

# THE BIBLE AND MYTHOLOGICAL POLYTHEISM\*

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IT IS an accepted postulate of Biblical scholarship that Israelite religion was cast in the crucible of a centuries-long struggle with polytheism, and took shape under the constant influence of its ideas throughout the Biblical period. The folk religion of pre-exilic Israel is conventionally represented as polytheistic, syncretistic, Canaanite-Israelite. The people, so this view goes, adopted both the culture and the deities of Canaan; they worshipped YHWH and Baal as the syncretistic deity YHWH-Baal, who was considered the lord of the land; but they also believed in other gods. As to the religion of the Biblical writers themselves, opinion is divided. Some maintain (Wellhausen, Meyer, Stade, Smend, et al.) that Israelite religion was at first polytheistic, and they distinguish in the Bible too a polytheistic stratum. This opinion would admit the existence of monotheism only from the period of the literary prophets of the eighth century. Others trace the beginnings of monotheism to the age of Moses (Sellin, Kittel, et al., and most recently Albright). Nevertheless, all agree that throughout the Biblical period heathen mythology exercised a profound influence on Israelite culture. For about a century now, scholars have labored with great diligence and ingenuity to clarify the nature of this influence. The pan-Babylonians found the Bible suffused with mythological allusions and symbolism. Gunkel, Zimmern, and Gressmann discovered mythological elements underlying Biblical legend and eschatology. The Scandinavian school (Mowinckel, Pedersen, Haldar, et al.) have gone to even greater lengths, it would seem, in this direction.

Scholars have drawn their conclusions on the basis of comparing Biblical data with heathen religion as it is known from heathen sources. They have failed, however, to ask the primary question: what acquaintance do the Biblical writers themselves show with the nature of real heathenism, i. e. with mythological religion? Where do they express any opinion on it? Precisely what do they condemn in it? And where do they fight against the mythological syncretism of the people of Israel?

When we examine Biblical literature from this standpoint we are

\* Translated from the Hebrew by Moshe Greenberg.

met by a startling phenomenon. The Bible shows absolutely no apprehension of the real character of mythological religion. On this point there is uniformity regardless of source, book, or period. Nowhere in Biblical literature is there revealed a true grasp of the essentials of heathenism.

#### THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF IDOLATRY

We may distinguish, as a rule, three elements in polytheism organically related to one another. One is the deification of natural phenomena in the broadest sense of the term: deification of the sky, earth, moon, and sea; deification of plants and animals, of the dead, of kings and heroes. A second element is myth. Myth arises as an outcome of the deification of nature; it represents the forces of nature as persons with independent existence, as beings who have a "biography." Through myth, polytheism interprets the phenomena of the universe as events in the lives of gods and goddesses. In myth, polytheism expresses its world view, and gives meaning to its cult. A third element is the deification of material objects, natural or artificial. Polytheistic man considers certain objects to be bearers of divine power as the habitat or symbol of deity. Worship of idols and pictures is a particular case: it is an artistic sphere parallel to, and grounded in, myth. The worship of material objects is liable to degenerate into fetishism, but fetishism is not an essential element of polytheism.

How is polytheistic religion reflected in the Bible? Briefly one can say that it is depicted chiefly as the worship of "wood and stone," that is to say, as fetishism. While there are in the Bible some traces of the pagan deification of nature, there is no record of the vital attribute of polytheism: the belief in mythological deities.

In several passages the Bible mentions the worship of heavenly bodies (Deut 4 19; 17 3; II Kings 21 3-5; 23 4-5, 11; Jer 8 2; 44 17-25; Ezek 8 16; Zeph 1 5); moon worship is hinted at in Job 31 26-28. There is likewise a record of the deifying of kings (Isa 14 13-14; Ezek 28 2-9; 29 3; Dan 6 8-13). It is surprising, therefore, that no mention is made of a deifying of the land, sea, thunder, lightning, storm, or other natural phenomena.

The core of idolatry, according to the Biblical representation, is the worship of "other gods", of *elilim* who are called by name: Baal, Chemosh, Milcom, Dagon, etc. We know today that these deities were both bound up with natural phenomena and the subjects of mythical accounts. Not so in the Bible. Here there is no allusion to the natural functions of any god, nor to other of his mythological qualities. Gods are identified only by the nation which serves them: thus there are gods of Egypt, Sidon, etc. But there is no god of the sun, earth, or sea. Nor

is there any indication of cosmogonic activity, genealogical descent, generations and matings, wars and victories. Most amazing is the absence of sexual differentiation among the gods of the gentiles. The Hebrew of the Bible possesses no word to designate a feminine deity: it has no 'ēlā, 'elīlā, or 'elōhā.<sup>1</sup> This alone makes a mythological conception difficult. All the legends of the gods have disappeared entirely, only their names have remained. *Elilim* are no more than certain conventional idol-figures that serve as the objects of a magical cult. So innocent is the Bible of a mythological world view that it may be safely asserted that had we no extra-Biblical sources, we should know next to nothing concerning the religion of the gentiles.

#### POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IDOLATRY

Several stories and bits of stories bearing a mythological impress have been preserved in the Bible. The majority of these are found in Genesis 1–11. The poetic and prophetic literature contains remnants of a legend, mythologically tinged, about the subjugation of Rahab and Tannin (Isa 27 1; 51 9; Ps 74 13–14; 89 11; Job 9 13; 26 11–12). We find mythological motifs also in Isaiah 14 12–13 and in Ezekiel 28 11–19.

To assess properly the nature and source of these legends, however, the following basic considerations must be kept in mind.

