JISMOR 1 Special Issue

Once More: Monotheism in Biblical Israel

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1.

May I begin with a sincere thank you to my colleagues at Doshisha University for making this lecture and the visit connected with it possible. It is indeed a distinct honor and privilege to be here with you. I have heard a great deal, particularly in the last week since my arrival in Japan, about Doshisha. May I add also that this is not my first visit to Japan. But it is so many years since the last that I feel as if I am on a voyage of new discovery. I came, in fact, 43 years ago with my grandparents, and our travels took us to Tokyo, Kyoto, and Nara. In Kyoto, we were very fortunate to be present at the summer Gion Festival, and it remains a highlight of my memories. Now you have afforded me the chance to return in a most meaningful way, and I stand in gratitude to you.

The importance of the theme of monotheism to the study of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament probably does not need any explanation or defense. Most of us understand the concept of monotheism, however we define it—and we shall come back to the issue of definition shortly—as a principal, if not the principal contribution that the Bible has made to human history and culture. Within the traditions that grew out of the Hebrew Bible, namely, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the concept of a single god remains central, even if they have had various ways of perceiving this. Consider, for example, a statement from the Babylonian Talmud, the major legal collection of rabbinic Judaism: "Anyone who denies the existence of other gods is called Jewish" (Megillah 13a, quoted from V. Nikiprowetzky, "Ethical Monotheism," *Daedalus* 104/2 [Spring, 1975], p. 82).

But defining monotheism in rigorous terms and determining whether and how precisely it exists in the Bible have proved to be a difficult, even daunting enterprise, full of uncertainties. In the face of this situation, therefore, it is not surprising that biblical scholars have sometimes turned elsewhere in their search for the great, distinctive contributions of the Bible to the human experience. One such alternative attracted an influential group of scholars, especially in the middle decades of the twentieth century. They argued that it was not monotheism, but a view of history, as a linear, goal-oriented development, which distinguished biblical Israel from all of the cultures around it. Indeed, for these scholars such a view should be labeled the first real concept of history, and Israel, thus, its place of origin and

promulgation. While proponents of this position on history and Israel can still be found, it has in more recent years been severely challenged, on the grounds that the linear, goal-oriented view of history was not actually unique to Israel within the ancient Near East and that, in any case, it was not the only view of history that could be regarded as legitimate: other views, also present in the ancient Near East, must be considered under the rubric of historical thinking as well. The strength of this twin challenge has led to a marked decline in proposals about history as biblical Israel's distinctive contribution to humanity, and, in turn, helped to pave the way for a return to monotheism as a leading issue in biblical culture. Indeed, that return has become increasingly prominent in biblical scholarship in the last thirty years, and to it let us now turn.

Several terms are basic to the modern scholarly discussion, both recent and earlier, of monotheism in the Hebrew Bible. At one end, there is the term polytheism. Essentially, this describes a religion that views the universe populated by a number of gods, who in various ways are worshipped. A popular view of polytheism—popular, at least, in the West—is that this multiplicity exists in random, chaotic confusion. But a study of polytheistic religions refutes such a view. The gods, rather, belong to a system or a set of interlocked systems, normally with a hierarchy or hierarchies of authority among the gods represented. The system has often been labeled, after the ancient Greek term for it, a pantheon. Yet as a system, one should note, it is not static but dynamic, revealing changes in placement and even structure over time and place.

At the other end of the spectrum of discussion is the term monotheism. This is a term that has had a number of definitions. But placed over against polytheism, it is probably best to define it very strictly, and philosophically, as the belief that there is only one deity, and that that deity, consequently, is the only one that can be worshipped. Rephrased in a kind of mathematical way, monotheism may be described as the proposition that for the category or set called deity, there is only one member.

Two other terms must be brought into the discussion, monolatry and henotheism; and they fall, on the spectrum we have been depicting, between polytheism and monotheism. Monolatry describes the situation in which a particular community accepts and worships only one god for itself, although it may acknowledge that other communities have their own deities, which may, in turn, be recognized as the equivalent of, or inferior, even subordinate to, their own god. The concept of monolatry has proved to be very important in the scholarly discussion of biblical monotheism. Henotheism, our last term, is the most difficult, because it has not always been defined clearly or in the same way by those who have used it. Sometimes it has been treated more or less as a synonym of monolatry, but then the term becomes superfluous. I adopt a different definition, in which the focus remains on one deity, but the deity is one that has absorbed or embodied within itself other deities and their powers and functions—a process that has not erased all traces, or even worship, of these others. Put

another way, henotheism is a concept of the many in the one. So considered, this term can be a potentially helpful one in understanding the phenomenon of biblical monotheism within the wider world of the ancient Near East.

