

Chapter Three

Israel and Judah

In the third quarter of the second millennium BC, people who lived in the hills between Canaan (the fertile plain along the sea) and the Arabian desert worshiped - among various other deities - the god Yahweh. Yahweh was as anthropomorphic and anthropopathic as the other gods in the Bronze Age, and was above all a war-god. "Yahweh is a man of war," was the cry (Exodus 15:3), and the name *Yahweh sabaoth* meant "Yahweh of the Armies." Needless to say, warlike societies were especially dependent upon him.

The most important of these was a warrior coalition known as "the Sons of Israel." That there once was a man named Israel is not at all unlikely. The name *Israel* is a theophoric compound (meaning "El strives") and has parallels in the names of men and women known from the Bronze Age of the southern Levant. El was the senior god throughout the Levant, the benevolent head of a pantheon who could usually be counted on to rein in the younger and more headstrong gods. It thus may well be that a warlord or tribal chief named Israel had at some time gained a name for himself in the southern Levant, and that generations after his death hundreds and then thousands of warriors formed a coalition under the name, "Sons of Israel" (*b^enē yisrael*). The coalition especially needed the war-god's assistance ca. 1200 BC, when it was sacking the rich cities of Canaan (and in so doing came into conflict with the Egyptian pharaoh, whose province Canaan was).

Like everyone else in the second millennium BC, the Sons of Israel were polytheists.¹ Although their eponymous founder was named for El, the Sons of Israel also made frequent sacrifices to Yahweh. The main cult center for Yahweh was Shiloh, which apparently did not belong to the coalition until it was forcibly taken over. According to a story in Judges 21 the Sons of Israel joined the festivities when the virgins of Shiloh came out to dance for Yahweh, and each of the unmarried Benjaminites seized one of the virgins. After the Israelites swore a covenant to Yahweh, they carried his cult objects along with them on campaigns, in their Ark of the Covenant. This was a portable and gold-covered chest, kept under a tent during a campaign and therefore immediately accessible when the commander needed divine approval for his plan of attack. Approval was given or denied by an *ephod* of Yahweh, a small image that was kept in the Ark of the Covenant.

In the Late Bronze Age the "covenant" that the Ark symbolized was probably little more than the warriors' vow of sacrificial victims to Yahweh *Sabaoth*, in return for his assistance in battle. At this early date the Sons of Israel and their war-god were equally fearsome. An early Hebrew poetic text, lost already by the Hellenistic period, was titled, *Book of the Wars of Yahweh* (Numbers 21:14). What ethical instructions, if any, the Israelites of the Bronze Age supposed that Yahweh had given them is not clear. As sackers of cities, the Israelites are not likely to have attributed to the war-god commandments such as, "Thou shalt not covet, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not kill..." Like the cults of other Levantine gods, the cult of Yahweh was centered on sacrifice: the daily sacrifices included sheep, oxen, and even the worshipers' first-born sons, who

were taken from their mothers and sacrificed on the eighth day after their birth.²

As the plundering and razing of cities grew less profitable and more difficult, the Sons of Israel appropriated the eastern edges of what had once been Canaan and they became civilized, learning to read and write and planting vineyards and olive trees. In the Early Iron Age the cult of Yahweh coexisted with cults of El, of Asherah or Astarte (goddess of love), and of various local Baals (*Baal* is actually a title, meaning something like "Lord"). Names of early heroes such as Samuel and Jerubbaal ("Let Baal take Action") are evidence for the worship of El and Baal in pre-monarchic Israel. A graffito from early in the first millennium BC invokes "Yahweh and his Asherah," suggesting that some of his worshipers supposed that Yahweh had a female consort. All of these cults were initially aniconic and tended to remain so, although - as we have seen - a crude *ephod* or small image of Yahweh was consulted by his priests for oracular purposes, and many Israelites kept *teraphim* - images of family gods - in their homes or took them with them while journeying. As in other cults in their day, at high places the Israelites offered their various gods sacrifice, music and dance, and in return received the desired temporal blessings. Presiding over these ceremonies and receiving a share of the offerings were Levites, an hereditary caste.

