

Israel in Egypt: Moses and the Beginning of Yahwism (Genesis 37- Exodus 4)

Lecture 7 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/r1st-145/lecture-7>

Overview

The book of Genesis concludes with the story of Joseph and the descent of the 12 tribes into Egypt, setting the stage for the Exodus in which God is seen as redeemer and liberator. Moses is the first in a line of apostolic (messenger) prophets and Yahwism is initiated. Mark Smith's thesis describing the emergence of Israelite religion through a process of convergence and divergence is presented as an alternative to the evolutionary-revolutionary dichotomy presented in Lecture 2.

1. One Who Wrestles: The Significance of Jacob's Name Change

[1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* We were talking last time about the mysterious episode by the Yabbok River, when Jacob undergoes a change in name, and I mentioned the fact that in the biblical view, the name of something somehow encapsulates its very essence. Knowing the name of something gives one power and control over that thing. Many commentators have observed that the change in name accompanies a change in character, a change of essence in Israel. So some have noted, one scholar in particular has noted that the struggle with the angel is the final purging of the unsavory qualities of character that marked Jacob's past career [Sarna 1966, 206]. And although Jacob appears to be something of an anti-hero — he actually literally limps into the Promised Land alone — Jacob is a new and honest man. We see this immediately in his reunion with Esau. He greets his former rival and enemy with these words — this is in Genesis 33:10-11: “‘If you would do me this favor, accept for me this gift, for to see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me favorably. Please accept my present, which has been brought to you, for God has favored me, and I have plenty.’ And when he urged him, he accepted.”

[2] With Jacob, who is now Israel, God seems perhaps to finally have found the working relationship with humans that he has been

seeking since their creation. God learned immediately after creating this unique being, that he will exercise his free will against God. God saw that he had to limit the life span of humans, or risk creating an enemy that was nearly equal to him. So he casts the humans out of the Garden, blocks access to the tree of life. But humans continue their violent and evil ways, and in desperation, God wipes them out, and starts again. This second creation proves to be not much better. They forget God, they turn to idolatry. God has promised at this point, however, not to destroy all humankind again, so he experiments with a single individual of faith. Abraham's faith withstands many a trial. He is obedient to God in a way that no one has been up to this point in the narrative, but perhaps ultimately the model of blind obedience is rejected, too. When Abraham prepares to slaughter his own son, perhaps God sees that blind faith can be as destructive and evil as disobedience, so God relinquishes his demand for blind obedience: he stops Abraham himself.

[3] The only relationship that will work with humans is perhaps one in which there is a balance between unchecked independence and blind obedience, and God seems to find that relationship with Jacob. And the metaphor for that relationship is a metaphor of struggle, or wrestling. Remember Yisrael means “one who wrestles, who struggles with God.” God and humans lock in an eternal struggle, neither prevailing, yet both forever changed by their encounter with one another.

2. *The 12 Sons of Jacob: Joseph and His Brothers*

- [4] Now the rest of Genesis relates the story of Joseph and his brothers, the 12 sons of Jacob. It's one of the most magnificent psychological dramas in the Bible. The story is intensely human. We don't have a lot of supernatural interference in this story. It focuses very much on the family relationships, on the jealousies, [with] very little reference to a divine perspective. It's like a little novella. Scholars are divided over the authenticity of the Egyptian elements in the story. You will read radically diverse things. Some point to the presence of Egyptian names, and customs, and religious beliefs and laws as a sign of some historical memory being preserved in these stories. Others point to all the problems: the anachronisms, the general lack of specificity as a sign that these are composed quite late. The art of dream interpretation places a very important role in this story, and dream interpretation was a developed science, particularly in Egypt, and the other parts of Mesopotamia, but the Egyptians were known in the ancient world as dream interpreters. Joseph is also known for his ability to interpret dreams, but the biblical narrator, the monotheizing biblical narrator, is very concerned to describe him as reporting what God reveals to him, rather than relying on some kind of occult science of interpretation.
- [5] Now Joseph's brothers are jealous of Jacob's partiality to Joseph, and they conspire to be rid of him. But at the last moment, his brother Judah convinces the brothers that, if instead of killing him, they sell him, they can profit a little for their troubles. So Joseph is sold [and] ultimately ends up in the household of Pharaoh in Egypt, and his adventures there prove his meritorious character. He rises to a position of great power when he correctly interprets some dreams regarding an impending famine, and with Joseph as the governor of the country, in control of the grain supply, Egypt successfully weathers seven years of famine. Now, this famine, which strikes Canaan as well, drives Joseph's brothers to Egypt in search of food, and Joseph doesn't reveal himself to his brothers. He puts them to the test. He wants to know if they are the same men who so callously broke their father's heart by selling Joseph, his father's favorite, so many years ago. In the climactic moment in the story, Joseph demands that his frightened brothers leave Benjamin — the other son of Rachel, the other son of the beloved wife — leave Benjamin as a pledge in Egypt. And Joseph knows that it would decimate his father Jacob to lose Rachel's only remaining son, but he's testing his brothers to see whether they have reformed since the day that they sold him into slavery. And indeed Judah, the one who had figured so prominently in the sale of Joseph, that had crushed his father, Judah steps forward and offers himself instead of Benjamin: he says: It would kill my father now to lose Benjamin, the last son of his beloved wife, Rachel. So the brothers, having proven their new integrity — Joseph weeps, he reveals his identity in a very moving scene, and ultimately the family is relocated to, and reunited in Egypt, where they live peacefully and prosperously for some generations.
- [6] That's the basic outline of the story of Joseph and his brothers, but one of the important themes of these stories is the theme of God's providence. The writer wants to represent Jacob's sons, their petty jealousies, their murderous conspiracy, Joseph himself, all as the unwitting instruments of a larger divine plan. In fact, Joseph says to his brothers in Genesis 50:20, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today." Joseph's betrayal by his brothers, his descent into Egypt, set the stage, not only for the reformation of his brothers' characters, which is an important part of the story, but for the descent of all of the Israelites into Egypt, so as to survive widespread famine. So yet another threat to the promise is overcome: threat of famine is overcome by the relocation to Egypt.
- [7] Significantly, God says to Jacob in Genesis 46:4, "I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back." So, in short, there seems to be a plan afoot. The writer wants to represent God going down there, and he will bring them back.
- [8] Israel's descent to Egypt sets the stage for the rise of a pharaoh who, the text says, didn't know Joseph and all that he had done for Egypt. And this new pharaoh will enslave the Israelites, and so embitter their lives, that their cry will rise up to heaven — the same cry from the generation of the flood, the same cry from Sodom and Gomorrah. And thus begins the book of Exodus, which will lead us from Egypt to Sinai.