The four terms just introduced have formed something of a framework for the discussion of biblical monotheism over the last two centuries. It is a long and involved discussion, with a variety of different expressions and controversies. At the risk of oversimplifying it, let me suggest four trends or issues that have been dominant in it. The first has been the argument that monotheism, in the strict sense defined earlier, came late in the history of ancient Israel—the Israel to which the Hebrew Bible refers. It is not to be found in the earliest phases of Israelite history as described in the Bible: the period of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; nor in the times of Moses or the initial settlement in the land of Israel, to which the Bible affixes the names of Joshua and the Judges; it is not even evident in much of the period of the kings of Israel and Judah. Depending on which modern scholar one follows, monotheism in the strict sense could be as late as the Babylonian Exile of the sixth century BCE, in the writing of the prophet that modern scholarship has labeled as the Second or Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55 and perhaps other chapters). Indeed, for proponents of biblical monotheism as late, the Second Isaiah has been the favored option. The real point here is not so much the lateness of monotheism as the developmental character of the phenomenon: monotheism, these scholars have argued, was something that appeared at the end of a long process among Israelites—and other cultures—of how to conceptualize what deity is. And the process was generally understood to have passed in Israel through the stages of polytheism, henotheism, monolatry, and finally monotheism. This developmental, analytical view, it should be added, became prominent in the nineteenth century, as part of the larger movement in academic European biblical scholarship of the period to look at all biblical literature, religion, and history in a developmental, or evolutionary, way. Its greatest exponent was the German savant, Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918).

A second trend in the scholarly discussion of biblical monotheism espouses the opposite thesis to the one just described, namely, that monotheism was not late in the history of ancient Israel, but early, even at the beginning of Israel as a national community. This view is perhaps most prominently represented by the Israeli scholar, Yehezkel Kaufmann (1889-1963), especially in his multi-volume *History of Israelite Religion* (1937-1956). Because, however, the latter was written in modern Hebrew, its ideas took some time before they entered broader scholarly discussion, doing so primarily when they were presented in English by the American/Israeli scholar, Moshe Greenberg, and that particularly in his condensed translation of Kaufmann's *History* (*The Religion of Israel* [1960]). Kaufmann mounted a direct attack on the late, developmental approach, arguing that monotheism in Israel was not the outcome of a gradual reduction in the number of entities that could be considered gods. Rather, monotheism was the product of a human insight, an intellectual revolution at a

particular moment, or moments, in time. Theologically, one might call this a revelation, but Kaufmann, being a secular Jewish nationalist philosopher, appeared to want to avoid such terminology. What was involved here, explained Kaufmann, was the perception, by some spiritually enlightened person—the Bible credits this to Moses, especially—that at the center of the universe is a single, coherent force: a force that stands outside of and above all other phenomena, which it creates and controls, and through which it may express itself.

This perception of deity should be called monotheistic, argued Kaufmann, and the best proof of its importance to the biblical authors, he proposed, is that these authors did not essentially understand the polytheism of their neighboring cultures—Canaanite, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, etc. Polytheism, Kaufmann went on, is actually quite sophisticated. The gods can be powerful and exalted, controlling major portions of nature, appearing in different forms, anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic, and manifest in different images like sculptures, which thus represent a portion of the god's divinity, but without encapsulating all of it. These deities can be responsive to human prayer or not as they wish, and, as we have already seen, are regularly arranged in a complex social order or pantheon. But none of this sophistication and complexity, said Kaufmann, or almost none of it, can be found in the biblical way of looking at other religions. The gods of these religions are not presented as high, powerful beings; they are at most little spirits. The tales about these high gods that we know as myths are barely in evidence in the Bible, and where they are, the stories are mere snippets, whose fragmentary, incoherent character suggests that they were really not understood or believed in by the biblical authors. As for the images of gods, these, for the Bible, are not living manifestations of divinities; they are lifeless: no gods at all, nothing more than the wood, stone, or metal out of which they were constructed by their human makers. The biblical misunderstanding of polytheism, therefore, could not have been more glaring, but how could this have come about, asked Kaufmann, given that such polytheism was all around, and even in the midst of, ancient Israel? The answer, Kaufmann proposed, is that the initial perception of God as the central, primary force in the universe, above and outside of all other phenomena, must have been so basic, so pervasive, and so powerful in the biblical worldview, and so different from the essential worldview of polytheism, that it warped the ability of the biblical authors to appreciate another, here polytheistic, view of reality. Because this monotheistic view was so all-encompassing in the Bible and for its authors and audiences, Kaufmann concluded, it must have been something that had come to biblical Israel at the beginning of its history, not at the end, for then we would have found in the Bible a greater representation of other points of view.

