

## WHO IS YHWH? FROM WHERE DID HE COME?

Some information, mainly from works by scholars in the history of religion.

## WER IST JAHWH? VON WO IST ER GEKOMMEN?

Einige Informationen, hauptsächlich aus Fachtexten in Religionsgeschichte.

### *Aus/from: Ein Gott allein? JHWH-Verehrung und biblischer Monotheismus im Kontext der israelitischen und altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte*

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(with contributions in various languages)

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In religionsgeschichtlichen Kreisen steht heute eine Meinung zur Debatte, die im deutschsprachigen Raum v.a. von B. Lang, H. Vorländer und M Weippert vertreten wird, „dass die Religion Israels während ihrer ganzen vorexilischen Phase ‚eine polytheistische Religion‘ gewesen sei“, bis erst im 2. Mos (22,19, 20,24 und 23,13) Belege „für das Fremdgötterverbot – in das ausgehende 8. oder 7. Jh.“ (v.Chr.) hinein, zu finden sind. (Reiner Albertz, Siegen, S. 77-96.)

In circles of history of religion, there is to day a debate about the opinion “that Israel’s religion has been ‘a polytheistic religion’ throughout the whole of its pre-exile phase”, in the German-language region advocated by B. Lang, H. Vorländer and M Weippert, until no earlier than when in Exodus (22:19, 20:24 and 23:13) evidence is given “for the prohibition of foreign gods – towards the ending 8<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century” (BCE). (Reiner Albertz, Siegen, pp. 77-96.)

“First the literary tradition (i.e., the Hebrew Bible) in the form in which it has come down is obviously late. The corpus is postexilic in date (even later), made up of composite texts and put together long after the events that the tradition purports to describe. ... More recently, a mass of archeological data has accumulated that points to the persistence of the cult of Asherah, the old Canaanite Mother Goddess ... The attempts of some Biblical scholars to get around this relatively clear reference to Asherah as a co-agent of blessing with Yahweh, and undoubtedly conceived in popular circles as his consort, is instructive ... Although *later* suppressed, and almost entirely lost in the Rabbinical texts, Asherah nevertheless re-emerges in Kabalistic Judaism of the medieval period as the ‘Shekinah’, Yahweh’s presence in this world. The Shekinah is actually called ‘Matronit’, and even the ‘Bride of Yahweh’ in certain texts ... I would argue that both the Shekinah in later Judaism and Mary in Roman Catholicism are later reflexes of the Canaanite Mother Goddess Asherah in Israel – ‘Asherah Abscondita’ ... true monotheism (i.e., not only henotheism) now appears to most scholars to be an Exilic and post-Exilic development ...

At Ugarit and elsewhere in the Late Bronze Age the Lady was known principally as Asherah ... a term that appears more than 40 times in the Hebrew Bible but has been obscured by later redactors and commentators. In at least a half-dozen cases, however, the term *’asērāh* must refer to the goddess herself, and not simply to a totemic object. There is simply no way around it: these are *Asherah* figurines [archeological findings in Ugarit]”. (William G. Dever, Tucson/Arizona, pp. 105-125.)

“‘El créateur de la terre’; ‘et devant El et Elyân, et devant le Cie(eux et la Terre)’ [deux inscriptions chez objets archéologiques trouvées]; ‘El Elyôn créateur des cieux et de la terre’ (Gen 14,19). La comparaison de ces trois formules indique qu’Elyân/Elyôn était probablement ‘créateur des cieux’ comme El l’était de la terre.” (André Lemaire, Paris, pp. 127-158.)

“‘El, creator of the Earth’; ‘and in front of El and Elyan, and in front of the heav(ens and the Earth)’ [two inscriptions in archeological findings]; ‘El Elyon, creator of the heavens and the Earth’ (Gen 14:19). The comparison of the three formulas indicates that Elyan/Elyon probably was the ‘creator of the heavens’ like El was the creator of the Earth.” (André Lemaire, Paris, pp. 127-158.)