[9] Most of the narrative account in Genesis 12 to 50 — with the exception of the Joseph story, actually — but most of Genesis 12 through 50 is assigned by scholars to the J source, and certain themes emerge in the J narrative. The first is, that while God’s promise is sure, the manner and the timing of its fulfillment is quite unpredictable. The land never belongs to the patriarchs to whom it was promised. Their descendants will take possession of it, but only after tremendous struggle. In other ways God’s methods are curious. Why does he go against the traditional Ancient Near Eastern practice of primogeniture, inheritance by the first born? He chooses Jacob, a liar and a cheat in his early life, over the elder Esau. Why does he choose young Joseph, who’s an arrogant spoiled brat? He provokes his brothers with his delusions of grandeur. Compare the law of primogeniture that’s listed in Deuteronomy 21:15-17: “If a man has two wives, one loved, and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, but the first-born is the son of the unloved one — / when he wills his property to his sons, he may not treat as first-born the son of the loved one in disregard of the son of the unloved one who is older.” And yet isn’t this what happens to Ishmael? Isn’t this what happens to Esau? Isn’t this what happens to all of Joseph’s brothers who are born before him? And there’s no explanation in the text. Yet despite the false starts, and the trials, and the years of famine, and the childlessness, and the infertility, the seed of Abraham survives, and the promise is reiterated: “I will go down myself with you to Egypt, and I myself will also bring you back.” So ultimately, the J source would appear to assert God does control history, all tends towards his purpose.

3. Exodus: Sequel to Genesis and Myth of Origins for a Nation

[10]The book of Exodus is really the sequel, then, to the book of Genesis. Despite God’s promise of land and blessing, things don’t look so good at the end of Genesis. The book closes with the Israelites residing in Egypt. They’ve managed to procure no more than a burial plot in the Promised Land. Even God has left his land, descending with the Israelites into Egypt, so the promises and their fulfillment seem quite remote. The book of Exodus will relate the

beginning of the process by which the promises will be fulfilled.

[11]I’ve just charted the structure very briefly for you [on the blackboard], so you can get your footing in the book of Exodus. The first fifteen chapters tell the story of Israel in Egypt: the rise of a new Pharaoh who didn’t know Joseph; the oppression of the Israelites; their enslavement in a state labor force; the killing of all first born Hebrew males; the birth, the early life, the call of Moses; the struggle for freedom, Moses will plead with the Pharaoh to let his people go and worship their god in the wilderness; and then the final liberation, when God does something at the Reed Sea — we’ll talk about that later — so that the Israelites can pass, leaving the heavy Egyptian chariotry to flounder in the mud. We have about two-and-a-half chapters, 15:22 until chapter 18, that recounts, then, the journey towards Sinai. This is a journey that’s filled with complaints. The people complain they’re going to starve, and God responds with quail, and manna, and water. Chapters 19 to 24 are very, very important chapters that contain the theophany, the self-revelation of God to the Israelites, and the covenant that’s concluded at Sinai. We’ll be talking more about that next time. Chapters 25 to 40 contain, beside the unfortunate incident with the golden calf which is in Exodus 32, the rest of this unit from 25 to 40, is God’s instruction on how to build or erect the tabernacle, and then an account of the Israelites actually constructing, erecting the tabernacle. Source critical scholars believe that J supplies the main narrative of this unit in Exodus. It’s supplemented by excerpts from E, and then the addition of considerable legal and ritual and genealogical material from P.