First: There is no mythological story or fragment in the Bible in which a heathen god or hero is featured. In all, the actors are only YHWH himself, his angels, primeval beasts (who are not considered deities) or persons of hoary antiquity (Adam, Eve, Noah, etc.), an age in which, according to the Bible, idolatry had not yet arisen. Second: No myth is characterized as false or idolatrous. Every mythical narrative belongs to the store of the Biblical writers' own religion, and is presented as a true story. We might say that the Bible contains mythology which is positive, accepted; it does not contain negative, rejected

<sup>1</sup> See Renan, *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques*, ed. 1928, p. 6; Baethgen, *Beiträge zur Semitischen Religionsgeschichte*: "Der Gott Israels und die Götter der Heiden," 1888, p. 201; Cornill, *Der Israelitische Prophetismus*, 1912, p. 23. Baethgen, Cornill, and others maintain, with Renan, that Hebrew is an "essentially monotheistic" language, so that it were impossible to designate a feminine deity in it. Such is not the case. *Ela* is a "terrible barbarism" (Renan, *ibid.*) not in Hebrew *per se*, but in the monotheistic language of the Bible. Had not the expression *bene 'elohim* been preserved, it would likewise strike one as a "barbarism." *Ela* is really no more "barbaric" than *ba'ala* or *ba'alat* which have been retained in place names (e. g. Josh 15 9; 19 44). The word 'elīlā, which cannot be considered a "barbarism" even in monotheistic Hebrew, is nevertheless lacking. The general categories of *ba'alim* and 'ashtarot (Judg 2 13; 10 6 etc.) do not denote sex differences in the gods, but rather the distinction which was fashioned into the idol figure itself; the plurals support this view.

mythology. Third: No mythological matter is adduced with derogatory or polemical intent. In fact there is not one explicit word of polemic against heathen myth in the Bible. The struggle with idolatry is not a struggle against idolatrous myth.

In other words, "mythology" and idolatry are two separate spheres in the Bible. The whole of Biblical "mythology" is considered true; idolatry is wholly false. Nothing remains to indicate that idolatry possesses any myth whatsoever; that the "mythology" of the Bible has a heathen counterpart is, of course, out of the question. Hence we may conclude that such mythological elements have nothing to do with the foreign idolatry which the Bible opposes, and their presence is no evidence for the influence of heathenism on Israel during the Biblical period. These elements are perforce a legacy of the past, whose origins were forgotten generations since. The fact that the Bible contains only fragments of myth and isolated mythological motifs supports this contention. Biblical religion is in essence non-mythological: the myth in it is demolished and suppressed, existing only in shredded remnants.

Now, if the struggle with idolatry does not involve a campaign against myth, it necessarily follows that the elimination of myth must have preceded this struggle. The advent of the new religion among the Israelite tribes of Moses' day shattered their early mythological beliefs, and the fragments which became embedded in the Bible were no longer felt to be "idolatrous" and non-Israelite. Nor did heathen mythology penetrate Israel at any subsequent period as an active, creative element. For the influence of heathenism was superficial, merely cultic-fetishistic. All the Bible says about idolatry bears this out.

#### GODS, SHEDIM, FETISHES

Not only does the Bible fail to designate any deity by a natural or mythological appellation, but it does not conceive heathen deities as persons in any sense, neither as spirits nor as demons. Even the heathen is not depicted as believing in personalized deities. In the Biblical view he considers the idol itself as god.

There are, to be sure, several passages which may be interpreted as referring to animate gods. Such are the remarks of the parable-speakers regarding Chemosh (Num 21 29), Jephthah's statement on Chemosh (Judg 11 24), Joash's reference to Baal (Judg 6 31), and Elijah's taunt of Baal (I Kings 18 27). The idea that heathen gods are *shedim* (Deut 32 17; Ps 106 37)<sup>2</sup> or dead (Ps 106 28) may also be found. But even

<sup>2</sup> *Shedim* are not "evil demons" as commonly supposed; they are spiritual beings with no power at all: "no gods" (*lō 'elōah*). The evil spirits of the Bible are destructive angels of the cortege of YHWH himself.

The LXX reading of Deut 32 8 "according to the number of the sons of god"

in these passages awareness of the mythological nature of the gods is totally absent, and this vague information is all we can gather about the gods in the entire Bible. The view that prevails throughout is that the heathen worships only "wood and stone."<sup>3</sup> This view dominates the narratives, the laws, and the polemic against idolatry.

### THE NARRATIVES

In no Biblical story does any of the heathen gods appear as actor or acted upon, as conscious or perceptive, as speaking, moving, eating, etc. The heathen indeed attributes "divine" activities to his *elilim*, but these are construed as a function of the cult, stemming from the cultic exercises which are performed on the idol. We are doubtless to understand Numbers 21 29 and Judges 11 24 in this way. For throughout the narratives, from the theft of Laban's "gods" (Gen 31 19, 30-35) to Nebuchadnezzar's image, idolatry is conceived solely as fetishism. Hence we find that in the majority of the stories about idolatry the narrator distinguishes two religious spheres: the sphere of the one living and acting god, the god of Israel, and the sphere of *elilim*, heathen fetishes unrelated to living gods. It is most illuminating that the narrator does not purport thereby to express his own personal distinction; he attributes it, in all naiveté, to the idolater as well. The "gods" of the gentiles are, by their own admission, merely inanimate objects. There are instances when the heathen is credited with the recognition of a living god, but this recognition is always limited to the god of Israel. A heathen belief in other living gods is beyond the scope of the Biblical narrators.

The first Biblical story dealing with idolatry is the episode with Laban in Genesis 31 19, 30-35. The view that Israel worships a living god while the heathens deify idols is presented in full even in this story. The heathen Laban believes in the god of Jacob, the only active god in

(*bene 'el*), is preferred by many scholars even though it injects a late concept into an early text in a patently artificial manner. Here too, however, it is not "gods" to whom the nations are apportioned as inheritance (cf. Steuernagel's commentary *ad loc.*): *bene 'el* are angels, the "patrons of the nations" (*šarê hā'ummōt*) of Rabbinic literature, and have nothing to do with mythological deities.

