



On
Jewish
Culture
and
Jewish
Secularism

BY YEHUDA BAUER

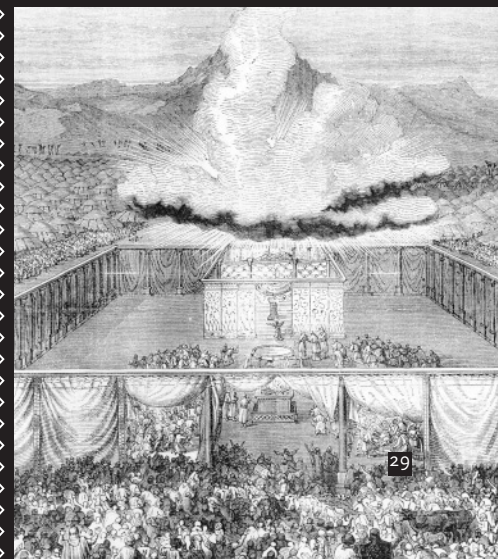
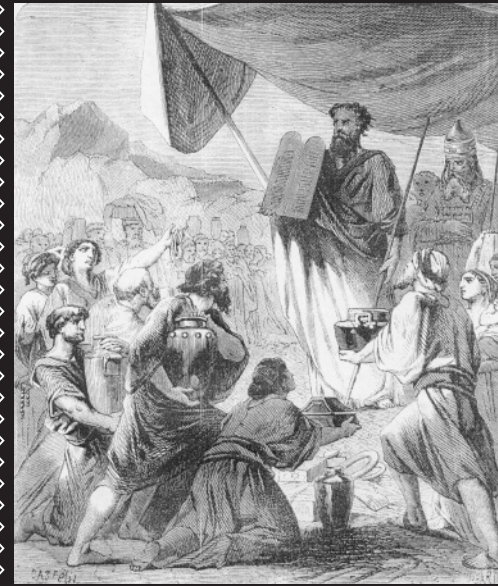
A central problem with discussions on Judaism, Jewishness, and the future of the Jewish people is the lack of clarity involved. What, exactly, does one mean by these terms?

Many Jews, if not most, confuse Judaism with the Jewish religion. But Judaism is not a religion, per se; it is much more than that. Judaism is a culture and a civilization, one that spans everything produced by Jews in a direct or indirect connection with what they inherited from their past. This becomes obvious when we examine the development of Jewish religion as one *aspect* of broader Jewish culture.

Jewish monotheism developed gradually, as these things do. We know for certain that most of the five books of Moses were written during the Babylonian exile or afterwards, and we know that the core dates from the 7th century BCE. (We know this on the basis of more ancient texts and traditions, some of them, as their language attests, dating from as early as the 9th or 10th centuries BCE.) And one can argue that the creation myth—as well as the legends about the flood, Abraham, Moses, and Sinai—either have some real historic kernel or reflect a logical understanding of the world as it actually is.

Take, for example, the story of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve of course never existed; as DNA probes have shown, we are all descendants of a group of *homo sapiens* who roamed the savannahs of East Africa between 500,000 and 200,000 years ago. But the story reflects the understanding that there is only one human race, and that all humans are, basically, related to each other. Although the story makes no sense when taken literally, it does, seemingly, contain a hidden meaning, because it is the woman who is the source of all knowledge—Eve ate from the tree of knowledge, and Adam received the apple from her.

The story of the flood, too, has a historical basis: some 5,600 years BCE, the Mediterranean burst into a very large sweetwater lake which then became the Black Sea. This natural catastrophe, probably caused by a very major earthquake or similar natural disaster, caused a very major flood in the regions now bordering the Black Sea. (Ararat, after all, is located exactly there.) The story of the Flood is found in ancient Mesopotamian legends, and elsewhere as well. Similarly, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not exist as flesh-and-blood individuals, but the ancient Hebrews (or Israelites) were Canaanites, and spoke the same language (more or less) as the other Canaanites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, and the Phoenicians. All of whom were part of the Aramean incursion into the Mideast region, from the Arabian peninsula, which was drying up about 1,100 years BCE.



The ancient Hebrews knew all of this, and called Abraham an Aramean (Aramean, of course, was the *lingua franca* of the Middle East, and is the language of the Talmud). There clearly was no Exodus from Egypt, but the legend has a factual basis nevertheless: in the 17th century BCE there were, apparently, droughts in Canaan (reflected in the Bible), and a coalition of Canaanite tribes invaded Egypt.