[12]Now, the historical value of the Exodus story has fascinated scholars, but also lay people, for generations. Could the Exodus really have happened? And if so, when? And does it matter? And is there any evidence for this story, for example, in external sources, outside the Bible? Well, no, there isn’t any direct evidence outside the Bible, but let’s start at the beginning. We do have a victory hymn, a victory hymn that’s inscribed on a stele — that’s a slab of stone — which was erected in the year 1204 BCE. It was erected by a pharaoh, Pharaoh Merneptah. So the stele of Merneptah dates to about 1204, and in this victory hymn he’s boasting of his victory over various groups in Canaan, and one of the groups he claims to have defeated is Israel. Now,

this is a fabulously important inscription, because it's the earliest known reference outside the Bible to any person or entity that is mentioned in the Bible, and it suggests that a people known as Israel was indeed in the land of Canaan by the end of the thirteenth century BCE. Whether they arrived there after an exodus from Egypt is not of course indicated. The source doesn't tell us that, and in fact there's really no archeological evidence of a group, a large group, entering the land of Canaan at this time. There's a steady cultural continuum, not evidence of destruction as we would expect for a big invasion. We'll talk more about that when we get to the book of Joshua.

[13] But nevertheless, let's just go with this for a minute, and if we suppose that it took about a generation to enter the land — so you see, I've done the math on the side [of the blackboard] here. I suppose I should have done subtractions, since we're talking BCE, but if we put 20 years in for actually arriving and settling in the land, that takes us to about 1225; and if we assume 40 years of wandering in the desert, or wandering from Egypt, that takes us to about 1265 as a date for the Exodus. Well, in 1265, the Eighteenth Dynasty's most illustrious pharaoh occupied the throne, Ramses II — who in fact was pharaoh for, what, 70 years, or something...most of the thirteenth century — and he's very famous for his building projects. Now, according to the biblical record, the Hebrews were set to work on urban building projects in the Delta region, at the north part of the Nile — the delta region of the Nile in the cities of Pithom and Ramses. The Bible states that Israel was in Egypt for 430 years, so if we add that, then that would put their descent into Egypt — Joseph, the other sons of Jacob — around the year 1700. Well, there's a certain appeal to that scenario, because in the 1720s, Egypt was invaded and conquered by a Semitic people known as the Hyksos. They established a dynasty of Semitic rulers. They were centered in the north of Egypt, in the area known as Goshen, so it's possible that the pharaohs of the Hyksos dynasty might have favored other Semites: they might have allowed them to enter in times of famine, and to dwell in the land of Goshen, which the Bible says — the Israelites lived in the land of Goshen. That Joseph, a Semitic foreigner, could be elevated to an important post, the post of governor, is a little less surprising, if we suppose there was a Semitic regime.

[14] In the sixteenth century, the native Egyptians, who were smarting and smoldering under the humiliating foreign rule of the Hyksos, finally succeeded in rising up and driving them out, and reestablishing a native Egyptian dynasty. So some scholars have speculated that that's the historic reality behind the statement in Exodus 1:18, that a new pharaoh, who knew nothing of Joseph and what he had done for Egypt, began to oppress the Hebrews. The feeling is that the establishment of a new native Egyptian dynasty might have led to the enslavement of any remaining Semites or Semitic outsiders, and that would include, of course, the Hebrews. So in all probability, anyone who was associated with the hated occupying regime would be treated poorly. It all seems to fit.

[15] Well, there's a problem with this theory. The Bible itself contains very contradictory statements regarding the length of the Israelites' stay in Egypt. So Exodus 6:16-20 says that the Israelites were there for only four generations, maybe 80 years, from Levi to Moses — Levi was the great grandfather of Moses — so only four generations — which would mean an arrival in Egypt a long time after the Hyksos, not 430 years; and we don't even know whether migration occurred in the Hyksos period, so what we have really is only a hypothesis. The 430 years number is also something of an ideal number. It places the Exodus 480 years before Solomon's building of the Temple: 480 is a multiple of 12, and the Bible really likes multiples of 12, so it is an ideal number. It's the kind of number that crops up a lot in biblical chronologies, which makes it suspect for other sorts of reasons, as well.