<sup>3</sup> Passages in which YHWH is described as "above all *'elohim*," or extolled in that he is incomparable among *elim* (cf. Exod 15 11; 18 11; Deut 3 24; 10 17; Jer 10 6; Ps 77 14; 86 8; 95 3; 96 4; 97 3 etc.) surely bear no allusion to gentile gods. *'Elohim*, *bene 'elim*, *bene 'elohim*, can apply equally well to the angels of YHWH: see e. g. the doxology of Ps 89 7-9 which is in the same style. The monotheistic intent of these phrases is demonstrated by their presence in books and passages permeated by the fetishistic conception of idolatry; cf. the book of Deuteronomy, Jer 10 11, Ps 135 5, 15-18. For the monotheistic significance of the form "who is like unto thee" (*mā kāmōkā*) compare II Sam 7 22, 28; I Kings 8 23, 60; Jer 10 7 exclaims "among all the *sages* of the gentiles . . . there is none like unto thee!"

the story (Gen 24 30, 40-41; 30 26, 30); it is this god who appears to him in a dream (31 24, 29), and Laban respects his surveillance (31 49-50). Yet Laban possesses a set of private "gods," the teraphim, which Rachel has stolen. Thus the narrator has naively ascribed to a heathen the view that Israel (here the ancestors of Israel) has an animate god, while the gentiles serve figurines. It does not occur to him at all that the gentiles might fancy their gods to be living deities.

Two religious spheres are evident also in Genesis 35 1-4. Jacob's household believe in the deity of the Bethel theophany, but they possess "foreign gods" as well. It is these that Jacob buries under the terebinth at Shechem.

The fetishistic conception of idolatry is manifest in the account of the golden calf (Exod 32). The calf is not regarded as a representation of YHWH: in itself it constitutes a "god" in place of YHWH (vv. 1, 4, 8), and so it is interpreted in Psalm 106 20. The calves of Jeroboam are likewise "other gods," inasmuch as he "cast YHWH behind his back" (II Chron 13 8; cf. I Kings 14 9; 12 28). On the other hand, the calves do not represent a gentile deity either. The fateful apostasy of Israel appears, then, to be nothing more than the worship of an anonymous "molten calf," which, while not representing any deity is itself served as a god. Thus two religious spheres are apparent in these narratives as well. Both the generation of the wilderness and Jeroboam recognize but one living god, yet they alienate themselves from him, and, after the fashion of heathens, manufacture images that represent nothing.

In the "wars of YHWH" heathen gods play no part whatsoever. The enemies of YHWH are the gentiles themselves, not their gods (cf. Num 10 35; Judg 5 31; I Sam 30 26; Ps 83 3). The account of the Exodus bears no reference to the participation of Egyptian gods. Pharaoh says "I know not YHWH" (Exod 5 2), without going on to express trust in gods of his own. To be sure, YHWH is said to "wreak judgment" on the gods of Egypt (Exod 12 12; Num 33 4), and a similar notion is expressed in several passages (cf. Isa 19 1; 46 1-2; Jer 46 25; 50 2; 51 44; Zeph 2 11). Other passages, however, make it clear that what is intended by this phrase is the breaking of idol-gods (Jer 10 14-15; 43 13; 51 47, 52; Nah 1 14; Ezek 30 13; Hos 8 6; and see below on Dagon). The magicians of Egypt work wonders by their own great skill; they call upon no gods to aid them. Only when they fail do they say "it is the finger of god" (Exod 8 15), referring, obviously, to the god of Israel. Pharaoh himself ultimately acknowledges this god, and among his servants are some who "fear the word of YHWH" (9 20). In these stories too, two religious spheres are set forth: the idol gods on whom judgment is wreaked, and the living god of Israel, recognition of whom is occasionally credited to a heathen.

"Judgment" of a heathen god is described fully in the story of Dagon's

fall before the Ark (I Sam 5-6). The portrayal of Dagon is fetishistic in every detail: the idol which stands in a temple, falls on its face and is broken, that alone is Dagon (5 2-5); that is what the Philistines call "Dagon our god." There is no hint of a belief in Dagon as an animate deity. Along with this the narrator has the Philistines acknowledge the feats of Israel's god: they are familiar with his mighty deeds in Egypt (6 3, 5, 9). But since this god is no idol, the narrator has perforce ascribed to the Philistines the view that Israel's god is indeed animate. He naively imagines the heathen concept of deity to be the same as Israel's: their own gods are idols, the god of Israel is living. Since this story bears all the marks of a folk-tale we are entitled to conclude from it that idolatry was popularly conceived in Israel as fetishism.

Quite illuminating is the account in II Kings 18 17-19 19 (= Isaiah 36 1-37 20). Rabshakeh boasts that the king of Assyria has conquered all the nations and set fire to their gods. Both he and his king admit the reality of YHWH (18 22, 25, 30, 32-35; 19 4, 6, 10-13, 15-18), but they tauntingly assert that, like the gods of the other nations, he too will be unable to save his people. Hezekiah is outraged that his "living god" should be compared to "gods of wood and stone" (19 16-18). In other words, Rabshakeh and Sennacherib know only one living god: they make no allusion to the defeated nation's trust in living gods of their own, nor does the Israelite take offense at having YHWH compared with the likes of these. Moreover, it is significant that the king of Assyria boasts of his own strength, never once extolling the prowess of his god. We know now that Assyrian kings do in fact always list the gods who lead them on to victory, and they especially glorify the god Ashur. But this practice is neither alluded to nor condemned in the Bible. At no point does the author of this historical account reveal an awareness of the heathen belief in gods, nor does he express any opinion of it.

The stories of Daniel 2-6 dealing with Babylonian and Persian kings belong to the same category.

Although Nebuchadnezzar's god is Bel (4 5) he is depicted in chapter 3 as a fetishist: his god is a golden image set up in the plain of Dura (3 12, 14, 18, 28). This image, like the golden calves, is set up to no deity, being itself a "god." Belshazzar likewise serves gods of silver and gold, brass and iron, wood and stone (5 4, 23). Yet Nebuchadnezzar knows the god of Israel and his angels: he admits that Daniel's deity is "god of gods" (2 47); he extols the god of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (3 25-33); this god is "Most High God" (3 26, 32; cf. chapter 4 where both Daniel and the king call him the "Most High", vv. 14, 21, 22, 23, 29, 31), and "king of the heavens" (4 34); Nebuchadnezzar sees his angel in a dream (4 10-14); knows that in Daniel is the spirit of the holy god (5 11); he calls this god "everlasting" (4 31). The phrase *'elāhīn dā medārehōn 'im bisrā lā 'iōhī* (2 11) doubtless refers to the god of Israel and his cortege

rather than to heathen *'elāhīm*. In these stories as well there is no indication of a belief in mythological deities. Nebuchadnezzar does not mistake the spirits he sees awake or asleep for pagan theophanies; he knows them to be the angels of the "Most High." Yet when he makes obeisance it is to Daniel; and his sacrifice is for Daniel, not for the "Most High" (2 46). The object of his worship is thus consistently a fetish, a material thing, animate or inanimate.