„Der Schöpfer der Erde’; ‚und vor El und Elyan, und vor den Him(meln und der Erde)’ [Zwei Inschriften bei archäologischen Funden]; ‚El Elyon, Schöpfer der Himmeln und der Erde’ (1Mos 14,19). Der Vergleich der drei Formulierungen deutet darauf hin, dass Elyan/Elyon wahrscheinlich der ‚Schöpfer der Himmeln’ war, so wie El der Schöpfer der Erde.“ (André Lemaire, Paris, S. 127-158.)

“First I shall consider the relationship between Yahweh and El. The view has been quite widely followed in recent years that Yahweh originated as a form of El ... but this view is open to serious objections ... The character of El as known from Ugaritic texts is uniformly benevolent, whereas Yahweh has a fierce as well as a kind side ... However, whatever Yahweh’s precise origins – the view that he was originally the god of Mt. Sinai still has a lot to be said for it ... so the Old Testament speaks of ‘El-Elyon, creator (קנה) of heaven and earth’ (Gen. 14,19,22) ...

Just as Yahweh was not El but became equated with him, so Yahweh was not Baal but became equated with him, at least by some Israelites, or so it appears ...

In conclusion, though Yahweh was not a Canaanite god in origin, he became equated with the supreme Canaanite god El in Israel.” (John Day, Oxford, pp. 181-196.)

“The discovery of the Ugaritic material has established the existence of a goddess Asherah at Ugarit without any doubt ... Although in Ugarit her name appears as *’atrt* (athirat), this is etymologically equivalent to Hebrew אֲשֶׁרָה ... Therefore most scholars now believe that the term אֲשֶׁרָה can mean both a goddess and her image or symbol ... It may be that Asherah was never associated with Baal ... it would show evidence of an attempt (presumably deuterionomistic) to discredit the worship of Asherah by associating her with Baal ... We thus have in this inscription [discovered in Khirbet-el-Qom] a reference to Yahweh and his Asherah ... Earlier, however, Yahweh and Asherah, the god and goddess, were linked in a consort relationship. Later it appears that Asherah’s cultic pole [her symbol] is being taken over by Yahweh as ‘his אֲשֶׁרָה’.” (Judith M. Hadley, Villanova, pp. 235-268.)

„Der Gott, der anstelle des Sonnengottes vom Tempel Besitz nahm, war ein Wettergott ... In Juda war es der ursprünglich aus Nordwestarabien/Teman [vgl. Habakuk 3,3!] stammende Jahweh, der etwa zur selben Zeit in die Rolle dieses kriegerischen Wettergottes einrückte ... Jahweh aber ist erst mit David nach Jerusalem gekommen. Der ‚Neuankömmling‘ war ein kriegerischer Wettergott, der nach Davids Machtübernahme in Jerusalem in Konkurrenz zur Sonnengottheit geraten musste ... Jahweh ist trotz seiner Akkulturation in Jerusalem zweifellos *auch* ein kriegerischer Wettergott geblieben.“ (Othmar Keel und Christoph Uehlinger, Fribourg, S. 269-306.)

“The god, who took possession of the temple in place of the Sun god, was a weather god ... in Juda it was Yahweh, who originated from northwestern Arabia / Teman [cf. Habakkuk 3:3], who at about the same time engaged himself in the role of a martial weather god ... but Yahweh came to Jerusalem no earlier than with David. The ‘newly arrived’ was a martial weather god, who had to enter competition with the Sun god after David had taken power ... Yahweh doubtlessly *also* remained a martial weather god in spite of his acculturation in Jerusalem.” (Othmar Keel und Christoph Uehlinger, Fribourg, pp. 269-306.)

„Bei der Frage, wie der aus dem midianitisch-edomitischen Bergland stammende Wettergott ... JHWH während des 1. vorchristlichen Jahrtausends zum höchsten Gott der israelitisch-jüdischen Religion aufstieg, wurde in der religionsgeschichtlichen Diskussion zumeist auf den Einfluss der nordwestsyrischen Stadt Ugarit verwiesen.“ (Herbert Niehr, Würzburg, S. 307-326.)

„As concerns the question, how YHWH, coming from the Medianitic-Edomitic mountains ... rose to become the highest god in the Israelite-Jewish religion, one has in the discussion mostly referred to the influence of the city Ugarit in northwestern Syrian.” (Herbert Niehr, Würzburg, pp. 307-326.)

