

# On the Appearance of a Monotheism in the Religion of Israel (3rd Century BC or Later?)

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The word 'monotheism' indicates a system of thought that recognizes the divine character of a single god to the exclusion of any other. This absolute idea of the divine distinguishes monotheism from henotheism, which, for a human group, means recognizing the authority of only one god among others, or monolatry, which characterizes the fact of worshipping only one god among others. Monotheism is a question of belief, unlike the traditional Eastern religions that the Bible originated from. Nowadays in lay language 'monotheism' means a group of beliefs and visible behaviours in the institutionalized religions that are aware of a kinship because of their open attachment to the fiction of an 'Abraham, father of believers', from whom all three claim to be descended.

According to the traditional presentation of biblical monotheism, the god of the Bible, having been thought of as one god among others, became the exclusive god of a human group (henotheism), then the only god (monotheism). It is the prophetic texts such as the books of Jeremiah and Isaiah (chap. 40–66) that are most often quoted to support the thesis of the oldest biblical monotheism. The arguments rely on the presentation those texts are supposed to give of a creator god, who seems to us today of necessity unique, and on the denial of the other gods they mention, even to the extent of stating the uniqueness of the god of Israel (Dt 6.4). However, the prophetic texts deny 'foreign gods' using the same vocabulary as for the human enemies of 'Israel' who actually existed, and long for the eventual victory that will not fail to crown the god of Jerusalem. In the prophet Isaiah for instance the victory of Cyrus, king of Persia, over Israel's enemies, which is the subject of praises in Isaiah 40–5, anticipates and guarantees the final victory of the god of Israel over his divine or even cosmic enemies at the time of the End. Might the foreign gods exist in spite of everything, or is the final victory to be won over non-existent gods? In passing, a historical problem raises its head: how did people come to invent monotheism in an environment that was not monotheistic? More generally we might wonder whether

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the idea of a gradual transition from primitive polytheism to monotheism is realistic, or if it is not an intellectual view that is based in a kind of good sense but ignores the true conditions of the development of one form of religion into another. In particular, studies on the emergence of monotheism, which have hitherto been carried out more from a theological than a historical perspective, have not sufficiently taken account of the relationship between political and social practice and worship and the mental and figurative representations associated with it. But this is what the biblical texts suggest, since they bear witness in their way to the religious developments that accompanied the abolition of the monarchy in Judah, then the promotion of the priests of the temple in Jerusalem to the office of hereditary guardians of the customs and norms to be observed by all the inhabitants of the province of Judea until taking the title of king. We also know the stature of the great god of Jerusalem developed considerably in the shadow of the great empires dominating the region. The character of the local god of the throne, as well as the migration of the province's inhabitants subject to the great god's laws, certainly helped to promote the ancient local god of the throne. However banal they may be, these data should encourage us to re-examine some texts in the Hebrew Bible that have long been read in a monotheistic sense, and have probably contributed to the dissemination of that line of thinking, but were not originally monotheistic when their authors wrote them down. Two complementary kinds of texts will be analysed from the viewpoint of the ideology they convey: the type of the so-called 'creation' narrative and the texts that call on readers to serve Yhwh alone, denying other gods.

### God the creator

It is a commonplace nowadays to note that the so-called 'creation' narratives in the Bible, starting with the one in Genesis 1.1 *et seq.*, do not talk of a creation *ex nihilo* but relate the gradual ordering by a demiurge, the world's great architect, of a watery chaos from which come earth and sky and everything they contain. Some of these narratives, which are close in form and content to the old myths of the birth of the universe (cosmogonic myths) and humanity (anthropogonic myths) attested in Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt, are manifestly older than the more recently created 'heptamerons' – narratives of the ordering of the world in seven days. The latter are rooted in the calendar of worship of the second temple in Jerusalem, whose week and weekly Sabbath form the minor structuring unity as against the holy year, which is its culmination. Despite the evolution in form and content, which betrays historical development, all these narratives describe 'god the creator' as the archetype of the craftsman and king who 'puts in order', and thus organizes, the world so that it may support life. This is what places the ideas conveyed by the Bible in the perspective of neighbouring countries' religious traditions and does not constitute the exception that is reserved by tradition for the 'God of the Bible'.