The Egyptians called these tribes the Hyksos, and they ruled Egypt for two hundred years, until 1580 BCE. One of the major pharaohs of that period was named Yakov. In the end, the Egyptians rebelled and reconquered their country, driving the Hyksos out, into the Sinai and beyond. In 1650 BCE the volcano island of Santorini in the Aegean exploded, and created a natural disaster of tremendous proportions, with a huge tsunami. These events seem to be the source of the legends about the Exodus, which is supposed to have taken place at some time in the 13th century BCE; they were written down centuries later than that. A similar interpretation may perhaps work regarding Moses and Sinai. As many have noted, Moses (Mses) was the name of a pharaonic family (Ra-mses, with the god Ra and the family name after it; or Tut-mses [Tutmosis]).

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The personal details about his life are vivid, and the date of the first documents about him may be from an early date, so that it may well be that we are dealing with a historical personage. The story about the ten tablets and the Sinai mountain is obviously a legend, but again, it is quite possible that there is some grain of historical facticity about it.

An inscription found in Ajjur mentions the god Jehovah and his consort, the goddess Ashera, and there may have been a group of Canaanites wandering in the desert who are the source for the legend. Archeologists tell us that the Israelite tribes were most probably descendants of inhabitants of Canaanite cities who fled into the then thickly forested mountains of the Galilee, Samaria, possibly because of the heavy hand of the cities' rulers and of the nomadic tribes in the region of Judea.

It is not impossible that they were joined by those desert wanderers, who were decisively influenced by Egyptian culture. In fact, the first chapter of Judges (*Shoftim*) tells us of the entrance of these people into Canaan from the south, and not from the east, as later legends would have it. These later legends are quite obviously constructed—for instance, the famous walls of Jericho did not exist, as Jericho did not have any walls for hundreds of years before and after they supposedly fell to Joshua. Joshua is supposed to have destroyed the city of Ai, but Ai had been a ruin for hundreds of years before that. There had been a city by that name, and the memory must have lingered. The Judges are, yet again, dim legendary figures, but later memory did not just invent them—there is no extra-biblical evidence for their existence, but people like that are probably not just a construct. David, we know for sure, is a historical figure. Solomon (Shlomo) has no existence outside the Bible, but while the stories about him contain a lot of fantasies, they seem to have a believable historical basis. It is he who is credited with building the Temple, which, as the Book of Kings tells us,¹ in-

cluded a statue of the goddess Ashera. Solomon himself built temples for other gods, too.²

In the kingdom of Israel, king Jeroboam (*Yarov'am*) worshipped the golden calf.³ Judean King Menashe (*Manasse*) “placed the statue of the Ashera which he [had caused to be] made in the house that Jehovah had said to David and to Solomon, his son, in this house and in Jerusalem which I had chosen of all the tribes of Israel I shall put my name forever.”⁴

By the way, Menashe, who “did evil in the eyes of the Lord,” ruled for fifty-five years, and there was peace and quiet in the land. When kings that did “right in the eyes of the Lord” ruled, they usually caused disasters and destruction. Biblical and post-biblical Judaism did not conclude from that that it was not a very good idea to do the “right,” or that God was not particularly reliable when it came to looking after “his” Jews. This became fairly obvious a few thousand years later, in the Holocaust.

So, Jews were polytheists, like almost everyone else, and only slowly did the adherents of Jehovah win the struggle against the other gods. Jehovah is worshipped by the “true” prophets, as opposed to the “false” ones. One can imagine that the “false” ones thought of themselves as the true ones, but the priests of Jehovah did not put down for us what the others had to say. As to history—the further forward we go, the more historically reliable the story becomes: the names of the Judean and Israelite kings are without doubt the names of real rulers; victories (that were exaggerated) and defeats (that were underrated) really happened—for some of them we have external, non-biblical evidence.

One might add that it is precisely in antiquity that the belief in God or gods was challenged by thinkers—agnostics such as Socrates or Protagoras in Greece, or outright deniers of a transcendental ruler such as Lao-Tse in China or Siddharta Gautama (the Buddha) in Nepal/India.

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Why do I go into all this? In order to show that the real culture and development of the Jewish people is much more interesting and meaningful than some Jews believe. These Jews are often the ones who insist that the Bible (*Tanakh*) is an exact account of what actually happened.

The truth, of course, is different. God, I would conclude, is a wonderful human invention, a kind of superman, really, endowed with human qualities. He hears, he listens, he sees; he dictates writings; he is terrible and cruel and vengeful; he is just, loving, and caring. He has created Heaven and Earth, and trillions of stars, and he apparently cares very much whether you have a coffee with milk after your chicken, or not.

His presence explains away all difficulties and solves all problems, and as we cannot really understand him—another wonderful twist that stands in stark contradiction to his (super)human qualities—we have to accept any fate that he decrees. Without his will nothing happens; we don't know his thoughts or his plans for us—our fates—and so whatever happens



to us as individuals and communities is something we have to live with.