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah

The kingdom of Israel was established ca. 1025 BC, and the initiative for its establishment came from the priests of the war-god. As a result, the first king of Israel - Saul - was indebted to the Yahweh cult and was careful to patronize it, although this did not prevent him from naming his son and crown prince *Ishbaal* ("Baal's Man"). At the beginning of his reign Saul brought the Yahweh priests from Shiloh to Nob, not far from his modest palace at Gibeah, so that they and their *ephod* of Yahweh were readily accessible when the king felt it necessary to ask for oracular guidance.

Late in his reign, however, Saul had a falling-out with the Yahweh priesthood. According to I Samuel 22, when the king of Israel learned of the priests' assistance to David, ruler of Judah, he sent his troops to Nob and slew eighty-five of the priests who had earned the right to carry the *ephod*. When Saul himself was killed in battle against the Palestinians - or "Philistines," as they appear in our English Bibles - the kingdom of Israel temporarily devolved upon Ishbaal. After reigning a very short time Ishbaal was assassinated by his generals, who then offered the throne of Israel to David of Judah. Judah (the name may have meant "place of gorges" or "hollows") lay just to the south of Israel, and David - a warlord with a formidable reputation - had made himself king there, with his capital at Hebron. David accepted the offer of the Israelite generals, and became king of both Judah and Israel. He then attacked the tiny Jebusite kingdom of Jerusalem, atop Mt. Zion. Taking the citadel, he abandoned his headquarters in Hebron and made Jerusalem the capital of his combined kingdom of Judah and Israel.

What cultic obligations David may have had as king of Judah are not known, but as king of Israel he was certainly involved with the cult of Yahweh and received oracles from its prophets. Eventually David brought to Jerusalem the cult's most sacred object, the Ark of the Covenant. To oversee the sacrifices to Yahweh he appointed two chief priests, Zadok and

Abiathar, the latter being one of the survivors of the massacre at Nob.

Thus was Yahweh the patron god of David's united kingdom of Judah and Israel. Other deities continued to be worshiped by David's subjects, if not by David himself, but the principal god of the kingdom was Yahweh. Neighboring kingdoms also had their patron gods. To the north, the kingdom of Damascus was under the god Hadad. To the south, the kingdom of Moab was looked after by the god Kemosh and the kingdom of Edom by the god Qaus. To the east the Ammonites' champion was the god Milkom. These gods were imagined as peers of Yahweh, and not yet as his mortal foes. In this tribal society, a person's ethnic identity was mostly a matter of his or her primary religious loyalty. Moabites, Israelites, Edomites and Ammonites looked alike, dressed alike, spoke alike (each group with its own slightly different Canaanite dialect), and lived very similar lives. Your community was essentially defined by your cultic association. If your main religious duty was to participate in the sacrifices to the god Kemosh at Dibon, you were a Moabite.

Like the other gods, Yahweh was aniconic. He was supposed to live not in a temple but in the heavens, and when his worshipers summoned him to partake of sacrifices, it was on a mountain such as Mt. Gerizim (just south of Shechem) or now at Jerusalem's Mt. Zion. David honored that tradition and refrained from building a temple for Yahweh. Solomon (ca. 960-925 BC), David's son and successor, broke with the tradition. Unlike his father, who had been a warrior king, Solomon did not go forth to battle but made his mark in other ways. As a wealthy king devoted to grand projects, and living in a palace that by the standards of Judah and Israel must have been sumptuous, Solomon decided that Yahweh too should have a "house" as grand as those of the gods in the Phoenician and Palestinian cities along the coast. Solomon therefore saw to it that a temple was built in Jerusalem for Yahweh and spared no expense in the construction, hiring for that purpose expert Phoenician architects and craftsmen. Thereafter the priests performed daily sacrifices of sheep and cattle at the temple's altar. First-born sons continued to be sacrificed to Yahweh, but not at the temple. These infant sacrifices were made just outside Jerusalem: the *tophet* or burial ground for the sacrificed infants was in the Valley of Gehinnom, south of the city wall.