Whatever the specific vocabulary used by the different Hebrew Bible texts, the god who presides over the appearance of the universe and humanity in the world reflects a craft conception of god 'the creator' on the model of the potter or blacksmith. As in the old myths of the ancient Near-Eastern world, the god of the Bible

'manufactures', 'shapes', 'forges' the various elements of the cosmos, then human beings. But the Hebrew word that is universally translated by 'create' poses a particular problem since its meaning and etymology are uncertain. How are we to understand this verb in the context of Genesis 1.1–2.4a, a text which itself is crammed with difficulties? Here we shall make do with examining the narrative of the first day.

### **The first day of the heptameron**

The Greek version (Septuagint) by the so-called Seventy translates the first word of the story unambiguously as: 'In the beginning God made heaven and earth.'<sup>1</sup> This is far from being the only way to understand the Hebrew text. Rachi, an 11th-century Jewish commentator, pointed out that the word translated as 'in the beginning' is always in a constructed form everywhere else in the Hebrew Bible and so should make up a phrase with the following verb. Furthermore the word always indicates the first stage of a process. The fact that the 'creation' is in this narrative thought of as a process in several stages is shown by the sentence: 'Thus heaven and earth were completed and all their mighty throng', between the end of the sixth and the start of the seventh day (Genesis 2.1), a sentence that deliberately repeats the story's opening idea by summing up the intermediate stages (1st–6th day) that describe words and actions. Thus the process of the 'creation' has a beginning and an end that seems to continue into the seventh day, since the word 'complete' is repeated once again at the start of the seventh day (Genesis 2.2). The purpose of this emphasis on the 'creation' as a process is not to highlight the absolute beginning of the world, which is not recounted here since, as we shall see, darkness and watery chaos already exist and the position of Elohīm's breath above the primal sea is not explained, by contrast with Egyptian (self-created demiurge) or Mesopotamian cosmogonic myths; what is foregrounded here is the initial stage in ordering the universe, first by a word 'Elohīm said' (and the text contains ten of these words), presented as a command that is executed at once, which demonstrates and illustrates the supreme sovereignty of the demiurge-Elohīm and anticipates the Decalogue; then by light, for just as Elohīm made it appear *first of all*, without the assistance of any 'lamp', so in the End time's everlasting light will reign, without any lamp (Ze 14.6–7): 'It will come to pass on that day that there will be no light, the precious stones (= stars) will become fixed. It shall be all one day, whose coming is known to Yhwh, without distinction of night or day, and at evening-time there shall be light.' It is in this sense that I think the words in Isaiah 46.9–10 should be understood: 'Remember the first things from long ago: it is I El, there is no other, Elohīm, and there is no one like me; I reveal the end from the beginning.' Finally the phrase 'first of all' highlights the effect of the word and the light, that is, the 'daylight' – and the text contains seven – which links verse 1 closely to the body of the narrative of the first day. And so, contrary to most exegetes, I am unable to see verse 1 as an independent title covering the whole text rather than the first day. The syntax of v. 1–3 is based on a protasis (v. 1–2) – apodosis (v. 3) movement. Analysed in this way the first idea in the narrative seems like a subordinate one: 'when Elohīm placed heaven and earth . . . '.

According to this interpretation the main idea should be sought at 'then Elohim said' in correct Hebrew syntax. This way of understanding the text turns the preamble to the narrative into the equivalent of the preamble to the Babylonian *Enuma elish*, which is read as: 'When above the heavens were not named, and down below the solid earth had not received a name, (then) Apsu, the Initial one, sired them, Tiamat the causal one gave birth to them all . . .'<sup>2</sup> The construction 'When . . . then' is characteristic of the style of the Mesopotamian poems about the birth of the world.

In passing we learn that before day 1 the earth was chaos, in the sense of a place unsuitable for life because it is impossible to find one's way around without paths, light, constellations, towns and any recognizable image (= *tohu bohu*); that darkness reigned over the watery chaos,<sup>3</sup> an image that emphasizes the lowly, inferior position in the depths of this watery chaos relative to the breath of Elohim which 'fluttered' above the water's surface. This juxtaposition, which is even more noticeable in Hebrew than Greek, of the 'breath' of the demiurge above the chaos and the demiurge's intervention, caused the ancients, as we know, to talk of an intellectual creation on the first day. How should we understand the breath of Elohim? Very often it is translated as 'wind', since the text seems to indicate something physical, almost material. But in Mesopotamia and the whole of the East, wind was seen as a sign of the physical presence of the invisible god, his 'spirit'. In the only parallel passage in the Bible (Dt 32.11) the verb referring to this 'breath' is applied to an eagle watching over its nestlings from the air. This seems to indicate a vertical, geo-stationary, concentric movement. The meaning 'wind' may appear somewhat inappropriate even though it is linked. In Ze 6.8, which draws upon the same imagery, one of the four winds of heaven carries the breath of Yhwh to the land of the North. So, however closely connected they may be, it seems that the 'breath' must be distinguished from the wind that carries it. We might think of a breath of air hovering over the primeval sea, compatible with the 'breath of life' blown by Yhwh Elohim into the nose of the clay statue called man in 2.7, or of some atmospheric phenomenon such as a mist or cloud manifesting the divine presence over the primal Ocean, from which will come the flash of light.

