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When the Personal Became Political: An Onomastic Perspective on The Rise of Yahwism

Hebrew personal names suggest that it was during the Iron Age IIB that ancient Israel and Judah underwent an unusual religious change: the pantheon was drastically reduced to focus on a relatively new god, Yahweh. The nature and origin of Israel’s religious distinctiveness are hotly contested, and names do not speak for themselves, but when integrated with contemporary evidence that helps us interpret them, an onomastic approach has special advantages. Despite their limits, inscribed names provide our single clearest source of evidence for early Israelite religion because, unlike edited literary texts, they can be precisely dated and confidently connected with society beyond Judahite scholarly circles. This clear pattern compels us to rethink both the recent notion that Iron Age Levantine societies were religiously uniform and the old assumption that monotheism was part of Israel’s original essence.

But the very strength of this evidence raises a theoretical problem: what if Judah really was different? How then can we understand such a value-laden historical shift historically, conceptualizing the rise of an apparently unique feature of Israelite religion without triumphalism? The following paper suggests we begin from the outside, by asking what aspects of the Iron Age Hebrew pantheon were ‘normal’ to begin with compared to how contemporary West Semitic cultures presented their relationships to their gods. This baseline lets us place Israel’s unique relationship between names and gods in a deeper historical perspective, showing that the very name “Israel” is our first evidence of a long-standing West Semitic tendency to inscribe divine tribal patrons onto popular names, one practiced with particular intensity and artfulness in the southern Levant. By the 9th century, this old tendency

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1 I thank Christoph Uehlinger for the invitation and intellectual framework, and the discussion with the other participants in the Zürich Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel workshop, Amihai Mazar, Omer Sergey, and Terje Stordalen. Critical readings by Mark Smith and an anonymous HeBAI reviewer improved the paper and sparked new thoughts.
had expanded into a new role. Israelite kings adapted that patron god for their own dynasties, making possible new types of relationship between kin, god, and king. As we shall see, the practice of forming ritual alliances of kinship between people, god and kingdom already existed in Iron Age West Semitic cultures. But this new form of loyalty, inscribing the name of the king’s god on the people themselves, was as much about language and media as worship and enabled a new kind of exclusive belonging, later mis-recognized as monotheism or the supposedly intolerant “Mosaic distinction” of Judaism.

1. Introduction: Two Approaches to the Yahwistic Distinction

In what may be at once the most historically precise and academically neglected study of the evidence of a shift towards worship of one god in the Semitic realm, D. Pardee compared the divine element of personal names in two chronologically and geographically distinct bodies of Hebrew inscriptions. One, from before the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.E., showed a strong focus on the distinctive Israelite god Yahweh, though not to the exclusion of well-known older West Semitic god names, especially Baal. In the second body, from Judah after 722, Baal had vanished and few others were to be found. Comparing this pattern with evidence of every other major attested ancient West Semitic naming practice, from third-millennium B.C.E. Ebla to Late Bronze Age Ugarit to Iron Age Phoenician and Aramaic, Pardee was able to show that ancient Israel and especially Judah had undergone an otherwise unparalleled change during the Iron Age IIB: “A specifically religious ideology is more clearly visible in the Hebrew sources than in other ancient Near Eastern sources because of the explicit

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2 D. Pardee, “An Evaluation of the Proper Names from Ebla from a West Semitic Perspective: Pantheon Distribution According to Genre,” in Eblaite Personal Names and Semitic Name-Giving: Papers of a Symposium in Rome July 15–17, 1985 (ed. A. Archi; Archivi Reali di Ebla: Studi, I; Rome: Missione Archaeologica Italiana in Siria, 1988), 119–151. Pardee isolated dated sets of texts to establish this pattern, a feature that has surprisingly not been replicated in any other study of ancient Hebrew names. The distinctiveness of Pardee’s study is marked both by its name and the volume where it is published, a collection of studies on Eblaite onomastics. Its sharp methodological difference from comparable studies is usually not mentioned in discussions of monotheism’s rise or family religion (see e.g. S. Sanders, “The Mutation Peculiar to Hebrew Religion: Monotheism, Pantheon Reduction, or Royal Adoption of Family Religion?,” JANER 14 [2014]: 217–227). C. Uehlinger and O. Keel were among the few scholars to draw on it in Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).
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attempt at pantheon reduction for which we have no real parallels, only dis-
tant similarities, in other Near Eastern cultures.³

But if the data could be historically located in time and space, their expla-
nation was missing: One of the great mysteries of ancient religion is why
the mutation peculiar to Hebrew religion took place viz., that a given deity
became not only the principal deity but the only deity of a major segment
of the culture.⁴

The opposite problem of Pardee’s appears in a more famous but less pre-
cise work, the Egyptologist J. Assmann’s sweeping theory of monotheism.
“At some stage in the course of ancient history – the dates proposed by the
experts range from the late Bronze Age to late antiquity – a shift took place
that has had a more profound impact on the world we live in today than any
political upheaval.”⁵ Assmann depicts the rise of monotheism as a historical
change more important than any revolution, but which nonetheless cannot
be placed historically any more precisely than between 1400 B.C.E.–500
C.E., a range of some 2000 years. Pardee’s epigraphic study locates the con-
crete phenomenon of pantheon reduction in the specific time and place of
the later Iron Age southern Levant, but leaves its cause open. Assmann, by
contrast, uses literary texts to theorize an explanation: in a radical break,
Hebrew tradition rejected the common pantheistic religious framework of
the ancient Near East to form a completely new type of religion, a “second-
ary” anti-religion.

A comparison between Pardee and Assmann’s studies of this “mystery of
ancient religion” suggests a troubling inverse relationship between credibil-
ity and impact: the specificity of Pardee’s study removed it from the realm
of grand ideas, while the generality of Assmann’s work prevented it from
being accepted by experts on the text about which he made his claims. The
difficulty pointed out by biblicists was that Assmann’s theory, despite being
based on a historical claim, is not just historically vague but essentially ahis-

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³ Pardee, “Evaluation of the Proper Names,” 133.
⁴ Pardee, “Evaluation of the Proper Names,” 150.
⁵ J. Assmann, The Price of Monotheism (trans. R. Savage; Stanford: Stanford University
Press, 2010), 1. For a reflective and data-rich critique that outlines multiple ancient
Near Eastern theories of divine unity and diversity, see M. S. Smith, God in Translation:
Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World (FAT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck,
2008). For a well-informed use of the most plausible aspects of Assmann’s approach in
the context of other theories of cultural memory, see R. Hendel, Remembering Abra-
ham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible (Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 2005). Assmann’s work on monotheism is opposed to Pardee’s in publishing
strategy as well, the subject of at least a half-dozen authored monographs in English and
German, not to mention a wide range of edited volumes and conference proceedings.
historical. At times, for example in the discussion of the ban on images, it is based on readings of Pentateuchal narratives with no demonstrable relationship to historical events. At other times, as in the supposed association of Egypt with idolatry, it is based on assumptions about Pentateuchal narrative that do not actually appear in the Pentateuch. Even more remarkably for a German scholar who claimed to be inspired by an attempt to understand the Holocaust, it assigns responsibility for a decisive turn toward violent intolerance to a transculturally Jewish “Mosaic” entity. Indeed, Assmann’s theory does not really differentiate between Moses himself, Iron Age Israelites, and late antique Jewish writers. In its transhistorical sweep, Assmann’s study resembles an old-fashioned History of Religions analysis— with all its flaws.