Whatever may have been Solomon's purposes in building a temple for Yahweh, the consequences were enormous. With a splendid stone and cedar structure, the cult of Yahweh was now institutionalized. Over the generations the temple became wealthy, as dedications were made to it. By the sixth century BC the temple personnel numbered more than a thousand Levites: twenty-four companies of priests to perform the daily sacrifices, professional prophets to give divine answers to worshipers' questions, musicians to sound the cymbals and to play the harps and other stringed instruments, guards and gate-keepers, bakers of the sacred bread, hundreds of menial servants, and apparently even an array of prostitutes. Most importantly, the temple eventually became the repository of texts: the covenant which had hitherto been carried from place to place in the Ark of the Covenant, the psalms to be sung in Yahweh's honor, and stories about his mighty deeds. Most of the aniconic gods did not have a temple, and Yahweh therefore became exceptional. Although not represented by a statue, he now had an imposing house and a human establishment of majestic proportions.

While the tribesmen of Judah were as proud of their temple of Yahweh as they were of their kings, the building of a temple did not please the tribesmen of Israel. They believed that a temple constrained their god, or diminished his divinity. Solomon himself was able to keep the Israelites in line, but when he died they refused allegiance to his son and to the Judahite dynasty ("To your tents, O Israel!"). The northerners restored their own Israelite kingdom, with the capital first at Shechem, then at Tirzah, and finally at Samaria. Because they believed that a temple violated Yahweh's covenant, the Israelites continued their traditional practice of making sacrifices to Yahweh at open high places. The kings of Israel enhanced the old practice by providing - in addition to the traditional high place on Mt. Gerizim, near Shechem - two new high places, each of which could accommodate several thousand people. At the northern edge of the kingdom a vast high place for Yahweh was prepared at Dan, and in the south at Bethel. At smaller and shabbier high places the people continued to make sacrifices to El, Baal, Asherah, and other gods, although these cults may not have enjoyed royal patronage. At almost every excavated site from tenth- and ninth-century Israel and Judah, including Jerusalem, Israeli archaeologists have found fertility figurines of Asherah, indicating the extent to which gods other than Yahweh were worshiped. El too continued to have his worshipers, although some of them may have begun to suppose that El was simply another name for Yahweh.

"Yahweh only" in the kingdom of Israel

We are relatively well informed about the religious policies of Omri and his son Ahab, two of Israel's most capable kings (although excoriated in the literary tradition of the Yahweh cult). Early in the ninth century BC Omri built the city of Samaria and made it his capital. Omri arranged for his son Ahab to marry Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the great Phoenician city of Tyre. Jezebel, whose name was a theophoric compound of the name "Baal," was gratified when Ahab - to please his bride - erected a temple for Baal (an image god) in Samaria. Yahweh, however, continued to be the Omrids principal deity, and continued to be worshiped at the great sanctuaries of Bethel, Dan, and Mt. Gerizim.

The construction of the Baal temple in Samaria inspired a hatred of Phoenicia among some Yahwists, ignited a bloody episode of cultic or religious violence, and also launched the prophetic tradition in Israel. Prophets had been around for centuries. As we have seen, when a king or war-leader needed a yes-or-no answer from Yahweh, he ordered a priest to bring forward the portable *ephod* of Yahweh, and then proceeded to ask his question. When matters were too complicated to be answered with a yes or no, an Israelite could consult with the prophets who usually frequented a popular temple or high place. For a fee, while some of the prophets played their pipes or other musical instruments, their colleagues would work themselves into a frenzy, rolling naked on the ground and uttering unintelligible sounds. Emerging from their frenzy they would then give the god's answer to the suppliant's question. These "establishment" prophets found work not only at cult-centers but also in the king's palace, because kings especially needed advice from the gods. Needless to say, successful establishment prophets were careful to give the king prophecies that he wanted to hear. Those who did otherwise were soon unemployed.