Besides views of biblical monotheism as either late or early in the history of ancient Israel, there has been a third trend in the discussion that tries to find a middle way between these positions. For this understanding, monotheism, that is to say, the belief that there is one central power in the universe, a single god like no other, exists already early in Israel, but

in an inchoate, incomplete, and not fully articulate form. At this stage, it could be called, as scholars like Baruch Halpern have advocated, incipient monotheism. The full implications, philosophical and in matters of worship, would then remain to be worked out over the course of the history of ancient Israel, for example, in the person of a prophet like the Second Isaiah. In the process—and it is a developmental one, but stressing an original proto-monotheistic core unlike the late view noted above—what was unreflected came to be reflected, what was inchoate came to be made explicit and articulate.

The fourth dominant trend in the study of biblical monotheism is one that really is common to all the preceding three, and it has become increasingly important over the last century and a half of discussion. Given the existence of other cultures that surrounded Israel in the ancient Near East, we have obviously to ask questions about what kinds of religious beliefs and worship were prevalent in these cultures: those of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Canaanite peoples who were direct neighbors of Israel. Archaeology has provided us, in the form of textual and non-textual artifacts, with a wealth of information about religious and other phenomena in these cultures. The question, therefore, is: do they offer any precedents or any analogies to the concepts of monotheism that we have been discussing? There are many answers here, and space does not permit a comprehensive accounting of them all. Let me mention, instead, just two.

The first response is one made famous by the great Viennese psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud, in his book translated as *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). The idea was not original to him, as he fully acknowledged, but he did adapt it in his own way. It has to do with the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton, the famous king who lived in the 14th century BCE and who had a particular vision of the Aton, the divine sun disk. According to some modern analysts of the surviving texts, Akhenaton saw the Aton as the only god in the universe and as a god without images, at least without conventional images. Freud and others made a great deal of this and suggested that Moses in one way or another was introduced to this conception, which then became the basis of his own monotheistic, or incipiently monotheistic, conception of Yahweh. The connection between Moses and Akhenaton, however, has proved to be controversial. Moses, to be sure, is said in the Bible to have been raised in the court of the Egyptian pharaoh, but present indications suggest that this was about 100 years after Akhenaton. The distance in time is critical, because after the death of Akhenaton, Aton worship was systematically attacked by his successors, though perhaps not all traces of it were wiped out. Indeed, there may be an echo of the rhetoric of the main hymn to the Aton in Psalm 104, yet, in the final analysis, this is not enough to clarify the relationship to Aton worship. Aton and Moses, in sum, cannot be resolved at the present time.

The second response concerning monotheism in the non-biblical ancient Near East to which I would draw attention concerns two types of ancient religious texts. They are found in several ancient Near Eastern cultures, of which Mesopotamia offers a particularly rich

documentation. One group of texts are hymns of praise to gods in which the god is singled out by saying, "Oh god X, god of the Moon, you are the only god for me," or, "You are the greatest of gods." Alternatively, one finds in Mesopotamia lists of gods, including a special kind of list that originates somewhere around the 14th century BCE—in other words, roughly at the time of Akhenaton—in which the text is arranged in the following way: god X has within him gods Y and Z in terms of his arms and his legs, or in his capacity to be a warrior. In other words, these god lists are examples of henotheism of a most striking kind.

2.

Let us turn from this sketch of the history of modern scholarship to the ancient sources directly, in order to see what we can learn from them about monotheism, and conceptions of deity more generally, in ancient Israel. There are two kinds of sources, two classes of evidence on which we can rely: one is biblical, and the other consists of sources outside of the Bible, both written and non-written.

The biblical source is a complicated one, and by biblical I mean here the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. I think every critical scholar would agree that the Hebrew Bible as we now have it was not written in one long evening—that is, in a single event of composition. It is too extensive, and, more importantly, it is too varied and complex; and one good and widely shared estimate today is that the written text of the Hebrew Bible may be the result of as many as 1,000 years of composition from approximately 1200 or 1100 BCE down to somewhere in the second century BCE. These 1,000 years could perhaps be lengthened if one considers that the history of the Bible is not only of the written text, but of the oral stages in which, it appears, some of the stories were passed down and transformed by word of mouth, before as well as alongside their written versions. Two aspects of this long history of development need emphasis. The first is that the Bible as we read it is not uniform about everything it says. It does not, for example, maintain the same viewpoint, or at least use the same language, about God in every place, or use the same language and concepts about the nature of law, about the nature of what Israel is, and so forth.