God is the literary hero of the Bible, and in that sense he exists, just like Hamlet, Othello, the young Werther, Tartuffe, or Don Quijote exist. The legends themselves became facts that influence thinking and acting. Thus, the story of the Exodus becomes a symbol of the struggle for freedom, and the Bible has had a tremendous, universal influence, with the symbol of the Exodus being accepted by many non-Jews as the banner for their struggles—no matter what freedom they’re fighting for.

True, there are books in the biblical anthology (finalized about 200 BCE) that made it in despite their non-theistic or even atheistic character, such as Ecclesiastes (*Kohelet*). Kohelet got in because its author was clever enough to ascribe his “book” to King Solomon, although it is perfectly clear that we are dealing with a Jewish adherent of Greek philosophy,⁵ and the book was written, most probably, in the third century BCE. Another example: the Book of Esther does not mention God at all, because it is an allegory expressing the Jews’ fear of being annihilated, most probably by the Greek Seleucid rulers of Syria, also in the third century BCE.

The intention to annihilate the Jews is ascribed to the Persians, whose empire had been destroyed by that time, and everyone knew that what the Book (actually: scroll [*Megillah*]) says is an invention, because everyone knew, of course, that the Persian Empire had been a solid supporter of Jewish aspirations. Ahasuerus (*Ahasver*) is actually a historic personality—namely Xerxes⁶—and he was a friend of the Judean Jews.

It was safe in the third pre-Christian century to accuse an Empire that no longer existed, rather than the real culprit, the Seleucids. The Persians supposedly attacked the Jews “because they do not follow the customs of the king” (*einam ossim et datei hamelech*), a first literary analysis of what we inaccurately call antisemitism. None of this has anything to do with God.

A particularly thorny problem is the Book of Job (“Iyov,” *Hiob*), which is the Hebrew version of a Mideastern myth that one can find in ancient Mesopotamian literature. The problem is: it was not invented by Jews. Job is the pawn of an argument between God and Satan (which turns Judaism into a polytheistic faith, with two opposing gods, a good one and an evil one). His family is killed because of, not despite, his righteousness, and he himself undergoes terrible tortures at the hand of Satan, with God’s full agreement. At the end, God is very nice to him and provides him with another wife and children. In other words, our won-

derful God is the murderer of an innocent woman and her children. The most ardent atheist could not have written a more damning account of the deity.

The other books of the Bible deal with what we would today call secular subjects: relations between people and ethnicities, contemporary political issues (as in the Prophets), and so on—everything, of course, in the name of God. The same basically holds true of the Mishnah and the Talmud, and their later commentators.

God is present everywhere, in the background mostly, but the themes in these writings are those of a living civilization: economic issues; social relations; relations with non-Jews; personal, family and sexual issues—etc. However, one should emphasize that during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, when the Mishna and the Talmud were written, the pluralism that was always present in Jewish history was expressed in the multiplicity of Jewish beliefs: the official Saducees, the opposition Pharisees, the Essenes, and many other Jewish sects.

The Talmud itself was written differently in Babylon (Babylonian Talmud) and in Jerusalem (Jerusalem Talmud). Polytheistic influences returned to become part of the religion—the Shechinah (God’s emanation), and Lilith, the evil spirit, are really goddesses that accompany Jehovah, quite apart from Satan, the evil god. Angels are born: Matatron, Gabriel, etc. Afterlife, that is Heaven and Hell, which were quite absent from the Bible, now make their appearance (in the Bible, “gehenna,” “gehinom,” i.e. Gei Ben-Hinom, was simply the gully below the walls of Jerusalem where people threw their sewage. In late usage, that became Hell).

The argument, therefore, is that Jewish civilization certainly included “religion,” which developed into the monotheism that we all know, but that it was much, much broader than that.⁷ One of the main characteristics of Jewish civilization is that its main internal motive force was—and is—frequent violent controversy. What defines the Jews is that they are a people that quarrel incessantly about different interpretations of the same traditions.

This is what I am doing here, too. It is that essential quality of pluralism, of incessant questioning, arguing, and correcting, that keeps the Jewish people alive. Were it not for that, it would have ossified long ago and passed into history.

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The original version of this paper included an analysis of the modern period as well.

¹ Kings I, 15:13

² Kings I, 12:28

³ Kings I, 14:23

⁴ KingsII, 21:7

⁵ basically Epicurean and Stoic

⁶ =his Greek name (his Aramaic name was Artachshasta)

⁷ Not only after Baruch Spinoza in the 17th century, but during ancient and medieval times, as well.