In stark contrast to the establishment prophets, there appeared in Israel in the ninth century BC self-proclaimed prophets who had no connection with either a cult-place or the king,

and who in fact denounced both the cult-places and the king as the *cause* of whatever misfortune had befallen the community. When bad things happened in the ancient world - a famine, a defeat in battle, an epidemic - the universal explanation was that one or more of the gods were angry, and the worshipers of Yahweh were especially prone to believe that their god was angry. During Ahab's reign a three-year drought afflicted all of the southern Levant. When Israelites began dying of famine, a renegade and charismatic prophet named Elijah boldly proclaimed that Yahweh was angry because King Ahab was elevating the cults of Baal and Asherah above the cult of Yahweh. Enough Israelites believed Elijah's prophecies that the prophet was able to lead his followers up Mt. Carmel and kill 450 priests and worshipers who were there performing a sacrifice to Baal.

Ever since the end of the Bronze Age the Israelites had given preferential treatment to Yahweh ("Thou shalt have no other gods *before me!*"), but they had also worshiped other gods. Aided by the harangues of Elijah and his successor, Elisha, a "Yahweh only" enthusiasm (coupled with a denunciation of Phoenicians, who were also partly to blame for the temple built in Jerusalem) began in Israel in the ninth century BC. The movement perhaps began among the Rechabites, a subculture of primitivists who despised agriculture, cities, houses and wine, and were sworn to nomadism, sobriety, and tents. Ca. 840 BC the "Yahweh only" party, led by Jehu, staged a bloody coup. Jehu shot King Jehoram with an arrow, killed all seventy princes of the royal Omrid family, and had the queen-mother Jezebel, the Phoenician patroness of the Baal cult, thrown down from her tower-apartment to the pavement below. Once in power, Jehu's first action as king of Israel was (II Kings 10) to kill all the priests and prophets of Baal and Asherah whom he could find. The temple of Baal was torn down and replaced by a latrine. Henceforth, the palace would lend its support only to the cult of Yahweh. Under the patronage of the new dynasty the priests of Yahweh composed a history (in the Documentary Hypothesis, this is Document "E"), the main point of which was that Yahweh had *always* been the one and only god of Israel. The ideology has often been called "henotheism" but a more recent and more appropriate term for it is "monolatry."³

Jehu's religion was monolatry with a vengeance, but it was a far cry from monotheism. Yahweh was the patron god of Israel, and his priests were eager that the kings of Israel give their support to no other god. That Yahweh was the only god in existence had not yet, in the ninth century BC, occurred to Jehu or to anyone else in Israel. As we have seen, in the Levant each kingdom or each "people" had its own patron god (tutelary deity). Ammon had Milkom, Moab had Kemosh, and Damascus had Hadad. The idea was, Martin West has observed, "that there was an original allocation of one god per nation."⁴ In each case, we may assume, the patron god was credited with having created the world and with ruling it, always of course in the best interest of his clients. The patron gods were part of a polytheistic world. If you and your countrymen worshiped god X you would probably have belittled gods Y and Z, who took care of neighboring (and often hostile) kingdoms, but you would not have denied their existence. In the story of Moses' negotiations with Pharaoh, as West noted, the author of Exodus makes Yahweh *our* god when Israelites speak, *your* god when Egyptians speak to Israelites, and *their* god when Egyptians speak among themselves about Yahweh. However much they detested him, the Egyptians had no doubt that Yahweh was a god.

The flavor of monolatry, first in Israel and later in Judah, comes through in a diatribe that the author of I Kings leveled against King Solomon. The author was a zealous monolatrism, but Solomon - who had lived four hundred years earlier - had not been:

He followed Ashtoreth, goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom, the loathsome god of the Ammonites. Thus Solomon did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord.... He built a shrine for Kemosh, the loathsome god of Moab, on the heights to the east of Jerusalem, and one for Milcom, the loathsome god of the Ammonites. These things he did for the gods to whom all his foreign wives burnt offerings and made sacrifices.⁵

In relatively lax Judah these shrines for Ashtoreth, Milkom and Kemosh remained in place for more than three centuries. They were not torn down until 622 BC, when King Josiah implemented his reform. Even in Israel, where Jehu and his "Yahweh only" supporters ended royal patronage of gods other than Yahweh, it is likely that for a long time the common people were allowed to worship whichever gods they pleased.⁶ A start had been made with Jehu's coup, however, introducing a radical ideology that eventually would threaten with death any Israelite or Judahite who worshiped a god other than Yahweh.