Yet even with this diversity, the fact is—and this is the second aspect of the Bible's history—that the text comes to us as a single collection. This entire collecting process suggests that at least at certain points in ancient times when the collection was being made, people saw certain unities or, perhaps better, a certain coherence behind the differences, certain ways in which the different ideas related to each other. Therefore, our problem is to find and pay attention to the differences as well as the possible coherence. And even with the recognition of these differences and the possibility of coherence, the actual study of the Bible in this way has been very difficult, because the biblical text we are studying is essentially the final version of this long 1,000-plus year history of composition. To be sure, some of the ancient versions

of the Bible in Greek and in Aramaic provide us at points with alternative texts, but basically we are working with this final deposit after 1,000 years of collecting and editing. We have to look at this final version and then try by internal analysis to see if we can find earlier versions that belong to one century or another, to one group or another within ancient Israel. Without getting into the details of this kind of analysis, one can well imagine that it has not brought complete agreement among scholars.

Besides the Hebrew Bible, we must consider the non-biblical sources on ancient Israel. The addition of these to our repertoire is the well-known achievement of archaeological discovery in the Near East that began in earnest in the mid-19th century and actively continues, even with the many conflicts that have beset the region. But the existence of these non-biblical sources poses straightaway the problem of how they are to be related to the Bible. Put in other terms, it is the tension between the study of ancient Israel, resting on the non-biblical *and* the biblical evidence, or the study of biblical Israel, the culture represented by the Bible considered alone. The issue is simply this: if the Bible, with all its complexity and long compositional history, remains nevertheless a single text comprising a selection from what must have been many other literary creations in ancient Israel, perhaps by other groups that are not represented in the Bible, then the Bible offers only a portion of what ancient Israel thought and did. This assumption is, in fact, borne out by the non-biblical evidence that archaeological research has brought to light. For example, we have begun to see that the worship of a goddess may have been a more prominent part of ancient Israelite religion than the Bible allows. The Bible, it must be noted, does hint at this, but to take the case of the inscriptions discovered at the sites of Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, we have there a picture of the goddess Asherah with the Israelite/biblical god Yahweh that we could not really have known from the Hebrew Bible alone.

Nonetheless, I want to focus here on the Hebrew Bible primarily, if not solely. I do so principally because this is the fullest evidence, the most articulate witness that we have about religious belief and practice in ancient Israel. Given that it does not represent everything, it nevertheless allows a scope of study that the extra-biblical evidence alone would not permit. And even with the difficulties of trying to take apart the Bible, it provides us with interesting and valuable insights as to how the biblical authors understood God, as well as the ways in which their understandings may have changed over time. It is for this reason that I have referred in the title of this paper to monotheism in biblical Israel, not ancient Israel. In order to illustrate my point, I shall select excerpts from the Hebrew Bible that reflect the way in which God was understood and imagined. Such a selection can obviously not be comprehensive and does not take in all parts of the Bible, but I think that the excerpts are reasonably representative of the range of ideas and perspectives on deity in the Bible and on the particular issue of monotheism.

3.

The first point, which is sometimes startling to modern readers of the Bible, is that the biblical authors do allow for the possibility that there is more than one God. Of the many illustrations of this let us look at two. Genesis 6:1-4 depicts quite directly a marriage between gods that are male and humans that are female. To a number of interpreters, the depiction seems almost like a chapter out of Greek mythology. While it may be true that the biblical narrator here might not have approved of such a marriage, since he follows the mention of it with statements about the reduction of the human lifespan and the pervasiveness of human wickedness (6:3, 5-6), still the narrator does not expressly condemn this marriage practice. It is for him, evidently, a reality of the cosmos, and so it has to be factored into the context in which monotheism is talked about in the Hebrew Bible. A second example of the plurality of gods in the Bible also comes from Genesis, chapter 31. This has to do with the tension between Jacob and his uncle (and, for a time, lord) Laban, a tension that leads Jacob to depart in the middle of the night with Laban's daughters and with some of the property that Laban thinks belongs to him. Laban chases after Jacob and catches up with him, but fortunately, instead of going to battle they decide to make peace. The peace involves defining the physical boundary between them. To do so, they put up markers, heaps of stone or pillars, between their territories. But as one reads the passage, it is apparent that these are no ordinary heaps of stones or pillars. They represent the gods, in the plural, of the two groups. Laban has his god who is named after his forefather Nahor; Jacob has his god who is named after his grandfather Abraham. These two gods then come into play in the agreement that Jacob and Laban make between themselves not to go to war and to have this boundary. As the text says in verse 53, "May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us." In the Hebrew the word "judge" is a plural form: there are two gods here, not one. And they are remarked on in a perfectly natural way.

