

Section 9 – Patriarchal Monotheism

Josiah

The ideas that crystallised into Judaism originated in the 7th century BCE, during the reign of King Josiah of Judah. Josiah ordered the renovation of the First Temple, and during this a set of scrolls was ‘discovered’ by the High Priest Hilkiyah. The scrolls are believed to have been most of the book of Deuteronomy. They contained a legal code that was the foundation of a patriarchal state. Scholars now recognise that Hilkiyah most likely arranged the writing of the scrolls, either adapting an older text or inventing a new one or both.¹ The multiple references to the glory of Joshua, Josiah’s namesake, and the delivery to him of the Promised Land, make it clear that, as well as a constitutional framework of laws, the document was commendation and praise in favour of King Josiah and his policy of militarily asserting control over Israel in the name of Jahweh.

This elegant construction was the conclusion of a bargain between throne and priesthood. Josiah would give all religious power and influence to the male priests of Jahweh, represented by Hilkiyah, and suppress the priestesses of Asherah as well as the cults of Ba’al and Astarte. In return, Jahweh would deliver to Josiah the Promised Land, Israel, a far wealthier and more fertile kingdom than Judah. Josiah’s father had died in a palace coup, probably fomented by the Hilikian faction of priests, while the young heir was still a child. He may have been brought up under the tutelage of the priesthood in order to ensure that he had the ‘right’ ideas. In any case, Josiah, either brainwashed or perhaps just through ambition to seize Israel, pledged allegiance to the social conservatism of the Jahwists.

The priests destroyed the political power structure of the priestesses, who had represented women and the Goddess and in the tradition of social conservatives before and since, they persecuted anyone who dared to disagree with them. And, for a time, the bargain was fulfilled. Josiah did indeed succeed in capturing the land of Israel for the crown of Judah, although this was largely due to the collapse of Assyrian power rather than his own efforts.

It was a short-lived triumph. In 609 BCE war broke out between the two great regional super-powers: Egypt and Assyria. In order to join battle with the enemy, the Egyptian king Necho needed to lead his army across Judah, since it was the best route north. Josiah refused

¹ Finkelstein and Silberman 2002.

and led his army against the Egyptians. They met at the Battle of Megiddo, where the Judahites were utterly crushed by a vastly superior military force. Josiah died, either at the battle or by execution shortly after at the instruction of Necho. His land and people were effectively annexed by Egypt.²

For hundreds of years, whenever there were more progressive kings, Judah's condition ameliorated. Yet when conservative kings – the very ones described as 'good' in Hebrew Scripture – came to power, disaster upon calamity befell the land as these kings, egged on by a rabid priesthood, offended far more powerful sovereigns and were punished for it.

In 605 BCE, Necho was defeated by the Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar. Judah, already annexed by Egypt, became a client state of Assyria and Jehoiakim, Josiah's successor, began paying tribute. After Egypt's defeat of Assyria in 601 BCE, Jehoiakim rebelled against Assyria. In 598 BCE Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. During this, Jehoiakim was killed and replaced by Jehoiachin, his son. After three months of siege, Assyrian forces entered the city and pillaged it, destroying the Temple. The noble, wealthy and intellectual people of Judah were taken into captivity and sent to Babylon.

The religion of Judah had been a 'temple' religion. All authority came from the power of the temple priests to intercede with Jahweh, in that holy place, on behalf of the people. Once in exile and without a temple, the priests could no longer orchestrate the highly profitable sacrifices and other rituals that they used to supplicate the deity. To retain control, they had to turn the focus of the religion to the law and the scriptures, which only they were empowered to interpret. The captive priests edited and redacted these scriptures to suit their objectives.

In 537 BCE, the Persian king Cyrus the Great invaded and conquered Babylon. One of his first acts was to release the Judahites from captivity, and they returned to Judah. They declared the new version of the Hebrew Scripture, which the exiled priests had spent decades rewriting, to be the only authorised text. The Exiles reclaimed Jerusalem and built a new Temple.

The result of the differences in religion between those who had stayed and the Exiles was that Judahite society split along class lines. Those who had remained behind and adhered to the religious ideas current before the Exile were later known as Samaritans. They were vilified by the returning Exiles, who adopted the role of urban ruling elite and sought to impose their new version of Judaism on the entire population. From this point on, the socio-political and religious divisions between Jerusalem and rural Judah became important.

² Were it not for the fact that the syncretisation of Hebrew mythology into the canon we now know began during his reign, Josiah would likely be forgotten.

Judah and Israel remained under the heel of occupying powers for centuries during the Biblical period. By the end of the first century BCE, the land was under the control of the most powerful Empire yet seen in the West, Rome. The establishment's reaction was to cleave to tradition and social conservatism.³

The Judahites were originally simple peasant farmers who wanted security of tenure of their land and to get on with life. One does have to sympathise with a people so put upon – largely due to the strategic importance of their lands – by vastly more powerful and sophisticated cultures all around them, which did not hesitate to use ruthless military force again and again. Jews never evangelise; it is difficult to become a Jew even if one marries into the culture and the only land they want is a postage-stamp of desert with practically no resources. Nothing could be further from the core philosophy of Judaism than a desire for world domination, making it one of only a very few religions not so afflicted.

Nevertheless, this was one of the most grimly patriarchal religions in the world. While this is no longer the case for most of Judaism today, some ultra-conservative sects remain profoundly misogynist.⁴ By the first millennium BCE, women's lot through much of the region was abysmal, and Judah was no exception. Men had legal power of life and death over women who had, effectively, ceased to be considered people. The male priesthood that served El (Jahweh) was socially conservative, determined to resist change, and committed to having absolute control.

Power in Goddess-culture flows from the Goddess, through the hands of a woman, to the king, and for the Jahwists to achieve the influence they desired, that link had to be broken. So, although in the Canaanite mythology that they had adopted, El (Jahweh) has a wife, the Goddess in the form of Asherah, it behoved the male priesthood to remove this powerful goddess and her priestesses, lest they demand access to the king's councils. The Goddess had to be airbrushed out and her supporters – women – cast down.

In the Judahite support of El over Ba'al, the father over the son, the writers had invoked a contract; if the Judahites would be faithful only to El, then El would not fail them. The First Commandment, 'You shall have no other gods before me', implies that there *are* other gods. The Judahites were told to put these other gods aside and pledge allegiance to El, who would deliver them the Promised Land – the more fertile and rich lands of Israel to the north. This faithfulness to 'one god' was not originally a monotheism, however. Other gods and goddesses still had

³ This reflex is by no means restricted to ancient Judah; in the modern United States for example, a culture of paranoia is maintained which serves the ends of right-wing conservatives and patriarchal Christians. Very much the same happened in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and the principle was well described by the writer George Orwell.

⁴ Modern, enlightened Judaism is far more inclusive and egalitarian but traditions such as the Hassidic, which is a reaction to modernisation and even worse the Lev Tabor tradition, which has actually been thrown out of Israel, show how deep the roots of misogyny are.

cadres of priests and priestesses seeking influence over the temporal ruler. What more natural next step could there be than to remove all of the pantheon but one male god and give him all the divine powers? Over time, as we shall see, the replacement of all deities with a single, male god was the result.⁵

⁵ This was not unique. In many cultures in the Near and Middle East at the time, there was a general tendency towards monotheism founded on the worship of a single male god. In every case the central deity was syncretised from previous deities, normally the king or chief of the pantheon of sky-gods and goddesses. This appears to have been the result of both political and religious change.