The end of the kingdom of Israel, and the continuity of "the Samaritans"

Misfortunes of course were no less frequent after Jehu's suppression of the Baal cults than before, and militarily things became much worse than they had ever been under the Omrids. Jehu was forced to submit to Shalmaneser III and pay an annual tribute, as Israel became a vassal state of the Assyrian empire. Ca. 750 BC a new breed of charismatic and anti-establishment prophets came to the fore, declaring Yahweh's anger not just at the kings of Israel but at most of the upper class. Hosea, Amos and Joel took it upon themselves to denounce, chastise and instruct the Israelites, including the royal courtiers and the priests at Dan and Bethel. Because the anti-establishment prophets had nothing to do with the royally subsidized cult they tended to downplay the importance of sacrifices. They proclaimed instead that what Yahweh wanted was righteousness, mercy, justice and charity, and that he hated greed, the abuse of power, and the oppression of the poor. At the outset this "liberation theology" was a marginal aspect of Israelite and Judahite religion, greatly overshadowed by the sacrificial establishment. But it took root and grew, and when the sacrificial tradition came to an end the demand for social justice and for charity became an important ingredient for Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The kingdom of Israel was twice as large as the kingdom of Judah. The two kingdoms were sometimes allies, sometimes enemies, but Israel was always much the stronger. The kings of Judah rather willingly submitted to the Assyrians, regarding the Assyrian overlord as a potential protector against the kings of Israel. The Jerusalem kings even saw to it that sacrifices for Ashur, the patron god of the Assyrians, were made regularly on an altar within Yahweh's temple precinct. While the kings of Judah faithfully paid tribute to Assyria, the eighth-century kings of Israel looked for opportunities to revolt. After several of these attempts, the Assyrians besieged Samaria, the capital of Israel, and after a three-year siege the city fell - in 722 BC - to Sargon II. Sargon deported the inhabitants of Samaria, taking them to Assyria and in their place installing a mixture of deportees from other lands. Most importantly, Sargon put an end to

kingship in Israel. The land of Israel was now a province of the Assyrian empire.

Jewish and Christian believers have traditionally insisted that all the people of Israel were deported by Sargon and were either planted somewhere in Assyria or dispersed over the world, to become “the lost tribes of Israel.” In fact, “the lost tribes” were not lost at all, because in 722 BC most of the population of Israel stayed right where it had always been. The myth of “the lost tribes” began with the Deuteronomic History, composed in the sixth century BC. The Deuteronomic Historian invented the story that “all Israel” was hauled away by Sargon. The people of Israel had worshiped other gods and so - the D writer explained - the people of Israel had ceased to exist:

Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight: there was none left but the tribe of Judah only. (II Kings 17:18, AV)

Sargon's own inscription records that he deported 27,290 people from the royal city of Samaria. Although the deportation was a tragedy for the city, it was no worse than Sargon's deportation of the people of Syrian Carchemish a few years later, or of other cities that rebelled and were taken after a lengthy siege. If the population of Israel at the time was approximately half a million, the deportees would have constituted about 5% of the whole. In other words, 95% of the people of Israel stayed where they were.

Once the kingdom of Israel was abolished, however, its legacy and ideology - and finally even its name - were appropriated by its southern neighbor, Judah. King Hezekiah in Jerusalem and the priests at the Jerusalem temple saw the end of the kingdom of Israel as a great opportunity. Israelites who had worshiped Yahweh at Shechem, Dan and Bethel were now urged and instructed to worship him at Jerusalem (that Yahweh allowed Assyria to conquer Israel was regarded by the Jerusalem priests as proof that sacrifices performed at any of the northern high places had never pleased him, and that he wished to receive sacrifices only on Mt. Zion). By the end of the seventh century BC the view in Jerusalem was that Judah was not only part of Israel but had always been part of Israel, and was now the *only* part of Israel still in existence, the rest of Israel having been extirpated by Sargon. In the parlance of the Jerusalem priests, those Yahweh-worshippers to the north who still insisted on worshipping him at Mt. Gerizim or one of the other high places were not Israelites at all but mere *shomronim*, or “Samaritans”: people of mixed ancestry who lived near the vile city of Samaria, and who had no claim to Yahweh's covenant or benevolence. In fact, most of the people who were called “Samaritans” in the time of Jesus were the descendants of people who early in the first millennium BC had called themselves “Israelites.” They continued to call themselves Israelites, or - turning the pejorative *shomronim* to their own advantage, as *shamerim*, “keepers” or “guardians” of the Laws of Moses.