Can one place such a momentous change in the history of religions more historically, locating specifiable mechanisms by which Yahweh became the only god of a major segment of Judahite culture by the end of the Iron Age? This paper argues for a middle ground between Pardee’s cautiously observed Iron Age patterns and Assmann’s loose 2,000 year generalization: a way to theorize a unique feature of ancient Israelite and Judahite religion without triumphalism. It argues that Pardee’s empirical approach provides a historically responsible way to answer Assmann’s political-theological question. It proposes hewing firmly to epigraphic methods, but expanding them by

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6 A set of detailed critiques of Assmann’s thesis from the viewpoints of biblical studies, cultural history, and theology appears in the original German edition (but was omitted from the English translation) of Die Mosaische Unterscheidung, oder, der Preis des Monotheismus (München: Carl Hanser, 2003). See the essays of R. Rendtorff, E. Zenger, K. Koch, O. Kaiser, and Kischel on p. 193–286 of the German edition, and note their absence from the English in Price of Monotheism. The fact that detailed early criticism of Assmann’s work was mainly limited to German may be a factor in the reception of his work in American academic circles.

7 As Smith writes in God in Translation, 25 n. 57, any evidence that might suggest a historical connection between Late Bronze Age Egyptian Aten-worship and later Israelite religion “indicates a major series of interpretive alterations such that the two barely resemble one another with respect to content.”


10 Comparing the work of such old master thinkers as G. Scholem, M. Eliade, or H. Corbin, it is apparent that Assmann lacks the former’s historical precision and rigor and clusters with the latter in sweep. For the shared approaches and problems of these figures, see S. Wasserstrom’s insightful Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
placing them in a broader framework of inscriptionsal evidence for pantheon expansion and contraction during the 9th–7th centuries B.C.E. By finding a historical trajectory for Hebrew pantheon reduction that takes seriously the nature of the written evidence as media, it argues that we can narrate a history of monotheism that is not exceptionalist.

2. The Concept of Israelite “Monotheism” in Recent Research: Problematised but Not Yet Replaced

As C. Uehlinger’s programmatic introductory essay in this HeBAI volume shows, the past two decades of research on Iron Age Israelite religion have marked a move away from a rhetoric of exceptionalism, on both evidentiary and methodological grounds. This move is clear in arguments such as those of H. Niehr that preexilic evidence showed Iron Age Israel and Judah to be typical Canaanite cultures. When it comes to monotheism, which was once claimed as the most unique feature of Israelite religion, K. Schmid pointed out that the term is hard to separate from its polemical and homogenizing history:

[T]he more that scholars use the terms monotheism and polytheism, the less they feel comfortable with them. It has become quite clear that the term monotheism (which stems from English 17th-century Deism) cannot adequately describe religious systems from the ancient world. In addition, monotheistic positions can vary considerably. The result has often been to speak of monotheisms in the plural. The notion of polytheism is even more problematic, because it is an aggressive and deprecating category used by the Christian-controlled academy of the 19th century … [To avoid the evolutionist polemic opposing a superior monotheism to an inferior pagan polytheism, if] terms such as monotheism are used with respect to particular texts or positions, then it is crucial to explain the specific shape of this monotheism.12

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12 In B. Pongratz-Leisten, Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 275.
Indeed, for a broad cross-section of experts in Israelite and ancient Near Eastern religion, the price of “monotheism” as a unitary concept is too high.\(^{13}\) The problem is that no coherent framework has yet replaced it.\(^{14}\)

The theory of a monotheistic revolution was a compelling, if poorly-supported, explanation of how ancient Hebrew religion diverged. Always dependent on pointed readings of literary data, it has not survived critique. A second critique, oriented towards different historical sources, may help provide a more concrete foundation. In his discussion of the historiographical methods for establishing a history of the religion of Judah and Israel, Uehlinger has supported the case, first made by Knauf and Ahlstrom, for the necessity of prioritizing what he terms primary sources over secondary sources. With this distinction, Uehlinger and Knauf mean contemporary excavated documents rather than edited literary texts. This is not to exalt epigraphic texts, which may be narrow, fragmentary, or tendentious, over literary texts, which cannot be assumed to be less reliable and are almost always more detailed. As Uehlinger notes, “Reliability does not automatically follow from temporal proximity.”\(^{15}\) It is simply to establish an initial basis for historical arguments.

What Uehlinger is arguing is that while we need the literary data, it cannot provide a starting point for the history of Israelite religion: “History of religion, as any other attempt at critical history writing, must start from the primary sources.”\(^{16}\) An example of how sophisticated literary texts may defy or even subvert historical understanding is the only direct account of the rise of monotheism in the Hebrew Bible. It exemplifies how ancient Hebrew literature can tell stories about its own distinctiveness in a powerfully self-

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\(^{13}\) For a summary of the results, see the introduction in Pongratz-Leisten, *Reconsidering the Concept*.

\(^{14}\) It may be no accident that Assmann’s “Mosaic distinction” brought back the very opposition Schmid is criticizing at precisely the time scholars of ancient Israel had abandoned it, since it is difficult to think without it. Assmann rescued the attractive part of the monotheism-polytheism binarism by simply reversing their value. Rather than progress from a bad primitive polytheism to a good advanced monotheism, polytheism for Assmann represents an old principle of tolerance, while the monotheism that rejects it represents a new principle of intolerance.

\(^{15}\) “In my view, the distinction between primary, secondary, tertiary sources, etc. does not imply an *a priori* judgment regarding *historical reliability*…. Primary sources can offer tendentious, concocted history, while tertiary sources may well pass down historically reliable information.” C. Uehlinger, “Was There a Cult Reform under King Josiah? The Case for a Well-Grounded Minimum,” in *Good Kings and Bad Kings* (ed. L. L. Grabbe; London: T&T Clark, 2005), 283.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 286. Not only are the literary sources the most rich as well as often the most challenging, but their afterlife is the reason many are interested in these questions in the first place.
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reflective and mythic way. Psalm 82 narrates the fall of a West-Semitic-style divine council, sentenced to death by Yahweh. But this version of the rise of monotheism is itself a polytheistic myth: Yahweh’s guilty verdict is based on an ancient West Semitic narrative first known from the Old Babylonian period. And it is never an objective description, but rather always an aggressive rhetorical tool: the accusation of failing to publicly perform just judgment and decide in favor of the poor appears in the mouths of usurpers in both Ugaritic (Kirta) and biblical (2 Sam 15) narrative.

If Psalm 82 is the only text in the Hebrew Bible that directly narrates the rise of monotheism, its main themes are old and attested in a variety of ancient West Semitic texts over at least a millennium. When Yahweh accuses the rest of the divine council of being unjust rulers, he voices an ancient West Semitic political trope: that a king’s divinely granted rule is entirely contingent on his publicly performing legal judgment in favor of the poor and weak. This theme first appears around 1800 B.C.E. in the famous letter from the storm-god Hadad to king Zimri-Lim (A 1968); then in the 13th-century Kirta epic in Yaṣṣibu’s challenge to his father (KTU 1.16 vi); and finally in Absalom’s accusations against David (1 Samuel 15) and Psalm 82. But even in the Old Babylonian period, this mythological trope was already sufficiently established as a norm or cliché that it was being politically manipulated in its earliest known attestations. The political myth of king as just judge coincides in Psalm 82 with an equally old and related but independent mythic theme, the ability of the chief god to dethrone subordinate gods.