From: *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* by John Day  
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Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, 287 pages

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“In the nineteenth century J. Wellhausen ... believed Yahweh to be the same as El, and more recently this has been particularly argued by F.M. Cross and J.C. de Moor. ... However, the following arguments may be brought against this. First, in the Ugaritic texts the god El is revealed to be wholly benevolent in nature, whereas Yahweh has a fierce as well as a kind side. ... Secondly, as T.N.D. Mettinger ... has rightly emphasized, the earliest evidence, such as that found in Judg. 5.4-5, associates Yahweh with the storm, which was not something with which El was connected at all. Rather,

this is reminiscent of Baal. Thirdly, as for F.M. Cross's view ... that Yahweh was originally a part of El's cultic title, 'El who creates hosts' (*'il dū yahwī šaba 'ōt*), this is pure speculation. ...

It is interesting that the Old Testament has no qualms in equating Yahweh with El, something which stands in marked contrast to its vehement opposition to Baal, let alone the equation of Yahweh with Baal (cf. Hos. 2.18 [ET 16]). ... This must reflect a favourable judgment on El's characteristic attributes: as supreme deity, creator god and one possessed of wisdom, El was deemed wholly fit to be equated with Yahweh. ... Baal, on the other hand, was not only subordinate to the chief god El, ... but was also considered to be dead in the underworld for half the year, something hardly compatible with Yahweh, who 'will neither slumber nor sleep' (Ps. 121.4).

Since Yahweh and El were originally separate deities, the question is raised where Yahweh originated. Yahweh himself does not appear to have been a Canaanite god in origin: for example, he does not appear in the Ugaritic pantheon lists. Most scholars who have written on the subject during recent decades support the idea that Yahweh had his origins outside the land of Israel to the south, in the area of Midian (cf. Judg. 5.4-5; Deut. 33.2; Hab. 3.3, 7) ... and there has been an increasing tendency to locate Mt Sinai and Kadesh in N.W. Arabia rather than the Sinai peninsula itself. ...

...

We do not know whether Yahweh was conceived of as a creator god from the beginning or not. One cannot presuppose this from the name itself, for it is more likely that it means 'he is' rather than 'he causes to be' (i.e. creates); certainly the former sense is how the Old Testament itself understands it (cf. Exod. 3.14).

...

#### CONCLUSION: THE CANAANITE GODS AND GODDESSES AND THE RISE OF MONOTHEISM

... J.H. Tigay, ... however, has fairly recently challenged this picture, arguing on the basis of Hebrew theophoric personal names in ancient Palestinian inscriptions that the worship of other gods and goddesses was in fact rather rare and that Israel was essentially monolatrous throughout. As a result of his survey he concludes that Yahwistic names (i.e. names incorporating *yhw*, etc.) were sixteen times more common than pagan names, and consequently believes that only a small proportion of Israelites actually worshipped other deities. The contrary impression given by the Old Testament he ascribes to rhetorical exaggeration. Tigay's study is interesting and carefully argued. However, a number of caveats need to be made, the net effect of which is to suggest that the worship of other gods and goddesses was more frequent than he allows.

First, it may be noted that the overwhelming preponderance of Yahwistic names need not imply that Yahweh was the only deity worshipped but is equally compatible with the idea that Yahweh was rather the most important deity worshipped. Those who worshipped other gods and goddesses surely still saw Yahweh as the chief god, with the other deities being regarded as subordinate members of his pantheon. Secondly, it should be observed that Hebrew theophoric personal names do not necessarily give a fair idea of the frequency of the worship of a god and goddess, since many names could well be traditional. For example, the names of female deities hardly ever occur in Ugaritic personal names, even though we know that Asherah, Anat and Astarte were prominent goddesses at Ugarit. If this was the case of Ugarit, there is no reason why the virtual absence of Hebrew theophoric personal names including the name of a goddess should indicate the absence of goddess worship in ancient Israel if there is other evidence to the contrary. As we have seen earlier, there is indeed evidence to the contrary. For example, quite apart from the Old Testament's allusions to Asherah worship, the texts referring to 'Yahweh and his Asherah' found at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, though referring to the Asherah cult object, nevertheless imply a close relationship (doubtless that of god and consort) between Yahweh and the goddess Asherah, since the cult object symbolized the goddess. Again, the presence of vast numbers of pillar figurines of the goddess Asherah, in particular from eighth- and seventh-century BCE Judah, clearly imply the popularity of her cult. Interestingly, this is the very time and place from which much of Tigay's epigraphic material derives, in which Asherah is so absent from personal names. A further point with regard to god-