The “Samaritans” not only survived but managed to thrive all through antiquity. They remained numerous in Samaria itself (a small number of Samaritans still live and worship near Nablus, in the West Bank), and after the conquest by Alexander the Great they began to emigrate and to export their distinctive worship of Yahweh to various places in the Near East and the Mediterranean. By the first century CE a sizeable number of Samaritans lived in Rome, and by Late Antiquity a Samaritan synagogue stood in many cities of the Roman empire. Although by

the end of the fifth century CE the Samaritan Diaspora was diminished, it still seems to have numbered some 150,000 people.⁷

The kingdom of Judah in the seventh century BC, and Josiah's reform (622 BC)

The small kingdom of Judah gave the Assyrians little or no trouble, and survived not only the kingdom of Israel but even the Assyrian empire. Although politically and militarily Judah was second-rate, as the centuries passed the Jerusalem temple had grown rich and its priesthood powerful. With the passing of time the belief arose that the two parties to the "covenant," of which the Ark of the Covenant was the symbol, were Yahweh and David: Yahweh, the only god who had a temple in all of Judah, had cut a covenant with David, guaranteeing that David's descendants would always rule Judah. In addition, after the fall of Samaria in 722 BC many of the "Yahweh only" Israelites moved to Judah, bringing their fervor with them. It seemed to them, and certainly to the priests at Jerusalem, that worshipping Yahweh at the high places of Dan, Bethel and Shechem (Mt. Gerizim) had not worked at all: far from pleasing Yahweh, sacrifices at the high places had obviously offended him, and it was for that reason that the kingdom of Israel fell victim to Assyria. The survival of Judah, on the other hand, proved that sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem was exactly what Yahweh wished.

That Yahweh was keeping his side of the covenant with Judah seemed all the more certain when the mighty Assyrians went into a sharp decline. After the death of Ashurbanipal, no later than 626 BC, the Assyrian kings were faced with a growing Median menace on their eastern border, and also by a rebellious vassal in Babylonia. They soon lost control of all of Babylonia and were in no position to collect tribute from any of their vassal kingdoms. Judah was a beneficiary of all this, and for all practical purposes was once more a fully sovereign state. For more than three hundred years Judah had been in the shadow of either the kingdom of Israel or the Assyrian empire, and more often of both. Now the shadow was gone. Sacrifices to the god Ashur, which the Assyrian kings had long required the priests of Yahweh to perform in the courtyard of the Jerusalem temple, were abruptly discontinued and Ashur's altar was destroyed.

The historic turnabout inspired an unprecedented religious project in the temple of Yahweh. It now seemed beyond doubt that Yahweh was a god of incomparable power, and that he had spectacularly fulfilled his covenant with the Davidic house. No other god, it was clear, should be worshiped in Judah, and the cult of Yahweh should be stripped of various rituals that it had traditionally shared with other cults in the Levant and most notoriously with the cults of Phoenicia. In the eighteenth year of his reign (622 BC), King Josiah was persuaded to implement a far-reaching but savage religious reform. Like all religious reforms, this one claimed to be merely restoring what was there At the Beginning. What it put in place, however, was something radically new. The reformers aimed to impose upon all of Judah the religious and social rules that they themselves endorsed, and in order to legitimize their project they produced a written text that was supposed to contain the very words of Yahweh and Moses. The principal objectives of the reform were a rigorous monolatry together with a centralization of all worship at the Jerusalem temple. The imposition of monolatry in Judah was evidently as bloody a business as it had been in Israel under Jehu, although in retrospect we may look on it as a stage in the ancient world's slow progress from polytheism to monotheism. Along with their principal

objectives Josiah and the reformers put forward criminal and civil laws, several of which showed a heightened concern for the poor, the fatherless, and resident foreigners.