The second idea present in the biblical texts is that God, whose name is Yahweh as we know from ancient evidence (in many translations, like the Revised Standard Version, this name is rendered as Lord), is indeed the God of Israel. As passages like Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Exodus 20:1-3 show, this is the God whom Israel should worship and no other, and Israel should worship Him, because, as Exodus 20:1-3 adds, he "brought you up out of the land of Egypt." If, then, Yahweh is first and foremost the God of Israel, what about other gods? Various biblical texts suggest a number of ways of dealing with them. One is to recognize that as Yahweh is the God of Israel, so other peoples and nations have their gods. Thus in Genesis 31:53, which we already examined, Laban has his god and Jacob his. Other texts, for example, Deuteronomy 4:19 and 32:8-9, present the issue in a more theologically sophisticated way: namely, that God, Yahweh, has assigned to other nations their gods, which means that He has control over these other gods as He has control over other nations. Deuteronomy 32:8-9

is particularly interesting in this respect. It reads: "When the Most High," which in this text is understood to be a title for the God Yahweh, "apportioned the nations and divided up humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods" (here reading "gods" with biblical versions and texts from the ancient Greek and the Dead Sea Scrolls). The text then announces: "Yahweh's own portion was his people; Jacob was his allotted share" (the word Jacob being used here as another name for Israel). In other words, God divided up the world, gave the rest of the world various gods, but took Israel for himself—a wonderfully monolatrous statement! At the core of this viewpoint, we may still recognize the kind of territorial division of the Jacob-Laban story in Genesis 31. But Deuteronomy 32:8-9 has now extended that division, and the deities involved in it, to the world as a whole.

The texts that we have been discussing push us to several further observations, which, in turn, are clarified by yet other texts in the Hebrew Bible. One observation is that Yahweh is the greatest of the gods. Here one could refer to Exodus 15:11: "Who is like you, O Yahweh, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?" In other words, while there are other gods, you are the greatest. But Yahweh cannot only be praised as the greatest; he can take over and perhaps be understood to absorb, in a henotheistic-like way, the powers and functions of other gods. Thus, in Deuteronomy 32:8, he is addressed, as we have seen, as "Most High" (Hebrew, *Elyon*), in this context originally an epithet of the Canaanite high god, El, whose position and function as divine leader he has assumed. Similarly, if Psalm 29 was originally a hymn to another Canaanite god, Baal, as H.L. Ginsberg persuasively proposed, then its adaptation as a hymn to Yahweh suggests also Yahweh's assumption of the properties and functions of that deity. If Yahweh, then, is the greatest of gods and can take over, even absorb the properties of other gods, then it should be no surprise that the Bible can describe him as controlling other nations besides Israel. We saw this above in the assertions of Deuteronomy 4:19 and 32:8-9. It is put to use, as it were, in a passage like Isaiah 8, where Yahweh's control allows him to go to the waters of the River—that is, the River Euphrates, which here stands for the Assyrian empire—and bring Assyria against his (Yahweh's) own people to punish them. Finally, in some texts we see Yahweh depicted as a king, even emperor, surrounded by a court of other deities, who are weaker and subordinate to him, but who are nonetheless deities. A good illustration of this situation is Psalm 29:1-2, where "the sons of gods," to translate the Hebrew literally ("heavenly beings" in the Revised Standard Version), praise Yahweh for his glory and strength.

The depiction of Yahweh as emperor amidst his court of subordinate gods is also found in Psalm 82, but developed there in a different and remarkable way. For if the psalm starts with God in heaven and the other gods around him, this God, this emperor, does not like his divine courtiers and officials. They have done wrong. Instead of helping those humans who cannot help themselves—the poor, the needy, the orphans, the weak—the gods around

Yahweh have only made their situation worse; they have shown thereby, in the words of this psalm, that "they have neither knowledge nor understanding" (verse 5) of what is required of them as gods. How does God respond to this? "I used to think, 'You are gods,'" he says in verse 6. (The Revised Standard Version translates incorrectly here, offering "I say," instead of "I used to think.") But now, given the wrong and the lack of knowledge these gods have displayed, God concludes, in verse 7, "you (gods) will die like mortals and fall like any prince." In short, because you gods have not exercised knowledge, here the knowledge of the divine to protect the weak and helpless, you shall lose the other characteristic of being gods, namely immortality, and so die on earth like all humans. With the gods around Yahweh now departed, it remains for the psalmist, in the final verse of his text (8), to call upon God to take up the task he had formerly delegated to his courtiers, that of governing the earth and protecting its weak. Yahweh, thus, becomes sole judge of the cosmos, indeed, sole god.