esses, as we have seen earlier, is the occurrence of the worship of the goddesses Anat-Yahu and Anat-Bethel alongside Yahu (Yahweh) at Elephantine, which is most naturally understood as a continuation of the worship of Anat in pre-exilic Israel. Thirdly, both the geographical and temporal limitations of the epigraphic material collected by Tigay should be noted, most of the personal names epigraphically come from Judah, and it is conceivable that if more material from the Northern Kingdom were available we would find more evidence of polytheism, as indeed is the case with the Samaria ostraca with their theophoric personal names incorporating Baal (in addition to Yahweh). Again, most of Tigay's material comes from the latter part of the monarchical period, and it is possible that a different picture would emerge if we had more personal names from earlier centuries, when 'the Yahweh alone party' was less in evidence. Fourthly, as Graham Davies has noted in a review of Tigay's work, ... there is evidence that Tigay tends to overestimate the number of Yahwistic names and underestimates the number of pagan names, so that the proportion of Yahwistic to non-Yahwistic names may be nearer ten to one rather than sixteen to one. My overall conclusion is that Yahweh was very much the chief god in ancient Israel, and the other gods and goddesses would have been worshipped as part of his pantheon, but the frequency of their worship has been underestimated by Tigay.

At the opposite extreme to J.H. Tigay stands A.P. Hayman ... who claims that absolute monotheism among the Jews was not finally achieved until the Middle Ages. This too is an extreme position. Much of Hayman's case hangs on the prominent position given to angels in Second Temple Judaism and subsequently, but over against this it should be noted that throughout history monotheists have not felt belief in angels to be incompatible with monotheism.

Over against the above extreme views, I would argue that it is clear that there was indeed a monolatrous party already in the pre-exilic period, though it was not as dominant as Tigay supposes, and absolute monotheism was first given explicit expression by the prophet Deutero-Isaiah in the exile and became fully operative in the post-exilic period. There has been a general rejection in recent decades of the view (once associated with W.F. Albright) that absolute monotheism can be traced back to the time of Moses. The tendency to trace absolute monotheism to Deutero-Isaiah goes with a general understanding, already maintained a century ago by J. Wellhausen, that the achievement of monotheism was a gradual process in the development of which the monolatrous challenge of Elijah, ... the work of the classical prophets, the Deuteronomic reform movement and Josiah's reform replayed an important role. There has been much talk of a 'Yahweh alone movement', following the work by B. Lang ... who borrowed the expression from Morton Smith. ... Unlike Lang, however, some scholars are willing to grant that this minority monolatrous movement may indeed go all the way back to earliest times ... perhaps to Moses."

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"There is one Ugaritic text, which seems to indicate that among the inhabitants of Ugarit, Yahweh was viewed as another son of El. KTU 1.1 IV 14 says:

*sm . bny . yw . ilt*

'The name of the son of god, Yahweh.'

This text seems to show that Yahweh was known at Ugarit, though not as the Lord but as one of the many sons of El."

From: <http://www.theology.edu/ugarbib.htm>

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From: "El, Yahweh, and the Original God of IsraEL and the Exodus", in:  
*The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, by Mark S. Smith, Oxford University Press, 2001

"Biblical texts do attest to Yahweh and El as different gods sanctioned by early Israel. For example, Genesis 49:24-25 presents a series of El epithets separate from the mention of Yahweh in verse 18. This passage does not show the relative status of the two gods in early Israel, only that they could

be named separately in the same poem. ... More helpful is the text of the Septuagint and one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QDeutj) for Deuteronomy 32:8-9, which cast Yahweh in the role of one of the divine sons, ... understood as fathered by El, called Elyon in the first line: ...