The ancient practice of sacrificing all firstborn sons to Yahweh was henceforth forbidden. Prostitutes, both male and female, had long been a feature of Yahweh's temple, which received a portion of the prostitutes' fees. Now Josiah ordered that the prostitutes be banished, and that their living quarters be torn down. Along with ending such sensational aspects of the Yahweh cult, Josiah demolished the sanctuaries of all other gods in Judah, tore down the Asherah poles, and slew the priests who presided over sacrifices to idols. From this point forward no god other than Yahweh was to be worshiped in Judah. More than that: in the future nobody in Judah was to make a sacrifice to Yahweh anywhere other than the Jerusalem temple, which would therefore have a monopoly on sacrificial offerings. To make this clear, Josiah's troops went into what once was Israel and slew on their own altars those priests of Yahweh who were still making sacrifices at Bethel and other high places (II Kings 23:20). The holy days were likewise to be celebrated *at the temple*. Along with these reforms came ritual laws and regulations, meant to ensure the purity of the Yahweh cult.

Deuteronomy and the beginnings of scripture

The basis – or the pretext - for Josiah's great reform was a pseudepigraphon, which now forms the core of the book called Deuteronomy ("second law").⁸ This text, which soon became synonymous with Yahweh's covenant and with the Torah, came from the pen of an anonymous writer, whom we must simply call "the Deuteronomist" and who wrote during the middle years of Josiah's reign. Purportedly, however, the text was a copy of "the words of Moses," spoken to all the Israelites in the valley near Beth-baal-peor, east of the Jordan. The purported occasion of Moses' long speech was the eve of his death, and the eve of Joshua's leading the Israelites into their Promised Land. As he is about to die, "Moses" recounts all of the laws that Yahweh had given him on Mt. Horeb (in Exodus the holy mountain is Sinai, but in Deuteronomy it is Horeb). The text of Moses' farewell address was purportedly lost for many centuries, only to be "discovered" during a repair of the temple in Josiah's eighteenth year.

In the three long discourses of Deuteronomy, "Moses" reveals the very words of Yahweh, a list of instructions that includes criminal and civil laws, but is mostly devoted to commandments and prohibitions about worship. These mirror the reforms undertaken by Josiah, and repeat in various forms the dire punishments that Yahweh will inflict on the Israelites if they worship other gods. The Jerusalem temple is emphatically, although obliquely, the prime beneficiary of Yahweh's instructions. He demands that all "high places" be destroyed, and that his worshipers bring sacrifices to him only at "the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling" (Deut 12:5 NIV). The great festivals are likewise to be celebrated only at the Jerusalem temple, and every adult male Israelite is to attend these festivals and to bring with him a gift for the temple: "Three times a year all your men must appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose: at the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Tabernacles. No one should appear before the LORD empty-handed: Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you" (Deut:16: 16-17 NIV).

Deuteronomy marks, in an important way, the beginning of the scriptural religions of the Western world. Prior to 622 BC various texts were kept in the Jerusalem temple, but few of them were known to the public or claimed to be “the word of God.” Instead, they were either hymns to Yahweh (many of the Psalms were composed before this date), or stories about Yahweh, telling what mighty deeds he had done: his creation of heaven and earth, his unleashing of the Flood, his dealings with Abraham, his victories over the enemies of Israel and Judah, and so forth. The words of Yahweh were those of the covenant (perhaps some form of Exodus 20-31) carried in the Ark of the Covenant, as well as the compositions of the *nebiim*, the prophets (Yahweh is the “I” in the poetry of Isaiah, Hosea, Amos and other prophets). All of this poetry circulated orally, and some of it may have been committed to writing. Although it was considered to be the inspired composition of this or that individual prophet, it did not yet have the prestige that it was to acquire in the Hellenistic period. As for the old covenant, it may have been familiar to a small circle of priests but not to the wider public.