19 This second myth, attested at Mari in ARM 26 196, is the subject of a rich comparison by Smith, God in Translation, 136–139, with bibliography. Psalm 82 is thus related to three different political-theological discourses known from Mari:
1. God threatens the human king that it will replace him with a different king, because of his violation of the West Semitic political principle of sovereignty, public performance of just judgment. The god will remove the military power, figured as divine weapons, which he had granted to the king (A. 1968).
2. God’s threats to the human king are ventriloquized by a more powerful senior king, who figures alliance with and obedience to him as just judgment. Here the divine weapons are figures for the senior king’s military power (A. 1121 + A. 2731).
3. Divine council announces to a god that it will replace him with a different god because his time has passed (ARM 26 196).
What distinguishes Psalm 82 is not its themes of divine dethronement or rule being dependent on just judgment, but the way they are combined. When Yahweh sentences the entire divine council to death for violating their own rules, an ancient system is used to imagine its own overthrow, but still entirely in its own terms. Narrated as acts of divine kings, councils, courts and death-sentences, monotheism’s rise is itself a polytheistic myth.

But as an original political theology that stands in a millennium-old West Semitic mythic tradition, Psalm 82’s vision resists reduction to any single set of historical circumstances. With its classical Hebrew diction and lack of reference to human political events, the text could be placed at virtually any point between the Iron Age and the early Hellenistic period. In the richest recent English-language study of the topic, M. Smith concludes that the rise of “biblical monotheism constituted part of Israelite [religion]’s own foundational myth comparable in some respects to Canaan’s own myths.”

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The biblical version is the only one where the whole system is overthrown: the entire council as a source of decisions and legitimacy is deposed. Thus, the system is used to visualize its own end. But as a polytheistic myth of the origins of monotheism – how else could you narrate it as having beginnings? – it is opposed to a conflicting ontology of monotheism, directly opposite the claim in a layer of Deuteronomy and Second Isaiah that there was never any god before or beside Yahweh (Deut 4:35, in tension with the claim in Deut 4:7–8 that what distinguishes Israel is not that their god is real but merely that he is the most attentive; see also Isa 48:12–16).

This reading is strengthened by the way it accords with the detailed and nuanced new reading of the text’s poetics and cosmology by P. Machinist, “How Gods Die, Biblically and Otherwise: A Problem of Cosmic Restructuring,” in *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism* (ed. B. Pongratz-Leisten; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011): 189–240.


Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 177–178. Smith ventures a plausible reconstruction of the rise of monotheism that draws thoughtfully on literary texts such as Psalm 82. But because it reads poetic texts like Numbers 23–24, Genesis 49, and Judges 5 as reflecting a typological and historical sequence of development, this reconstruction itself opens up a dialogue that embodies the playful, mythic and ultimately undecidable nature of the sources. For example, Smith reads Numbers 23–24 as reflecting the same developmental stage as Judges 5. But linguistically, as T. Notarius has demonstrated, Numbers 23–24 represents a typologically later verbal syntax than Judges 5 or Genesis 49. See T. Notarius, *The Verb in Archaic Biblical Poetry: A Discursive, Typological, and Historical Investigation of the Tense System* (Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics; Leiden: Brill, 2013).

Does Numbers 23–24 embody culturally archaic contents in more linguistically developed form? This is plausible, but it is equally possible that in Judges 5 or Genesis 49, a skilled traditional poet voiced more recent contents in an archaic register.
3. The Multiple Bodies and Alliances of West Semitic Gods in the Iron Age IIB (9th–7th centuries)

Taken together, the past two decades of research suggests that what may be most lacking in the dialogue is a way of integrating the patterns found in primary sources into a History of Religions picture: a more historical way to narrate and theorize religious change. The following section will suggest a comparative framework, based in primary sources, that can serve as a check on the more broad-based but less contextualized onomastic evidence: two sets of inscriptions from the northern and southern extremes of alphabetic culture, Zincirli and Saba’, illustrate key shared features of diversity within West Semitic pantheons during the 9th–7th centuries B.C.E. Compared with Israelite and Judahite onomastic evidence, each can serve as a check on the other, showing not just how one culture became special, but rather what the distinctive features of each are.

This will let us build on the older discussion of a long-range historical trajectory for Hebrew pantheon reduction. Recognizing the need to identify linguistic evidence connecting divine names with social groups, it will investigate a little-noted but well-documented pattern in the theophoric name “Israel” which can be traced from the second millennium through the Iron Age. Finally, it will draw some new conclusions from the well-established consensus of the major recent studies of Hebrew onomastics by Pardee, J. Tigay and R. Albertz. It will argue that what is distinct about the unusual level of Hebrew onomastic focus on Yahweh is not its pantheon reduction per se, which is found even more intensely in Ammonite names, but the specific type of pantheon reduction they manifest. Only in Hebrew is the dynastic god identical with the most popular kin-god. This unique feature, which can be traced to at least 800 B.C.E., represents the first verifiable point at which a three-way connection was built between Yahweh and Israelite and Judahite groups, a connection later misrecognized as ‘monotheism.’

The first set of epigraphic texts provide our initial historical perspective: that the default West Semitic situation in the Iron Age IIB is multiformity of gods, including multiple aspects of a single god. By the beginning of the

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23 Where a practice text addressed to “my lord” (presumably the king) blesses the ruler “by Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah,” (see below), thus demonstrating not only the broadly shared West Semitic features of pantheon diversity – a pantheon including multiple manifestations of one god – but also the actual “mutation distinctive to Hebrew religion,” in Pardee’s terms.

24 For the most sophisticated theoretical model of this phenomenon in the ancient Near East along with a detailed survey of evidence, see B. Sommer, The Bodies of God and
8th century B.C.E., Hebrew texts lie within this spectrum, but are already on an extreme point of it, where the divine terms are already unusually narrow, focused on El, Baal and instances of Yahweh and his materializations, whether local or differently gendered (Teman, Samaria, Asherah).

It is helpful to begin with the Iron Age West Semitic society whose epigraphic remains depict a situation closest to the militaristic, tribal ideal that runs through Joshua, Samuel and much of Kings. This is the Old South Arabian corpus, a body that biblicists may find unfamiliar yet surprisingly recognizable. The kingdom of Saba’ in Yemen left substantial inscriptions during the Iron IIB, traded goods and left writing and artifacts from Jerusalem to Carchemish.\(^{25}\)

A cast bronze altar (AO 31929), written boustrophedon in monumental Sabaean script from the second half of 8th century B.C.E. commemorates the victory of king Yṯʿmr Wtr.\(^{26}\) Note how here, a single god can function as a master of territory, a political patron, and a material object:

(King) Yṯʿmr Wtr son of Ykrbmlk, mukarrib of Sabaʾ, dedicated (this altar) to (the god) ‘rnyd—the-Patron, when he brought back (the statue of) ‘rnyd from Kamna to Nashshān … and when he assigned the territories of (the god) ‘rnyd and (the city) Nashshān, and vindicated Nashshān against Kamna because Nashshān had maintained the alliance (‘âḥāt) of (the god) ‘Almaqah and (the god) ‘rnyd and (king) Yṯʿmr and (king) Malikwaqah and (the kingdom/people of) Sabaʾ and Nashshān, on the basis of that (alliance) of the god and the patron, and that of the territory and the people.\(^{27}\)

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\(^{26}\) Note that, due to the largely consonantal OSA writing system and the rarity of transliterations into other languages, most names are unvocalized.