When the Most High (Elyon) allotted peoples for inheritance,  
When He divided up humanity,  
He fixed the boundaries for peoples,  
According to the number of the divine sons:  
For Yahweh's portion is his people,  
Jacob His own inheritance.

The traditional Hebrew text (MT) perhaps reflects a discomfort with this polytheistic theology of Israel, for it shows in the fourth line not 'sons of El' but 'sons of Israel.' This passage, with the Septuagint and Dead Sea Scroll reading, presents a cosmic order in which each deity received its own nation. Israel was the nation, which Yahweh received, yet El was the head of this pantheon and Yahweh only one of its members. This reading points to an old phase of Israel's religion when El held a pre-eminent position apart from the status of Yahweh. Apparently, originally El was Israel's chief god, as suggested by the personal name, Israel. Then when the cult of Yahweh became more important in the land of early Israel, the view reflected in Deuteronomy 32:8-9 served as a mode to accommodate this religious development.

If El was the original god of Israel, then how did Yahweh come to be the chief god of Israel and identified with El? We may posit three hypothetical stages (not necessarily discrete in time or geography) to account for the information presented so far:

1. El was the original god of early Israel. As noted, the name Israel points to the first stage. So do references to El as a separate figure (Genesis 49, Psalm 82). ...
2. El was the head of an early Israelite pantheon, with Yahweh as its warrior-god.<sup>61</sup> Texts that mention both El and Yahweh but not as the same figure (Genesis 49; Numbers 23-24, discussed in the next section; Psalm 82) suggest an early accommodation of the two in some early form of Israelite polytheism. If Psalm 82 reflects an early model of an Israelite polytheistic assembly, then El would have been its head with the warrior Yahweh as a member of the second tier ... Yet the same psalm also uses familial language: the other gods are said to be the 'sons of the Most High.' Accordingly, Yahweh might have been earlier understood as one of these sons.
3. El and Yahweh were identified as a single god. If El was the original god of Israel, then his merger with Yahweh, the southern divine warrior, predates the Song of Deborah in Judges 5, at least for the area of Israel where this composition was created. In this text Yahweh, the divine warrior from the south, is attributed a victory in the central highlands. The merger probably took place at different rates in different parts of Israel, in which case it was relatively early in the area where Judges 5 was composed, but possibly later elsewhere. Many scholars place the poem in the pre-monarchic period, ... and perhaps the cult of Yahweh spread further into the highlands of Israel in the pre-monarchic period infiltrating cult sites of El and accommodating to their El theologies (perhaps best reflected by the later version of Deuteronomy 32:8-9). The references to El in Numbers 23-24 (discussed in the following section) and perhaps Job appear to be further indications of the survival of El's cult in Transjordan. Beyond this rather vaguely defined pattern of distribution, it is difficult to be more specific.

El as a separate god disappeared, perhaps at different rates in different regions. This process may appear to involve Yahweh incorporating El's characteristics, for Yahweh is the eventual historical 'winner.' Yet in the pre-monarchic period, the process may be envisioned – at least initially – in the opposite terms: Israelite highland cult sites of El assimilated the outsider, southerner Yahweh. In comparison, Yahweh in ancient Israel and Baal at Ugarit were both outsider warrior gods who stood second in rank to El, but they eventually overshadowed him in power. Yet Yahweh's development went further. He was identified with El: ... here the son replaced and became the father whose name only serves as a title for the son. ...

...

## 6. The Question of Yahweh's Original Character

A closer look at Yahweh's origins is warranted. According to many scholars, Yahweh originated at the southern sites of Seir/Edom/Teman/Sinai (known from biblical passages cited earlier), located by many scholars today in the northwestern Arabian peninsula east of the Red Sea. ... The cult of Yahweh then found a home in highland sites such as Shiloh. According to an incisive study by J. D. Schloen ... some vestiges of the historical process may be found in Judges 5. Some form of direct cultural contact may account for the adoption of Yahweh in Judah, ... but it is not clear that the worship of Yahweh spread then from the south to the central and northern highlands."