Deuteronomy was very different. This was the first Hebrew text written precisely so that it could be read aloud (at the Feast of Tabernacles) to all of Yahweh’s worshipers. An oral presentation was of course required, since very few people in Judah or anywhere else would have been able to read a book. Deuteronomy thus would teach the people of Judah the laws claimed to have been issued by Yahweh himself. In the years after its “discovery” Deuteronomy replaced whatever had until then been the covenant between Yahweh and the Judahites, and to this day it remains the core of that covenant. However contrived its origins were, Deuteronomy was as sacred as a text could be. Here was supposed to be the *torah* (“instruction,” or “teaching”) given by Yahweh to Moses on Mt. Horeb, and written down either by Yahweh himself or by Moses after his descent from the holy mountain. All of Yahweh’s worshipers were to learn the instruction well and to keep it always.

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6: 6-9, NIV)

After Josiah’s reform, monolatry was enforced and worship of any other god was regarded as a grave violation of Yahweh’s covenant. As rewritten by the Deuteronomist historian, Yahweh had been the one and only god worshiped by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all of Jacob’s sons, and rites of which the Deuteronomist disapproved (infant sacrifice, and temple prostitution) had never been approved by Yahweh. Just as the Elohist had interwoven the worship of Yahweh with everything known about the history of Israel (the northern kingdom), so now the temple texts in Jerusalem told how the history of both Israel and Judah was synonymous with Yahweh’s blessing and punishing those kingdoms and their forbears.

Although Judahites recognized the existence of other aniconic gods in other kingdoms, in their own kingdom Adonai became synonymous with deity. His very name became so sacred that to say it aloud was to profane it, and he came to be addressed instead with the title, *Adonai*

("My Lord"). The Deuteronomist was fanatical in his monolatry and his war against anyone in Judah who worshiped other gods. In Deuteronomy "Moses" repeats Adonai's command that the people seek out and kill all those in "Israel" who worship gods other than himself. You were to slay such a person, regardless of whether he or she was your friend, brother, sister, son or daughter. Thus did the Deuteronomist try to give to Adonai in Judah the same dreadful character that he had in Israel during the dynasty of Jehu. But the worship of Adonai was about to evolve in a very different direction.

1. On the polytheism of early Israel, and its connections with the polytheism seen in Ugaritic texts, see Smith 2001.

2. On this primitive practice see Exodus 22:29-30 (OSB): "You must give me your firstborn sons. You must do the same with your oxen and your sheep. They should stay with the mother for seven days: on the eighth day you are to give them to me." For Gehinnom as the site of the *tophet* see II Kings 23:10 and Jeremiah 7:31. By the end of the seventh century BC the Jerusalem priesthood had come to believe that infant sacrifices were not acceptable to Yahweh. Like the Second Temple authors of the Tanakh, most Jewish and Christian scholars have claimed that infant sacrifices had never been made to Yahweh. But the evidence to the contrary is clear. For a detailed study see Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). At p. 5 Levenson summarizes his conclusion "that only at a particular stage rather late in the history of Israel was child sacrifice branded as counter to the will of YHWH and thus ipso facto idolatrous."

3. On the wider topic see Robert Gnuse, "The Emergence of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: A Survey of Recent Scholarship," *Religion* 29 (1999), pp. 315-36. For a more popular account of the evolution of monolatry in ancient Israel see Chapter 6, "From Polytheism to Monolatry," in Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009).

4. West 1999, p. 26.

5. I Kings 11:5-7 (OSB).

6. Cf. Miller and Hayes 1986, p. 273: "It is doubtful in our opinion that even the most radical Yahwistic prophets of the ninth century B.C.E. would have been calling for the exclusive worship of Yahweh throughout the land."

7. On this topic see Alan Crown, "The Samaritan Diaspora to the End of the Byzantine Era," *Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 1974, pp. 107-123. At p. 115 Crown notes that in the 5th century CE there were Samaritan congregations scattered all through Italy and Sicily, and at p. 123 estimates the Diaspora at about 150,000.

8. See Nadav Na'aman, "The 'Discovered' Book and the Legitimation of Josiah's Reform," *JBL* 130 (2011), pp. 47—62. On the reforms of Josiah see Miller and Hayes 1986, pp. 397-401.