[16] So the Hyksos theory is one that got people very excited for a while, but is really not well supported. Still, there's some very interesting circumstantial evidence for Semites engaged in building projects in the thirteenth century, however and whenever they might have gotten to Egypt. We do know, archaeologically, that the fortified city of Pi-Ramses, very much like Pithom Ramses, was rebuilt in the early thirteenth century on the site of the old Hyksos capital. There was a capital [at] Avaris. They had moved the capital up to the Delta region. It had fallen into decay. Now, in the thirteenth century, this is being rebuilt, and that's in the area of Goshen. So the city was being reoccupied in the time of the pharaoh Ramses, Ramses II, in the thirteenth century. We do

know that Egyptian officials allowed hungry nomads to enter the Delta region for food: we have records, written records of this. We also know that Semitic slaves are well attested in Egypt at this time, the end of the thirteenth century: we also have records of that. We know of a people called the Hapiru or 'Apiru. They don't seem to be an ethnic group so much as a marginalized social class, but some have suggested a connection with the word "Hebrew." We know that they worked on the building of the capital city of Ramses II. Other scholars deny that there would be any connection with "Hebrew." The debates are endless. One thirteenth-century Egyptian papyrus describes Egypt's tight control of her border areas, and another reports some Egyptian officials pursuing some runaway slaves. Obviously this happened from time to time, escaping into the desert. The Exodus story also contains many Egyptian elements. The names Moses, Aaron, Pinhas...these are all Egyptian names. "Moses" is simply this part of Ramses [underlines the letters m-s-e-s]: Tutmosis, Ramses, this [m-s-s] is Egyptian for "born of," [Ramses equals] born of the God Ra. And even Moses is an Egyptian name.

[17]So none of this, of course, corroborates the specific details of the biblical story. There's no Egyptian record of the biblical Moses, no record of plagues, no record of a defeat of Pharaoh's army. There is a lot of circumstantial evidence, and some scholars think that that lends plausibility to a story of slaves working on building projects who escape from Egypt at this time, and if there's any historical basis to the Exodus, then the most plausible time, the most plausible backdrop would be the thirteenth century BCE. Some scholars assume there's a historical memory behind the elaborate and dramatic story of a miraculous redemption by God. Why would you invent a hero, a national hero who's entirely Egyptian and has an Egyptian name? Why would you invent a myth of origins in which your ancestors are slaves? Nevertheless, as I emphasized earlier in the patriarchal stories, in the end we're dealing here with sacred history. We're dealing with a highly embellished and theologically interpreted myth of origins for a nation. So much more important than historical verifiability is the conviction of the ancient Israelites who received and venerated these traditions, and developed them, and embellished them, that God had once acted

on their behalf, rescuing them from bondage, binding them to himself in an eternal covenant.

4. Moses's Legendary Birth Story and Early Life

[18]A little bit about the outline of the story, and then we're going to finally have an introduction between God and Moses, which will I think bring us back to some of the conversations we had at the beginning of the course. So let me first say a little bit about the story line, and some of the themes at the beginning of Exodus, the first six or seven chapters. According to the text, the Israelites have multiplied, they've filled the land of Goshen that had been given to them during Joseph's tenure in office, and this new pharaoh who feared them — he didn't know Joseph, he feared the foreign presence — he rose and he attempted to curb their growth. He pressed all of the adult males into slavery. The text says "harsh labor at mortar and brick," but the text says, "the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out," so Pharaoh resorts to more drastic measures. He decrees the murder of all newborn Israelite males at the hands of Egyptian midwives. He's thwarted by these midwives. They say: Oh, these ladies are too quick; we get there too late, they've already given birth by the time we arrive. They allow the male infants to live. So the pharaoh enlists all of the people to annihilate the Israelites by drowning all newborn males in the Nile River. This leads then to the account of the birth of Moses, and his exposure to the Nile River. He is born into a Levite family. The Levites will be priests in Israel, so he's born to a priestly family. He's hidden away for three months, and then he's placed in a wicker basket, which is lined with bitumen, a tar, and set among the bulrushes at the edge of the Nile River. Pharaoh's daughter will eventually discover him. His own mother will volunteer to be his nurse, and Pharaoh's daughter will eventually adopt him and name his Moses: again, this is an Egyptian name. The etymology given in the biblical text is invented.

[19]A lot of scholars have noted that this story is full of irony. The rescue of Moses, who will foil Pharaoh, is affected by the daughter of that pharaoh, and Moses grows up and is sheltered right in the pharaoh's own palace. Further, the significance of Moses is hinted at through literary allusions in the narrative of his birth, his

infancy. The basket in which he is placed is called an ark: the Hebrew word is *tevah*. This word is used precisely twice in the entire Hebrew Bible. It's not the same word that's used for Ark of the Covenant, by the way: the Ark of the Covenant, the word is *aron*. This word for ark, *tevah*, occurs exactly twice: here, and in the story of Noah's ark. Noah's ark is a *tevah*. Scholars have always been quick to point out that in both cases, this ark, this *tevah*, is in the words of one scholar "the instrument of salvation through perilous waters" [Sarna 1986, 28], waters that threaten to capsize it, and so blot out God's hopes and plans for his creatures. Moreover, the basket is placed among the reeds — the Hebrew word for reeds is *suph* — and that's a hint or an allusion to the fact that Moses will lead the Israelites through the "Reed Sea," the *Yam Suph*. It's not the Red Sea, it's the Reed Sea, but we'll talk about that later also.

