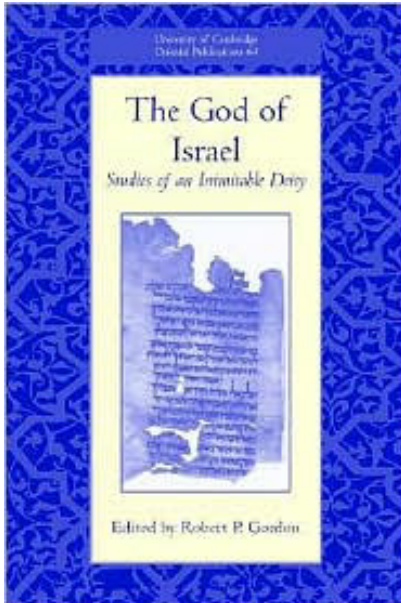


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***The God of Israel***

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Except for editor Robert Gordon's substantial introduction, this volume's seventeen essays were presented between 2001 and 2004 in seminars sponsored by the Old Testament Seminar of the Faculty of Divinity and the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Cambridge University. All but two of the contributors, Klaus Koch (Hamburg) and Judith Hadley (Villanova), are associated with institutions in Great Britain.

The several authors approach the subject, "the God of Israel," from a variety of directions, addressing an equally wide variety of questions—historical, literary, and theological. While no one method dominates the book, Gordon is quick to point out in the preface that, in spite of its title's reference to *the* God of Israel, the book assumes as "axiomatic" that worship in Israel and Judah was not "mono-focused" (xi) in the way that some biblical texts insist it should have been. This indisputable axiom, or tautology, figures heavily in some of the essays, not at all in others. The book's chapters are loosely organized in two parts: "General Perspectives" and "Texts and Themes."

**Part 1: General perspectives**

In his introductory chapter ("Introducing the God of Israel," 3–19), Gordon ably and

helpfully describes the arguments advanced in the chapters that follow. He also argues, from biblical and extrabiblical texts and archaeology, for his own conclusion that Yhwh was indeed (relatively but significantly) unique among ancient deities, not only in being the national God of the people Israel but also in not having, or being part of, a pantheon as Israel's national God. Gordon also sees the seeds of monotheism, or a monotheistic tendency, in the period of the two kingdoms.

Nathan MacDonald passes over issues of monotheism ("Pre-exilic Israelite religion was polytheistic," 20) to discuss the rationale for aniconism and its logic ("Aniconism in the Old Testament," 20–34). In surveying previous efforts to explain aniconism, MacDonald proposes a division of labor between historical and exegetical tasks. The latter, which he pursues, cannot explain the origins of aniconism, but it may be able to discern the rationale of "*programmatically*" aniconism (Mettinger) and how aniconism is perceived in some texts. MacDonald focuses on three texts: Ezekiel; Isa 40–48; and Deut 4. Despite differences among them, each of these texts grounds aniconism, or the rejection of idolatry, by way of identifying humans, particularly Israel, as "the appropriate, alternative locus for the divine presence" (30).

John Barton ("Imitation of God in the Old Testament," 35–46) and Ronald E. Clements ("Monotheism and the God of Many Names," 47–59) both treat the problematic nature of God's character as portrayed in some portions of the Bible. Barton, arguing against Cyril Rodd, finds that imitation of God forms part of the Old Testament's ethical repertoire. His principal contention, however, is that God's character is variable. In Isaiah and in Deuteronomistic thought, God is inimitable, committing acts forbidden to humans and repugnant to us. For Clements, the problem is "an intolerant monolatry" of the kind Deuteronomy sponsors (54). In contrast to the book of Exodus, where God's earlier names are integrated into the one God revealed as Yhwh, Deuteronomy and its theological stream enforced a rigid and exclusive, nationalistic monolatry. Monotheism, born fully as a "doctrine" in Second Isaiah, sheds the nationalism and consequent intolerance of Deuteronomy; thus, it stands with Moses.

Katharine J. Dell also appeals to a part of the Old Testament that is "less nationalistic" but instead universal and monotheistic; in her case, this is the wisdom literature ("God, Creation, and the Contribution of Wisdom," 60–72). She offers an instructive review of the debate about creation in Old Testament theology since von Rad, pointing especially to the mediating work of Bernhard W. Anderson and the proposals of H. H. Schmid, Leo Perdue, and others. Dell is not convinced of Westermann's division of creation traditions between anthropology and cosmology, and she suggests that covenant and creation—and thus also wisdom—may be more integrated than previously thought. Creation's primacy is reaffirmed.

