Section 9 – Patriarchal Monotheism

Ba'al's Challenge

Contemporary research of the archaeological sites in Judah and Israel has revealed that the people who became the Jews were originally Canaanite hill-people who worshipped a standard pantheon derived from the Assyrian tradition, a descendant of the Sumerian and Akkadian.[1] The principal male gods in this pantheon were El, who iscognate with the Sumerian Sky-god, An, and Ba'al, who is cognate with Enlil. Both El and Ba'al had female consort deities, Asherah and Astarte, thus forming a tetrad.[2]

Asherah's sacred symbol was a tall wooden statue which was set in a post-hole. These votives took her name and were themselves called asherahs.[3] Asherah-poles were often arranged on either side of an altar but sometimes in the form of a circle or grove. Discovery of the remains of a set of post-holes for such a grove within the confines of the Old Temple in Jerusalem confirms Asherah's importance. Judahite society was not religiously homogeneous; older deities continued to be worshipped.

One of the central themes of Canaanite mythology is the struggle for power between El and Ba'al. Their names mean 'God' and 'Lord' respectively, and they are father and son. In this tradition, these are very masculine, warrior gods. In the end, Ba'al eclipses El, who retires into obscurity.

The idea of younger deities struggling against and eventually overwhelming their elders is a recurrent theme of the ancient mythology of the Near and Middle East. This probably expresses the internal upheavals within very conservative cultures when confronted with new technological and social ideas. These cultures were extremely rigid, and it would be surprising if change and reaction to it were not reflected in their mythologies.

The great set-piece scenes in Hebrew Scripture such as, for example, when Moses comes down the mountain and is enraged to find the people raising altars to Ba'al, indicate that the writers

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[1] Finkelstein and Silberman 2002.

[2] Some sources see Asherah as directly cognate with Astarte: once again, in an oral tradition as rich and diversified as existed in the Middle East, there were many versions of the same deities, and it is not now clear whether these were directly related to each other or were derived from an older common ancestor that informed them both.

[3] We will use the convention of describing the votive object in lower case but capitalising the name when it refers to the goddess Asherah herself. Unfortunately there has been a great deal of conflation of the terms, which has led to confusion, both in Biblical times and now, and we should make it clear: we do not believe that the people saw these votives as incarnations of the goddess, but as representations of her.

were followers of El, resisting the challenge by his son Ba'al. This suggests a conservative, inward-looking and cautious society, which fits with what we know of Judahite culture at the time.

At every turn Hebrew Scripture rails against pluralism, polytheism and what it sees as the excesses of the more advanced and powerful cultures in the region.[4] This reflects the struggle between the culture of the poor, conservative, hill-farming people of Judah, and that of the more liberal, inclusive, urbanised Israel. The thrust of the Scripture is profoundly conservative despite a number of contradictory redactions that were introduced by priestly scribes influenced by the relatively liberal Israelite tradition.

In one myth, Ba'al and Astarte are allowed to rule over Canaan in El's name. There is a possibility that the adoption of El as Jahweh, the 'only god' of the Judahites, was a conservative reaction to this, a rejection of the new gods in favour of the old. The repeated injunctions in Hebrew Scripture to destroy the 'high places' dedicated to Ba'al support this. The whole narrative of the text may derive from it being one side in a socio-political debate, the other side of which is now lost. The Judahite tradition persisted, not because the culture triumphed, but because the more liberal, progressive and economically successful Israelite one was repeatedly destroyed by invaders!

For many years, scholars thought it possible that the Judahite monotheism was derived from the earlier monotheism of the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten; indeed there are many tempting similarities.[5] These ideas have been challenged by archaeological evidence showing that the exile into Egypt as described in Hebrew Scripture simply did not happen. It is an invention, probably intended as a metaphor for the real Babylonian exile, during which the story was actually written. Similarly, while the Zoroastrian monotheist ideas were influential upon revisions of Hebrew Scripture carried out during the Babylonian Exile, there is, as we shall see, a prior and more compelling reason for the development of monotheism in this culture.

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[4] We will use the term 'Hebrew Scripture' to refer to the body of religious texts written by the Judahites and adopted as the Christian canon of the Old Testament.

[5] Akhenaten's cult might have been known about even in a place so fundamentally conservative and inward-looking as Judah in the 9th century BCE. This knowledge might have been transmitted through the Hyksos, who ruled in Egypt from around 1750 to 1530 BCE. They were slowly restricted to the north and the Nile Delta, and later fled to Gaza. (Gertoux, *Gerard. Dating the Wars of the Hyksos.* http://www.chronosynchro.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Dating-War-of-Hyksos.pdf. Retrieved 09/12/2014.) Although it has often been postulated, notably by Josephus and later Christian apologists, that the Hyksos and the Biblical Hebrews were identical, this has been debunked by modern scholars (Finkelstein and Silberman 2002.) Nevertheless the possibility remains that some folk memory may have been passed by them to the Canaanites.