[20] This legendary birth story has important parallels in Ancient Near Eastern and other literature. It's very common to find stories of the extraordinary events that surround the birth of someone who will later become great: Cyrus of Persia, Oedipus, Jesus, and so on. Many scholars have pointed out that this story in particular is paralleled by the birth story of a great Akkadian king, Sargon, from about 2300 BCE, Sargon of Akkad. Strikingly similar story to Moses. [He's] placed in a basket lined with tar, put in the river, and so on. It underscores the degree to which this story is part of a literary genre, part of a literary convention, how much the Exodus story itself is very much a literary story. Nothing is said of Moses' childhood, but we learn of his awareness of his Israelite identity, or his identification with the Hebrews, in the following passage: this is in Exodus 2:11-15:

[21] Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that, and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting, and so he said to the offender, "Why do you strike your fellow?" He retorted, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses was frightened and thought: Then the matter is known! When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from

Pharaoh. He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well.

[22] So coming to the aid of an oppressed kinsman, Moses kills an Egyptian, and he has to flee to the territory of Midian. There at the well, again he acts to defend the defenseless. This is a key to his character; these two episodes are the two that we're given of Moses' life. So continuing verses 16 and 17 in Exodus 2: "Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock; but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock." So again, this is a key to Moses' character, aiding the defenseless. Moses will later marry Zipporah, one of these women, and live as a shepherd in Midian for about 40 years.

5. Descriptions of God in the Bible

[23] Now, the situation of the Israelites in Egypt, the text says, remains bitter. Exodus 2:23-24: "The Israelites were groaning under the bondage, and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." One day in the wilderness at a place called Horeb, also Sinai, where there's a mountain, Moses sees a flame in a bush that doesn't consume the flame, and then he hears a voice. And the voice says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," and Moses hides his face in fear, but God continues. He has a job for Moses:

[24] "I have marked well the plight of my people in Egypt, and have heeded their outcry because of the taskmaster; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. And I've come down to rescue them from the Egyptians, and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Now the cry of the Israelites has reached me. Moreover I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free my people, the Israelites, from Egypt." [Exodus 3:7-10]

[25]Moses demurs: Who me? Why not my big brother Aaron, he's a much better public speaker? This is the line that he takes: I'm slow of tongue. But as we've already seen in Genesis, God chooses whom he chooses, and his reasons aren't always fathomed.

[26]Moses says: May I say who sent me? He asks for God's name. The Israelites will want to know who has sent me, and God replies with a sentence, "Ehyeh asher ehyeh." This is a first person sentence that can be translated, "I am who I am," or perhaps, "I will be who I will be," or perhaps, "I cause to be what I cause to be." We really don't know, but it has something to do with "being." So he asks who God is, God says, "I am who am I am" or "I will cause to be what I will cause to be." So Moses, wisely enough, converts that into a third-person formula: okay, he will be who he will be, he is who he is, "Yahweh asher Yahweh." God's answer to the question of his name is this sentence, and Moses converts it from a first-person to a third-person sentence: he will be who he will be; he is who he is; he will cause to be, I think most people think now, what he will cause to be, and that sentence gets shortened to "Yahweh." This is the Bible's explanation for the name Yahweh, and as the personal name of God, some have argued that the name Yahweh expresses the quality of being, an active, dynamic being. This God is one who brings things into being, whether it's a cosmos from chaos, or now a new nation from a band of runaway slaves. But it could well be that this is simply God's way of not answering Moses' question. We've seen how the Bible feels about revealing names, and the divine being who struggled and wrestled with Jacob sure didn't want to give him his name. So I've often wondered if we're to read this differently: Who am I? I am who I am, and never you mind.

[27]There are certain important and unique features of this burning bush dialogue. First God identifies himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and as numerous commentators have pointed out, in so doing, the biblical writer is trying to establish an unbroken historic continuity between the present revelation to Moses, and the revelations and promises that are received by Israel's forefathers, the patriarchs. And yet, paradoxically, the very assertion of continuity only serves to underscore a fundamental discontinuity, because even as God asserts that he is the God of the patriarchs, he reveals to

Moses a new name, Yahweh, so that Yahwism, and the Yahweh cult, can be said to begin only with Moses. Now, as we've seen, the biblical sources differ on this point. According to the J source, in Genesis 4:26, the earliest humans worshiped Yahweh as Yahweh. The name was always known. J wants to assert a direct continuity between the God of the patriarchs, and the God of the Exodus. The P and E sources tell it a little differently. Exodus 6:2-4, a very important passage, is assigned to P, and here God says, "I am [Yahweh]. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name [Yahweh]." Now, this contradicts the J source, and many scholars have suggested that P and E preserve a memory of a time when Israel worshipped the Canaanite god, El. P and E wish to claim that the God who covenanted with the patriarchs is the God of the Exodus, but now with a new name. They also, like J, want to assert a continuity, but in doing so, they do it in a way that really ultimately draws attention to the fundamental discontinuity, the sense of a new beginning. To understand that new beginning, we need to look at the differences between patriarchal religion, and the new Yahwism.

