

THE RELIGION OF THE ISRAELITES IN EGYPT

MICHAEL ALAN STEIN

What was the religion of the Israelites in Egypt? What their religious practice actually was remains conjectural, however the Pentateuch provides hints, some explicit and some suggested by their emphatic and repeated prohibition. The suggestions to follow are based on practices depicted especially in Genesis and Exodus as apparently popular and respected and either co-opted or eradicated throughout the Bible. Sources of pre-revelation religious expression or belief could have been Mesopotamian, Canaanite, Egyptian or *sui generis*. Even the rabbis in the midrash state that the Israelites in Egypt acted as their neighbors (*Vayikra Rabbah* 22:8, *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 2:2).

The Israelites in Egypt retained a vestige of the ideas of Jacob, in particular a direct, personal connection to God, known as *Y-H-V-H*, and an ethnic destiny determined through covenant with Him. These ideas remained in the communal memory through the tales of Genesis. The stories of larger-than-life ancestors and their interactions with God, especially His promises to them of a better future, would have sustained the distraught Israelites. Indeed God invokes His hoary relationships with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as His credentials to the Israelites.¹

The Israelites understood *Y-H-V-H* to be their immanent, anthropomorphic, ethnic father-God, as when Adam and Eve *heard the sound of Y-H-V-H walking about in the garden* (Gen. 3:8).² However, Israelite folklore accepted inferior deities, and episodes that seemingly describe God's limitations suggest monolatry rather than monotheism. God's hands-on construction of Eden, the challenge of a clever, talking serpent which apparently stimulates God's fear of human aspiration, the mating of sons of gods with humans to produce *Nephilim*, God's regretting creation and His reversal of it, and the threat posed by the tower of Babel are tales that were ancient when Abram and Sarai appeared.³

Despite these communal memories, by the time of the Exodus the Israelites demand of Moses, *What is His name?* (Ex. 3:13) for they believed *Y-H-V-H* to

Michael Stein has a B.A. in English from Muhlenberg College, a B.S.E. in Electrical Engineering from the University of Pennsylvania and a J.D. from Villanova University School of Law. He is the CEO of ESL ElectroScience, an international high technology materials company, has published many papers in the field of microelectronics, and is a multiple patent holder. He has led seminars in Genesis at synagogues in the Philadelphia area for many years.

be subordinate to Egyptian deities as evidenced by their enslavement. Before God could again inspire Israel He had to demonstrate power over Egypt's gods, especially the Nile and Pharaoh himself, and He goes to extremes to obliterate the idea of their divinity.⁴

Israelite stories of night demons or trolls at water crossings were similar to those of many folk traditions.⁵ Israelites probably had idols in their Goshen homes, divine seats for God or other deities, in the form of a serpent (an early representation of wisdom and power, used by Moses to impress the Israelites and Pharaoh); a young bull (to which the people would quickly revert in stress); a decorated post; or the *cherub* (a hybrid of human, bird and beast).⁶ The First Commandment emphatically rejects worship of other deities, although it does not deny they exist, and it is the only one of the Ten Commandments for which punishment for violation is explicit. Nevertheless, reversion to idol worship was rapid and easy.⁷

Originally, there was no priesthood or cultic hierarchy. Informally acknowledged elders, but no priests, met with Moses and Aaron and would later attend them on the mountain.⁸ Firstborn sons were responsible for memorial or other simple rituals.⁹ There were no required forms of worship. Israelites accepted the reality of magic, human usurpation of divine power over the natural world, as a technology one could obtain. God assigned Moses certain magic tricks in order to make his claims credible to the Israelites and Moses demonstrated magic to Pharaoh whose priest-magicians duplicated it, albeit poorly.¹⁰

Israelite observance of seasonal husbandry celebrations had been routine in Canaan and were supplemented by harvest festivals in Goshen.¹¹ Both may have had fertility or sexual components, recalling that forefather Jacob had induced livestock propagation and that his son Judah, while attending a shearing festival, casually engaged a cultic prostitute. Indeed, religious prostitution was enough of a concern later that Moses would outlaw it.¹²