\(^{27}\) For this translation along with edition, photographs, and bibliography, see the digital Corpus of Sabaic Inscriptions edited by A. Avanzini at http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it.
In this Sabaean political theology, not only peoples and gods, but also kings and city-states can not only interact with each other but become relatives. They are able to form ritual-political bonds of kinship, termed “brotherhood” (ʾaḥāt). The term appears in this usage in three early Sabaean inscriptions, where it also refers to political alliances between kingdoms.\(^{28}\) Successful military acts and victory would confirm that the bonds are those of blood. L. Monroe has acutely noted the similarities to the ritual by which the people of Israel become the kin of Yahweh (e.g. Deut 26:18, 27:9, 28:9), similarly founded on sharing a pact and sacrificial blood in ritual and confirmed by military victory and grant of territory.\(^{29}\)

A single Sabaean god could be invoked in multiple aspects within the same inscription, manifesting different political or social relationships to the dedicator. In an incised stone inscription from a later king of Saba’ ca. 7th century B.C.E. (CIH 366a, with parallels in CIH 366b and 366b’), we see the god ʿAttar invoked twice in a single list, once in his basic form and once as Patron:

Ydʾl ʾrḥ son of Sʾmḥʾ lly, mukarrrib of Sabaʾ, built the temple of ʾAlmaqah, when he executed the construction of the sanctuary for the third time and he founded all the community (gwm), that of the god and patron (ʾsʾymm) and of the territory and people; for ʿAttar and ʾAlmaqah and ṭ Ḥymym and ʿAttar-the-Patron.\(^{30}\)

This Sabaean inscription characterizes a set of gods, territory, and population group as a single community (gwm, plausibly related to Mari Amorite gayu(m) and Hebrew gôy), oriented around a sanctuary. As with the “brotherhood” of the previous inscription, here too they are bonded through a ritual, again suggesting how the unique bond with Yahweh described in Exodus and Deuteronomy is a literary representation of a broadly shared political ideology distinctive to the Iron Age. Crucially, ‘patron’ (ʾsʾymm) is a special role a god can assume, leading him to assume a second identity in the same text. As Sommer shows, in a case like this one, we have to do not with a division of labor between specialized gods but with individual gods who appear differently in different roles or avatars.\(^{31}\)

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\(^{28}\) The other two instances are in Jabal Riyām 2006–1 and 2006–2, in both of which it refers to a dedication “by the brotherhood of (the kingdoms of) Sabaʾ and Samʾiʾ.” All 14 later instances represent a second, etymologically related but semantically distinct, homographically written term ūhw – the plural form of “brother.”


\(^{30}\) For the text, see Avanzini’s online Corpus of Sabaic Inscriptions cited above.

\(^{31}\) Sommer, *Bodies of God.*
These early Sabaean inscriptions are not isolated in West Semitic, but find correspondences further north, in Jordan where they resemble the king-god-people-territory bond memorialized in the late-9th-century Mesha stele. Indeed, the specific term for ritual genocide, *ḥrm*, is shared between the Mesha stele and a 7th-century Sabean inscription (RES 3945), which boasts of having performed *ḥrm* for the god ʾAlmaqah against the city of Nashshān named in the first inscription. These provide a further link with Deuteronomistic ideology, represented in Joshua 6–7 and 1 Samuel 15. In Sabaean and Moabite inscriptions, and Deuteronomistic literary representation, a military-ritual act of *ḥrm* reclaims land that rightfully belongs to the authors, uniting peoples, gods and territories. It is in the Hebrew and Moabite accounts that this common West Semitic political theology appears in the singular: it is an alliance of but one dynastic god with king, people and territory.

At the other extreme of West Semitic inscriptions, the northern Syrian city-state of Zinçirli (ancient Yaʿudi) offers an unusually data-rich parallel in that we can track the set of gods invoked over the course of a century through no fewer than 8 inscriptions, in at least three language varieties, from the same city-state and dynasty. In addition to a dynastic god Rakkib-El, who tracks over the entire time period, we also see Barrakkib describing three different beings as ‘my lord’ – the traditional Rakkib-El, the moon-god termed the Lord of Harran, and the Assyrian king Tiglathpilesrer (in an inscription alongside the dynastic god).

In the best-attested and most widely-distributed cases such as Sabaʿ and Zincirli, we see that focus on a dynastic god does not exclude other gods. That a single dynastic god responsible for sovereignty and military victory, as well as a partner in unifying land and people, could include or alternate with dedication or patronage from other important gods is clear from these texts. It is also apparent in other early Northwest Semitic inscriptions such

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as the late 9th-century Aramaic Zakkur stele (where the king dedicates a stele to Iluwer, but the actual text focuses on the saving acts of BaalShamem), as well as the OSA inscriptions mentioned.

Comparison of the Sabaean and Zincirli texts offers one possible context for pantheon reduction: imperial political pressure. If the eight texts from Zincirli are representative, they may suggest a pattern. While the Sabaean pantheon throughout the Iron Age IIB continues to resemble the earlier set of Zincirli inscriptions in breath, the Zincirli pantheon contracts. The old dynastic god Rakkib-El becomes the main deity of the state, much as in Moab or Israel; only here his rise appears in the context of detailed evidence of an originally larger, fuller pantheon.

The Zincirli and Sabaean corpora are especially valuable for placing change in West Semitic religion historically, because they are contemporary but independent, each presenting a West Semitic inventory of gods alongside explicit descriptions of the writers’ political situation. The Zincirli corpus presents us with a West Semitic pantheon subject to two Iron Age phenomena that are familiar from the southern Levant: a cultural break with Late Bronze Age tradition and extensive ensuing interaction with an empire (Assyria). By contrast, while the rise of monumental writing in relation to state formation is a shared feature, neither the cultural break nor the massive imperial interaction are evident in Sabaean – and neither is the pantheon reduction.

But correlation is not explanation. Surely the cultural breaks and imperial pressure affected Zincirli, but is this correlation enough to explain the religious change? If we consider a second issue, that of media form, it complicates this pattern and pushes us toward a more three-dimensional view. This is that the Sabaean texts, which assume a brotherhood between peoples, territories, kings and gods do not actually claim to be speaking to an audience. Like early Phoenician dedications on monuments, the inscriptions begin with “This is the object which PN dedicated.”

33 For Zincirli’s breaks with Late Bronze Age culture, see Sanders, “Naming the Dead,” 7–31; for its history with Assyria, see D. Schloen and A. Fink, “New Excavations at Zincirli Höyük in Turkey (Ancient Sam’al) and the Discovery of an Inscribed Mortuary Stele,” BASOR 356 (2009): 1–13.

34 For this formula and its rethinking in Northwest Semitic inscriptions, see Sanders, Invention of Hebrew; and more broadly, D. Green, ‘I Undertook Great Works: The Ideology of Domestic Achievements in West Semitic Royal Inscriptions (FAT II/41; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).
By contrast, a well-known text much closer to Israel does use writing formally to present the king and his relationship to his people and territory. As I have shown, the Moabite Mesha stela is the first known alphabetic inscription to address an audience in the first-person voice of the king.\textsuperscript{35} It presents a man who claims, in Moabite, to be the king of Moab. The shift in participants from earlier alphabetic royal inscriptions is decisive. The inscription now designates itself by the speaker, not the object. No longer “(this is) the stela which Mesha set up” but “I am Mesha, son of Kemoshayat, King of Moab, the Dibonite.” The inscription presents royal power by making the king present in language, ventriloquizing Mesha as if he were standing in front of us. And it tacitly assumes something quite remarkable: an audience for Moabite monuments.

The people and territory he describes are then recognized in the Bible as a united “Moab,” under the tutelage of a national god: am ʿKemôš (Num 21:29). But the Mesha inscription does not reflect the existence of a unified state, people, and written language so much as make an argument for one. It demands that Mesha’s patchwork conquests, by which he attached territory to his hometown, be recognized as a kingdom. B. Routledge calls the text a turning point in the political discourse of the region, since there is no evidence of an integrated Moabite state before Mesha.\textsuperscript{36} His examination of the inscription reveals that Mesha himself does not describe his actual power as broadly territorial, but rather as centering on the main city he controls, Dibon. This contradiction is clear in the first line, when he announces himself as “King of Moab, the Dibonite.” The identification with his hometown mitigates his regional pretensions. Moab did not begin as a sovereign political territory, but as a regional name; it becomes the name for his control over various cities with surrounding lands that he claims to have annexed or founded.