Daniel 6 tells of how Darius the Mede ordered all his subjects to pray to him alone for thirty days. Here the king himself is a "fetish"-god. But neither here nor anywhere else does the Bible allude to the mythological background of the heathen deification of kings; namely, the idea that the king is descended from the gods. The prince of Tyre says "I am god" (Ezek 28 2, 6, 9), not "I am son of god." Divinely begotten mortals do appear in the story of the "heroes," offspring of the "sons of god" (Gen 6 1-8). This, however, is part of Israel's own "positive" mythology, inasmuch as only living "sons of god" could have taken human wives and begotten progeny; no such story could possibly be told about lifeless fetishes. The Bible is ignorant of the existence of this idea among the heathen, and of the connection between it and the deification of kings. The idolater says "*to wood*: thou art my father, and *to stone*: thou didst bear me" (Jer 2 27). That is why the same King Darius who purports to be divine nevertheless knows "the god of Daniel" and his angels, and moreover speaks of him as the "living god" (Dan 6 17-28). Even here, therefore, the living god of a heathen is only the god of Israel.

#### MAGIC AND DIVINATION

In the heathen world magic and divination are linked with mythological religion. Gods and demons have an active role in both: magicians and diviners invoke the names of gods and spirits and look to them for assistance. The Bible fails to appreciate the mythological basis of magic and divination; its fetishistic concept of idolatry here found striking expression.

All types of sorcery are prohibited in the Bible, but not on the ground that they imply belief in the power of the gods to work wonders or reveal the future. There is no indication whatsoever that the Bible relates the occult arts to the gods. Magic and divination are viewed as human skills, employed by presumptuous men to unveil the future or set in motion supernatural forces; they are an attempt to be "like God." The Bible does not deny the efficacy of sorcery. This is not because it credits the power of the gods, but because it believes in the mysterious human arts of the diviner and magician. Laban can disclose by divining



that he was blessed for the sake of Jacob (Gen 30 27). Egyptian magicians work wonders through their sorceries (Exod 7 11—8 3). Balaam, expert in the occult, “goes towards enchantments” (Num 24 1), knows the future, and can bless and curse efficaciously. The witch of Endor successfully raises Samuel from his grave (I Sam 28 3—25); ghosts are believed to speak from the earth (Isa 8 19; 29 4). The magician is “skilled in enchantment” (Isa 3 3), and the binder of spells “cunning” (Ps 58 6). The Bible does mention divination through *elilim*: Egyptians “seek unto their *elilim*” (Isa 19 3), and Ahaziah divines through Baal-zebub (II Kings 2 6). However this does not necessarily imply a belief in the participation of mythological gods: the use of *elilim* is but one of many categories of divination, and doubtless refers to nothing more than divination by idols which was widespread among the ancients (cf. the use of *teraphim* in Ezek 21 26). It is this type of art which Habakkuk derides as senseless fetishism (Hab 2 19), and that Hosea probably alludes to in Hos 4 12. This particular type of divination is considered vain; not so divination in general. For while Second Isaiah emphasizes the inability of heathen gods to predict, inasmuch as they are “wood and stone” (Isa 41 23, 26, 28—29; 42 8—9; 43 9, 12; 44 7—20; 45 20—21; 46 5—10; 48 14), when he speaks of Babylon’s sorceries (47 9—15) it is as though they have been effective heretofore — and in this case idols are not mentioned. The heathen faith in dream omens is similarly viewed as bearing no relation to faith in gods. Joseph must disclose to Pharaoh that his dream is from God (Gen 41 25, 28, 32), and Daniel must do the same for Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2 28—30). Even the Midianite dream interpreter of Judg 7 14 fails to mention that his companion’s dream is from the gods.

This is not to imply that in the stories about magic and divination divine activity is not mentioned. Here too, however, it is the activity of Israel’s god, not that of the heathens’. Laban discloses that YHWH has blessed him (Gen 30 27). YHWH reveals the future to Pharaoh, the Midianite, and Nebuchadnezzar. He directs the speech of Balaam; Philistine sorcerers divine by cows, but YHWH directs the beasts’ steps (I Sam 6 7—16). He manipulates the lots of the sailors (Jonah 1 7), and controls the divination of Nebuchadnezzar (Ezek 21 26). The only heathen divining connected with a spiritual being is necromancy: the soul of the dead which rises as a ghost is designated *elohim* (I Sam 28 13).

Thus two spheres are reflected also in the Biblical data on magic and divination: these are represented as human skills which even the heathens fail to associate with gods. To the extent that that divination employs idols or *teraphim* it contains a true fetishistic element. Only insofar as the soul of the dead is *elohim* can it be called in any sense divine. The workings of a god are occasionally recognized in sorcery, but only of the God of Israel.