The Israelites used sacrificial blood as an apotropaic or spiritual detergent. The use of blood and the act of circumcision appear as such in the fragmentary "Bridegroom of Blood" story (Ex. 4:25-26), likely a popular parable and probably meant as a synecdoche of archaic human sacrifice. The ancient idea of the purifying power of blood from animal sacrifice would be retained by the Leviticus cult.¹³

The wilderness was a hostile place of ancient deities and Israelites offered an annual expiation of sins to a goat demon who resided in *azazel* (from *ez*, goat).¹⁴ Yet, with some sense of destiny, Israelites commemorated the eponymous ancestor's mythic combat, which occurred after a wilderness trek and during a river crossing, with their unique culinary limitation: they disdained the sciatic nerve of food animals (Gen. 32:33).

Despite the punishment for the sin of the spies in Num. 14:20-35, actually not one generation but many had to die out before the Torah of a sublime, meta-worldly God could take hold. Genesis and Exodus subordinate antique superstitions to ethical monotheism and to the preeminence of God. Much of the latter part of Exodus, most of Leviticus, the first section of Numbers and much of Deuteronomy are concerned with establishing the new cult to the exclusion or co-option of antique practices and influences. Exodus and Leviticus infuse the mundane with awesome grandeur; Leviticus and Deuteronomy insist on God's exclusivity and cultic supremacy through ritual and forecasts of curses and exile, blessings and restoration.¹⁵

Were these blessings and curses to be at the whim of the Deity? Hardly. The halakhic portions of the Bible lay out communal and individual obligations, accessible and knowable to all. Moses insists his teachings are not mysterious or esoteric and rejects older or neighboring mythologies of secret wisdom or the need for intermediary prophets or priests (Deut. 30:11-13). This distinction is the gift of Judaism: our obligations arise from our essential direct servitude to God; to be righteous one must do right under the law.¹⁶

NOTES

1. Although identified as *Y-H-V-H* in Genesis 2:4f, what may have been the earliest tales of creation according to the Documentary Hypothesis, and explicitly called *Y-H-V-H* at the time of Enosh, Genesis 4:26, the origin, meaning and pronunciation of the name is lost (although suggested in Exodus 3:14). He is identified as *Y-H-V-H* in His initial conversation with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-8 and He invokes the covenant with the forefathers to Moses as a credential in Exodus 3:6-17 (*I am that I am....Y-H-V-H, the God of your fathers....I will bring you up....*) and 6:2-8. God is also known as *El Shaddai* to the Israelites, perhaps from Canaanite antecedents; Exodus 6:3 and Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2004) pp. 399-400.

2. The anthropomorphism was still explicit at Sinai, Exodus 24:10: *And they saw the God of Israel and beneath His feet....*

3. See, respectively, Genesis 2:7-22 (God's creating of life in Eden as a manual technology); Genesis 3:1-5, 22 (the serpent as a rival who, when God is not around, thwarts His plans for

humankind and awakens His fear of human aspiration); Genesis 6:2-4 (a fragment of a too-popular-to-ignore tale of Earth-visiting deities); Genesis 6:6 (despite rabbinic, e.g., Rashi's, apologies, God acknowledges His error); Genesis 11:6-7 (God uses the first person plural as if a decision had been made by conference, as noted by Rashi here and in his note to Genesis 1:26).

4. Thus the apparent excesses of the Ten Plagues, Exodus 7-12. As to exerting explicit power over the divine Nile, see Exodus 4:9 and 7:17-29; and over divine Pharaoh, see e.g., Exodus 5:2 (in which Pharaoh says, *Who is the Lord...?*) and Exodus 7:1 (in which God tells Moses: *I have set you up as a God to Pharaoh*). Indeed the entire Ten Plagues pageant is designed to humiliate Pharaoh.

5. These beings evolved into agents of God's will in Genesis 32:25-32 and Exodus 4:24-26; see also Alter, *supra*, p. 180.