Reading verse 2 as it appears in Hebrew, the biblical demiurge does not 'create' *ex nihilo*, his aerial presence intervenes from above in a pre-existing watery chaos. The nature of this intervention is hard to define. Out of the 49 biblical occurrences of the word *bârâ* seven are attested in the first Genesis narrative, a figure that relates to a universal cosmogonic schema.<sup>4</sup> As a specifically cosmogonic verb it describes a peculiarly divine activity but does not ever apply to a human, even if royal, activity, and it always connotes the idea of a radical, unprecedented and unheard-of newness in a priestly and liturgical context, scattered throughout prayers and anthems.<sup>5</sup> This means that the verb is appropriate only for the god of heaven, that it is alien to human activity and that it connotes a very holy divine activity, probably associated with the 'breath' of Elohim, since he alone occupies the place on high which is the site of heaven. Traditionally translated into Latin by Jerome as *creare*, the Hebrew *bârâ* has no equivalent in the ancient Semitic languages of the North-West.<sup>6</sup> The root is attested only in Sabean with the sense 'build, make', a variant of the root *bany/û/â* attested in Akkadian and ancient North-Western Semitic languages. It is this root

*bârâ* that the ancient translators of the Hebrew and Bible in Greek referred to, and they were followed by all the modern ones.

This sense of 'build, make, create' is definitely unsatisfactory in the context of the biblical narrative of the birth of the cosmos (= the universe as order) immediately we acknowledge that heaven and earth were not strictly speaking 'created' by Elohim but gradually brought forth from the mass of primal water, according to the stories of the second and third days. In order to express these connotations we might think of the verb 'to organize' heaven and earth. However, none of these senses fits completely Genesis 2, verses 3 and 4–5. The two verbs *bârâ* and the one we translate as 'make, manufacture' are used together but in this case they do not appear at all synonymous. The sequence 'create in order to do' or 'organize in order to do' in verse 3 suggests two stages, of conceiving and executing. But the meaning 'conceive' a plan or an aim, a design, is normally applied to another verb in Hebrew, so that is not entirely satisfactory either.

Nevertheless the creation of cosmic order in two stages, one preparing the other, is not utterly alien to the relationship between the first two chapters of Genesis: in chapter 1 Elohim 'establishes' heaven and earth (1.1; 2.3–4), in chapter 2 Yhwh Elohim 'makes' heaven and earth. But what is recounted in chapter 2 concerns only the microcosm of the earth, with the notable exception of the explanation given in verse 5 of the absence of vegetable life on earth before Yhwh Elohim had made it rain on the ground: a way of expressing the fact that Yhwh, who is constantly called master of the whole earth in the Hebrew Bible, is also master of the rain from heaven, the domain of Elohim whose breath is above the watery chaos. Thus understanding the verb *bârâ* should help us to clarify the relationship between the first two chapters of Genesis, the second of which, as we can already see, is subordinate to the first since it assumes the prior establishment of the macrocosm. And so, unlike the first chapter, it is difficult for the second to appear as an independent (cosmogonic) narrative of the world coming into being. Rather it is an anthropogonic story, a type of which there are also parallels in Mesopotamia and Egypt dealing with the status and function of human beings vis-à-vis the gods.

*Light.* This traditional attribute of sovereignty is the attribute of gods and kings in the ancient Near East. The theme is part of royal ideology. We can recognize a relationship between this motif and the role attributed to the sun god Rê in Egyptian cosmogonic literature and, more precisely, the old Syrian myth of the god Baal thundering above the sea and hurling his lightning bolts and flashes on to it. Similarly the theophanic narratives in the Bible represent the voice of god as thunder and the divine presence as a flash of light associated with fire from heaven (lightning) and the flashes loosed like arrows by the great god: 'the sound of thy thunder was in the whirlwind, thy lightnings lit up the world' says Psalm 77.19.<sup>7</sup> Theophanies make explicit the warlike, martial nature of these representations of the cosmogony, which come from the conception of sacralization as a war pitting the sacred against the profane. Elohim subdues chaos as a king vanquishes his enemies, with weapons he fashions for himself. Light is the first of these weapons, the first of the creations as an attribute of the divine. Similarly the remark that the light was 'good' fits with the vocabulary of royal ideology describing conformity with order, favourable for the life of the country and its inhabitants, which the monarchy guarantees.