## THE LAWS

The laws of the Pentateuch nowhere proscribe the belief in heathen gods or the recounting of their myths. While a cultic prohibition is placed on uttering their names (Exod 23 13; Josh 23 7), there is no law aimed against the mythological god-belief of the heathen. The "satyrs" of Leviticus 17 7, along with the "gods" of Exodus 22 19 are divine or demonic beings of the Israelites who were not completely ejected from the popular cult of early times. But wherever worship of heathen gods is expressly prohibited, worship of idols or heavenly bodies as gods is meant.<sup>4</sup>

Some scholars maintain that at an early period images of YHWH were set up in Israelite sanctuaries, and only later were they forbidden. As a matter of fact, images of YHWH were never forbidden. There is no law in the Bible which bans fashioning an image of YHWH, nor do the prophets ever condemn such images. Moreover there is no prohibition of making an image even of a heathen god. What is forbidden is the "making" of gods, the worship of one's own handiwork. There is no awareness of the heathen endeavor to *represent* the gods in plastic form. The religion of the gentile is apprehended only as fetishism: he "makes" himself a god and then worships what he manufactures. This is reflected quite clearly in the Decalogue's prohibition of idol and picture making (Exod 20 4-5; Deut 5 8-9), and in the detailed commentary of Deuteronomy 4 16-18. The legislator forbids making the likeness of a human ("male or female"), an animal, fowl, insect, or fish. The phrase "which is in the heaven above" is doubtless intended to cover the host of heaven as well. These laws, then, ban the making of an image of visible, material objects — organic and inorganic — and forbid serving them as gods. The idea of heathenism that imagery merely represents invisible, mythological deities whose abode is the heaven, earth, or sea is entirely absent. The heathen artificer postulates three realms: the gods, material objects, and the idols; the idols are fashioned in the image of the gods. The Bible knows only two realms: material objects and idols made in their image. The third link, the gods, is missing. To be sure, the idea of an image of deity is found: man is created in the image of God (Gen 1 26-27; 5 1), and God assumes human form. But this idea is found only with regard to the living God of Israel, never in connection with heathen gods. We also find a very modest representation of super-mundane beings in Israel: the cherubim of the South and the

<sup>4</sup> "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exod 20 3; Deut 5 7) may be interpreted as prohibiting the deification of any other spiritual being; it is perhaps directed against a belief in gods. If so, we have preserved in this passage a vestige of the fight against heathenism which took place in Israel with the advent of monotheism.

calves of the North, images of the sacred creatures who serve as the bearers of the god. Ideologic and plastic imagery, therefore, are associated only with YHWH and his cortege. This parallels the motif of divine offspring which similarly appears in a story about the "sons of God," but never in a story about heathen gods. Since neither the fashioning of an image of YHWH nor the representation of other gods are ever dealt with, it necessarily follows that the Bible lacks any prohibition of representing deity. The very idea of portraying deity seems to be wanting.<sup>5</sup> Only "making gods" is forbidden, inasmuch as the manufacture of the image is in itself taken as making a "god."<sup>6</sup> The deprecation of the calves as idolatry indicates that they too were viewed as manufactured gods, or fetishes.

The fetishistic conception dominates all of Biblical legislation on idolatry. Making gods out of silver and gold is banned (Exod 20 23); Canaanite gods are to be torn down (Exod 23 24); making molten gods or *elilim* is forbidden (Exod 34 17; Lev 19 4; 26 1); idols are to be burnt (Deut 7 5, 25); he is cursed who makes "an idol or molten image . . . the handiwork of a craftsman" (Deut 27 15). Deuteronomy terms gentile gods "abominations," "detested things," "wood and stone," "silver and gold." In addition, this book prohibits the worship of sun, moon, and the host of heaven, which are all viewed as fetishes, with no relation to mythological deities.

#### THE POLEMIC AGAINST IDOLATRY

The Biblical polemic against idolatry stands on the single contention that idolatry is foolishness in that it apotheosizes material objects. There is no argument against plurality of gods; against faith in beings who are born and die; who are male and female; who have animal desires, etc. Nowhere is there an explicit statement to the effect that the gods in whom the gentiles believe are non-existent. Nowhere is any heathen myth confuted, nor is the depravity which is often imputed to the gods exploited. The entire Biblical philosophy of heathenism is summed up in the charge of fetishism.

There is no basis for the opinion that this type of polemic first makes its appearance in Deuteronomy, while the early prophets considered

<sup>5</sup> Nor is it to be found in Isa 40 18. *Ta'arekū* means "place over against," "compare," cf. Ps 89 7; Job 28 17, 19. The thought is explicitly stated in Isa 40 25; 46 5.

<sup>6</sup> Expressions such as the "idols of their gods" (Deut 7 25), "the idols of her gods" (Isa 21 9), "Bel . . . Nebo . . . their idols" (Isa 46 1), and similar phrases do not imply a distinction between the god and the idol. We have here a kind of fetishistic "nominalism": every name of a heathen "god" designates a conventionally fixed form which is actualized in the various idols. Fashioning an idol in such a form produces the "god." Hence we find "every nation *made* gods of their own" (II Kings 17 29).

heathenism as other than mere idol worship.<sup>7</sup> On this point there is no differing among the prophets. Narrative and poetry may contain allusions to gods who are reduced to *shēdīm*; but the prophetic literature does not hint at the existence of gods even to this extent.

Some have discovered in Hosea a polemic against the syncretistic worship of YHWH-Baal. This syncretism is a product of scholarly romancing. Such a fusion could have arisen only on the basis of a belief in the mythological Baal. The Bible, however, never refers to the mythological Baal, no polemic is waged against such a conception of him, nor is there a word of polemic against the worship of a syncretistic YHWH-Baal. First Hosea (Hos 1–3) reproves the people for following *baalim*, for thinking them to be “lovers” who supply the prosperity which really YHWH has given them. Israel has “made over to Baal” the silver and gold that YHWH conferred upon her. In other words, YHWH and the *baalim* are absolutely distinct. The fetishistic conception of idolatry in Second Hosea (Hosea 4–14) is particularly pronounced: cf. 4 12, 17; 8 4–6; 10 5–6; 11 2; 13 2; 14 4. Isaiah likewise conceives idolatry as fetishism: cf. Isa 2 7–8; 10 10–11; 17 7–8; 27 9; 30 22; 31 7. He envisions the end of idolatry as the time when the worship of *elilim* of silver and gold will come to an end (2 18, 20). Micah’s view is the same (1 7; 5 12).

