

## The Hebrew Bible

These considerations present something of a conundrum for the legions of biblical scholars who view the Hebrew Bible as an "official religion." For the text itself acknowledges that consensus has not been achieved, and coercion is not an option. For these reasons I reject the widespread assumption that the Hebrew Bible represents the viewpoint of a pre-exilic official religion. On the contrary, it strikes me as the impassioned voice of a minority group, one that was at odds with the official religions of its times. One thinks of the late Morton Smith's reference to the "Yahweh-alone party" (1987:17). By this he meant a small group of fanatical Yahwists who passed down their monotheistic teachings from generation to generation throughout the pre-exilic period. The dividend of this activity was the Hebrew Bible, or what Smith referred to as a "cult collection" (1987:11).

In Smith's estimation, the actual official religions of Israel did recognize Yahweh. The problem was that they recognized Him in ways that drove the Yahweh-alone party to the brink of madness. "Syncretism," writes Smith, "was dominant in the cult of Yahweh at Jerusalem to the very last days of the first temple" (1987: 19:21; 35). This syncretistic official religion, I would surmise, made sure that its recognized gods were known to the masses.

Perhaps it succeeded in achieving consensus, for as Susan Ackerman has observed, in ancient Israel many "simply believed that it was legitimate in Yahwism to supplement the worship of Yahweh with the worship of other gods" (1990: 215). "Asherah and her cult symbol" writes Saul Olyan, "were legitimate not only in popular Yahwism, but in the official cult as well" (1988:74). This may explain the Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qôm inscriptions discussed above, not to mention the thousands of Palestinian fertility figurines. In other words, worship of Asherah and Yahweh, among others deities, was part of various official religions of Israel and Judah in the pre-exilic period. These monarchies endorsed a syncretistic form of worship and—being skilled in the hegemonic arts—convinced numerous social groups and classes to do so as well.

In my reading, the Hebrew Bible is anything but the voice of an official religion. On the contrary, it is the religion of an embattled, perhaps even oppressed minority, endowed with a sublime literary imagination and an uncompromising commitment to the God of Israel. In contrast to Kaufmann, I suggest that the official religions of the pre-exilic period were usually polytheistic and that they typically shared this attribute with countless popular religious groups. There arose among the latter—when this occurred I am not ready to say-- a small dissenting group of pure Yahwists. I would speculate that their teachings were transmitted from generation to generation. The transmission process involved, among other things, the continual editing and re-editing, cutting and pasting, of the cult collection. The various official religions they encountered throughout the pre-exilic period, one would assume, managed these cantankerous Yahwists in a variety of ways. These ranged from brute force, to tolerance, to official recognition, to ambivalence, to apathy.

At some later point in time, perhaps in the early post-exilic period, this Yahweh-alone party finally gained the consensus of various Palestinian groups. Under the watchful eye of the Persian Empire, they emerged as local official religion. Endowed with this limited, albeit tangible, capacity to exert power they painstakingly redacted and revised the "cult collection," which we now know as the Hebrew Bible. They convinced post-exilic Judahites to accept its teachings about the oneness of the divine, the evils of Asherah and a host of other things. They persuaded them that it was disloyalty to Yahweh that triggered the numerous and sundry miseries that afflicted the children of Israel. They endorsed a corpus of texts that suggested the Assyrian and Babylonian debacles had actually been predicted by uncompromising Yahwists such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Gradually, the collection came to assume the status of a sacred text of a local monotheistic official religion. Poised as such it provided the foundation for the advent of Pharisaic Judaism, Christianity and eventually Islam.

If this hypothesis is correct—and I concede that it is in need of much greater elaboration—then it would force us to re-think the history of emergent Judaism. We would need to view the Dtr. circle as a group of God-afflicted men, marginal men, insufferable men perhaps, but men in possession of that type of preternatural talent that Thomas Mann reminded us is at once a gift and an affliction. Their theology was initially rejected (or completely ignored) by both the monarchy and the various social groups and classes that comprised Judah and Israel. In this sense they may be understood as a minority party, situated in a subordinate relation of power with an official religion—a sort of highly literate popular religious group. Following this line of analysis we would have to concede that we know next to nothing about the actual official religions of the pre-exilic period, outside of the numerous complaints leveled against them in the Tanakh.

Lastly, my hypothesis suggests that the idea of critique is as central to the Judaic as is the idea of monotheism. Michael Walzer has suggested that the prophets “were the inventors of the practice of social criticism” (1987:71). Early Judaism, then, is a religion of critique—an attribute as strikingly unique and significant as is its steadfast belief in one God.