As O. Sergey points out in this volume, the Mesha stele shares important formal and ideological features with early Hebrew political narratives preserved in Samuel. It is not coincidentally both paleographically and grammatically the closest inscription to early Hebrew. As I have argued, it is also the first known attempt to politically instrumentalize alphabetic writing, using it to formally address a reading and listening audience in “their own” local language. The appearance of similar language and nearly identical script in Israel and Judah a few decades after the Mesha inscription implies

\textsuperscript{35} A slightly different version of this argument appears in my Invention of Hebrew, 114–115.

that written Hebrew may have been created alongside Moabite and stan-
ardized with similar political and cultural goals. Each shared a process of vernacular literization – the deliberate reengineering of the generic Phoe-
nician script into a local form of writing. And also not coincidentally, both Moabite and Hebrew instrumentalize a single dynastic god alongside a script-language and people.

This suggests a second factor in Levantine pantheon reduction: the drive to represent one’s culture as singular and unified. Independent from but related to pressure from the Assyrian Empire, we see in Hebrew the self-
conscious creation of a native written culture. Starting in the 9th century, some alphabetic writing was engineered to present a unified people and ter-
ritory under a single god and king, in a single local linguistic medium. That this drive to consolidate is only a potential and not an automatic function of local alphabetic writing is demonstrated by the fact that such a possibility seems never to have been entertained by kings of Saba’.

But not all reduced pantheons had an afterlife. There is no clear evidence that the reduced pantheons of Moab or Zincirli gained popular traction even during their own time. Relatively few Kemosh-names survive, and many personal names at Zincirli were not even West Semitic, suggesting that nei-
ther of these two pantheons formed extensive durable bonds with a broader segment of their societies. How can we place West Semitic pantheon reduc-
tion into a longer-range historical trajectory?

3. “Israel:” A Historical Trajectory for Hebrew Pantheon Reduction

In his thorough survey of the evidence for early Israelite divinities, Smith points out that the ancient designation “Israel,” already attested as a tribal name ca. 1200 B.C.E. in the Merneptah stele, suggests that Yahweh was not originally Israel’s only god, and perhaps not even the chief one:

“If Yahweh had been the original god of Israel, then its name might have been *yiśrâ-
yahweh, or perhaps better * yiśrâ-yāh in accordance with other Hebrew proper names containing the divine name. This fact would suggest that El not Yahweh was the original chief god of the group named Israel.”

He notes that the name seems to be attested already at Ebla and Ugarit, but focuses on surveying a set of archaic Biblical Hebrew poems, from Numbers 23–24 to Genesis 49 to Deuteronomy 32, all of which credit El with a spe-

37 Smith, Origins of Biblical Monotheism, 142–143.
cial relationship with Israel. The difficulty, as always with archaic poetry, is locating it in a particular time and place, though it can powerfully raise questions that other data may help answer.

Fortunately, it is possible to say something more about the name of Israel before the Bible. It is a West Semitic name of a common type (yaqtul-DN) that is well documented since the late third millennium, so the contexts and frequency of this type of name can be investigated based on dated and contextualized data – though interestingly, this work appears not to have been done. It emerges that what is unusual about “Israel” is not its form, but rather the use of a personal name as a tribal name.

The name Israel (“El contends”) is of a standard West Semitic name-type. The general form has thousands of attested parallels. The combination of the god-name El (earlier ‘ilu[m]) with a prefix form of the root ŚRY “struggle, contend” has likely single-instance parallels in Ebla (iš-ra-il) and Ugaritic (yšril CAT 4.623.3), as well as two suffix-form parallels in Amorite (sarati-il).

But the use of this sort of personal name as a tribal name is rare, despite the (plausible but undemonstrated) assumption that most West Semitic tribe names are eponyms. Of the 25 Amorite tribal names that can easily be gathered from the Genealogy of the Hammurapi Dynasty and discussions of Mari political organization, only two – Yamutbal (variant form Emutbal)

38 Ibid., 143–144.
39 Even relatively archaic verbal syntax such as that of the poetry in Genesis 49, with prefixed futures and jussives and suffixed past and present forms, is still attested in Aramaic and Phoenician inscriptions of the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E. On the stages of Biblical Hebrew verbal syntax, see Notarius, The Verb; and for comparison with the attested verbal syntax of Old Aramaic, see S. Sanders, “Dating the Earliest Hebrew Verbal System: The Importance of Dialect Variety in Ancient Linguistic Change,” forthcoming.
42 In his valuable article on Amorite tribes, Whiting writes that “Hypothetically, a new tribe could develop when an individual took his family beyond the tribal area. We presume that tribal names were originally derived from an ancestor who was regarded as seminal to the foundation of the tribe, just as for the Israelites, Israel (=Jacob) was deemed crucial to its origins.” But he follows this statement with the three most important large-scale tribal designations at Mari, Hana (“tent-dwellers”), Bani Sim’al (“northerners”) and Bani Yamina (“southerners”), none of which fit standard Amorite personal-name types. See R. Whiting, “Amorite Tribes and Nations of Second-Millennium Western Asia,” in Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vol. 2 (ed. J. M. Sasson; New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1995), 1231–1242.
and *Abi-yamuta* – are plausibly of the *yatqul* + DN form.\(^{43}\) Strikingly, both are attested as Amorite personal names, *Yamutbal* in multiple instances.\(^{44}\)

When we get to the Iron Age, this type of *yaqtul*-DN tribal name is completely unattested. Of a total of 18 Aramean tribal names easily derivable from Assyrian inscriptions,\(^{45}\) only two have plausibly prefix form verbs (*bit yahiri* and *bit yakini*, hypocoristic shortening is possible but unverifiable here), and none have divine names. “Israel” is thus formally an unusual and archaic tribal name, one that was not “in the air” or widely distributed during the Iron Age. It is also significant that “Ishmael” (*yišmaʿ*-El “El heeded [my request for help/a child],” represented in the narrative of Gen 16:10–12 as the ancestor of a tribal people parallel to Israel, follows the same distinctive Amorite morphology.\(^{46}\)

The comparison with thousands of documented West Semitic personal names, and dozens of tribal ones, suggests that the name Israel performed an unusual though not unique role of connecting patron god with kin group and individual from the beginning. As one of the rare tribal names that has the shape of a common type of personal name, it is *typologically* an eponym – the designation of a kinship group that is identical with the name of a person. And as a theophorous name, it unites both the implied founder and the political kinship group with the patron god. This suggests that there was a distinctive, though not unique, connection between personal names and political units already at work in the name Israel in the Late Bronze Age, documented in the form of the name in the Merneptah stele and later represented in a legendary form in the eponymy of Jacob = Israel.

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\(^{43}\) The list is gathered from ibid. and W. Heimpel, *Letters to the King of Mari: A New Translation, with Historical Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (Mesopotamian Civilizations; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003). I have no idea why MWT is the root in both! Both Gelb, *Computer-Aided Analysis*; and M. Streck, *Das Amurritische Onomastikon der altbabylonischen Zeit* (AOAT; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2000), give the root MWT its common West Semitic meaning “to die,” leading Streck to render Yamut-Ba’l as “The Lord is Dead” and Abi-Yamuta as “the (divine) Father is Dead.”