6. Genesis 31:35 recalls (ridicules?) the importance of *teraphim* to Laban (and possibly to Rachel). In Genesis 3:1, Israelites were told *the serpent was the most cunning of all beasts*; and in v. 14 God asserts power over this archaic, supernatural (talking) creature. Its residual power is acknowledged in Exodus 4:3, 7:8-13 and Numbers 21:3-9. A young bull is the Israelites' divine seat of default when God himself is no longer immanent, Exodus 32-34. Canaanite *asherim*, sacred posts, are to be cut down, Exodus 34:13, Leviticus 26:1, and Deuteronomy 15:21-22. They may commemorate Asherah, a Canaanite consort to El circa 14th Century BCE, T. Eskanazi and A. Weiss, editors, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: URT Press, 2008) p. 511. Genesis 3:24 refers to the cherubim, using the definite article to suggest that hybrid creatures, known features of Near Eastern mythology (e.g., the Egyptian sphinx), were familiar to Israelites who associated it (and the fiery sword) with forbidden access; Alter, *supra*, p. 28; also Exodus 25:18.

7. It is also one of only two commandments for which reward for compliance is explicit, Exodus 20:2-6. Nonetheless the people quickly revert to idolatry in Exodus 32.

8. Exodus 4:29 and 24:1-14. Priesthood and a central cult were first organized after revelation, Exodus 28-29, Leviticus 8.

9. Before Sinai, the ancient and common practice of favoring the firstborn is undermined or overcome in crucial, often jarring circumstances (Cain, Ishmael, Esau, Reuben, Aaron). The importance of being firstborn persists in many passages, e.g., Exodus 12:29f, 13:2, 34:20 and Numbers 33:4; perhaps by implication the acolytes (*ne'arim*, lit. lads) of Exodus 24:5; the indication that the firstborn had performed priestly duties until replaced by the tribe of Levi, Numbers 3:12; the repeated cultic status and consecration of firstborn animals, e.g., Exodus 13:2 and Deuteronomy 15:19.

10. Exodus 4:1-9, 30-31 and Exodus 7:8-12. Sorcery was proscribed after revelation, Exodus 22:17 and Leviticus 20:27. After claiming the likelihood of Israelite practices of sorcery, Everett Fox notes, "Magic as such was forbidden...all over the Bible, as an attempt to manipulate God's world..."; E. Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, translation and commentary (New York: Schocken, 1995) p. 381. Moses' claim that it is he who brought the water from the rock (without crediting God) caused his early death, Numbers 20:10.

11. Judah attends a shearing festival in Genesis 38. Originally agricultural festivals, Sukkot and Passover were merged with and later co-opted as historically inspired religious commemorations; e.g., Leviticus 23:34-43.

12. Genesis 30:35-43. The characters later characterize Jacob's husbandry as divine blessing, Genesis 31:9-12, 42. As to cult prostitution, see Genesis 38:15, 21, Deuteronomy 23:18, Alter,

supra, p. 218. In particular, the whoring by daughters of priests is punishable by burning in Leviticus 21:9, prompting Rashi's comment to Genesis 38:24 that Tamar was a priest's daughter.

13. Alter, *supra*, p. 330 and N. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991) p. 25. See also Exodus 12:22f, Leviticus 3:2, 8, 13. As to the purifying power of blood, see e.g., Leviticus 14:6f; Leviticus 14:6f (the purgative and detergent effect of blood from the bird ritual), and sections of Leviticus 4, 5, 8, 9 and 16.

14. Leviticus 16. See, e.g., Genesis 16:7 and 21:14, Exodus 4:24-26; Leviticus 17. Sacrifices to goat demons (*se'irim*) were forbidden in Leviticus 17:7.

15. See, for example, Leviticus 26. The Israelites would repeatedly revert to their pre-revelation practices as depicted in Exodus (e.g., Exodus 32-34) and Numbers (e.g., Numbers 16-17). They would also succumb to the familiar and comforting ways of old neighbors, as Moses warned (e.g., Deuteronomy 12).

16. E.g., Exodus 20:2, Leviticus 25:55 and Leviticus 26.



Full text of articles from Volumes 28 - 38 is
available for download on our website:

<http://jbbq.jewishbible.org/jbbq-past-issues/>

