

Yahweh before Israel

Yahweh is the proper name of the biblical God. His early character is central to understanding the foundations of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic monotheism. As a deity, the name appears only in connection with the peoples of the Hebrew Bible, but long before Israel, the name is found in an Egyptian list as one group in the land of tent-dwellers, the Shasu. This is the starting point for Daniel Fleming's sharply new approach to the god Yahweh. In his analysis, the Bible's "people of Yahweh" serve as a clue to how one of the Bronze Age herding peoples of the inland Levant gave its name to a deity, initially outside of any relationship to Israel. For 150 years, the dominant paradigm for Yahweh's origin has envisioned borrowing from peoples of the desert south of Israel. Fleming argues in contrast that Yahweh was not taken from outsiders. Rather, this divine name is evidence for the diverse background of Israel itself.

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Glimpses of History in a Divine Name

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for Mark Stratton Smith, my friend,
without whom my scholarly life would not be the same
and life generally far duller

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Preface

My students and I have a running joke about speculation. I am against it, I say. New ideas, new possibilities, are essential, and uncertainty is unavoidable. We must learn to describe precisely what we propose, the evidence and arguments for it, along with the gaps and soft spots in the resulting interpretation. Speculation launches into unfounded guesswork, refusing the rigors of proof and disproof. This is not the same as identification of novel explanations, measured carefully against failed alternatives.

For all my determination to eschew speculation, the accusing word hangs over scholarly work as a plague waiting to infest it. When I took on Yahweh, the special god of the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israel, I entered a realm where ancient history and contemporary religion meet in a cacophony of convictions and conclusions. I offer my own, and their interest to me lies in their novelty, the hope that I have pushed down paths that will prove productive even to those with differing solutions. At every point in the discussion that follows, I will be elaborating what I perceive as a new framework for understanding the earliest evidence for Yahweh, even as I build on the work of others and try not to underplay the uncertainties.

I mean the last in specific terms. My acceptance of the notion that Yhwꜣ of the Shasu people in old Egyptian evidence reflects the same name as the famous god is widely shared but capable of valid doubt. My treatment of the opening hymn in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5) as a later elaboration began as an effort at caution, to avoid reading the name Israel as original to all the peoples of the battle account (vv. 12–23) when the pattern of appearance suggested otherwise. Yet others make the

equation without hesitation. These two interpretive choices are essential to the history I reconstruct here, and they are debatable from the start.

Yet I am determined to avoid speculation, and I hope that my interpretations and discussion are thought-provoking and as often as possible persuasive, worth the read, and worth having written. I begin my offering with this acknowledgment of what such an effort involves. My first higher education was in the natural sciences (geology), and I still carry with me the ideals of scientific pursuit. Progress is made by the construction of interpretations that are capable of testing and susceptible to improvement or disproof. There is no fixed destination, because reality always presents new questions with every conceptual advance. For all that readers may prefer certainties to probabilities, and solutions with alternatives may look like speculation, historical reconstruction always inhabits such conceptual space, the more so when peering at obscure first appearances. Possibilities and probabilities are what we have, and they warrant weighing. Through this work I will construct my argument with as much nuance and precision as I can muster, taking account of degrees of certainty along with what appear secure landmarks. It is my hope that readers will find my caution appropriate to the material and measured carefully, even where their own may lead them differently.

My ruminations on Yahweh before Israel build on generations of insightful study, and so far as they contribute to future work, they will themselves be corrected and improved. This is as it should be. These questions take us back to the hazy horizon of the evidence, where the available facts are well known and the issue is how to situate them in the expanse of what we do not know properly. With what follows I propose to rearrange these facts, convinced that the arrangement is new and interesting, plausible and yet tentative, calling for the reflection of others. It is this reflection to which you are invited.

Acknowledgments

The roots of this book lie in a conversation with Rachel Angel, a New York University doctoral student at the time, who asked me what I considered the oldest biblical evidence for Yahweh. This led me to the Song of Deborah in Judges 5, which I had recently recognized to have been recast in a way that made all the peoples of the battle with Canaan a unified “Israel” – when, as I saw it, they had originally been “the people of Yahweh” (v. 13). In this reading, verse 13 would be older than the lines that had Yahweh come from Seir and Edom as “God of Israel” (vv. 4–5), older than the connection with a land far south of Israel and Judah. The geography of the people of Yahweh in the Song of Deborah would overlap with the later kingdom of Israel, and this made me wonder whether Yahweh’s connections to a foreign southern space might not provide a straightforward origin story after all. Soon afterward, at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (2015), I found myself talking with various colleagues about Yahweh, and in particular, a conversation with Brendon Benz led to a collaboration at the 2016 meeting, to which Benz contributed an evaluation of all the biblical evidence for “the people of Yahweh.”

