

GOD IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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The Hebrew Bible is neither a book of history nor of theology, yet it is central to our understanding of ancient Israel and its faith. Its contents are rich and varied. Some of its writings reached their final form as late as the second century BCE (Before the Common Era), such as the Book of Daniel, alluding as it does to the Maccabean age. Others, such as the Song of Deborah, are a thousand years older, with passages dating from the age of the Judges in the twelfth century BCE. It is not surprising, then, that its pages reflect the religious beliefs and practices of the times and social conditions in which they originated.

The stories of the patriarchs, for example, while reaching their present form in later days, retain memories of the time when the ancestors of Israel were still landless, wandering clans. Each was headed by a patriarch who not only saw to its physical well-being, but to the maintenance of its customs and traditions and the training of the young. He also was charged with the proper maintenance and worship of the family god (“the god of the fathers”) who was considered part of the household and protected it from evil spirits. Hence the biblical notion that the first born were to serve as priests. This may have been the reason behind Jacob’s eagerness to inherit the right of the first born, as the midrash also suggests. Note that the god of each of the patriarchs is referred to by a different name: *elohei Avraham*, *pahad Yitzhak*, *abir Ya’akov*, suggesting that different deities were involved. Alongside of this god, many families had other gods, some (known as “*trafim*”) to ward off demonic forces, others to assure fertility. Family festivals were regularly celebrated at the home shrine, while others, often major agricultural ones, were observed at larger open-air sanctuaries.

Laws in the Covenant Code (Exodus 21-23) and stories of the conquest in the Book of Judges reflect the early stages in the life of the tribes (12th-11th centuries BCE). Many of the clans had settled down in villages and towns, usually of no more than three-hundred members. The clans still maintained their family solidarity, but now they had to negotiate their practices with their neighbors (“*re’im*”). The council of elders served that purpose, with each family retaining a high degree of independence. It controlled its own property, homes as well as slaves and cattle. It continued to worship its household gods and held its own family celebrations. At the same time, all of the families were bound by common moral laws and joined with their neighbors in worshiping at open-air shrines on the occasion of communal celebrations. The gods to whom they brought offerings were generally the ones responsible for the fertility of the land and of the cattle, the *ba’alim* and *asheivot*.

Clans banded together into tribes to defend themselves against marauders and to conquer new territories from the Canaanites. In these battles, they turned to YHWH, the god of war (Exodus 15:3) who appointed charismatic chieftains (“*shoftim*”) to pacify the land. These chieftains were imbued with the spirit of YHWH, but did not give up on their local gods. Thus, Gideon, zealous as he was for YHWH, even refusing the invitation of his people to rule over them since YHWH alone was their ruler (Judges 8:23), did not refrain from erecting an ephod (probably, in this context, an image to be worshiped) which “became a snare to Gideon and his household” (8:27). Elsewhere we are told that under the pressure of the Philistines, the tribe of Dan left its original home, north of Judah, to settle on the northern border, beyond the Kinneret. Here the tribe erected a sanctuary to house the ephod, together with the Levite who ministered to it, both of which had been taken by force from the house of Micah. The sanctuary later occupied a place of honor in the northern kingdom since its priesthood was descended from Moses (18:30).

The onslaught of the Philistines led to the union of the tribes, a move sanctioned by YHWH, who directed Samuel - judge, priest and prophet - to anoint Saul as their first king. The kingdom was now involved in ongoing battles, under the leadership of YHWH and his anointed king. This was especially true of David who was promised an eternal dynasty by him, one that was sealed by a covenant. YHWH was now recognized as the god of the realm, his ark brought to Jerusalem and subsequently installed in an ornate temple erected by Solomon. That this did not affect the way the people continued to worship their own gods is evident from the narratives in Kings and the pronouncements of the classical prophets. Even as late as the closing days of the first temple (586 BCE) we find the prophet Ezekiel denouncing the

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people for the worship of alien gods in the temple itself (ch.8) and the ongoing sacrifices at the open-air sanctuaries (so also, eg, Jeremiah 2:30ff, an older contemporary of Ezekiel's).

It is only after the Babylonian exile that we witness a change in mood. This is attested by the Torah which seems to have emerged in Babylonia itself. It was evidently the product of priests and scribes who set themselves to collect and preserve the oral traditions and practices of the past. The need for this was felt by the newly established communities of exiles who, living in their own villages, still longed to return to their own land and sought to keep the connection with the past alive for themselves and their descendants. The earlier materials, which were edited and reconstituted to provide hope and guidance for the future, were taught orally on Sabbaths and holy day, as well as at sessions with young men being trained to take their place in the community.

To maintain their distinctiveness from the surrounding Babylonian groups, the Jewish villages had to have a common god who had been worshiped by them in the past. The discrete household and village gods no longer sufficed. What was needed was a god who was known to all of the ancestors of Israel and only one met that requirement: YHWH, who had been worshiped nationally in the temple in Jerusalem, whose prophets had warned of the coming destruction and urged the people to be faithful to him.