This view of Yahweh as God alone is explicitly proclaimed in yet other biblical texts. The most often cited in modern discussions, because they are arguably the clearest, are passages from the Second Isaiah, the prophet who seems, as noted above, to have been active during the sixth century BCE Babylonian Exile. Two points above all emerge from the Second Isaiah's speeches. First, the prophet, speaking in the name of Yahweh, challenges other nations and other gods to come forward to try to function as gods. In chapter 41:22-23, for example, Yahweh through the prophet demands of the other gods: "Tell us the former things (=the events of the past), what they are, so that we may consider them, and that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come … that we may know that you are gods." Following this demand in verse 23, we must understand a pause on God's and the prophet's part, while they wait for the other gods to respond. Evidently, the latter do not and cannot, because in verse 24 God through Isaiah gives his riposte to these gods: "You, indeed, are nothing, and your work is nothing at all." The conclusion to the challenge comes, it would appear, two chapters later, in Isaiah 43:10-11. Here, Yahweh, again speaking through the prophet, addresses the audience of Judaeans in Babylonian Exile: "You (now) are my witnesses … so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He. No god was formed before me nor will there be any after me. I, I am Yahweh; there is no one else who can save (you from trouble)." Presumably, what the Judaean audience is witness to is God's fateful challenge to the other gods to be gods. Their failure is a proof of their nullity, and the result is that in Second Isaiah, God Yahweh not only knows no rival; he knows no other god at all.

4.

The question is now whether we can take the different ideas about deity that we have found in the Hebrew Bible—and it should be re-emphasized that we have not surveyed all the ideas that the Bible offers—and make historical sense of them. That is, can we put these ideas into

some kind of chronological order that might suggest a change or a developmental trajectory in ancient Israel's conception of God? This is not easy to do. As noted earlier, it is very difficult to divide and date all portions of biblical literature. Perhaps, then, we can base our chronological development of ideas on what may be called relative criteria—criteria that may allow us to recognize that an idea in text B comes logically later than, because it presumes and perhaps even grows out of, an idea in text A. Of course, such a procedure carries with it real risks, among them the possibility that even if one idea can be shown to grow logically out of another, it does not have to come later; both ideas could be held simultaneously by different groups in the population with different approaches to and concepts of the world around them. In using such a relative model of logical development, therefore, we must be careful. Nonetheless, it offers at least a place to start in making sense of the long history behind the biblical text and the ideas it reflects.

With this model of development as our measure, then, let us look back at the biblical ideas and texts about deity that we have discussed, adding here and there some other biblical texts to fill out the picture. A point of departure, I would suggest, is furnished by Genesis 6:1-4, which describes primarily a polytheistic situation, a polytheistic myth one might say, in which Yahweh seems to be added, secondarily, to the scene. Genesis 31, though differently structured, also depicts a polytheistic situation. For while Yahweh is here, as he is not explicitly in Genesis 6, the god of the family of Abraham and Jacob, yet he is a god with no evident superiority to the god of Laban with whom he enters into treaty. Rather, the two gods are presented as counterparts: gods of their separate communities which have now to rework their relationship.

The next logical stage may be represented by texts like Exodus 20:1-2, and Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and 32:8-9. They assert that Yahweh is the God of Israel, thus building on the view of Yahweh in Genesis 31 as the family god of Abraham and Jacob—the family, of course, that the biblical authors understand as the matrix of the future and larger community of Israel. But there is another dimension here as well, signaled by the mention in Exodus 15 and 20:1-2 of the Israelite exodus from Egypt. The exodus occurs, as these and other passages indicate, because of Yahweh, who is attentive to his role as God of Israel and so rescues his people from Egyptian slavery. The rescue, in turn, has a major consequence for the understanding of Yahweh, as proclaimed in particular by Exodus 15 and, indeed, by the whole story of the exodus starting with Exodus 1, of which 15 is the climactic chapter. The point here is simple: by engaging with and besting Egypt, one of the major empires of the day, Yahweh has engaged with and bested its gods. He has thus earned the status, as Exodus 15:11 asserts, of the mightiest of the gods: incomparable, "majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders."

What then to do with the other gods, whose existence, it must be noted, is acknowledged by Exodus 15? One viewpoint is offered by Deuteronomy 4:19 and 32:8-9, which likewise acknowledge the existence of the other gods, but argue that they are under the power of

Yahweh, who assigns them to nations other than Israel while keeping Israel, in accordance with his old role as God of Israel, for himself. The imperial behavior that Yahweh implicitly exercises in distributing this divine power among the nations and peoples is made explicit in texts like Psalm 29. Here the other gods form part of the imperial court of Yahweh, and one of their principal duties is to regularly praise his powers. As we have also seen, however, Psalm 29, along with Deuteronomy 32:8, is an example of another view of Yahweh and the gods, namely, of Yahweh's assumption of the place and power of other deities, perhaps in something like a henotheism; and the fact that both texts can exhibit both this perspective and the imperial one suggests that both perspectives could have been held in biblical Israel at the same time.