\(^{46}\) I am grateful to Daniel Fleming for suggesting this point to me.
4. Why Are Iron Age Hebrew Names So Yahwistic?

By the mid-1980s, scholars of Israelite religion had of course long been aware of the tension between literary sources and primary historical documents, and had sought to address a second problem as well: even inscriptions tended to overrepresent such unusual elite figures as kings and powerful administrators. In response, two studies that appeared almost concurrently addressed a less precise but more broad-based aspect of religion: the invocation of gods in personal names. These studies were Tigay’s short but influential 1986 monograph *You Shall Have No Other Gods*47 and Pardee’s even shorter but farther-ranging article, “Evaluation of the Proper Names from Ebla from a West Semitic Perspective,” a lecture from 1985 that first appeared in a volume of Eblaitic studies.48

Citing examples from Ammonite through Palmyrene inscriptions, Pardee pointed out that names can reveal forms of piety outside of literature and archives: “It has often been remarked in West Semitic studies that the deities known from ritual, narrative, or other documentary sources to be considered the deities most proper for worship and veneration are not those that occur most frequently in proper names.”49

Similarly, Tigay was spurred to examine the epigraphic evidence when his biblical assumptions were challenged: he expected to discover “numerous examples of pagan personal names which were not found in the Bible because of the kind of scribal revisions which had turned Eshbaal into Ishbosheth and Beeliada into Eliada.” But an initial survey contradicted this expectation, forcing him to wonder, “since personal names are a reflex of religious loyalties,” whether “polytheism was as prevalent among the Israelites as scholars believed.”

Tigay’s findings led him to describe preexilic Israel as virtually monotheistic: He claimed 592 theophoric names from inscriptions of the preexilic period, 557 (94.1 %) of which were Yahwistic and 35 (5.9 %) of which were pagan names.50 He concluded that “After the United Monarchy, and

48 See n. 2 above.
49 “Thus Caquot observed about Palmyra that the pantheon in proper names is not the pantheon we know from the tesserae,” “of 106 PNS from inscriptions judged to be Ammonite not one mentions Milkom, the “national” dynastic war god mentioned in royal inscriptions” – the latter pattern is only confirmed by Albertz’s 209 instances, of which only two mention Milkom.
50 As opposed to his count of 89 % to 11 % for the Hebrew Bible (see Tigay, *No Other Gods*, here 7 and 15).
perhaps ever earlier, the evidence currently available makes it very diffi-
cult to suppose that many Israelites worshipped gods other than YHWH.”
His work has two major methodological flaws, only one of which strongly
affected his results: he notes in a footnote\textsuperscript{51} that the provenanced corpus
was much smaller yet similar, with 213 (91.4\%) Yahwistic names verses 20
(8.6\%) pagan names, a total of only 233. But Tigay excluded all of the El
names from his corpus, so that if one includes the 30 provenanced El names,
Tigay’s numbers shift to 80\% Yahwistic and 20\% other (including El and
other gods).\textsuperscript{52}

Pardee looked at a more precisely contextualized set of data that revealed a
subtly but intriguingly different picture. He concurred in broad outline with
Tigay that the Hebrew onomasticon was distinguished by a unique level of
pantheon reduction. But importantly, he separated the corpora into three
sets of mostly well-dated inscriptions from Samaria, Arad and Lachish, as
well as a small body of seals. He agreed that, aside from El, we find very few
deities known from elsewhere but that “there is a surprising lack of correla-
tion between the Hebrew pantheon as attested in the prose and poetry of the
Hebrew Bible and that found in the personal names.” In explaining this only
partially facetious conclusion, he pointed out that the attested names of God
in the Hebrew Bible are \textit{El, Eloah, Elohim, Yah, Yahweh, Elyon, Shadday,} and
perhaps \textit{Adonay} (plus compounds with \textit{El, Yahweh}). All of these except Yah
(with consonantal \textit{H, not yâ}) appear in various West Semitic languages, but
only El and Shadday appear in Hebrew personal names.\textsuperscript{53}

Pardee noted with some surprise that “the yahweh-related elements only
slightly outnumber El-names in the Bible (about 130/120), as opposed to the
7/1 ratio in the extrabiblical sources analyzed above. This is probably owing
to the inclusion in the Bible of older, non-yahwistic sources from before the
establishment of full-blown yahwism; the inscriptions, the vast majority of
which date from the last century of the existence of Judah, represent the rela-
tive triumph of yahwism.”\textsuperscript{54}

\begin{flushright}
51 Ibid., 15 n. 46.
52 The picture for the unfiltered corpus of both provenanced and unprovenanced is simi-
lar: 70 El or other non-Yahwistic names to 669 Yahwistic names produces a proportion
of 17\% to 83\%.
53 Why does Yahweh – rather than \textit{yah-}, etc. – not appear in a single Hebrew personal
name? That this suggestion was not inconceivable to an ancient Hebrew writer is proven
by the fact that prophets did imagine such names: \textit{Yahweh Sidqenu} in Jer 23:6 and 33:16;
and \textit{Yahweh-Shammah} in Ezek 48:35 (as well as the name of an altar in Ex 17:15 and the
renaming of mount Moriah as \textit{Yahweh-Yireh} in Genesis 22).
54 Pardee, “Evaluation of the Proper Names,” 129.
\end{flushright}
But the ability to create such statistics is dependent on certain powerful assumptions – one of which is that the kinship terms (e.g. Abimelekh, Ahab) that sometimes fill the divine-name role in Hebrew personal names are either non-divine or always refer simply to Yahweh. Evidence of a certain consolidation in viewpoints is apparent if we compare the perspective taken by M. Noth in his 1926 dissertation\textsuperscript{55} with the results of Tigay (and to some extent Pardee, who insisted that these kin terms may mask an undecidable number of non-Yahwistic gods) during the 1980s. Noth asked how the names in the Bible looked from the viewpoint of Semitic name-giving and found them to follow very much the same pattern. The high prominence of \( \text{aḥ}-, \text{ab}-, \text{am}- \) and other kinship terms fit what he argued was a pattern common to Semitic-speaking societies with tribal ideologies, ones that portrayed themselves as organized around kinship bonds with each other and their gods.

None of these studies were able to include what is now the earliest known set of Hebrew inscriptions containing religious statements, the inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud that date to ca. 800 B.C.E. Of seven passages with certain religious references, six of them invoke more diverse gods or aspects of one god than simply Yahweh.\textsuperscript{56}

\textbf{Stone Basin}

(1.2)
To Obadyaw son of Adna, blessed be he to YHW

\textbf{Pithos 1}

(3.1)
Message of ‘[…] Speak to Yaheli and to Yaw’āšah and to […] I [b]less you by YHWH of Samaria and his Asherah

(3.6)
Message of Amaryaw: say to [my] lord, “Are you well? I bless you by YHWH of Teman and his Asherah. May He bless you and may he keep you and may He be with my lord [forever(?)]”

\textsuperscript{55} Compare the focus of Noth’s earlier dissertation \textit{Gemeinsemitische Erscheinungen in der israelitischen Namengebung} (Leipzig: G. Kreysing, 1926) with his following book \textit{Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsenemitischen Namengebung} (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1928).

\textsuperscript{56} Epigraphic readings and interpretations follow the complete edition of S. Ahituv, E. Eshel and Z. Meshel in \textit{Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (Horvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border} (ed. Z. Meshel; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2012), with their numbering system in parentheses.
**Pithos 2**

(3.9)

[... to YHWH of the (?) Teman and to his Asherah [...]] Whatever he asks from a man, that man will give him generously. And if he would urge – YHW will grant him what he wishes.