Proceeding along dramatically different routes, Diana Lipton and R. W. L. Moberly take up some of the moral quandaries that Barton and Clements treated. Lipton (“By Royal Appointment: God’s Influence on Influencing God,” 73–93) considers biblical descriptions of God as king, and as a king with flaws. How does one influence a king or manage his anger (78)? After briefly pointing to prophetic, and textual, mediation between Israel and God, Lipton explores a couple of midrashim, to the effect of God’s wanting and needing an intercessor, Moses, to “stand in the breach” (77, citing Yochanan Muffs) and influence the king away from his anger. She then turns to 1 Sam 12, where Samuel’s intercession, like Moses’, moves God away from destroying Israel. Finally, she considers “textual intercession” in both rabbinic and biblical texts. Her last example of “God as reader” treats Sennacherib’s letter (2 Kgs 19:14–19), which Hezekiah spread out before God ... to read. Prophets intended to influence human behavior, and also God’s. Moberly’s essay (“Is Monotheism Bad for You? ...” (94–112) challenges Regina Schwartz’s influential work, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Moberly’s challenge addresses some of Schwartz’s arguments directly, along with a few of what he considers her gaffes. In sum, and in consideration of the narratives of Abel and Cain, Esau and Jacob, Moberly’s answer is no: monotheism is not bad for you. To the contrary, he argues, the Bible’s vision is realistic, while Schwartz’s is utopian—in a bad sense. Alone among the book’s contributors, Moberly writes from expressed Christian convictions and draws from the New Testament.

Continuing the theme of monotheism, Simon J. Sherwin considers whether Zoroastrianism influenced the Bible (“Old Testament Monotheism and Zoroastrian Influence,” 113–24). He conducts a thorough, quite technical historical review regarding Zoroaster, the Avesta, and Cyrus’s campaigns, especially the latter’s conquest of Babylon. Sherwin discredits claims that a Zoroastrian propagandist worked in Babylon prior to 539 and denies attendant claims of Zoroastrian influence on Jewish beliefs.

## **Part 2: Texts and Themes**

Janet E. Tollington (“God, Women, and Children,” 127–38) surveys stories of women, with children or without, set in the time before the monarchy. Her interest focuses on God’s interaction with these women, including those described as barren and thus lacking God’s blessing. She concludes that, in the patriarchal stories, women rather than men are portrayed as “acting in ways which enable God’s specific promises about descendants to be fulfilled” (136).

How Exod 3:13–15; 6:2–8; 34:5–8 explicate the name Yhwh occupies Graham I. Davies in his exegetically thorough essay (“The Exegesis of the Divine Name in Exodus,” 139–56).

Though these texts derive from different sources—E, P, and perhaps J, respectively—Davies argues that they all reflect a liturgical background; for Exod 6:2–8, Davies suggests, more specifically, a cultic-prophet background. Regardless, the texts interpret the divine name in slightly different ways. Exodus 34:5–8 stresses Yhwh’s attributes, 6:2–8 Yhwh’s actions, and 3:13–15 Yhwh’s presence and “undefinedness” (151). An appendix offers notes on the history of interpretation of Exod 3:14, with examples ancient and modern.

Deuteronomy acknowledges, as do other books, that the Israelites worshiped deities other than Yhwh. But according to Judith M. Hadley, Deuteronomy robs these deities of their divinity (“The De-deification of Deities in Deuteronomy,” 157–74). She begins by examining the process of Astarte’s de-deification in other biblical texts and then proceeds to Deuteronomy. The principal deities she considers are Sheger, Dagon, Tirosh, Asherah, the Host of Heaven, and Baal. The tendency in Deuteronomy is to treat these as common nouns, not as the names of gods. Hadley notes the absence of Astarte in Chronicles, perhaps because of the influence of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History.

Returning to a theme Lipton and Moberly touched on (see above), Peter J. Williams asks, “Is God Moral?” (subtitle: *On the Saul Narratives as Tragedy*,” 175–89). He engages the work of three scholars, David Gunn, W. Lee Humphreys, and Cheryl Exum, who have written on the Saul narratives and employed the term *tragic* or *tragedy* in relation to either Saul or the narrative. Examining 1 Sam 13–15, Williams concludes that a tragic reading of the narrative is unwarranted and that Saul was not God’s victim; his punishment was warranted.