[28]There's a list on your handout [*this handout is appended to this transcript*], so I hope everyone got a copy of the handout. If you didn't, perhaps you can raise your hand, and if the TFs [Teaching Fellows] have any left — you'll want to take a look at these differences between patriarchal religion and Mosaic Yahwism, and this is going to help us. This list is based on information that's supplied by many scholars. I've relied very much on Michael Coogan, but others as well. Look first at the sheet that gives you the titles of God, and you'll see that in the patriarchal traditions — so we're talking about Genesis primarily; I've thrown in some other texts also, but focusing for a moment on the patriarchal traditions of Genesis — God is six times called El Shaddai. Other names are El 'Elyon, and El Olam, El Ro'i, El Beyt El. You can see the translations of these: the everlasting God, God most high, the God of seeing, the God of the house of God, and so on. El is the name of the chief God in the Canaanite pantheon.

[29]Flip over to the other side of your handout, where I discuss an important set of texts that were discovered at a place called Ras Shamra. Ras Shamra was ancient Ugarit. In 1928, a

peasant in Syria discovered a tomb at Ras Shamra, which was subsequently excavated by the French, and it was found to contain a library of tablets that were written in a language very, very close to biblical Hebrew. It's clear that Hebrew is simply a Canaanite dialect — in fact, I remember reading one scholar who said if you go back far enough, you'd be really hard pressed to tell the difference between Canaanite and Hebrew — and in these texts we read of the exploits of the gods of Canaanite religion. These gods include the sky god, El, I've listed here, the father of the various gods and humans. El has a wife, Asherah: she's listed third on your paper, a mother goddess; their daughter, Anat, who is a goddess of love and war. She's quite fierce. And then their son, Baal, who is a storm god. He's depicted in mythological literature as defeating both the chaotic sea god, Yam, and the god of death, Mot.

[30] There are striking resemblances between the biblical gods of the Patriarchs and the Canaanite god El. El is the head of a council of gods. He is said to have a long white beard. He dwells on a mountaintop in a tent. His epithets include "Father of all creatures," "Bull," "King." He's also described as the protector of patriarchs, patriarchal figures, "a God of the father of the clan," it says in the text. He guides them. He protects them. He promises them descendants. Many biblical passages depict God exactly this way, as the head of a council of divine beings. He's occasionally described with some of the epithets that are associated with El. He's referred to as the father of all creatures. There are poetic passages in which he is referred to as "Bull." Also certainly as "King." And in the patriarchal narratives, God refers to himself as the God of the Father. "I am the God of the father," the same way El is referred to. He guides and protects the patriarchs. He makes promises of progeny to Abraham and his heirs. He also is associated with a mountaintop, Sinai, and gives instructions for the building of a tabernacle, a tent-like structure, in which he will dwell. Many personal and place names in the patriarchal narratives are compounds in which one element is El. Israel, Ishmael, Beth-el. El is the God of the Patriarchs. By contrast, after the time of Moses, Israelite names start to be formed using Yah, or Yahu, as part of the name Yahweh: Elijah in Hebrew is Eliyahu. So you start to have theophorics, names that use a name of a deity, which are using forms of Yahu instead of El.

[31] There are other descriptions in the Bible of God, which are much more reminiscent, however, of the storm god, Baal. According to Canaanite mythology, Baal defeated El, and assumed his position at a certain point as the head of the Canaanite pantheon, so there was a switch in Canaanite mythology, from El to Baal becoming supreme. Like Baal, Yahweh is said to ride on the clouds: we have a poetic passage in which that's the case. His revelations are accompanied by thunderstorms, earthquakes: Baal is the god of the storm. There are poetic fragments also that allude to Yahweh's victory over water foes, and that is a motif that's associated with Baal, who does battle with the Yam, with the sea. And finally, also associated with Israel's God, we have Ancient Near Eastern holy war traditions. God is depicted as a warrior, who leads his host [he's], the Lord of hosts in battle. He's armed with spear and bow and arrows.

[32] The worship practices of ancient Israel and Judah clearly resemble what we know of Canaanite and Ancient Near Eastern worship practices. Canaanite religious ritual took place in small temples that housed cultic statues. There were stone pillars, perhaps symbols of the gods, or memorials to the dead. There were altars for animal sacrifices, cereal, liquid sacrifices. Similarly, Israel's gods, or Israel's God, was worshiped at various high places: they're referred to as elevated or high places. They were shrines with little altars, maybe cultic pillars, and wooden poles: the word for a wooden pole that's used in the Bible is asherah. These shrines may have been associated with some kind of contact with ancestors, some kind of cult of the dead. Now, worship at these local altars and high places would come to be banned: Deuteronomy is going to polemicize against this. Deuteronomy will insist that all worship must occur in one central sanctuary and these outlying areas, and their asherot are to be destroyed. It will decree the destruction of all of these altars and high places. The patriarchal stories are clearly not the work of the Deuteronomist, and these stories must have had very longstanding traditional authority if they were adopted without serious modification by the Deuteronomist redactor — [there's] some modification, but not serious.