We do not know when the Torah emerged in its present form. Since Ezra is alleged to have brought it back to Jerusalem in the fifth century BCE, it appears to have existed at that time, though possibly not in its final form. Interestingly, a midrash seems to recognize Ezra's role in the composition of the written text, stating that the original copy of the Torah had been destroyed at the time of the exile and that Ezra had rewritten it from memory. Accordingly, if Moses had not given the people the Torah, Ezra would have proved worthy of doing so!

The Torah, then, became the foundational text of Israel and its God the one to be worshiped and revered. As such, He is its central subject and his existence is taken for granted. He is incomprehensible, yet He reveals himself in a variety of ways.

To start with, He is the creator. Behind Genesis 1 lurk older Mesopotamian myths, yet the chapter itself is relatively free of mythical allusions. Nor does it insist on "*creatio ex nihilo*" (creation out of nothing) a reference to which does not appear in any text before the Maccabean age. Rather, written in poetic prose, it refers to God as bringing order out of chaos in an effortless manner. Everything proceeds according to the divine plan, with each day allocated a specific act of creation. The objects created in days four to six are parallel to those in days one to three, except that they are endowed with the power of locomotion. At the summit stands the human being who alone is celebrated as having been created in the divine image, which probably means that he is to be the divine surrogate on earth. On the seventh day, God "rests", indicating that the active process of creation has been completed and that the Creator has provided His creatures with a hallowed day on which they could enjoy the blessedness available to them as His creatures. Difficult though the circumstances might be under which they were living, His people were reassured that He could be trusted to bring order out of the chaos in which they were living, if only they carried out His will for sacred living.

He is the God who enters into covenants. These are of two major kinds. The first is essentially a promise sealed by a sacred oath and accompanied by a sign, as in the case of the covenant with Noah and with Abraham. The second is a mutual agreement in which each of the two parties obligates himself to specific behaviors. Thus marriage may be considered a covenant. Even a close friendship, such as that of David and Jonathan, may be sealed by a covenant. More famous is the covenant between God and David in which the latter is promised that his descendants will always rule over Israel, provided that they live in accord with the divine will. And, of course, the most significant one is that between God and Israel in which He announces that Israel is his to be His treasured people, bound to Him by a life-long

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commitment to His commandments, failing which they are to be punished by exile and destruction. The most dramatic example of this is found in Deuteronomy 27 where the vassal treaty of Esarhaddon (672 BCE) serves as a model.

He is the God who commands. From the point of view of Judaism, this is His most prevalent characteristic. His commandments supersede every other claim; they are non-negotiable. The most famous among them is the decalogue, the so-called “Ten Commandments”. Technically, they appear to be the principles of the law, rather than the law itself, setting down the divine claim for obedience to His will, the exclusivity of His worship and the moral foundations for the Israelite society. Father and mother are to be honored as the transmitters of the traditions of their people and the Sabbath observed as the day celebrating the covenant of Israel.

Aside from Genesis which is largely narrative in nature, all of the other books of the Torah contain laws. The earliest collection is *Sefer ha-Brit*, the so-called “Covenant Code”. It contains civil, criminal, religious and moral laws, many of which appear to be quite ancient. The laws in Leviticus largely relate to the priests, though chapter 19, “You shall be holy...” is addressed to the entire people. The laws in Numbers appear like an appendix to Leviticus, while Deuteronomy, as its Hebrew name, *Mishneh Torah*, (“a copy of the Torah”) suggests, is a reprise of earlier laws, some of which are updated. The laws are not systematically organized, but the books do contain information about the courts, their authority and what kind of punishment is to be meted out.

The function of the laws is to make it possible to maintain a well-ordered society and to keep chaos from overwhelming order, whether social or cosmic. This is true not only of the civil and criminal laws but of the ritual ones as well which are intended to keep life-threatening disorders in check. The sacrificial system, too, is designed to maintain proper relationships with the deity to assure His blessings for the entire community.

He is the redeemer. As such, he can transform any chaos into order, any intolerable situation to one of joy. He can overcome bondage and exploitation and see to it that those who are abandoned are cared for. The exodus from Egypt is but a past example of His redemptive power, assuring those in Babylonian exile that their time of redemption is close at hand. As for those who are suffering at the hand of the dark powers behind the mighty empires that control Judea, their hour too has come, as God’s hosts intervene to do battle with the forces of evil to bring the entire world under His reign and assure the victory of the forces of peace and justice.

The God of the Bible is everywhere and “everywhen”. He cannot be manipulated but may always be approached in prayer and worship. The biblical text suggests how that may be done, not only spelling out the words and rites to do so but helping create the spirit into which we may enter when we seek His presence.