*Separation.* If the light is separated from the darkness this is because they are contradictory and cannot mix. The light is 'good' because, first, it is the attribute of sovereignty and, secondly, it expresses the specificity of the divine.<sup>8</sup> The darkness is on the side of the lowly, the profane, the light on the side of the high, the sacred, and the relationship between them is antagonistic and mutually exclusive if they are not clearly separate. Thus the demiurge establishes the dynamic dyad of sacred and profane that is symbolized in the cosmic order by day and night, earth and heaven, above and below. The many operations of separation that recur in the whole work are merely illustrations of that dyad and its dynamic role in the universe, until the stars stand still (Ze 14.6–7), the days cease (Dn 12.13) and the light fades no more (Dn 12.3) because the darkness has been completely swallowed up by the light, symbolizing the world's consecration to him who ordered it. At the same time the sacred–profane dyad introduces into the universe a differentiation in time and space, which makes possible a taxonomy or hierarchical classification of the world's elements according to the categories of pure and impure on the one hand and sacred and profane on the other. The distinction between sacred and profane assumes an organization of powers that governs the distinction in practice between sacred and profane. We can already see that this distinction comes about prior to the demiurge's royalty, since sacred and profane are inseparable from the monarchic principle. The Near-Eastern king is the chief of the priests as well as the generals and military governors. Genesis 1.1–2.4 argues in favour of a distinction between sacred and profane powers in the cosmos under the sovereignty of the demiurge, thus reflecting the separation within the microcosm between a civil, administrative and military power and a sacred power held by consecrated pontiffs.

The evening and morning mentioned in verse 5 cannot be identified with physical phenomena associated with sunset and sunrise, which are not 'fixed' till the fourth day. Just as this first day and the light reigning over it are alien to human experience, the evening and morning concerned here are not empirical. Both words designate the two high points of the differentiation between light and absence of light. We should note that, in the field of experience, these two words indicate the two moments in the day when burnt (i.e. entirely consumed) sacrifices are offered up to Yhwh.

*Day one.* This is the usual Hebrew way of describing the first day of the calendar month. It is therefore the first day of the temple calendar that is so indicated. The fact that this narrative is based on the calendar of the Jerusalem second temple and the rite of the sanctuary has led many authors to attribute to this 'sacerdotal creation narrative' a very late date in the literary history of the Bible, possibly around 300 BC, probably even later.

### **'Let us make a man in our image'**

We should note that, even at this period in the history of Judaism, monotheism is not the norm. The demiurge's name/title is plural 'Elohim' and the plurality of man's 'creators' is confirmed in Genesis 1.26–7:

Elohim said: 'Let us make a man in our image and likeness to rule the fish in the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all wild animals on earth, and all reptiles that crawl upon the earth.'

So Elohim created (*bârâ*) man in his own image; in the image of the Elohim he created (*bârâ*) him, male and female he created (*bârâ*) them.

Parallel to the development of angelology in the biblical literature, these verses attest to the council at the heavenly court whose divine members decide to place a 'man' within the world to represent them. The first person plural 'us' in Hebrew cannot be understood as a 'form for royalty'. In that case the third person is used. And in general cosmogonic texts, especially Mesopotamian ones, present the genesis of cosmic order as the result of a council of the great gods gathered around a sovereign god. Similarly, in Mesopotamian myths, the 'manufacture' of man is the outcome of a consensus and collaboration between the gods and goddesses under the aegis of a god who is the father of humanity. Indeed the so-called 'creation' narratives should be included among the cosmogonic and anthropogonic myths that in no way implied a single god for the ancients, quite the reverse.