6. *Smith's Convergence and Divergence Model*

[33] So what is going on here? What are we to make of the incredible similarity of Israel's deity and cult to those of her neighbors? How are we to understand the rise of Israel's God, Israel's religion? Well, so far we've had two models that have been thrown out to you: the kind of classic evolutionary model. From polytheism's worship of many gods there's a natural evolution to henotheism's elevation of one god to a supreme position. One comes to be favored and then eventually becomes so important, the others really fall away, and you have the denial of all gods but the one. We saw Kaufman in the 1930s reacted against this. He argued that monotheism and polytheism are so radically distinct that one could not possibly have evolved from the other. Surely there's an element of truth in both models.

[34] The evolutionary model is, I think, responding to, and picking up on, the fact that in many respects, Yahweh resembles the gods of Israel's neighbors. To be blunt, the patriarchs seem to have worshiped the Canaanite God, El. The problem with the evolutionary model is that it doesn't account for those aspects of the biblical text that show a clear polemical relationship between Israel's religion and that of her neighbors. Now, we saw when we read Genesis 1, that there was something going on there, there's a polemic going on. There are strata within the Bible that are clearly polemicizing against a certain kind of mythological presentation of the deity. By contrast, Kaufman's revolutionary model focuses almost exclusively on the dissimilarities and the polemical relationship between Yahwism and Canaanite polytheism. [But] the revolutionary model also fails because it doesn't acknowledge the many, many areas of contact, similarity, and even identity.

[35] So a third way has emerged in the last 20 years, or 15 years or so, and it's one that seeks to avoid this dichotomy between polytheism and monotheism. Instead of viewing Israelite religion as an evolution from and a refinement — just this natural process of refinement — of Canaanite religion, or as a radical break with and polemic against Canaanite religion, we have some biblical scholars — Mark S. Smith is among them, and Steven Geller — who examine

the cultural and ideological negotiations that gave rise to Israelite monotheism. What do I mean? Mark Smith specifically describes the origin and development of Israelite religion as a process of what he calls convergence and differentiation. He writes, "Convergence involved the coalescence of various deities, and/or some of their features into the figure of Yahweh" [Smith 2002, 7-8]. There's a period of convergence and blending of the deities. By contrast, he describes differentiation as a process whereby Israel came to reject its Canaanite roots, and create a separate identity. At some point there was a desire to separate, and in that process of identity formation, a polemic began to develop that created Yahweh in a distinct way, differentiated from the Canaanite deities.

[36] So let's consider Smith's convergence first. The Canaanite roots of Israel's ancestors are clear. The Hebrew language itself is essentially Canaanite, a Canaanite dialect. The Canaanite god El was, from the biblical text, the God of Israel's earliest ancestors. Through a process of convergence, he argues: the God Yahweh was the god that we think originally came from a region further south, Sinai, Edom, somewhere further south — but this god, through a process of convergence and cultural mixing, began to take on the characteristics of other deities, first El, and then Baal, or sort of simultaneously El and Baal. Later, certain aspects of this convergence would be polemicized against, and rejected as a Yahweh-only party sought to differentiate itself from those that it would now label as other, and call Canaanites, as distinct from Israelites. Smith's model of convergence and then differentiation, has great explanatory power. It explains the deep similarity of Israel's deity and the deities of her neighbors, but it also explains the vehement biblical polemic against Canaanite religion, and Baal worship in particular, which we will come to see. It reminds one of sibling rivalry. Siblings who obviously share a tremendous amount, and can be extraordinarily similar are precisely the siblings who can struggle and wrestle the most to differentiate themselves from one another.

[37] Smith's model of convergence and differentiation also avoids unhelpful dichotomies. Israel is either like or unlike her neighbors — that's not helpful. It helps us understand Israel's God as the end product of familiar cultural processes, processes of convergence — we see convergences of cultures

all the time — and differentiation. Differentiations of culture happen all the time as well. When and why, you may ask, did this differentiation occur? When and why did some Israelites adopt a Yahweh-only position, and seek to differentiate what they would call a pure Yahwism from the cult of Baal, for example? The debate over that question is fierce, and it's one we're going to leave for another day. We will come back, as we continue moving through the biblical text, and we will address that question.

[38]But to sum up, it's clear that the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs are not strict Yahwists, as we will come to understand that term. The P and the E sources preserve this insight; and they preserve it in their insistence that the Patriarchs worshiped God as El, but at the time of the Exodus, God revealed himself as Yahweh. There's an interesting passage in the book of Joshua, Joshua 24:14-15. Joshua was the successor to Moses. He presents the Israelites with the following choice: "Now therefore revere the Lord," using the word Yahweh, "revere Yahweh, and serve him with undivided loyalty. Put away the gods that your forefathers served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt" — put away the gods your forefathers served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt — "and serve Yahweh. / Choose this day which ones you are going to serve, but I in my household will serve Yahweh," serve the Lord. Only later would a Yahweh-only party polemicize against and seek to suppress certain... what came to be seen as undesirable elements of Israelite-Judean religion, and these elements would be labeled Canaanite, as a part of a process of Israelite

differentiation. But what appears in the Bible as a battle between Israelites, pure Yahwists, and Canaanites, pure polytheists, is indeed better understood as a civil war between Yahweh-only Israelites, and Israelites who are participating in the cult of their ancestors.