{3.8, uncertain: ...[YHW] of Samaria – barley ...}

**Plaster wall fragments in Phoenician script**

(4.1.1)

[... May he lengthen their days and may they be sated [... may] they recount to [Y]HWH of Teman and to [his] Asherah [...] / [...because (?)] YHWH of Teman has shown favor [to them (?)...] has bettered their days...

(4.2)

[In earthquake] And when El shines forth in the [heights ... Y] HW[H ...] the mountains will melt, the hills will be crushed [ ...]

[earth. The Holy one over gods [ ...]

[prepare (yourself) to [b]less Baal on the day of war...

to bless/praise] the name of El (or: Name-of-El, as deity) on the day of war...

(4.4.1)

[Ba’al in voice[

The picture is similar in the names at Samaria, where Yahweh is in the majority but where this majority is not overwhelming. Pardee counts 6 different Baal names as well as an Elyon name, over against 11 Yahweh names.

So why do the data look so different when one takes into account the earliest Northern Hebrew inscriptions, while still fitting together in a larger story about the rise of a Yahweh? In a 2012 study by Albertz and R. Schmitt on *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant*, there is a massive chapter by Albertz on “Personal Names and Family Religion” that, on its own, is more than twice as long as Tigay’s study.\(^57\) Despite its problematic inclusion of unprovenanced with provenanced material,\(^58\) it none-
theless provides the most comprehensive and transparent survey of all published Iron Age Northwest Semitic names. The fine-grained categorizations and statistical analyses make it possible for the first time to compare how narrowly focused each onomasticon was, around which types of god(s) and which divine attributes were invoked.

The statistics differ significantly from Tigay’s. Derivatives of Yahweh such as Yah, Yeho- and Yaw (though, as Pardee points out and Albertz’s chart conceals, never actually the full form Yahweh) make up 67.6% of instances across 1,978 analyzed Hebrew names. But if prominence of a single god at the expense of diversity is a mark of “monotheism” (more accurately, pantheon reduction), then it turns out that Israel and Judah were by no means the most nominally monotheistic Iron Age Levantine culture. That honor belongs to the Ammonites, for whom a staggering 81.8% of instances of 209 attested names are derivatives of the high god El.

What distinguishes Hebrew names is not the predominance of a single god, but rather the predominance of a single god who is also the royal dynastic god. Albertz’s results here match well with the smaller but more cautiously analyzed corpus of Pardee. It is this feature that distinguishes the more extreme Ammonite pantheon reduction from the Hebrew one: the Ammonite dynastic god Milcom, known from the Amman citadel inscription as well as from biblical references, appears in only 2 of the known names – a paltry 1%. The distinctiveness of this pattern holds across languages: Baalshamayn, the dynastic god of the Aramean king Zakkur, does not even appear in Aramean names; even Hadad is not particularly common. Early Aramean, like Ammonite, dynastic gods were not the same as popular gods in personal names. A significant, though not as well-attested or clear-cut, possible parallel is in Moabite, where a strong minority of names (17 out of 42 instances, or 40.5%) invoke the dynastic god Kemosh.

The result of analyzing the Northwest Semitic onomasticon on the basis of these two factors – presence of dynastic deity and high attestation of single deity – suggests that, among Iron Age corpuses, while both Ammonite and Hebrew names show the highest level of preference for one god, only in Hebrew does this dominant god match the dynastic god. The implications for Pardee’s “mystery of ancient religion” are intriguing: pantheon reduction by itself appears unexceptional, at least as attested in extreme preference for one dominant god in personal names. It appears to be a southern Levantine areal feature shared between Israel, Judah, and Ammon.

When the Personal Became Political

Why was the Judahite and Israelite dynastic god Yahweh also a dominant family god? It is difficult to imagine large numbers of families choosing a remote dynastic god for their child’s name (indeed, it may have been hard for them even to know who the king’s god was). This difficulty suggests that rather than the majority of the onomastically attested Iron Age Israelite and Judahite population choosing names based on the royal dynasty, the initial move was the opposite. The king adopted the god who was already the most popular with the people. Unity between dynastic kin-god and popular kin-god was created from the top, not the bottom. Judahite and perhaps also Israelite rulers chose as their dynastic god one already strongly associated with the group they intended to rule.59

The royal move to choose a prominent god of the people, a common tribal ancestral deity, as dynastic god is a striking act of political kinship-making that parallels the choice to write in a local spoken language. Each one is a way of claiming to represent and speak for the people. Thus the onomastic evidence parallels the evidence from epigraphy that shows that Hebrew was chosen as way of invoking and addressing an audience.60

The interplay of shared and distinctive features in the Old Hebrew onomasticon emerges as a powerful example of why ancient Israel and Judah might be worth studying as examples of ancient Near Eastern religion. This lets us in turn reflect back on the null hypothesis of no distinction, present in reconstructions such as Niehr’s that tend to conflate religion at different

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59 This fits with the “segmentary state” strategy suggested by Routledge, “Politics of Mesha,” and suggests theoretical common ground with van der Toorn (Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Changes in the Forms of Religious Life [Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East; Leiden: Brill, 1996], 275) that would help explain van der Toorn’s important observation that “[w]hereas the expanded family or clan used to be referred to as the ‘am (‘people’) of a given deity, it was now the community of all the citizens that was defined as the ‘am of Yahweh … The convergence between the ideologies underlying family religion and early state religion betrays their common origin, and foreshadows their potential competition.” But historically and socially it represents the opposite of van der Toorn’s thesis that “As the head of state[, Saul] promoted his god to the rank of national god,” which would require 11th-century data unavailable to us (ibid., 267). In addition to placing perhaps too much stress on a “great man” theory of history, the thesis leaves open the key question of how this religion was mediated from the state to the local level: “Once Yahweh was the national god, his worship was spread over the territory of the Saulide state … The Israelite worship of [the originally ‘foreign’ Edomite deity Yahweh] was a concomitant effect of the formation of the Israelite state; because Israel’s first king was a devotee of Yahweh … Yahweh became the official god of Israel.” (here 286).

60 Sanders, Invention of Hebrew; for parallel processes in Iron Age Aramaic, see H. Gzella, A Cultural History of Aramaic: From the Beginnings to the Advent of Islam (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming), 57–63.
social scales and genres when they claim that Israel and Judah were simply instances of Syro-Phoenician religion. In particular, Niehr tended to focus on biblical literary evidence and its correlations to make the argument that, before Josiah’s reforms and the exile, Hebrew religion was simply Northwest Semitic. The null hypothesis would be that, by accidents of preservation and later history, they happen to have uniquely rich, if also uniquely complex, documentation.

If these epigraphic results challenge the anti-exceptionalist narrative that Israel and Judah were not in any powerful ways distinctive, they also challenge us to explain this distinction without exceptionalism. The royal strategy of adopting a prominent ancestral god as dynastic patron suggests a historical pathway thorough which one form of this distinctiveness was achieved, mediating between family and state scales through naming practices. This approach is attractive precisely because its building blocks require no exceptions, but it also requires a plausible historical scenario.

5. Yahwist Media

For our purposes, what remains is to theorize each of the three main trajectories we have traced together, from the initial framework beginning with Sabaean and Zincirli, to the earlier history of “Israel,” to the royal adoption of Yahwistic family religion suggested above. Taking these trajectories together, we may ask: Is the history of Yahwism that the inscriptions document a history of misrecognized kinship relations?