We find a truly polemical style, emphatic, reasoned, and satirical in Habakkuk 2 18–19; Jeremiah 10 1–16; 16 19–20; Isaiah 40 18–20; 41 7; 42 8, 17; 44 9–20; 45 16, 20–21; 46 1–2, 5–7; 48 5. The ideological argument of these passages is but one: idolatry is fetishistic folly: It is nowhere labelled mythological folly; the heathen belief in gods is never mentioned.

A few critics maintain that Jeremiah (and the prophets who preceded him) had not yet repudiated the reality of the gods and their rule over gentile lands (for which Jer 16 13 is cited).<sup>8</sup> The error of this notion is manifest from the fact that the fetishistic conception prevails throughout the book of Jeremiah; gods are neither mentioned nor alluded to. (Cf. 1 16; 2 5, 27–28; 3 9; 7 30; 8 19; 10 3–15; 14 22; 32 34) The gentiles’ reversion from idolatry will be signaled by their realization that man cannot manufacture gods (16 19–20).

Ezekiel is generally considered to be “crammed full of mythological material.”<sup>9</sup> The force of this observation is greatly lessened by the fact

<sup>7</sup> So Duhm in his commentary to Isaiah (*ad* 37 19).

<sup>8</sup> See Smend, *Lehrbuch der Alttestamentlichen Religionsgeschichte*, 1899, p. 182; Kuenen, *Volksreligion und Weltreligion*, 1883, p. 120 f.; 316–319; Baudissin, *Studien zur Semitischen Religionsgeschichte*, 1876 (ed. 1911), Vol. I, pp. 29, 51, 96, 109; Ehrlich, *Miqrā Kīpshūtō*, *ad* Isa 2; so too Wellhausen, Stade, Duhm et. al.

<sup>9</sup> See Gunkel’s commentary to Genesis, p. 34; Hölscher, *Hesekiel, der Dichter und das Buch*, 1924, p. 9; Dürr, *Ezechiels Vision von der Erscheinung Gottes (Ez. c. l u. 10) im Lichte der Vorderasiatischen Altertumskunde*, 1912, p. 6; Cassuto, *Mē-Ādām ‘ad Nōah*, p. 39 f.

that this material consists entirely of "positive mythology," i. e. ideas which the prophet himself subscribes to. Ezekiel too fails to discredit any mythological motif, or denounce any mythological beliefs. The lament of Tammuz is noted, but without reference to the legend of the god's death. In chapters 17 and 23 the prophet describes Israel's apostasy in extravagantly erotic imagery; yet despite his affinity for the erotic he has nothing to say about the sexual elements of heathen myth. Idolatry is epitomized in one brief phrase: it is the "service of wood and stone" (20 32).

Deuteronomy abounds in denunciations of idolatry, and here too a fetishistic conception underlies. Typical is the taunt that the gods of the gentiles "neither see nor hear, nor eat nor smell" (4 28). In a similar vein are the remarks of Jeremiah 10 5, Psalms 115 4-7, 135 15-18, and Daniel 5 23. The writers scoff at heathenism on account of its gods who cannot eat! No Biblical writer has any jeers, however, for the banquets of the gods — scenes of unbridled gluttony and drunkenness.

#### A CRITIQUE OF THE CONVENTIONAL INTERPRETATION

Scholars have long realized the peculiarity of the Bible's appraisal of idolatry, and some attempts have already been made to explain this anomaly. But the historical conclusions of the phenomenon have as yet not been drawn. The conventional explanation is that the prophets deride idol worship because they deny the reality of the gods. The charge of fetishism is the consequence of their repudiation of the gods' existence: thus the prophets imply in this charge an oblique verdict on polytheism as well.<sup>10</sup> Such an explanation does not commend itself; in fact, it makes the anomaly many times more puzzling.

<sup>10</sup> See Baethgen, *op. cit.*; compare Baudissin's comprehensive and fundamental study "Die Anschauungen des Alten Testaments von den Göttern des Heidentums" in *Studien. . . (vide note 8)*, part I, p. 49 ff. Note there the remarks on the controversy between De Wette and Hupfeld on p. 82. Following Hupfeld, Baudissin maintains that the prophets' charges against idol-worship pre-suppose a denial of the gods' existence. This is the view also of Kuenen, *op. cit.* p. 316-318, and Schultz (quoted by Kuenen) *Alttestamentliche Theologie*, 1869, Vol. I, p. 45 f. See also Hehn, *Die Biblische und die Babylonische Gottesidee*, 1913, p. 282; Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 1940, p. 250. In his commentary to Isa 44 19, Duhm characterizes this entire polemical approach as unsatisfactory and ineffectual. Volz, in *Jesaja II* ed. Sellin, 1932, p. 52, seeks to resolve the difficulty by assuming that while the prophet actually knew the distinction between gods and idols, his attack was directed against the magical cult which was widespread among his people. Isaiah, however, reveals no such knowledge. The magical cult of idols was intimately related to gods and their myths, so that one could not have combatted it without making reference to the latter. The charge of fetishism, therefore, has no real bearing on the magical cult either. A study dedicated entirely to this problem is Eissfeldt's "Gott und Götzen im Alten

This view understands the denial of the reality of the gods to be the real and conclusive ground of the Bible's verdict on idolatry. How came it, then, that this conclusive ground is so well suppressed as not to be plainly stated even once? This explanation casually ascribes to the prophets and other Biblical writers either a prodigious tragi-comical failure of thought and expression, or an incredible circumlocution. Instead of saying that the idols are nought because the gods do not exist, they persist in saying something entirely different for a thousand years: that the idols are nought because wood and stone are not gods. And they press this irrelevant point with such emphasis and passion that one might suppose it to be their decisive argument against idolatry. Moreover, they charge the *heathen* with senseless fetishism! Now we know that a belief in gods underlay the heathen's idol-worship; how then could Biblical writers fatuously accuse the heathen of folly because they themselves did not happen to believe in his gods? Indeed it is quite clear that in the opinion of the Bible the heathen views his own religion as the worship of wood and stone, and has no other gods at all beside these.