Robert P. Gordon’s contribution (“Standing in the Council: When Prophets Encounter God,” 190–204) treats the notion of a divine council in the Old Testament against the background of other ancient literature. He sees the notion developing by analogy from the presence of diviners in the royal council, in Mesopotamia, to their access to the divine council. This analogy is reflected in 1 Kgs 22, but in the Old Testament the council is “humanized.” Only God is *named* as a divine member, and humans have access, especially as messengers and intercessors. Gordon sees the divine council operative in Gen 18, where—and especially among the prophets—it seems God desires an intercessor to deflect his wrath (see on Lipton, above).

The book’s longest essay, by Klaus Koch (“Ugaritic Polytheism and Hebrew Monotheism in Isaiah 40–55,” 205–28), begins with a consideration of terms and proceeds to a description of Ugarit’s four principal deities: Baal-Haddu, El, Anat, and Athirat. Koch notes that Ugaritic texts lack both a theogony and a cosmogony and that (thus) Ugarit lacked a notion of world order that resolved tensions among the gods. He suggests that monotheism arose in response to “such an ill-balanced religious system” (216). That

response developed over time in Israel and, most significantly, in Isa 40–55. These chapters proclaim Yhwh’s singular and transnational transcendence as creator and also Yhwh’s presence even to individuals, while also declaring God’s revelation in history—“in the history of the nations.” Their correlation of prophecy and fulfillment provide the cornerstone of Second Isaiah’s “metahistory” (224). At crucial points, as in 40:18, 25, God is *El*, the name of the Canaanite high god, rather than (merely?) *Elohim*.

Philip P. Jenson (“Interpreting Jonah’s God: Canon and Criticism,” 229–45) reviews a variety of approaches to Jonah, both the book and the character Jonah in the book, and then turns to scholarly characterizations of God in Jonah. Historical-critical approaches have not done justice to the complexity of Jonah. Neither have interpretations of the book as parody or satire been satisfactory. Jenson then considers ways interpreters have characterized God in Jonah: as irrational, gullible, indifferent, sadistic, and incoherently constructed. Jenson stresses the importance of one’s interpretive starting point; his is a “higher-level commitment to the unity of the Bible” (239), which leads to a discussion of biblical theology. Critically following Brueggemann, Jenson advances a polar approach, according to which the God of Jonah is sovereign but limited, present and distant, the God of all nations and of Israel, wrathful and compassionate.

The final two essays of the book treat Jewish literature beyond the Protestant and Jewish canons. James K. Aitken (“The God of the Pre-Maccabees: Designations of the Divine in the Early Hellenistic Period,” 246–66) counters the prevailing opinion that a religious crisis, brought about by Greek influence and consisting in opposing responses to it within Judaism, explains the terms for God used by Jews in the late Persian and Hellenistic periods before the Maccabees. Aitken conducts a review of research, critical especially of Elias Bickerman and Martin Hengel and replete with discussion of inscriptions and papyri. Next, he considers terms for God—“God of heaven” and “God most high”—in non-Jewish and Jewish texts, including the Septuagint. He concludes, among other things, that Jews of the period found resources in Greek for expressing their own devotion to God. Antiochus IV changed matters dramatically.

William Horburn (“Deity in Ecclesiasticus,” 267–92) draws occasionally on James K. Aitken’s earlier work and proceeds similarly in consideration of names for God in a more limited but “rolling corpus” (268): Ecclesiasticus. Horburn’s discussion is often technical; his analysis depends on the entire manuscript tradition of Ecclesiasticus, Hebrew and Greek, and it draws on the Targums, Qumran, and other literature. Horburn traces a development from the Tetragram (Yhwh) and Adonai, with mentions of El and Elohim, to an avoidance of the latter term—lest God be confused with other gods—and then a return to the Tetragram, understood as a name of dominion rather than simply deity. Altogether, the divine titles in Ecclesiasticus bring together aspects of deity often

separated, transcendence and immanence among them. Lesser deities, hypostases or intermediaries, aid in relating the Lord to the community.

Research on all of the subjects and texts addressed in *The God of Israel* has continued since its chapters were presented at the Cambridge seminar. Hence, some chapters will seem dated. They also vary considerably in quality and in degree of technical difficulty. The chapters by Aitken and Horbury score high in both categories. Other chapters, if less technical, will reward careful reading; I have in mind especially, but not only, those by Katherine Dell and Diana Lipton. None of the essays explores new theoretical or methodological ground; some among us will regard this as a deficit, others as a relief. All of us should thank Robert Gordon for collecting, editing, and publishing these essays.