Cosmogonic and anthropogonic myths are not designed to explain the origin of the world. As the sacerdotal narrative of the creation in Genesis 1.1–2.4a demonstrates, what is involved is a type of ideological literary genre that legitimizes, as established by the gods, the institutions that are supposed to represent them on earth. Near-Eastern myths present the institution of the monarchy and the king's actions in the country as inscribed in the cosmic order established by the gods since the beginning of time. Thus every great god, every monarchy could be the subject of a mythology of this kind. The world's order described by these narratives is only ever conceived of at the level of the territory in which that order of things is applicable. Similarly the Bible narrative in Genesis 1.1–2.4a legitimizes, through the good order of the world, the institution of the Sabbath, which is peculiar to Judea, as well as the separation in the province of religious and secular powers, which ensure the community worship of which the hereditary high priest of the Jerusalem temple is the repository, and David and his descendants the founder and guarantee, according to the Books of Chronicles. Furthermore, it is known<sup>9</sup> that the so-called 'creation' narrative was read every day at the beginning of the liturgical year by groups of priests, Levites and sons of Israel assembled as 'patrols', some in Jerusalem and some in their towns. The Books of Chronicles say these liturgical patrols were instituted by King David.

Though the god of the Bible does not always appear alone, even in the texts that seem to figure among the most recent in the Pentateuch such as the sacerdotal 'creation' narrative, we know that many biblical texts praise his incomparable nature, while the book of Deuteronomy, 4.6, states that Yhwh is a 'one' god, a word most frequently translated as 'unique'. Is this the indicator of biblical monotheism?

### God and the other gods: the god who alone saves

The second part of the Book of Isaiah (Is 40–66) regularly alludes to enemies of the nation and gods inimical to Yhwh who had both helped to destroy in 587–6 the kingdom of Judah, Jerusalem and the royal temple that stood there. In particular Isaiah 40–5 sings the praises of Cyrus king of the Medes for having in his turn punished the guilty and replaced the neo-Babylonian empire, which was succeeded by the Persian empire. In this passage Cyrus even appears as ‘the anointed of Yhwh’ (45.1), a title constantly used in the Books of Samuel to describe Saul, then David, the first two kings of Israel. The human and divine enemies of the past are now dispersed by the power of Yhwh, who gives victory to the one who is consecrated to him by anointing. This irresistible power of Yhwh is measured first by the ability he demonstrates to put the universe in order (Is 40.12–15). So beside him the nations are ‘mere nothings’ (40.17; 41.12), the nations’ gods zeros (41.24, 29). The same vocabulary is used to describe human and divine enemies. The god of Israel says (43.11–12):

I am Yhwh, I myself and none but I can deliver.  
I myself have made it known in full and declared it, I and no alien (god) among you.  
And you are my witnesses, says Yhwh, that I am a god (*el*).

And again (44.6):

Thus says Yhwh, Israel’s king, and its ransom, Yhwh, the omnipotent:  
I am the first and I am the last, and there is no Elohim but me.

We see that it is as sovereign god, master of the country and its inhabitants, that Yhwh is the only great god, able to save Israel (see also Is 45.17). The other gods are powerless in Israel for the sons of Israel. However, their divinity is not questioned any more than is the humanity of the human enemies of the sons of Israel.

In Jeremiah 2.8–11 Baal and the foreign gods are branded ‘useless’ (Greek) in the sense of ‘offering no succour’, ‘being powerless to rescue, save’, as the parallel text in I Samuel 12.21 demonstrates and as Jeremiah 2.27–8 spells out, because they are not *Elohim*. Incidentally we realize the unsuitability of the current translations of Jeremiah 2.11, which follow the Greek translation by the Seventy: ‘Has a nation ever changed its gods, although they were not gods?’

How should we understand the apparent contradiction of gods that are not gods? Are they lacking in divine essence or attributes? The Hebrew has the word *Elohim*, which is applied to the great sovereign gods, in contrast to ‘*elim*’, the usual name for gods, regardless of their rank. As Jeremiah 16.20, interpreted in context, gives us to understand, ‘idols’ are useless lies because the power and sovereign domination over Israel belong to the one and only Yhwh. It is not at all about contesting the divine essence of these gods. We should note that in the Maccabean period, the 2nd century BC, the Book of Daniel also included among the enormities perpetrated by the Antichrist Antiochus IV Epiphanes the fact that he ‘ignored his ancestral gods (Hebrew *Elohim*)’ (Dn 11.37) and that he ‘honoured a great god (*Eloah*) unknown to his ancestors’ (v. 38). The quotation from Jeremiah 2.11 only reminds us that in



