchy, when the nationalist politics of the Yahwists would become important for the emerging independent Israelite state.

The details of how Yahweh came to Israel are not known with certainty. He was probably originally introduced to the Israelite pantheon through trade between the Israelites of the hill country and the Midianites of Edom (Smith 2002, pgs.32-33). It is possible that Saul had something to do with Yahweh's importation due to the King's Edomite connections, but this is not strongly supported (Smith 2002, p.32). It is well supported, however, that there was a lot of cultural interaction between Israel and Edom and this would seem to be how Yahweh came to Israel (Smith 2002, p.61).

The important story of how Yahweh became the national god of Israel is better understood. David promoted Yahweh worship in order to legitimize his monarchy. Language used to describe how Baal battles with his previously mentioned enemies is the same language used to tell how Yahweh battles the same monsters and gods in favor of the House of David (Smith 2002, p.92). The coopting of another warrior's stories to describe the new national gods of new political entities is an established pattern in ancient Near Eastern history. Assur of Assyria and Marduk of Babylon are further examples of this. This process is important for understanding that Yahweh was not merely another form of Baal, but that he was always independent from Baal, other than the usage of Baal language (Smith 2002, pgs.93-94). This was Israel's self-identity as a separate people from the rest of Canaan come to fruition as well as the root of the monotheism that would become so strongly associated with Yahweh.

Far from being the only god of the ancient Israelites, Yahweh was neither their first god nor even originally associated with them. He was a god for a band of desert nomads whom the law giver Moses may have been related to by marriage. However, Moses' story is not strictly necessary for this adoption to have occurred and there is evidence to suggest a process completely independent of him. Yahweh became part of an otherwise Canaanite pantheon, which included El, Asherah, and Baal (Smith 2002, p.57). It was his competition with Baal that led to some of Yahweh's most important characteristics, most notably his position as the national god of Israel. Yahweh was not an exception, and his history was as normally entwined with political processes as any other national god at this time and place.

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