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From: *Yahweh's Wife*, by Arthur Frederick Ide, Monument Press, Las Colinas, 1991, 112 pages

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"Censorship is the tool of corruption employed by those who are afraid of individual intellectual growth and personal development. It is the hallmark of dying societies and petty priesthoods who struggle against the evolution of thought in hopes of retaining a staid and ossified existence around a single rule of behavior and morality. Censorship is part and parcel of religions that work to elevate the few over the many, creating a nay-saying priesthood that creates the persona of an immovable and merciless god. This became the fate of the civilization of Canaan when the priests of Levi rose to champion a devoluted program of worship and behavior with the overthrow of the Aaronid priesthood that accepted the worship of a brass serpent and the goddess Asherah. ...

The current Old Testament – the product of clerical censors – has little in common with the earliest Hebrew bible. Most of the original books of the Old Testament, such as *The Book of the Wars of Yahweh*, ... the *Book of the Generations of Adam*, ... the *Book of Yahweh*, ... the *Book of Jasher* [Yasher], ... and *The Cities of Canaan*, ... have been suppressed, with only fragments of their wondrous tales allowed to creep into the canon.

Yahweh is also known by the name *Shaddai*. This peculiar name appears 301 times and should be translated as 'he who lives on a mountain top.' Through inferior translations, the god Shaddai is referred to in liturgical services as Lord Sabaoth ('Lord of Hosts').

Shaddai is not a very desirable or pleasant god. He is jealous, ruthless, wrathful and vengeful. Peace and love is seldom part of his psychology or action, yet Shaddai coupled with Yahweh became the root for the Greek Κύριος (kurios: 'Lord') of the New Testament. He took on a popular persona among the warriors and priesthood of Levi because he didn't tolerate foreign deities, worship of 'strange gods' or accept temple prostitution and ritual sodomy (*toevah*) as a way of ultimate communion between mortals and the divine."

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From: *Yahweh versus Yahweh*, by Jay Y. Gonen, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison WIS, 2005, 183 pages

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"The jealous God, in Hebrew el kana, carries the meanings of God of anger, God of zeal, God of vengeance. But as we shall soon see, God is also el ra'hum ve'hanun, one who shows benevolence, or hesed in Hebrew. That word refers to grace, mercy, charity, benevolence and love.

The philosophical question arises: Why punish the innocent descendants of sinners? This remained a difficulty for Judaism that the great Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides tried to resolve, but not very successfully ... He wrote that God is called 'jealous' and 'avenging' because this is what we call human beings when they engage in such actions. But, unlike humans, God does not feel anger, wrath, or other emotions. All he does is act. As for punishing the offspring of sinners to the fourth generation, this is a preventive measure in the special case of idolatry that is designed to root out this corruption. This rationalistic discussion by Maimonides was not likely to quell the deep anxieties of ordinary Jews. In them, a psychological sense of uneasiness was aroused by this self-introduction by Yahweh. What if he ever forgets who are those who honestly love him (the children of Israel) or gets a bit mixed up about who are the ones who truly hate him (polytheistic Gentiles) or are the enemies of Jews (monotheistic Gentiles)?

The fateful duality that is imbedded in God receives expression in other biblical passages. In Exodus 34:6-7 Yahweh descended in a cloud in front of Moses: 'Yahweh passed before him and Yahweh proclaimed: Yahweh is a merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in benevolence and faithfulness, keeping benevolence for thousands, forgiving transgression, crime and sin, but who by no means clears the guilty, who visits the sins of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.' Somewhat later in the chapter, God sounds a warning to the Israelites not to emulate the worship of other nations: 'For you shall not bow to another god for Yahweh his name is jealous, he is a jealous God' (Exodus 34:14). Clearly, what we witness here is the juxtaposition of Yahweh the jealous God – el kana – with Yahweh the merciful and compassionate God – el ra'hum ve'hanun. A similar juxtaposition recurs in Deuteronomy, where the Israelites are reminded, on the one hand, that 'Yahweh your God, a consuming fire he is, a jealous God' (4:24) but, on the other hand, that 'a merciful God is Yahweh your God, he will not let go of you and will not destroy you and will not forget the covenant with your fathers which he swore to the' (4:31).