antiquity the great gods are the source of the sovereignty kings exercise over their territories, a sovereignty to which the inhabitants of this territory (the 'nations') are statutorily subject by heredity. Thus a nation, in the sense of all the inhabitants of a certain region and their descendants, cannot change gods, nor *a fortiori* can they change the god of the throne (*Elohim*). Yhwh, the great god, king of Israel, could not be supplanted on his territory and in the midst of his people by gods from 'abroad', as Jeremiah 2.13 *et seq.* has it. The note about the inhabitants of the Assyrian province of Samaria in II Kings 17.24–41 gives one of the most representative instances. The Assyrian kings, having deported some of the inhabitants of the old rebel kingdom of Israel, had installed, the text tells us, colonists originating from provinces in the east of their empire who continued to serve their forefathers' ancestral gods in Samaria. However, they had also adopted the cult of Yhwh, the old local dynasty's god of the throne, so the Assyrian authorities had allegedly repatriated to the temple of Bethel a priest of Yhwh in order to continue the cult of the god for the newcomers. Despite its lack of coherence this passage illustrates the cults' territorial and hereditary nature, which is typical of Near-Eastern antiquity. These details help us to understand better what 'foreign gods' mean.

The Hebrew in Jeremiah 2.11 makes clear that these foreign gods are not *Elohim*, who are sovereign because demiurges. This is largely the meaning of the recurring criticism of idolatry, that is, the fact that the 'sons of Israel' bow down before statues 'of wood and stone' (Jr 2.27; 3.9) made by their hands, calling them 'father' and 'mother' (Jr 2.27), though there is no breath in them (Jr 10.14), unlike the *Elohim* of Genesis 1.2. Jeremiah 10.11 invites everyone to say it in Aramaic, i.e. the language of the nations: 'The gods who did not make heaven and earth shall perish from the earth and from under these heavens.' Unlike Yhwh, they are no *Elohim*, great sovereign gods, masters of life and the universe, which Yhwh can refashion at will, as the previous verse explains (Jr 10.10), but rather 'empty phantoms' (Jr 2.5) who are good for nothing. Thus these gods are not denied *per se*, it is the power and ability to reign that is denied them in these passages. We note that these diatribes against idolatry and the worship offered to images of wood and stone (2.27) assume that images and figurative representations of god had been banished from the cult of Yhwh at the period when these passages were written, which was not the case at the time of the monarchy, according to the Book of Jeremiah and the second Book of Kings and judging by the standing stones and clay figurines brought to light by archaeology in the local temples of the period scattered around the area of Judah. On the other hand it was especially the Persians and Medes who were known in antiquity precisely for not worshipping wood or stone statues.<sup>10</sup>

Some passages from the Book of Jeremiah also highlight the foreign gods' status as creatures rather than creators. Thus the reference to the queen of heaven<sup>11</sup> suggests, as far as her title is concerned, a female counterpart of *Elohim* Yhwh, the great king of heaven and earth described at the beginning of the book. The criticism of this cult shows that, from the book's viewpoint, the 'army of heaven' is thought of, as in Genesis 2.1, as created by *Elohim*. The Book of Jeremiah in its editorial elaboration relies on the Genesis narrative (Gn 2.1), which it continually refers to. In their vocabulary and content these attacks on 'foreign gods' also link with passages in Deuteronomy that detail the consequences of exclusive devotion to Yhwh of

'Israel' and all the 'sons of Israel': that those foreign gods are Yhwh's enemies, resisting his legitimate authority and coveting his sacred domain and the people attached to it. So agreeing to serve those gods (*'elîm*), whose divinity is not denied but who cannot be *Elohim*, is equivalent to rebelling against legitimate authority and serving powers that question the consecrated, sacred character of the land and its inhabitants.

Examining the consequences of this questioning makes it clear not only that the foreign gods are not demiurges but that they are forces for chaos, resistant to the harmony of the cosmos ensured by Yhwh in 'Israel' and for the 'sons of Israel'. Indeed, according to Jeremiah's recriminations, the 'sons of Israel' who worship them are abandoning the god who had led them to the desert, 'the land of drought and deadly shade' (Jr 2.6), an allusion to the primal darkness (Gn 1.1–5), by preferring to Yhwh 'lions' that turn the country into a 'desolate wasteland' (Jr 2.15) – this is the general sense of *tohu bohu* in Genesis 1.2 – and the holy land into a loathsome place defiled by impurity (Jr 2.7; 23.15). Therefore the foreign gods are a source of profanation and desecration (Jr 16.18), while Yhwh alone gives life and sanctity to his spokesman (Jr 1.5). The defiling pollution is expressed using the priestly vocabulary of the Books of Leviticus,<sup>12</sup> Ezekiel<sup>13</sup> and Deuteronomy (21.23).