By seeing the prominence of kinship relations in naming and the distinctively Israelite form of pantheon reduction together, the further question arises of whether Yahwism’s rise may be describable as a move from kinship to kingship. If kinship with Yahweh is originally broadly claimed (Noth’s common tribal ideology and shared Semitic naming practice) but is later reduced to an exclusively royal (in the Israelite Kuntillet Ajrud texts) and then exclusively Judahite dynastic claim, the end result is a claim that Yahweh is kin to the Davidic line only (Psalm 2’s “you are my son, today I have begotten you”). What does this Davidic monopolization of divine kinship

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61 For Niehr’s arguments, see n. 11 above.
62 It has been argued that the most socially productive aspect of Yahweh’s isolation may be his childlessness, which opens up a new space for both people and king to serve as his children. This argument is weakened by the fact that, since Amorite times, many West Semitic gods have had tribal groups as their kin. Indeed, R. Smith already argued well over a century ago that kinship bonding through a shared meal may have been the most
do to the Yahweh-as-divine-kinsman ideology implicit in so many Hebrew names? If Yahweh is the king’s paternal ancestor only, how can he be kin to a population group? It may be this tension, rather than any putative aping of universal Persian kingship, that lies at the root of theological universalism.

It is striking that within epigraphic Hebrew, onomastic Yahwism is even higher than in the Hebrew Bible, and its combination of popular and dynastic pantheons is unique within the contemporary West Semitic world. Yet we can see the trajectory by which it got this way. Both the traditions preserved in literary form in the Hebrew Bible and the early epigraphic evidence show a multiform Yahweh who overlapped but also contrasted with Baal, El and Shadday. Prophetic and Deuteronomistic accounts such as Balaam’s oracles and Absalom’s sacrifice to Yahweh-in-Hebron, and externally attested patterns at Kuntillet Ajrud, Samaria, Khirbet El Qom, the Deir Alla inscriptions (if we consider this territory to be connected to Gilead), and possibly continuing as late as Khirbet Beit Lei, all suggest multiple Yahwehs and physical manifestations of him.

It is in the world of inscriptional Hebrew that Yahwism emerges most aggressively, even more so than in the Hebrew Bible. Did epigraphic Hebrew’s deliberate standardization in form correlate with a deliberate standardization of content? In contrast to the long history of attempts to find a material culture pattern that maps well onto most plausible borders of biblical Israel, there is only one artifact that closely tracks normative Israelite geography: written Hebrew itself. The nature of most epigraphic Hebrew after 722 B.C.E. is highly stereotyped, with most of the evidence being bureaucratic and thus in a framework conducive to conformity. It follows what K. McCarter calls “the principle of banality,” which states that, all things being equal, any new inscription should be assumed to be saying what most other inscriptions of its type say.

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63 For a suggestive analysis of this point see Smith, “The Problem of the God and His Manifestations,” 212.
64 McCarter, personal communication 1997.
It is only when we leave the area of standard Hebrew in Kuntillet Ajrud, Samaria and Gilead, as well as the caves of Khirbet Beit Lei, that we leave the realm of standard Yahwism as well. What Deir Alla’s difference from standard Hebrew and standard Yahwism (alongside its strong connections with the oracles of Numbers 22–24\textsuperscript{65}) shows is that there was a larger Israel and that people of this area and time were no more naturally Yahwistic than they were naturally alphabetic and instinctively writing in a standard ductus and orthography.

Of the three West Semitic cases we began with, the one that politically most resembles the picture we would reconstruct for IA I or early IA II Israel is Sabaean. The political theology we see in this corpus is a matter of shifting, socially constructed alliances of kinship between kings, peoples, gods and territories. And we see a parallel political vision being invoked and co-opted in the Mesha inscription. Zincirli shows what happens to a parallel but independent culture from a different region with a combination of new freedoms – the dynastic god Rakkib-El only goes back three or so generations from Kilamuwa – and massive military pressure. From this evidence, we would assume that the earliest Hebrew literature, if we found it, would look even superficially monotheistic only in dynastic contexts.

A key to the rise of Judahite Yahwism, then, may lie in the misrecognition of the Israelite Yahweh’s originally polyform nature, a task in which Hebrew itself aided. If we compare pantheon- and media-distribution in late Iron Age segmentary states and monarchies, we see that Aramaic and Old South Arabian spread beyond any one state, dynasty, or locale, whereas Hebrew and Moabite did not and remained tied to one or two intertwined regional polities. By what stages did this happen?

Conclusion: Early Hebrew Religion – Yahweh’s Nation or a Nation of Yahwehs?

From the primary evidence surveyed here, one may postulate three phases of Yahwism.

*Prehistory:* An undocumented period beginning ca. 1200 B.C.E., when, if the theophoric name “Israel” was indeed representative, the primary god

was El. This period extended to the 9th century when both popular and dynastic loyalty to Yahweh were overtaking El.66

Stage 1. 8th century, attested at Kuntillet Ajrud and represented literarily in some David narratives.67 The default conception is Yahweh-of-X, who partly overlaps with Baal and Elyon. Yahweh is already widespread in personal names.

Stage 2. Late 8th–7th centuries B.C.E., with dynastic co-optation, as at Moab. Yahweh is re-presented as both the king’s dynastic god and the people’s god of the fathers, an impression made iconic through standardized writing. This movement was represented literarily by Yahweh’s self-presentation to Moses at Sinai as the ancestral “god of your fathers.”68

Stage 3. 6th–5th centuries B.C.E. Yahweh is reinterpreted or misrecognized as having always been Israel’s only god. A new creativity becomes possible as the throne is vacated, and a new type of public arises with the death of Hebrew as an official language.69 Hebrew begins to function in a new way among Judeans, with the exception of the group at Elephantine that retains a more traditional type of Yahwistic divine plurality comparable to that of Kuntillet Ajrud.

Placing the transformation of Hebrew religion in its Levantine context shows that Yahwism was not inevitable, and raises the issue of whether it indeed went very far back at all. Recently, M. Satlow has asked this question anew and placed the crucial change in Israelite religion after the Babylonian exile.70 He emphasizes the role of historical accident in privileging a Jerusalem priestly group’s god Yahweh and this same group’s traditions after the exile’s weakening of Israel’s other religions.

The very fact that Yahwism was not inevitable makes the precise mechanisms by which it took such deep hold worthy of study. As we have seen, the basis for Yahwistic identity, not only of a postexilic Jerusalem priestly group, but also of a broader population base that used or interacted with

66 For new data suggesting the religion of the North still contained strong El elements in the 9th century, see A. Mazar’s analysis of the finds from Rehov in this volume.
68 The phrase appears in doublets within the non-P sources of Ex 3:15, 16, suggesting that it appeared in multiple early traditions but the connection to divine kinship is absent from the P version of the revelation of Yahweh’s name in Ex 6:3.
writing, goes back at least to 800 B.C.E. and earlier. Later writers took the early royal equation of the people and their ancestors with the dynastic god at face value. This made possible the third stage of Yahwism, in which this originally royal ideology far outlasted the dynasty itself.

Ancient Israel was surely, among other things, a cultural construct of the artifacts that produced Yahwism and a nation of Yahwists. And like every patterned self-representation, it was ideological. Perhaps a great illusion has been to fixate on a particular reading of one set of artifacts – i.e., biblical literary texts – and to see that ideology as late. But related textual artifacts were already in wide circulation by the 8th century B.C.E., dominating the bureaucratic and economic realms. We should not misrecognize Hebrew culture as uniform, unbroken or primordial. It is a construct most likely generated initially during conflicts of the 9th century. But neither should we base our reconstructions of history on literary readings of only one late set of artifacts, lest we simply mask one misrecognition with another. When seen in a long-term material context of the ancient Levant, the culture of Hebrew writing does reveal an ideology in action, but one that can speak to us if we know how to listen.

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