By the end of the summer of 2018, I had completed a full second draft of a book, which I both gave to various generous readers and submitted to Cambridge for review, with appreciation for the editorial interest of Beatrice Rehl. In the last phases of production, the volume benefited especially from the careful copyediting of Eric Christianson. My hope was that the book would benefit from serious response before one last revision, and I am in the particular debt of numerous readers who approached the manuscript from many angles, which I will not elaborate

here. The list includes Betsy Bryan, Quinn Daniels, Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, Ted Lewis, Adam Miglio, Lauren Monroe, Jaime Myers, Stephen Russell, Thomas Schneider, Mark Smith, and Michael Stahl. From the sum of my readers' efforts, I have not merely added observations and refined arguments; I have restructured the whole book and reconceived the problem that it treats. These are scholars at every career stage, including current doctoral students, and this diversity of perspective has represented a benefit in itself. All the pleasure of my scholarly work lies in such shared scheming over the mysteries of the distant past, along with the friendships formed in the pursuit.

In the final stage of work on the book, I have benefited from the support of four who served in a variety of roles as research assistants. Quinn Daniels reread the whole for flow – within the limits of what my prose and publication calendar allowed. Spencer Elliott, new to NYU and to the project, offered generously to help with the indices and in the process added polish to the text. Elizabeth Knott stepped in to guide me through the steps necessary to incorporate images and to help with the preparation of the two maps, which were created by Kyle Brunner. She also recruited Ogden Goelet to draw the writing of Yhw₃ from the Soleb appearance, for reference. Jaime Myers ran down material from Soleb to help me refine my treatment of the Egyptian evidence. Nancy Fleming collaborated in the measurement and calculation of space available for prisoners and their identifications on the temple columns at Soleb.

Although the idea for this book began with doubt regarding the Midianite Hypothesis and its expectation of a foreign southern origin for Yahweh, the project shifted as I moved more deeply into the Egyptian evidence, beginning with a full review of all the evidence for the Shasu “nomad” population, as gathered in Giveon (1971). The further I progressed, the more I was convinced that Yhw₃ and the other named Shasu entities in the lists from Soleb and ‘Amarah West required new interpretation in social and spatial terms. As part of my final round of rewriting, I benefited from the Egyptological expertise of Thomas Schneider first, in both extended conversation and then response to a chapter draft, and more recently of Betsy Bryan. The interpretation of the Shasu entities remains very much my own, with hope that it makes sense of both the Egyptian scribal perspective and the Asian social and political realities, with which I am more familiar.

I have dedicated this book to Mark Smith, who was my closest colleague at New York University between 2000 and 2016. Together, we worked with an exciting cohort of doctoral students in Hebrew Bible and

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enjoyed offices with facing open doors across a hallway. This project was just getting under way when he moved to Princeton Seminary, and I began telling people that I had to write on Yahweh because he had bequeathed to me responsibility for the study of God. In fact, this has been an opportunity to walk in Mark's steps for a period, to appreciate more fully how complex, how subtle, are the problems of God's "early history," and the poise and generosity he has added to mastery of evidence and rigor of evaluation. Our years teaching together were a privilege never to be forgotten, including a trust and friendship that undergirded every endeavor. In the last rewriting of this book, your voice has been first in my head, from your reading comments and from these many years of respecting your critical, and self-critical, mind. Thank you for it all.

Finally, I cannot finish a project of this scope without acknowledgment of Nancy, my wife now for years counted in decades, in everything my companion and anchor as I intend to be hers, still.

Abbreviations

- BASOR *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
 BN *Biblische Notizen*
 CBQ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
 COS William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (eds.), *The Context of Scripture*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1997–2000)
 FM *Florilegium Marianum*
 HBAI *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel*
 HTR *Harvard Theological Review*
 HUCA *Hebrew Union College Annual*
 IEJ *Israel Exploration Journal*
 JANER *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religion*
 JBL *Journal of Biblical Literature*
 JNES *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
 JQR *Jewish Quarterly Review*
 JSOT *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
 NEA *Near Eastern Archaeology*
 PEQ *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*
 RA *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale*
 RIA E. Ebeling et al. (eds.), *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1928–)
 SEL *Studi epigrafici e linguistici sul Vicino Oriente Antico*
 Soleb M. Schiff-Giorgini, *Soleb IV. Le temple: Bas reliefs et inscriptions* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2003)
 Soleb V M. Schiff-Giorgini, *Soleb V. Le temple: Plans et photographies* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2002)

TA	<i>Tel Aviv</i>
UF	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WO	<i>Die Welt des Orients</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZDPV	<i>Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>
ZThK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>