[39]I have a couple of quick announcements that I want to make about the schedule, so I wanted to stop two minutes early....

[40][end of transcript]

—

[41]References

[42]Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from "Tanakh: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text." Copyright (c) 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society. Single copies of the JPS biblical citations cited within the transcripts can be reproduced for personal and non-commercial uses only.

[43]Sarna, Nahum. 1966. *Understanding Genesis*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary.

[44]Sarna, Nahum. 1986. *Exploring Exodus: the heritage of biblical Israel*. New York: Schocken Books.

[45]Smith, Mark S. 2002. *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. 2d ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Canaanite Religion as a Background for Patriarchal and Early Israelite Religion

The Ras Shamra texts (site of ancient Ugarit) dating from 1500-1200 B.C.E.) provide important information about Canaanite religion. Ugarit is representative of a larger cultural continuum that included 2nd-1st millennium Syria-Palestine and formed the background for the formation of the tribes of Israel. These texts attest to aspects of Canaanite culture and mythology that the ancient Israelites alternately shared, adopted, modified and rejected.

The Ugaritic gods and goddesses

1. El. Literally, "god" but also the personal name for the head of the Canaanite pantheon and council of the gods until overthrown by Baal. He is also called: King, Creator of All, Father of years, Kind, Compassionate. He is represented as a patriarchal god who dwells in a tent. El appears throughout Semitic cultures as Allah (=El) in Arabic religion and *EI/Elohim* in the Hebrew Bible.

2. Baal. Literally "master" but also "husband." Son of the grain god Dagan, Baal was a storm god. By 1000 B.C.E. he had become the chief deity and head of the Canaanite pantheon. He is featured in a fertility myth in which he is killed by Mot, the god of death, and then restored to life (a Canaanite version of the myth of a dying and rising god that is linked to the cycle of nature and agriculture). Another story tells of a battle between Baal the storm god and the chaotic watery demon Yamm (reminiscent of the battle between Marduk and Tiamat in Mesopotamian myth and reflected in Israel's demythologized version of creation in which God's wind moves over the watery deep, and in God's parting the Red Sea by a blast from his nostrils. In the Bible, Baal appears frequently as Yahweh's rival.

3. Asherah. Wife of El, but in the Hebrew Bible the consort of Baal, evidence of Baal's usurpation of El's position. In the Hebrew Bible the term *asherah* (plural *asherim*) refers to a sacred tree or pole associated with the cultic worship of a goddess. But Asherah is mentioned by name in I and II Kings.

4. Anat. Baal's wife and sister. A fertility goddess, and goddess of both love and war. Anat is violent and bloodthirsty. She is later supplanted by or merged with Astarte (= the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar from which the Hebrew name Esther derives) and appears as such in the Bible in I and II Kings.

Titles of the God of Israel

1. El Shadday. Literally, "El, the one of the mountain" but the common translation is "God Almighty." In Canaanite myth, El is said to live on a mountain. El Shadday occurs in Gen 17:1,28:3,35:11,43:14,48:3,49:25; Ex 6:3.
2. El Elyon. Literally, "God most High." Mentioned only in Gen 14:18-22 and Ps 78:35, but Elyon alone occurs frequently.
3. El Olam. "The Everlasting God." Gen 21:33. This title can be compared to the Ugaritic titles for El as "El, the Eternal One." .
4. El Ro'i. "A God of Seeing." Gen 16:13.
5. El Bethel. "The God of the House of God" Gen 31:13, 35:7.
6. The Fear of Isaac. Gen 31:42, 53.
7. The Bull of Jacob. Or "the mighty one of Jacob." Gen 49:24; Ps 132:2, 5; Isa 49:26; 60:16.
8. El, the god of: Abraham/Isaac/Israel/my father Abraham, etc. Gen 26:24,28: 13,32:9, 33:20,43:23,46:1,3; Ex 3:15.

Yahweh as "Baal"

Although identified explicitly as El (e.g., in Ex 6:3), Yahweh also has a number of traits in common with Baal. Like Baal he is called "rider on the clouds" (Ps 68:4) and there are allusions to a battle with sea/river in Ex 15, Ps 114 and Isa 51:9-11. Thus Yahweh is a composite of features of El and Baal. This new deity required a new name and it was fitting that the new God be introduced at the time of the Exodus, which sees the formation of a new people about to make the transition from the semi-nomadic tent-dwelling existence of the patriarchs (whose God El also dwelled in a tent) to the settled urban way of life in Canaan (the Canaanite Baal lived in a house).

Copyright © 2007 Yale University. Some rights reserved. Unless otherwise indicated on this document or on the Open Yale Courses web site, all content is licensed under a Creative Commons License (Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0).

Open Yale courses

Copyright © 2011 Yale University. Some rights reserved. Unless otherwise indicated on this document or on the Open Yale Courses website, all content is licensed under a Creative Commons License (Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0).