And so the foreign gods are 'demonized' rather than denied. In the sacred sphere of the cosmos they are comparable to rebels who bring looting and destruction to the kingdom of the great, just and legitimate sovereign. Serving them is the same as betraying the king of heaven, earth and country, and letting the order that alone is propitious to life turn into chaos (in Hebrew *tohu bohu*). In this sense the idols and those who serve them are 'sons of darkness', a symbol of the chaos that reigned before the coming of the first word from *Elohim* that brought light, in contrast to the faithful servants of Yhwh's laws who are 'sons of the light' created by *Elohim* on the first 'day'. We may wonder whether this dualism light–darkness, cosmos–chaos that underlies the representation of Jeremiah's god on the one hand, and the other gods on the other hand, does not betray the Iranian-tending nature of the ideas that run through the Genesis narrative and the Book of Jeremiah. In the final analysis and all things considered, denial of other gods does not seem to be the infallible sign of a monotheistic conception of the biblical god. What can we make of the claims to Yhwh's 'oneness' made by Deuteronomy 6.4 and Zechariah 14?

### Oneness of Yhwh

The most common translation of Deuteronomy 6.4 goes as follows: 'Hear, O Israel, Yhwh is our Elohim, Yhwh is one.' Theologians have tried to read Deuteronomy 6.4 as a theological doctrine pronounced by a believing community whose aim is to found monotheism by defining the divine person of Yhwh as 'one', and interpreting the word 'one' as meaning 'unique'. We should note at once that there is a different Hebrew word to express the quality 'unique'. It is a word that is used in particular to mean an 'only' child and by extension people who are alone and lonely.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, why must the verb 'to be' be implied in this statement? The Hebrew syntax does not indicate that 'our Elohim' and 'one' are attributes of the divine name.

Neither does the context recommend it. The whole chapter is an exhortation from Moses to the sons of Israel to 'hear' the commandments of Yhwh and obey them by putting them into practice. In verse 3 the expression 'If you listen, O Israel, and are careful to observe them' (the laws and commandments just mentioned) shows that it does not mean 'hear' Moses but God. So separating 'Hear, O Israel' from 'Yhwh our Elohim' is arbitrary and goes against the chapter's form and content. In addition Moses is speaking in favour of obeying Yhwh's laws exclusively and not obeying rules imposed by other Elohim on surrounding peoples (v. 13–14):

You shall fear your Elohim, serve him and take your oaths in his name.  
You must not follow other Elohim of the nations that are around you.

Verse 4 synthesizes the two parts of the exhortation: hear Yhwh's orders and obey him alone. Reading the text as it appears, without forcing it, the translation that comes through is the following: 'Hear, O Israel, Yhwh your Elohim, Yhwh alone.' This introduces the succeeding verses far more naturally than a theological statement that has no echo in the text, either before or after. Verses 13–14 clearly give us to understand that this text is not monotheistic either. It requires only henotheism of the sons of Israel. The other Elohim, far from being denied, are sovereign for other peoples. As for the sons of Israel, they must recognize only Yhwh and his earthly representatives, Moses' successors, as their authority in the area of customs.

As the Hebrew Bible tells it, the history of the sons of Israel shows that this ideal henotheism was never completely realized in this world. Zechariah 14.7–9 implies that it will be necessary to await the last end, *eschaton*, before seeing it come to pass. Here yet again the context does not encourage us to rush to translate the number by 'one and only'. Chapter 14 concludes the book by describing the nations' final assault on Jerusalem and the transformation of the holy city at the end of time. Once the nations are victorious and the city captured (v. 1–2), God shows himself in order to become once again master of his heritage and the whole earth for ever (v. 3–9). The universe and the city are refashioned (v. 10–11), the peoples punished (v. 12–15), and a small band of them comes periodically, on pain of death, to celebrate the feast of the divine king in Jerusalem (v. 16–19). The city and everything it contains is dedicated to Yhwh and is granted the same degree of purity and sanctity as the utensils that are used for the ceremony celebrated on the altar of burnt offerings. In this fresco of the creation of the world the expression 'It will be a unique day' (v. 7), which is commonly read in translations, fails miserably to recall the 'day one' in Genesis 1.5, which we noted as being normally used to designate the first day of the month in the liturgical calendar. However the recurrence in this chapter of the liturgical formula 'on that day' allows us to glimpse the fact that this day one is primordial in all senses of the word. This is 'Yhwh's day' when Yhwh the demiurge will take back possession of his creation by re-consecrating it to himself for ever, as on the world's first Sabbath (Gn 2.3), having vanquished all the other Elohim who might lay claim to undivided kingship over the world. The idea of 'Yhwh's day' enables us to understand that 'day one' gives its name to the 'god one' (Ze 14.9) and vice versa. This reminds us of many passages in Isaiah where the demiurge calls himself the first, the initial, the primordial at the same time as the last, the final, the ultimate.<sup>15</sup> It

is true that Yhwh is the final conqueror, he will therefore be 'the only one' in the new sabbatical era that will begin after the last day. However, this sense seems secondary in the context of Ze 14. Thus, even if certain emphases in the Bible point in the direction of a universal god, the 'oneness' of the Bible god remains to be won in the eschatological future. The biblical conception of God is rooted in the image of the warlike god who conquers at the time of the End; and that image is rooted in the ancient royal ideology of the Near East and Iranian doctrine of the closed period.