One must also wonder how the Biblical writers could suppose that such a polemic, elaborating a trivial, superficial charge while totally suppressing the really compelling argument, would be in any way effective. If they were acquainted with mythological polytheism they could not fail to see that their argument did not strike at its heart. Moreover if the Israelite masses believed in heathen deities and their myths — as the prevailing view asserts — an adequate attack on idolatry could not be sustained without directly assaulting such beliefs. The first objective should have been to eradicate those beliefs from the consciousness of the people, for they constitute the core of heathenism. If the Biblical writers attained the realization that the gods did not exist, their exertions should have been directed first and foremost to elucidating and conveying this thought to the people. They not only neglect to do this, they never once give their new idea outspoken expression. In their pre-occupation with idols they completely overlook the mythological gods behind them. To deny the reality of the gods is a sort of "secret weapon" which they are loath to bring into play. The

Testament" (*Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, 1931, pp. 151-160). According to Eissfeldt, after the period of Elijah-Elisha the idea developed in Israel that only a god who was worshipped without idols was truly god. From this stemmed the denial of gentile gods: since they had idols they could be no more than wood and stone. It is difficult indeed to understand how such an absurd idea could possibly have developed. The Bible certainly never gives it clear expression. The reality of the gods is not denied because they are worshipped through idols; it is only the idols who are spoken of as no-gods inasmuch as they are wood and stone.

absurdity of all this is self-evident. The Biblical battle with idolatry will be understood only on the assumption that the idolatry of the Israelite people was fetishism.

#### ISRAEL'S LIFELESS IDOLATRY

What is the place of the idolatry that is reflected in the Bible?

This idolatry is not a representation perverted for the sake of polemic; nor is it an artificial contrivance, the product of naïveté or circumlocution. It is something historically real: it is idolatry as it existed in pre-exilic Israel. This is the key to the riddle of the Bible's conception of idolatry: it knows only Israelite idolatry, which was lifeless, without gods or mythology. Israel was distinct from other nations of antiquity not by its idea of monotheism alone; it was equally distinct in its idolatry. The vestigial idolatry which is reflected in the Bible existed nowhere except in Israel. Herein lay the error of the Biblical writers themselves: failing to realize the uniquely Israelite character of their idolatry, they identified it with that of the gentiles. This idolatry was created by the impact of the monotheistic revolution which occurred at Israel's birth as a nation in the days of Moses. Although the vitality of heathenism was snuffed out by this revolution, it did not entirely disappear at once. Of the early Hebrew pantheon, shades — "satyrs" — were preserved. Another element was similarly preserved: the fetishistic worship of idols which went on among the people for many generations as a real "superstition," as a cult whose ideological roots were severed, which was no longer congruent with the dominant national religion and which therefore was incapable of further creativity as an element in the national culture. That this was its form even in early times is demonstrated by the stories of Rachel and the *teraphim*, Jacob and the "foreign gods," and the "judgment" of Dagon. Such idolatry is the strongest evidence that Israel was a monotheistic nation from its inception and throughout its "idolatrous" pre-exilic period as well. But even this lifeless idol-worship aroused zealots who viewed it as a grievous sin in Israel's history. Fetishistic practices too were a violation of the Covenant and a backsliding of the nation of YHWH; not even *teraphim* in a camel-saddle were to be tolerated!

To be sure, this idolatry received continual nourishment from foreign sources. Despite its essentially Israelite character, it is consistently viewed in the Bible as something foreign. For if gods and myths could not successfully invade the monotheistic atmosphere of Israel, the production of idols still could enter from abroad, and the people did attribute some magical powers to these "charms." Syncretism and theocrasis could not strike roots in Israel since their ideological basis was wanting. There was no family of gods into which foreign deities

could marry, nor, indeed any pantheon at all into which they could be naturalized. Syncretism leads always to the assimilation of foreign gods in their new surroundings with the eventual obliteration of their foreignness. In Israel, however, idolatry never ceased being the worship of "foreign gods." From the *teraphim* of Laban to the "queen of heaven" of Jeremiah's day, the "pantheon" of Israel contained only "gentile" deities, "strange gods . . . that they knew not, new gods that came up of late" (Deut 32 16-17). That these gentile deities have no mythological characteristics attached to them reveals the true significance of their perpetual foreignness: the heathen "pantheon" of Israel was one of images, masks, "dumb idols."

### TWO WORLDS

This conclusion must itself appear quite paradoxical. Can it be that Biblical Israel did not know polytheism? The people lived in a polytheistic world and was in constant contact with heathen nations. Within Israel a form of idolatry was still practiced, and from time to time fanatical idolaters arose in its midst. Ezekiel did see, if only in a vision, the lamentation of Tammuz in the Temple. How could it have been, then, that there was no awareness of the heathens' belief in living gods?

Before attempting to explain this phenomenon of ignorance within Israel, we must note that it is matched by another, equally remarkable, which no one seriously questions: the heathens' ignorance of Israelite religion. This religion was destined to destroy heathenism on its own ground, yet what do the gentiles know of it? We find no trace of the influence of Israelite religion on the cultures of Babylonia, Assyria, Canaan, or Persia. Nor do their literatures contain allusions to any of Israel's great religious thinkers. Contact with Israel is not sufficient to bring about familiarity with its culture. Even after the exile when Jews establish sizeable colonies in the diaspora their religion remains *terra incognita* to the gentiles for centuries. The Persians know it no better than did the early Egyptians and Babylonians. The Greeks and Romans of Second Commonwealth times are likewise ignorant of its essential character. They are acquainted with some of its customs and rites, but the religion itself is a sealed book to them. Even the numerous gentiles who toward the end of this period actually come under the influence of Judaism begin by adopting only its external aspects, with its basic ideology remaining alien to them for a long while. This process parallels the solely ritualistic influence of foreign idolatry on pre-exilic Israel. For a thousand years Israelite religion develops in the midst of a heathen milieu without the heathens' knowing its real nature. We may conclude from this that in the sphere of religious creativity Israel and the gentiles were two worlds, distinct and mutually incomprehensible.



And if the gentiles failed to apprehend Israelite religion for so long a period is it any greater marvel that Israel on its part was ignorant of the religion of the gentiles?

