

## **14. F Oct 25: The Image of God and the Names of God**

Themes:

Who is Israel's God?

What is God like and how does God relate to the world?

May other Gods/gods be worshiped too?

Images and idolatry

### **Who is Israel's God?**

- Gen 1: *Elohim*, a plural form but grammatically singular (usually), translated "God," apparently the plural of *Elowah*, which in turn is a variant of *El*, a standard NE name for "God" and the Ugaritic name for the chief god of the pantheon.
  - Sometimes *elohim* in fact means "gods" and governs a plural verb or adjective (e.g. Exodus 20:2, Deuteronomy 5:7)
  - When the Bible is speaking universally (e.g. Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes – three "wisdom" books – and Jonah) it uses *Elohim* "the deity."
- Gen 2-3: *YHWH Elohim*, translated "Lord God"; chapter 4 simply *YHWH*, "Lord."
  - The translation "Lord" derives from the Hebrew *Adonai*, or Greek *Kyrios*, substitutions that Jews used when reading *YHWH* since they did not want to pronounce the name.
  - "Lord" or *Kyrios* is standard Christian title for Jesus
  - *Adonai* remains the standard Hebrew name for God
  - The vocalization *Yahweh* is the work of a nineteenth century German philologist.
  - Traditionalist Jews to this day do not use that pronunciation.
    - The taboo on writing the name *YHWH* gradually extended even to translations and substitutes and written forms of this name including G-d or L-rd. No basis in Jewish law.
    - Pronunciation *Jehovah* is the result of an error;
  - *YHWH* seems to mean "the being one" or "the one who causes [things to come into] being," but not sure.
  - Much debate whether *YHWH* (the God and the name) is originally Israelite or came to the Israelites from elsewhere; *YHWH* is also found in inscriptions in neighboring areas, much debate how to interpret those inscriptions and their relationship with Israelite religion (Kugel 426).
- Other names too: *El*, *El Shaddai*, *El Elyon*, "the God of Abraham your father" (Gen 26:24, 28:13), "the God of my father Abraham and the God of my father Isaac" (32:9), "the God of your father" (46:3), etc.

How to make sense of all this:

- Traditionalists see here different aspects of God; name = essence, so different names reflect different aspects of God.
- Academic scholars see here combination of different strata/sources, and homogenization of Gods.
  - Similarly modern scholars see “name changes” as combination of different versions, sources, dialects (e.g. Abram/Abraham, Sarai/Sarah, etc.) (see Kugel)
  - Modern scholars see confirmation of YHWH’s newness in Exodus 3:13-15 and 6:2-3. See JSB and Kugel.
  - Exodus 3:13-15 <sup>13</sup>Moses said to God, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?”<sup>14</sup> And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” He continued, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you.’”<sup>15</sup> And God said further to Moses, “Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.
  - :Exodus 6:2-3 <sup>2</sup>God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the LORD (YHWH). <sup>3</sup>I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name YHWH.

So who is YHWH?

MBS: a warrior God who comes to Israel from the deserts of the south; various poetic passages seem to reflect this (Kugel 216, 424)

- e.g. Deuteronomy 33:2 The LORD came from Sinai; He shone upon them from Seir; He appeared from Mount Paran, And approached from Ribebboth-kodesh, Lightning flashing at them from His right [meaning not certain].
- Habakkuk 3:3-7 <sup>3</sup>God is coming from Teman, The Holy One from Mount Paran. *Selah*. His majesty covers the skies, His splendor fills the earth.<sup>4</sup> It is a brilliant light Which gives off rays on every side—And therein His glory is enveloped. <sup>5</sup>Pestilence marches before Him, And plague comes forth at His heels. <sup>6</sup>When He stands, He makes the earth shake; When He glances, He makes nations tremble. The age-old mountains are shattered, The primeval hills sink low, His are the ancient routes:<sup>7</sup>As a scene of havoc I behold [meaning not certain] The tents of Cushan; Shaken are the pavilions Of the land of Midian!
- Are these poetic passages “real” theology or “just” poetry?
  - Cf. poetic references to God’s battles with the sea monster.