But we must ask yet another question and, in so doing, move to another stage of development: what about these other gods as they relate to Israel? Is there a chance that Israel might still acknowledge them, particularly if they are part of Yahweh's court? 1 Kings 18 suggests that that is not to be. In this famous story of the prophet Elijah challenging Baal and his prophets on Mount Carmel, the point is made very clearly that Israelites cannot worship and so acknowledge both Baal and Yahweh together. Hosea 2:16-17 puts it another way: Israel cannot even call Yahweh "my Baal." In other words, Yahweh is supreme and has to be regarded as such. If there are other gods, they are clearly inferior. Indeed, according to 1 Kings 18, Baal, by losing the contest, ends up being not much of a god at all. As verse 39, toward the end of the story, affirms: "It is Yahweh who is God; it is Yahweh who is God."

Psalm 82 extends this kind of devaluation of Baal to the gods of Yahweh's own court. Here, as we have seen, Yahweh declares them gods no more, dead gods, really. We appear to have gone beyond the henotheism stage, for Yahweh has not simply taken over the capacities and functions of these gods; he has explicitly eliminated them as gods. Implicitly, therefore, we are to understand that the court itself is dead, and with that the way is prepared, as the psalmist suggests in the final verse, for Yahweh to emerge as god alone.

This point is made explicit and is celebrated in the last stage of our developmental scheme, represented by the Second Isaiah. In passages like 41:21-24 and 43:10-13, this Exilic prophet demonstrates that the other gods cannot make a case for themselves because they are unable to speak or function at all. And the result, as testified to in 43:10-13, is God's proclamation that no other god was formed before or after him, that is, that he alone qualifies for the status of god (cf. also 44:6; 45:21). One part of the language used here calls for special comment. It is in 43:11, 10, and 13, where Yahweh says, "I am he" and "I, I am Yahweh, and besides me there is no one who can save (you from trouble)…" This same language appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, in particular in Deuteronomy 32:39, a text to be dated, apparently, earlier than Second Isaiah: "See now that I, even I, am he; there is no God beside me. I kill and make alive; I wound and heal; and no one can deliver from my hand. I am a savior." It also appears in Hosea 13:4, which is likewise to be dated before Second Isaiah: "You

know no God but me, and besides me there is no one who can save." But the similarity of language among all three texts does not have to carry with it a similarity of meaning. In fact, a close look at the three passages confirms this. For Deuteronomy 32 and Hosea 14, what is at stake is that there is no other god *for Israel* who can save. The existence of other gods is not absolutely denied; indeed, it is acknowledged, as we have seen, in verses 8-9 of Deuteronomy 32 (cf. also verses 16-17). But when we reach Second Isaiah, there is no other god *at all*, who can save or do anything else, no other god in existence to afford Yahweh any opposition or subordination. Yahweh is alone, in a depiction of what, for all intents and purposes, can be called monotheism.

5.

We have ranged widely over the Hebrew Bible in our discussion of monotheism and its context there, and we have had to do so because the subject of divinity and in particular of the god Yahweh is a fundamental one for the biblical authors. While we have found definite variety in the ways these authors understand our subject, we have also seen some elements of coherence, some common themes and problems. Let us review the situation as it has emerged.

Perhaps the major point is that in the present form of the text of the Hebrew Bible—the so-called Masoretic text—the dominant picture is of the god Yahweh as the supreme and primary God, at least of Israel. Yet equally obviously, the Bible preserves many traces, and in some cases more than a trace, even a little discussion, of other deities. Our examination has suggested that between these two views, there is a tension in the Bible, as well as a struggle to resolve that tension: to find a way to hold simultaneously the view of Yahweh's supremacy and the acknowledgement of other deities. Indeed, I have tried to take the evidence of struggle and understand it in a developmental scheme: from a recognition that there are just simply gods of various kinds to the recognition of the God Yahweh's supremacy and, eventually, of his singularity, his uniqueness as god. Whether or not this scheme—and other interpreters have advanced schemes like it—is correct, at the very least it suggests that the situation in the Bible in regard to the understanding of deity is fluid and dynamic. The biblical authors, it appears, were constantly reconsidering the matter of who Yahweh is and in what his power consists. But they could not ask this about Yahweh without asking it also about the other deities, whose presence, as the non-biblical data from archaeology make clear, was all around them and so something these authors could not ignore or, *pace* Yehezkel Kaufmann, ignorantly distort and trivialize. And if, as our discussion has revealed, the biblical authors offered at different times and in different settings a variety of perspectives on Yahweh's power and relationship to other deities, so likewise did they offer a range of perspectives about the other deities, albeit never allowing them, in their own view, to eclipse Yahweh. (This does not, of course, mean that various Israelites did not put their divine priorities elsewhere. The biblical authors

are full of denunciations of Israel on just this point, and one particularly striking example is from Jeremiah 44, with its account of Judaeans worshipping a goddess called the Queen of Heaven.) Thus, our texts show that the other deities could be viewed as essentially dead (e.g., 1 Kings 18, Psalm 82), or credited with some level of reality, if only subordinate to Yahweh (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:19; 32:8-9; Psalm 29:1-2), or given more independence (Genesis 6:1-4; 31:53).