Thus, a dread of fateful duality runs throughout Jewish history in various incarnations and reincarnations. It saturates the Jewish heritage. Its origin, however, is the split image of Yahweh as a merciful and compassionate God who is nevertheless also a zealous and vengeful God. This is the starting point from which other biblical, then Talmudic, and later Jewish mystical, philosophical, and ethical elaborations ensued. It has become a shared fantasy that conditioned the Jews' collective responses and their expectations of history. The problem lies with the unpredictability of Yahweh. It is hard to stay secure in the knowledge of God's boundless love when he is also known to suddenly convert to a ferocity that signals cosmic anger. At that point, he is ready, able, and willing to inflict punishment on future generations of innocent souls. In the official doctrine, the punishment can never be truly unexpected. Throughout the generations, the sinners know that they have sinned and can therefore expect punishment. But this is not how things work out psychologically. Even if most of the sins could come under the rubric of normal human fallibility, some of the dreaded punishments seem abnormally harsh. It is difficult to trust a loving God who intermittently flies off the handle. It is a juxtaposition of contradictory emotions that are too extreme and that therefore seem too unstable. At any given moment, God may be given to a mood shift. At no time, therefore, can the well-being of the people be considered as truly safe or stable.

Consequently, throughout the generations, Jews felt a basic sense of insecurity. They never felt safe. Only too frequently they felt compelled to turn their gaze to heaven, wondering how God is doing right then. Is he smiling or is he frowning? Is Yahweh el kana for now, God forbid, or is he at least for the time being el ra'hum ve'hanun, thanks be the Name. The constant dread and insecurity led to obsessive monitoring of everything that was happening in this world. Fear was the driving force behind the recurrent and obsessive enquiry concerning each and all events whether they were good for the Jews. This chronic and compulsive viewing of the world through Jewish glasses has even acquired the name of 'the elephant and the Jewish problem,' the title of an imaginary doctoral dissertation on elephants as produced by a Jew in a Jewish joke ... Yet as Jews were scanning the earth, they were also gazing at heaven. And when they were explicitly asking whether something down here was good for the Jews, they were also implicitly asking whether he up there was good for the Jews. It was as if everything on heaven and earth required constant monitoring.

...

'Thou shall circumcise every male. Thou shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin that it would become the sign of the covenant between me and you ... and my covenant in your flesh would become an eternal covenant. But anyone with a foreskin, a male who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that soul will be cut off from its people for he has violated my covenant.' It seems that chapter 17 provided the never-to-be-ignored fine print that was attached to the insurance form of chapter 15. And what a fine print it was. As usual, the devil, or, should one say, el kana, was hidden in the details.

The revisions in the updated covenant went way beyond mere formalities. A fatal switch had taken place. The switch was from the cutting of covenants by cutting animals to the cutting of covenants by cutting humans. And the choice of the specific organ was no coincidence, as will soon become clear. The covenant among the pieces has become in effect the covenant among the foreskins, and it was referred to by Yahweh as 'my covenant in your flesh.' God's order was an offer one could not refuse. Abraham, the ninety-nine-year-old patriarch, and his entire household underwent the painful cuts on the threat of death. It was no idle threat. Yahweh could turn murderous if disobeyed. As we learn from Exodus 4:24-26, the enraged Yahweh accosted Moses and was about to kill him for failing to circumcise his son. Luckily for Moses, his wife, Zipporah, rushed to circumcise her son, threw the foreskin at Moses' feet, and called him 'my groom-of-blood,' thus reaffirming that a Jewish betrothal necessitates the bloodshed of circumcision of all male offspring. Yahweh then let go of Moses. It all goes to show that you just do not mess with Yahweh.

Thus, long before American ranchers ever branded their cattle to signal ownership, which is a fairly painful procedure, Yahweh branded his herd in an affirmation of his possession. And the pain, especially for adult converts, was excruciating. By yielding to this procedure Jews demonstrated their unconditional submission to the heavenly father. But circumcision defined not only the proper attitude toward heaven but also the proper conduct vis-a-vis the other peoples of this earth. Through circumcision, Jews have marked their flesh to distinguish themselves from all other nations or goyim. Gentile nations and Gentile persons were thus rigorously set apart from Jews.