Mountain of the Lord (=Sinai =Horeb) is in the desert outside the land

- But other poetic passages give YHWH a northern connection, most clearly Psalm 29: <sup>1</sup>Ascribe to the LORD, O divine beings [lit. “sons of Gods”], ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. <sup>2</sup>Ascribe to the LORD the glory of His name; bow down to the LORD, majestic in holiness. <sup>3</sup>The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over the mighty waters. <sup>4</sup>The voice of the LORD is power; the voice of the LORD is majesty; <sup>5</sup>the voice of the LORD breaks cedars; the LORD shatters the cedars of Lebanon. <sup>6</sup>He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion, like a young wild ox. <sup>7</sup>The voice of the LORD kindles flames of fire ...

Israelite poets derived inspiration from many places.

### What is God like and how does God relate to the world?

The God of the philosophers: omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, without a body (because a body is finite and corruptible and according to Maimonides believing in a corporeal God is a violation of the principle of God’s unity)

- This is the God of Judaism and Christianity

- Philosophical problem: how does this God create, and interact with, the world? How does this God hearken to prayer?

*Not clear whether this conception of God can be found anywhere in the Bible.*

- In the narratives of Genesis and Exodus usually attributed to J by MBS God is anthropomorphic, anthropopathic, with a body, located in time and space
- Kugel: this is “the God of Old.”
  - “Angels” are the manifestation of this God in interaction with a human.
  - But the function of angels in the narratives are truly confusing, as the text flits from “man” to “angel” to God (classic examples: Gen 18; 32)
  - And even the philosophers might use angels to express how God deals with the world (cf. Logos/Christ in Christianity)
  - So, angel might be a sign of “the God of Old” or a sign of a philosophically sophisticated conception of God, what we might call “the God of New”

The Torah’s unphilosophical conception of God can be seen from a consideration of the question: who or what dwells in the central sanctuary? Is God universal? If so, how can he be contained in a building?

- **God himself:** God himself took the Israelites out of Egypt and accompanies them in their wilderness encampments. Note Exodus 25:8 with reference to the Tabernacle: Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them (cf. Leviticus 26:11).
- God’s glory (or is it God himself?) is represented by cloud and/or pillar of fire: God’s glory fills up the Tabernacle: Exodus 40:34-35 Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.  
<sup>35</sup>Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.
- Name of God: esp. in Deuteronomy 12: the place that God “shall choose in which to cause his name to dwell.”
- In P, God is a cosmic god who creates the whole world but who nonetheless is contained by the Tabernacle; the land is sacred.
  - Contrast D: God is everywhere; the Israelites can pray to him from wherever they may be exiled because God can hear them (Deuteronomy 4)

Is the God of the Torah/OT a god of vengeance/war/anger, as opposed to the NT God who is a god of Love?

- This contrast is famously associated with Marcion (a Christian thinker of the mid-second century CE)
- The NT side of this question is not our concern; Matthew 7:13-14, 10:34-39, 24:3-31, 25:31-46 would suggest otherwise. Cf. 1 Corinthians 13 (Paul’s sermon about love).

God suffers bad press in the Torah:

- Punishes humanity with death as a response to sin (at least this is the Christian reading of the Garden of Eden story)
- Destruction of the world in a flood
- Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah
- Death of the Egyptian first born
- Repeated threatened destruction of the Israelites in the wilderness
- Lex talionis (Exodus 22:24-25)
- God is a warrior (Exodus 15:3)
- Visiting the sins of the fathers (parents) upon the children

BUT:

There is another side ...

- Matthew 22:34-40 greatest commandment citing Deut 6:5 *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart* (D) and Leviticus 19:18 *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (P or H))

Visiting the sins of the fathers (parents) upon the children:

- God punishes across the generations, an aspect of *divine mercy*: Numbers 14:17-19  
<sup>17</sup>Therefore, I pray, let my Lord's forbearance be great, as You have declared, saying, <sup>18</sup>'The LORD! slow to anger and abounding in kindness; forgiving iniquity and transgression; yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of fathers upon children, upon the third and fourth generations.'  
<sup>19</sup>'Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt.' Allusion to Exodus 34:6-7  
<sup>6</sup>The LORD passed before him and proclaimed: "The LORD! the LORD! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup>extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."
  - Cash up front vs. a mortgage!!
- God punishes across the generations, an aspect of *divine anger* (softened by the presence of "those who reject me"): Exodus 20:5  
<sup>5</sup>For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, <sup>6</sup>but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.
  - Cf. lex talionis

The mercy of the Torah's God needs to be judged first and foremost in its historical context.

May other Gods/gods be worshiped too? (see above lecture 2, M Sep 9)

Images and idolatry (see above lecture 2, M Sep 9)