We can restate this tension between Yahweh and the gods in terms of the categories with which we began. That is, while the Hebrew Bible gives evidence of monotheism, especially in the utterances of the Second Isaiah (e.g., 41, 43), it also tells of polytheism (e.g., Genesis 6:1-4; 31:53), monolatry (of Yahweh: e.g., Deuteronomy 4:19; 32:8-9), and, perhaps implicitly, henotheism (with Yahweh: e.g., Deuteronomy 32:8; Psalm 29). As for the scholarly divide over the appearance of monotheism in Israel, whether early and the result of an insight, late, with a history of something like polytheism, henotheism, and monolatry behind it, or a gradual process as an incipient monotheism is made more fully articulate—perhaps the developmental scheme here proposed is closest to the second and after that to the third, but not really to the first. Even so, we may concede to the first that insight should not necessarily be excluded in the understanding of biblical religion (see further below), and that while the perception of Yahweh's supremacy, once it is reached, does not eliminate the traditions about the gods, it does become for the biblical authors the lens through which to read those traditions.

What could have occasioned this variety and change of viewpoints concerning Yahweh and the other deities? Needless to say, this is a major question that none of us can fully answer. But perhaps a few suggestions are possible. Two of these involve human historical factors. Thus, if the Exodus has any historical authenticity, and I believe that there is a core of veracity to it, then clearly the escape and survival of a small group against the worst odds, one of the great empires, must have caused those who survived to think about how they could have survived and what god—in the ancient Near East no culture thought events occurred without the gods—allowed them to do so. Conversely, in the case of Isaiah 8, where God is said to take the Assyrian Empire and bring it as an instrument of his punishment against Israel, this, too, must have been borne of an actual historical situation that the Bible otherwise describes. Indeed, in the ninth and particularly the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, Assyria was the great empire of the world, having succeeded Egypt, whose major imperial ambitions had long before disappeared. Israel and Judah fell into the Assyrian empire as small states. How could you imagine that our God Yahweh would give us up to Assyria? Answer: Yahweh must be controlling Assyria and using Assyria for his own ends.

But beyond such human historical reasons for changes in the biblical perceptions of Yahweh, can one really leave out the possibility of what we might call spiritual or revelational factors, or, to use language closer to that of Yehezkel Kaufmann, factors involving the sudden breakthrough of human insight? These are always difficult for the Western historian or the historian trained in the methods of Western history, because they are not accessible to

the kind of proof that Western historians normally demand when they take on the task of reconstructing the life of a particular community. And yet, when one reads in Deuteronomy 4:15, "Since you saw no form when Yahweh spoke to you at Horeb (the name for Mt. Sinai in the Book of Deuteronomy) out of the midst of the fire," can one dismiss out of hand that some experience of insight lies behind such a statement? And need this experience have occurred just at the beginning of Israel's history? Could it not, as the Bible asserts, have been a part of the lives of other Israelites later on, like the prophets Isaiah or Amos, leading to new appreciations of divinity? Obviously none of us can know this in any scientific way. At the same time, insight, whether thought of as revelation or not, is a phenomenon powerfully testified to throughout human history, and I would hate to be so rigid in my Western historical perspective as to exclude its influence on the conception of deity in ancient Israel.

There is one final point. Even if we are able to say that eventually, in the person of the Second Isaiah and perhaps others of his contemporaries, a kind of monotheism was articulated, the fact remains that the Hebrew Bible—the canonical, sacred scriptures for Jews and Christians—retains the texts that say the gods are still around, and so still, in some sense, meaningful. In fact, in post-Hebrew biblical times, we even find the gods given new emphasis as the "angels" of an enlarged divine court of Yahweh and as one of these angels, the Satan/Belial/Devil/Lucifer, who leaves the heavenly court to establish his own anti-heavenly realm. One of the most penetrating efforts to make sense of this situation was published almost fifteen years ago by my colleague at the Harvard Divinity School, Jon Levenson, in his book, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (1988). Here, Levenson argued that the universe as imagined by the biblical authors, and by later theologians and others down through Jewish history to the Holocaust and beyond, is a fragile and uncertain one. Yahweh may be the supreme God, but he has constantly to reclaim his supremacy by warring against other forces. One cannot be over-confident that the battle once won will never be fought again. And in this battle, Yahweh needs us as much as we need him.