Yet we must not misconstrue the extent of this ignorance.

That we find absolutely no grasp of the nature of heathenism in the Bible does not exclude there having been persons or even sects in Israel who were intimate with the religion of the gentiles. Manasseh and the likes of him were unquestionably ardent heathens in religious outlook, and some of the Biblical writers may have known more than they disclose in their writings. One thing however is certain: the people of Israel did not know polytheism. Here again we are not speaking of speculative, abstract knowledge which is essentially external and superficial — such knowledge was, perhaps, to be found here and there. But there was no vital, fundamental, psychic experience of polytheism among the people. Those who knew it, knew it from afar, and not as a creative element in their own midst. The people lived and created in another sphere; they perceived the heathen world, as it were, through an obscuring fog.

It must be remarked in this connection that every creative sphere is isolated from its surroundings in the same manner. Wherever an original national culture arises a closed culture area develops; hence the uniformity in the style of that culture. For several generations it manifests itself in pristine, homogeneous forms as a world in itself. All that Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, or Chinese art produced in their early, formative period bears a unique, unalloyed impress. Here too one may ask: were not these artists aware of other creative styles? Undoubtedly they were; but awareness of the art of others was not important. It remained external and alien without decisive effect on native expressions and styles. The isolation of Israelite religion from heathenism was perhaps greater because the contrast between them was so much stronger and fundamental. Yet the phenomenon in itself is not limited to these two areas.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BIBLICAL POLEMIC AGAINST IDOLATRY

The fact that the Bible's battle against idolatry is directed at one of its least significant aspects determines the historical import of this battle as itself small and subsidiary. It could have played no part in the formation of Israel's monotheism. The ideological content of this polemic is the affirmation that "wood and stone" are not god. Such a superficial observation could never suffice to confute mythological idolatry. The fatal error of Biblical scholarship is that it seeks in this polemic the budding of the monotheistic idea. Its pivotal question is:

when was the existence of the gods first denied? It assumes that the denial of the gods was the crest of the Bible's struggle with idolatry and the expression of true monotheism. On the basis of what has been adduced here we are constrained to offer the embarrassing reply that nowhere in the Bible is the existence of the gods denied, neither explicitly nor implicitly. Even the polemic of Second-Isaiah attacks the idols with no word at all for the gods. Where *elohim* other than the one god and his cortege are mentioned, their reality is not denied; rather are they termed *shēdīm lō 'elōah*. In other words, monotheism was not born when one or the other of the Biblical writers asserted that the gods were non-existent, for such an assertion is never made. Inasmuch as the Bible's battle with heathenism deals solely with the worship of idols, the essence of Israelite religion could not possibly have found expression through it.

It must be equally emphasized that nowhere in Biblical literature is the existence of the gods and their dominion affirmed, so that we can detect no transition from belief to denial, or from monolatry to monotheism. There is neither acknowledgment nor denial of the gods' reality, for they have disappeared virtually without leaving a trace. In this the radicality of Israelite monotheism is particularly prominent: it operates in a world without gods, in a period when all besides YHWH have passed away.

#### AN INTUITIVE CREATION

Once the true nature of the Biblical battle against idolatry is grasped, the evolution of Israelite religion can be seen in a new light.

The Bible does not contend with real heathenism, yet it is in essence non-heathen. Without denying the existence of many gods it is suffused with a belief in one god. It does not combat mythology, yet it is virtually non-mythological. Objectively speaking, there is a metaphysical as well as a moral contrast between Biblical religion and heathenism which expresses itself in every detail of legend, cult, prophecy, and morals. But this contrast is not formulated by so much as one word. Although Israelite religion offers a new, non-heathen world view its polemic against heathenism is never more than peripheral, failing entirely to set forth its real novelty. Israelite religion eliminated theogony, but this is never stated. It did away with sexual differentiation in deity, but this is not said in so many words. It cast out the idea of the deity's subjection to primordial laws of existence, but this is not made explicit. With the advent of Hellenism and Christianity, when the battle between Judaism and true heathenism was joined, although the charge of fetishism was employed, priority was given to Judaism's emphatic claims of metaphysical-moral superiority. Biblical polemic, however, contains no assertion of this superiority despite the fact that it was already in

existence. In other words, the religion of the Bible was an intuitive creation whose novel essence was not yet comprehended and hence not then capable of being adequately expressed. This creation did not originate in the battle with fetishistic idolatry; it preceded this battle. For it was the new religion which put an end to heathenism in Israel and thereby created the necessary conditions for the rise of that lifeless idolatry which the Bible condemns.

In the historical unfolding of Israelite religion the Biblical philosophy of idolatry again failed to play a decisive role. Its analysis was not that which conquered heathenism inside and outside of Israel. The Jews of the Restoration were immune to idolatry not because they finally realized that wood and stone could not be god. Even less effective could such an argument be in the gentile world, for it missed the vitals of heathenism: the belief in many gods. The national and universal appeal of Israelite religion inhered in its fresh, intuitive creation; the battle of words was superficial. This unformulated creation found form in all spheres of national life and produced its own world of symbols in cult, prophecy, song, story, and politics. The mighty force that welled from it was what ultimately overcame heathenism.

Such a creation could arise only as the product of a people. Polemic is the province of individuals; intuitive forms, however, are a folk-creation. And the pinnacle of Israel's cultural creativity was reached in the very midst of its "idolatrous" age. This is highly significant: it means that the culture was monotheistic throughout the pre-exilic period. Israelite "idolatry" was as superficial as its philosophy of idolatry; it existed either as a lifeless vestige or as an extraneous body, and hence was incapable of affecting Israel's root monotheism. The world of the Bible is a world without gods because such was the world of the people. In the beginning was the conquest of true heathenism; this conquest underlies Israel's later "idolatry" and its impact produced the partition which set Israel apart from the gentiles. Our data compel us to assume that the monotheistic idea was not only born in Israel's initial period, but that already then it had effected a far-reaching revolution in the spirit of the people. It did not make its appearance as the esoteric doctrine of a select circle, but became at once the basis of a new culture for the whole nation.