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Based in a fundamentally henotheistic concept, as defined above, the figure of Yhwh, even when it acquires a universal stature, only lends itself to monotheistic doctrine if painfully contorted. We should certainly see in it the influence of a system of political and social organization set up in the province of Judea by the whole of the Achaeminid dynasty, which was hardly concerned to restore the local monarchy and preferred to place the province of Judea and its inhabitants under the authority of the ancient local god of the throne, giving the priests of the temple in Jerusalem responsibility for maintaining local customs. In that political system Yhwh is the Lord of the 'sons of Israel', who are descended from the inhabitants of the ancient kingdom of Israel, of which Solomon was master when he built the temple at Jerusalem. The other gods are 'nothing' in Israel because of their legal incapacity to exercise any authority whatsoever over the 'Israelites'. These are the 'foreign' gods to which the neighbouring peoples living in adjacent lands are subject through inheritance. Monotheism hardly seems compatible with this system, which identifies the people with the traditional great local god and attempts to separate off the community of neighbouring peoples on pain of contaminating the cult through mixing with other peoples pledged to other gods.<sup>16</sup> Thus foreign gods are recognized as divine. Again the Book of Daniel, around 140 BC, criticizes the Antichrist for not respecting the gods of his fathers.<sup>17</sup> It is in the Roman period, particularly in Philo of Alexandria, that we encounter more strictly monotheistic writing in allegorical exegeses on cosmogonic myths, chief among them being the biblical narrative in Genesis. Imperial power had to take on increasingly universal characteristics before the idea of a single god guaranteeing that power would emerge from the throng. Finally, let us remember the numerous so-called Hellenistic pagan cults that have been brought to light in ancient Palestine by archaeology. One of them in particular, dedicated to a healing god, was uncovered north of the temple in Jerusalem, at the Probatic pool, under the scrutiny of the Temple authorities. The episode narrated in John 5 bears witness to its functioning in the time of Jesus and to the participation of the Jews in religious activities.<sup>18</sup> What sort of monotheism is that?

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## Notes

1. Quotations from the Bible are based on the version given in the New English Bible (1970) (translator's note).
2. Translated from M.-J. Seux's French translation.
3. The word used can be traced to Akkadian *tiamtu* 'sea', Ebla Tiamat [salt water] of Mesopotamian myths, Egyptian *Noun* and Syrian *thwm*, attested at Ugarit.
4. Demonstrated by Léopold de Saussure in an article that has sadly received too little attention and is quoted in the *Journal asiatique* published in 1924.
5. Is 40.26, 28; Am 4.13; Ps 89.13, 148.5.
6. Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic, etc.
7. Ps 97.2–4: 'Cloud and mist enfold him . . . Fire goes before him, and burns up his enemies all around. The world is lit up beneath his lightning flash, the earth sees it and writhes in pain' (Ha 3.10–11; Ps 104.32: 'When he looks at the earth it quakes, when he touches the hills they pour forth smoke', etc.).
8. Ze 4; the Ancient of days on his throne-chariot of fire in Dn 7.9–10, etc.
9. Mishna *Ta'anit* (IV, 2).
10. According to evidence from Herodotus, Strabo and Berosus passed down by Clement of Alexandria: Herodotus I, 131; Strabo XV, 3.13; Berosus, in Jacoby, *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, 680 F 11.
11. Jr 7.18; 44.17–25.
12. Lv 11.43; 18.30; etc.
13. Ez 23.17; 43.7; etc.
14. Ps 25.16; 68.7.
15. Is 41.4; 44.6; 48.12.
16. Dt 6.13–14; Esd 6.21, 9.1–2; Ne 13.1,3.
17. Dn 11.37.
18. A. Duprez, 'Jésus et les dieux guérisseurs. À propos de Jean, V', *Cahiers de la Revue biblique* 12, Paris: Gabalda, 1970.

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